

Introduction: Responding to the 21st-century migration challenge: Community interpreting in the European periphery

Jonathan Maurice Ross 

Boğaziçi University, Turkey

jonathan.ross@bogazici.edu.tr

Tamara Mikolič Južnič 

University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

tamara.mikolicjuznic@ff.uni-lj.si



ABSTRACT

This article explains the thematic focus of the current special issue, a collection of contributions that deal on macro and meso levels with the evolution of community interpreting services in the 2010s and early 2020s in what could be considered the 'European periphery', i.e., countries in Southeastern and East Central Europe. In this period, countries as varied as Turkey, Poland and Hungary were faced with massive and sudden flows of asylum-seekers and other migrants from the east, south and southeast, creating unprecedented challenges for effective communication between users and providers of public services. Due to the paucity of existing infrastructure for community interpreting, as well as the lack of interpreters with the required cultural and linguistic competencies, national and local governments, international organisations, NGOs, and individual interpreters and administrators often improvised and resorted to *ad hoc* remedies. The article suggests that some of the problems that arose in the field and that are addressed in the articles in the special issue (e.g., the role of the community interpreter and the status of cultural mediators) were not new and had a long-standing presence within the literature on community interpreting. It also shows how the responses of national and international bodies to the so-called refugee crisis can be conceptualised within the framework of humanitarian interpreting; when understanding the behaviour of individual interpreters, moreover, insights can be gained from the burgeoning field of research on non-professional interpreting.

Keywords: migration, community interpreting, humanitarian interpreting, non-professional interpreting, interpreting policy

Odzivi na izziv migracij v 21. stoletju: skupnostno tolmačenje na evropskem obrobju

IZVLEČEK

V članku je predstavljen tematski fokus posebne številke, v kateri so zbrani prispevki, ki obravnavajo makro in mezo ravni razvoja skupnostnega tolmačenja na evropskem obrobju v drugem in tretjem desetletju 21. stoletja. V tem času so se različne države, kot so Turčija, Poljska in Madžarska, soočile s povečanimi in nenadnimi tokovi prisilcev za mednarodno zaščito in drugih migrantov z vzhoda, juga in jugovzhoda, kar je povzročilo izzive brez primere na področju učinkovite komunikacije med uporabniki in izvajalci javnih storitev. Zaradi pomanjkljivosti obstoječe infrastrukture za skupnostno tolmačenje, pa tudi zaradi pomanjkanja tolmačev s potrebnimi kulturnimi in jezikovnimi kompetencami, so nacionalne in lokalne oblasti, mednarodne organizacije, nevladne organizacije in posamezni tolmači in upravni uslužbenci pogosto improvizirali in posegali po *ad hoc* rešitvah. V prispevku izpostavljam, kako nekatere težave, ki so se pojavile na terenu in ki so obravnavane v prispevkih posebne številke (npr. vloga skupnostnega tolmača in status kulturnega mediatorja), niso nove, saj se že dolgo pojavljajo v literaturi o skupnostnem tolmačenju. Prav tako je prikazano, kako odziv nacionalnih in mednarodnih organov na t. i. begunsko krizo lahko razložimo v okviru humanitarnega tolmačenja, pri razumevanju vedenja posameznih tolmačev pa se lahko opremo na naraščajočo množico raziskav o neprofesionalnem tolmačenju.

Ključne besede: migracije, skupnostno tolmačenje, humanitarno tolmačenje, neprofesionalno tolmačenje, tolmaška politika

1. Introduction

This special issue of *Stridon* aims to investigate how international organisations, national and local governments and public authorities, educational institutions, NGOs and individual interpreters at the Southeastern ends of Europe and in East Central Europe have responded to the challenge of providing community interpreting and/or mediation services to increasingly diverse populations in the 2010s and 2020s. The rise in demographic diversity has to a large extent been a consequence of two migration phases: the so-called “European migrant crisis” or “European refugee crisis” (Schuster and Baixauli-Olmos 2018, 734) of 2015, and the displacement of people following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (see below); most of the articles in the special issue deal with the provision and providers of interpreting services within the context of an urgent humanitarian crisis. That is, they are largely concerned with a period when asylum-seekers or migrants were first arriving in countries or attempting to launch new lives there. Additionally, some attention is devoted to the subsequent phase, when members of migrant communities had already settled in the host country but needed continued support in healthcare and other sectors.

The articles in this special issue lie at the intersection of research on community interpreting and research on interpreting in the context of humanitarian crises and

emergencies. Community interpreting research began in earnest in the mid-1990s. The organisation of the first Critical Link conference in June 1995, in Geneva Park, Canada, and the subsequent publication of the contributions to this (Carr et al. 1997) and other conferences in the Critical Link series helped place both the practice and study of community interpreting on the map. ‘Humanitarian interpreting studies’ are a rather more recent arrival in the academic world. From the turn of the 21st century onwards, scholars in Translation and Interpreting Studies have displayed a new-found interest in the communication problems that emerge from, and that can also exacerbate, crises, whether human-made (e.g., wars, terrorism or political conflict) or the consequence of natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes and floods). Previously, there had only been scant literature on translating and interpreting in humanitarian emergencies, and most that did exist focussed on translation and interpreting needs triggered by conflict (Federici 2016, 5).

Despite the scale and significance of the post-2015 migrant crises, so far no publication has been devoted to how the countries of Southeastern and East Central Europe in particular faced up to the new and urgent communicative challenge. A special issue of *The European Legacy* set out to address *The Role of Public Service Interpreting in the Migrant Crisis* (Schuster and Baixauli-Olmos 2018), but the articles there deal with Belgium, Spain, Israel and Norway, i.e. not countries in the area covered in the special issue. Another anthology that combines studies of cases of translation and interpreting during and after disasters, emergencies and conflicts, including coverage of the 2015 refugee crisis, is *Intercultural crisis communication: Translation, interpreting and languages in local crises*, edited by Federici and Declercq (2021); this, however, does not have a regional focus. A conference held in Nitra, Slovakia in 2018 gave rise to a collected volume on interpreter training in Central Europe (Šveda 2021), a key theme within which was the impact that migration since 2015 has had on the need for, and practice of, community interpreting and on the training initiatives that have emerged to meet this need. This anthology parallels our special issue in terms of its concern with post-2015 migration and its concentration on a specific area of Europe; this area, though, does not include some of the countries covered by the current issue, and the anthology naturally does not include any contributions related to the consequences of the Russia-Ukraine war, which sparked mass emigration only in 2022.

Isolated articles have employed diverse methodologies to examine how the migration crisis affected community interpreting practices in individual countries or localities in Southeastern Europe and East Central Europe, such as Croatia (e.g., Čemerin and Črnko 2019), Greece (Skourmalla and Sounoglou 2021), Poland (Krysztofowicz and

Krupienicz 2016), Slovakia (Šveda and Štefková 2023), Slovenia (Pokorn and Čibej 2018; Mikolič Južnič and Pokorn 2021) and Turkey (Eser and Lai 2024; Ulaş 2021). Publications have also emerged from the EU-funded ReTrans Project on ‘interpreting in humanitarian and transborder migration contexts’, a project involving the collaboration of scholars from Greece, Slovenia, the Republic of North Macedonia and Austria (Nuč Blažič, Iacono, and Orthaber 2023).

In order to better understand the conditions that gave rise to such studies and to the contributions to this special issue, in the following section we present an overview of the context of the large displacements and migrations of people that have created the increased need for community-based interpreting. We also provide some key definitions, to situate the special issue and its components within the overlapping fields of community and humanitarian interpreting.

2. Context and definitions

In the 2010s and 2020s, Europe has witnessed a marked increase in the number of refugees and migrants trying to enter or cross the continent. The first phase of this so-called ‘crisis’ involved people from the Middle East (especially Syria and Iraq), countries further East (e.g., Afghanistan), and North and Equatorial Africa attempting to enter Europe from its southern and southeastern sea and land borders, fleeing wars and internal conflicts, persecution, terrorism, ongoing political instability, economic uncertainties, and the impacts of global warming (Šveda and Tužinská 2021, 26). This coincided with an increase in northward and westward migration from Albania and Kosovo (Zoppi 2019). Most sources date the beginning of this wave of migration to 2015, a year in which a record number of first-time asylum seekers (1,255,600) applied for protection in the member states of the EU, more than twice the number in the previous year (Eurostat 2016).

That said, to put this figure and the very notion of a ‘*European* refugee crisis’ into perspective, it should be noted that – according to *2015 Türkiye Göç Raporu* [Turkey’s Migration Report for 2015] – Turkey, at Europe’s southeastern corner, had been dealing with a mass influx of refugees from the Syrian Civil War ever since the summer of 2011 and by the end of 2015 was providing ‘temporary protection’ to more than 2.5 million Syrians (İçişleri Bakanlığı Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü 2016, 86), almost twice the number of asylum seekers in 2015 for the whole of the EU. In 2015, moreover, of the six countries in the world hosting the largest numbers of refugees – Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia and Jordan – only one (Turkey) was in some sense European and not one was a member of the European Union (UNHCR 2016, 03).

The very notion of a refugee *crisis* and the terms to label such a phenomenon also need to be used with caution. Since the early 2000s, several Translation and Interpreting Studies researchers have turned their attention to cross-cultural communication in humanitarian crises, and in their publications they frequently problematise alarmist popular and populist discourse around ‘crises’. In “Mediating migration crises: Sicily and the language of despair”, for instance, Denise Filmer and Federico Federici (2018, 229) emphasise that migration is “a natural part of homo sapiens’ biological evolution”. Federici and O’Brien (2019) also critique the discourse that presents mass migration flows as “disruptive *events*”, as “emergencies”; they assert that one of the main reasons why such flows trigger emergencies is the lack of preparedness on the part of international organisations and receiving countries, and they call for more awareness of the cross-cultural dimensions to crises and for advanced planning of appropriate communicative strategies, to help mitigate the harm caused by inadequate or inappropriate communication. In the same work, Federici and O’Brien suggest a succinct definition of crisis, with neutral connotations, which we too regard as helpful for labelling the events of 2015 and 2022: “an all-encompassing term to include short- and long-term events and their effects, which may be triggered by a disaster” (Federici and O’Brien 2019, 5).

The abovementioned important caveats concerning the scale and naming of the refugee or migrant crisis do not negate the fact that, by European standards, the amount of migration and asylum claims in 2015 was extraordinary. And mass movements of people on the continent did not end in that year. The second major migration phase came from Eastern Europe itself. This was sparked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which pushed sizeable numbers to seek refuge in Europe and elsewhere. As of March 2025, more than 6,300,000 displaced Ukrainians were scattered across Europe (UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe 2025, 1).

As the size and diversity of the refugee and migrant communities increased, so too did the need for linguistic and cultural mediation in receiving and transit countries. Interpreters and/or intercultural mediators were vital at all stages of the migration process and in multiple settings. When asylum seekers and other kinds of migrants first arrived in Europe or when they were intercepted before setting foot there, they needed to communicate with public officials and/or representatives of international organisations at reception centres, reception camps, official ports of entry and local government institutions. Later on, if they were allowed to stay in a country at least temporarily, they could find themselves needing the services of interpreters, translators and mediators in classic community interpreting settings like doctors’ surgeries, offices of social workers or lawyers, police stations, prisons or courts (Hale 2007, 26).

Geographically, the special issue is concerned with the two specific areas mentioned above. By ‘Southeastern Europe’, we understand the countries that were the first landing-points for many of the refugees that arrived in 2015, primarily Greece and Turkey, as well as the countries where a relatively small number of refugees settled and which a much larger number passed through on their way to seemingly more hospitable destinations, above all, Germany and Sweden (Todorova 2017, 123); this meant countries like Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. We take ‘East Central Europe’ to denote the countries that border on Ukraine or that are relatively close to it, and that were thus the first to experience the mass exodus in the aftermath of the Russian invasion; this includes Poland, Romania, Moldova, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia.

What makes the geographical focus of this special issue particularly interesting is that the societies and polities in question were mostly not used to large-scale immigration. On the contrary, countries as varied as Turkey, Hungary and Poland had traditionally been ‘exporters’ of migrants, rather than targets or transit-areas for refugees and migrants (Rokicka 2021; Kirişçi 2007). What is more, because of local traditions of ardent monolingualism and politicians’ instrumentalisation of “ethno-populism”, the region was susceptible to elite- and popular-level opposition to immigration (Šveda and Tužinská 2021) and to rejection of measures designed to facilitate refugees’ and migrants’ access to public services.

Before the refugee crisis, in Southeastern Europe and East Central Europe, attitudes and policies regarding refugees, immigrants, linguistic diversity and language services had been on the whole a good deal less welcoming than those in other parts of Europe and in other continents. Notwithstanding the occasional hardening in attitudes and policies, countries like Sweden, the UK, Australia, Canada and South Africa had long before officially embraced multiculturalism and multilingualism and developed systems for meeting the needs of linguistic and cultural minorities, including communication. This involved the creation of public service interpreting and translation (PSIT) systems. As Uldis Ozolins observed back in 2010, a state’s attitude towards language services, such as community interpreting, will depend to a large extent on its level of openness towards immigration. Before the onset of the refugee crisis, states such as Greece, Poland and Hungary were anything but ‘open towards immigration’ and were reluctant to take steps towards meeting the communication needs of indigenous linguistic minorities, let alone immigrants (Skourmalla and Sounoglou 2021).

Partly because of such attitudes and partly because of the reality that the populations of many of the countries in the area under discussion were indeed comparatively homogeneous in linguistic and cultural terms, interpreting training and research at

universities and other institutions in Southeastern and East Central Europe had tended to concentrate on interpreting provision and practice associated with countries' relationships with the EU, the emphasis being on conference and business-oriented interpreting. Community interpreting, on the other hand, had been seen as something relevant to Western European countries, with their significant populations of ethnic minorities (Šveda and Tužinská 2021, 26).

When the migration crisis of 2015 emerged, then, trained community (or public service) interpreters were in short supply in the countries in the impacted area. Few of the professional interpreters that did exist possessed the language combinations and cultural competence that matched the needs of the incoming communities. One thinks, for instance, of the absence of interpreters in the area capable of interpreting between the vernacular or English on the one hand and, on the other hand, Farsi, Pashtu, Urdu or Dari, or dialects of Arabic and Kurdish (Čemerin and Črnko 2019, 110).

The situation with regards to asylum-seekers from Ukraine after 2022 was different in several respects. For one thing, the Ukrainians were mostly Ukrainian or Russian-speakers, i.e. speakers of Eastern Slavic languages, so the official and vernacular languages in most of the countries of East Central Europe (e.g., Poland and Czechia) and some of the countries of Southeastern Europe (e.g., Croatia and Slovenia) would at least have belonged to the same language family, i.e., Slavic. Under normal circumstances, because of this linguistic proximity, a Ukrainian in Poland, for instance, could be expected to have a better chance of achieving a degree of mutual understanding when communicating with a Polish-speaking local than would be the case with an Arabic-speaking Syrian in Turkey or a Pashtu-speaking Afghan in Hungary. As citizens of neighbouring European countries, moreover, the Ukrainians could be expected to have some degree of familiarity, even affinity, with the cultures of their host countries (and vice-versa), which might not have been the case so much with asylum-seekers from further afield. Another important distinction that should be made between the demographics of the two waves of migration is related to gender. In the 2015 wave, a disproportionate number of the people fleeing Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries were young males, although a large number of women and children also travelled on the boats and on the various other vehicles and routes used to reach Europe (Schiele 2024). By contrast, especially in the earliest months of the influx from Ukraine, around 90% of the arrivals were women and children, as men of fighting age were obliged to stay in the country (UNHCR 2022, 4).

The differences between the participants in the two migration waves have certainly been magnified in elite and popular discourse in Europe: while the asylum-seekers of 2015 were framed by many politicians and ordinary citizens as “threats to [EU]

Member States' public, economic and cultural security", Ukrainian protection seekers were held to be "ethnically and culturally similar", making their protection "a humanitarian imperative" (Sosa Popovic and Welfens 2025, 609). However, such malevolent generalisations should not detract from the facts that the participants in these two mass migrational movements had seen and suffered hardship and would face challenges in communicating with the individuals and institutional representatives they encountered in the new country. Furthermore, whether an asylum-seeker was perceived as an undesirable, alien, male Muslim threat or a harmless and pitiable fellow-Christian sister or daughter, the country they came to was the same, with the same history of non- or minimal provision of community interpreting services. That is, when asylum-seekers and migrants started arriving from the south, the southeast and the east, they found themselves at the mercy of states in Southeastern and East Central Europe that generally did not have a well-established and comprehensive infrastructure for training, accrediting, recruiting, assigning and regulating community interpreters.

The lack of well-prepared and competent interpreters meant that a conspicuous feature of initial Southeastern/East Central European responses to the crisis was widespread recourse to *ad hoc* solutions. This could include the deployment of non-professional interpreters and mediators (Schuster and Baixauli-Olmos 2018; Nuč Blažič, Iacono, and Orthaber 2023), including children (Anders 2017), the use of pivot languages and *linguae francae* (especially English), the deployment of machine translation, and recourse to monolingual, bilingual or multilingual language aids such as dictionaries, glossaries and text cards containing common questions and answers, as well as visual aids like Google Images (Čemerin 2019, 46–47). Given the extent of involvement of non-professional interpreters in the response to the refugee crisis, it is not surprising that many of the articles in this issue touch on the characteristic behaviours of non-professional interpreters and the problems involved in the use of such interpreters, topics that the burgeoning literature on non-professional interpreting and interpreters has addressed (cf. Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva 2012; Antonini et al. 2017; Martínez-Gómez 2019; Pokorn and Mikolič Južnič 2020).

In their introduction to *Translation in Cascading Crises*, Federici and O'Brien pinpoint the different kinds of translation solutions that can be expected to come to the fore during the three successive phases of a so-called "cascading crisis", namely "Response", "Resilience" and "Recovery" (Federici and O'Brien 2019, 11). The solutions in the initial "Response" phase consist of what is cryptically identified on their diagram as "0", which we take to denote 'no solution' (i.e. neglect), followed by "Machine translation". The "Resilience" phase sees the involvement of "Citizen translators" (presumably, *ad*

hoc volunteers), “Domain-specific bilinguals” and “Community translators”; in the Recovery stage, “Professional translators” and “Professional translation to industry standards (6-eye)” make their presence felt. In their model, Federici and O’Brien suggest that, as the crisis matures, the quality of translation and translators involved increases. While asserting that the highest standards of quality are always preferable, they defend the “provocative” and pragmatic position that, faced with urgent needs and a lack of human resources, it might be necessary to tolerate less-than-ideal solutions as an alternative to “no-translation options” (Federici and O’Brien 2019, 10–11). In the diagram which Federici and O’Brien use to visualise their model, no mention is made of interpreting, with reference only being made to translation and translators. However, they do comment that the diagram “recognizes and accepts that different operational options for T&I exist” (Federici and O’Brien 2019, 11), which could be read as signalling that they believe that the same, or at least a similar, chronology and hierarchy of solutions would apply to interpreting in a crisis. Federici and O’Brien’s model may not be universally applicable and is arguably in need of updating; thanks to very recent developments in AI, machine translation has made huge strides and might yield better quality than untrained “Citizen translators”. What is also debatable, moreover, is the extent to which professional translators (or interpreters), the gold standard for quality, actually provided translation or interpreting services during the 2015 crisis. All the same, the model’s overall differentiation between types and providers of translation, and the levels of quality that tend to be associated with them, does constitute an illuminating model for categorising at least some of the different types of translators who became involved in the refugee crisis.

Judging from the existing literature on the ‘refugee crises’ of the 2010s and 2020s and from many of the contributions to this special issue, interpreters and translators were not the only people who were initially unprepared for the tasks that they had to face. The initiators and managers of interpreting services were also ‘learning on the job’. One comment that captures particularly poignantly the extraordinary degree of improvisation that the crisis forced on interpreters and coordinators alike surfaces in an interview in Olga Čadajeva and Martina Pálušová’s ethnographic study of a regional assistance centre for Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic: “We were building the plane while flying it”. In other words, interpreters – at least those in that particular regional assistance centre – were not performing their work (“flying”) in line with a system, guidelines and norms that others had put in place. It was they who were creating their *modus operandi* as they went along. The metaphor of a *plane* being built while being flown conveys vividly the degree of danger inherent in such improvisation: we know what will happen if there are flaws in the building process; the plane will crash!

Most of the articles in this special issue deal to some extent with the role and ethical positioning of the community interpreter. This, of course, has been an unending concern of practising interpreters and a perennial object of research and discussion in the scholarly literature on community interpreting. From the 1990s onwards, when community interpreting started establishing itself as a profession, practitioners and scholars alike have been debating where interpreters should position themselves on the spectrum stretching from the role of the conduit, who ‘just’ interprets, to the role of the mediator, who assists the service user in various ways, even to the extent of advocating on their behalf (Bancroft 2015, 224–26). Judging from the contributions to this special issue and other literature on the refugee crisis, uncertainty about the role of the interpreter was a problem for all parties involved, including interpreters, managers and service-users alike. It is not difficult to see why this was the case. On the one hand, as has already been noted, many of the individuals serving as interpreters were untrained non-professionals, possibly recruited in a great rush with little assessment of their appropriateness and competence for the task. They may have had little awareness of what professional norms existed within their sector, their country or the world at large when it came to the role of the interpreter. Many institutions and managers were likewise in the midst of a learning process, hardly in an ideal position to offer guidance. The physical and emotional circumstances in which interpreters operated were barely conducive for the adoption and maintenance of clear and sustainable positions on role. The locations in which they were working were liable to be crowded, noisy and physically demanding. The service users with whom they were faced could well have been highly stressed and disturbed individuals, traumatised by what they had experienced, whether that be living in a war zone, being exposed to violence, abuse or illness, witnessing the death or maiming of loved ones or acquaintances, or simply enduring long and exhausting journeys over land or sea. They were individuals, moreover, who were often very unfamiliar with the culture(s) of the countries in which they ended up, and their cultures could have seemed extremely alien to the ‘locals’ they met. Insensitivity and racism on the part of public service providers were additional pressures with which interpreters had to contend (see Čadajeva and Pálušová’s observations regarding anti-Roma racism in their contribution to this issue). Faced with such a combination of unsettling factors, and in the absence of clear guidance, it was little wonder that interpreters not used to such conditions would have constantly been asking themselves where they belonged on the role spectrum. That said, the complexity and unpredictability of the situations experienced by ‘ordinary’ community interpreters, let alone interpreters caught up in the refugee crisis, make the very notion of ‘maintaining a single role’ seem an impossible and unrealistic construct. In that respect, Llewellyn-Jones and Lee’s (2014) concept of “role-space” “better captures

the fluidity and dynamism of the (re)positioning processes in intercultural and interlingual mediation” (Tipton and Furmanek 2016, 10).

One of the generic role-types that is referred to in some of the contributions in the special issue is that of the cultural (or intercultural) mediator. While the term is often used, it may have different meanings in different countries (Pokorn and Mikolič Južnič 2020) and the expected competences are often quite broad. Martín and Phelan (2010) characterize the mediator as a professional who goes beyond language interpreting to bridge sociocultural gaps, resolve potential conflicts, and act as a culture broker, clarifying values, norms, and institutional expectations between service providers and clients. Especially in European countries where large-scale immigration is quite a recent phenomenon (e.g., Ireland, Italy and Slovenia), the assumption has sometimes taken root that conventional interlingual mediators (i.e., interpreters) are insufficient for dealing with refugees who are believed to possess distinctly alien cultures: instead, either proactive cultural mediators should work alongside interpreters, or the people serving as interpreters need to combine the roles of linguistic, cultural and legal mediators, “important not only as interpreters but also as accompaniment and support” (Čemerin and Črnko 2019, 112). However, in many countries, uncertainty and debate persist regarding the role, benefits and expected competencies of the intercultural mediator (Pokorn and Mikolič Južnič 2020; Mikolič Južnič and Pokorn 2021). The articles in this special issue show how the role is frequently associated with members of migrant communities, or other more or less bilingual individuals, who step in during a crisis. They frequently make do without any proper training or support and lack guidance in navigating role boundaries and ethical concerns, often working pro bono or for minimal fees. Even when the initial crisis conditions of Federici and O’Brien’s “response” phrase give way to the more settled circumstances of the “recovery”, there is a risk that the initially *ad hoc* practice of recruiting non-professional intercultural mediators, with the challenges they bring, will become institutionalised. Several authors therefore call for sustainable solutions in terms of training, recruitment, and working conditions.

3. Contributions to the current issue

This special issue brings together a small sample of original papers that describe, explain and discuss how community interpreting has been deployed (or even initiated) in this relatively peripheral area of Europe in the last decade and a half, especially in response to the two post-2015 migration crises. Individual articles approach the subject of community interpreting on two of the three levels to which Pöchhacker (2022, 167) has referred, namely the macro level, the meso level and the micro level. While studies

of the macro level (**Çurum Duman** and **Tryuk**) offer a broad overview of how community interpreting has been organised and how it operates within the society at large, the articles by **Ioannidis**, **Čadajeva** and **Pálušová**, and **Horvath** and **Kozár** could be said to be more concerned with the meso level, i.e. with what happens to interpreting and interpreters in particular social settings and institutional domains.

More specifically, in her contribution to this thematic issue, **Duygu Çurum Duman** examines the evolving provision of community interpreting across different institutional contexts in Turkey and the ways in which this development is shaped by both national and international actors, offering a comprehensive overview of the field. While she acknowledges the unsatisfactory state of legal interpreting, her analysis focuses primarily on the healthcare and education settings. Drawing on a multiple case study centred on the Turkish Ministry of Health and Ministry of National Education, as well as their connections with other national and international institutions and organizations, Duman investigates their respective roles and influence on policies and practices related to community interpreting. Her study analyses more than ninety documents with the aim of mapping the actors involved in language access for migrants and of defining their roles and collaborations. Employing Mencütek's (2019) meta-governance framework, she identifies significant differences in language access across sectors and actors: whereas in the Turkish healthcare system interpreting services have become increasingly visible and institutionalized through training and employment, in education settings, language acquisition is prioritized, and interpreting tends to operate on a more local and *ad hoc* basis. Duman further argues that interpreting in healthcare settings is perceived as more urgent and directly linked to survival, which has led to the establishment of more stable structures, while educational interpreting remains dependent on project-based partnerships lacking long-term systemic planning.

Adopting a closer perspective on the impact of national policies and institutional ecologies on the professional and personal realities of community interpreters, **Anastasi-os Ioannidis**'s article examines the micropolitical dynamics of community interpreting in Greece. This qualitative study, based on interviews with interpreters, NGO staff and public servants, conducted by interpreting students under the author's supervision, explores how participants in interpreting-mediated interactions experience and negotiate interpreters' professional identities, with particular attention to questions of power, trust and emotional labour. Among the micropolitical factors shaping interpreting practices in Greece, interpreter training emerges as especially influential, as it contributes to maintaining clearer role boundaries and positions of neutrality. In line with previous studies (Major 2024; Wadensjö 1998; Inghilleri 2003; Angelelli 2004;

Wolf 2014), Ioannidis argues that interpreting is a profoundly relational practice in which interpreters are not invisible linguistic conduits but active participants who continually renegotiate multiple layers of boundaries, between neutrality and involvement, detachment and empathy, institutional expectations and human responsiveness. The study highlights an urgent need for structural reform encompassing clearer role definitions, strong organized support mechanisms and comprehensive training in the linguistic and cultural competences required, as well as in managing emotional boundaries and labour. The author also calls for greater involvement of interpreters in decision-making processes.

Małgorzata Tryuk's macro-level article examines the response to the refugee crisis in Poland following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Professional translators' associations and NGOs, together with non-professional language mediators, were compelled to intervene in the absence of an adequate institutional reaction and to provide linguistic assistance to millions of refugees. The article offers an overview of the principal actors involved in the provision of language support and their roles, with special attention to public institutions and their responses during the migration crisis. As in the Turkish education sector, though even more markedly due to the proximity between the Ukrainian and Polish languages, the Polish state prioritized language learning as both an emergency response and a tool for integration. Consequently, translation and interpreting were largely delegated to volunteers who lacked proper training and psychological support, a situation further illustrated in the case study presented by the author. Tryuk argues that language-learning initiatives should be complemented by the provision of community interpreting, particularly in the healthcare sector, where joint training for language mediators and medical personnel is viewed as a desirable and sustainable solution.

The Ukrainian crisis, however, extended far beyond the country's immediate neighbours, affecting a wide range of European states. In their article, **Martina Pálušová and Olga Čadajeva** shed light on the Czech Republic's response to the unprecedented influx of refugees, focusing their meso-level case study on one of the regional assistance centres established by the state to provide access to essential services, a centre that was heavily reliant on language mediation. Drawing on ethnographic observation and interviews with interpreters, coordinators, and psychologists, the authors analyse how *ad hoc* interpreting emerged within the context of crisis management, where the scarcity of professional interpreters led to the normalizations of practices that blurred roles and rendered ethical positions ambiguous. Moreover, the absence of systemic mechanisms for psychological support resulted in long-term emotional strain for interpreters. Čadajeva and Pálušová argue that, while such improvised practices

were unavoidable and necessary at the height of the crisis, their continuation beyond the initial emergency has created systemic fragility by institutionalizing reactive recruitment and underprofessionalization rather than fostering a stable and sustainable support system for refugees and interpreters. As potential remedies to the current practices, the authors advocate institutionalized measures including the training of professional community interpreters, the development of context-sensitive professional codes of conduct, and the provision of psychosocial support to avoid burnout and role overload.

While the other contributions to this thematic issue address the initial responses to migrant and refugee crises and the evolution of community interpreting practices over time, the final article by **Ágnes Horváth** and **Vivien Andrea Kozár** turns to a distinct area of healthcare not typically associated with migrant and refugee crises, namely pre-, peri- and postnatal care. The growing presence of foreign-language speakers in Hungary, a traditionally monolingual society, resulting from migration and other factors, has led to an increasing number of families with limited or no proficiency in Hungarian, who nonetheless require access to healthcare services. The authors present an exploratory study based on surveys conducted among Hungarian health visitors and families with at least one non-Hungarian speaking parent, who have needed the health visitors' services. The article aims to examine how oral communication occurs in these encounters and how essential written healthcare information is conveyed. The findings reveal that the Hungarian healthcare system remains largely monolingual: health visitors' limited foreign language proficiency, combined with the absence of institutionalized language support (such as community interpreters), result in individual improvisation. Communication is frequently mediated through *ad hoc* interpreting, while written materials are sight-translated, summarized, or informally translated by non-professionals – practices that expose patients to serious risks of misunderstanding and potentially endanger patient safety. The authors conclude that ensuring equitable healthcare access for foreign-language speakers requires targeted improvements. These should include the systemic translation of key materials, widened access to interpreter services, and encouraging selected health visitors to pursue qualifications as medical interpreters or translators.

4. Conclusion

The 2015 migrant crisis and the recent Ukrainian refugee crisis have both significantly increased the demand for community interpreters in European countries, highlighting the unpreparedness of Southeastern and East Central European countries in handling the sudden influx of foreign-speaking individuals requiring access to essential

services such as healthcare, education, and legal assistance, to name but a few. The articles in this special issue demonstrate that while some responses to these challenges were similar, others were unique, reflecting the diverse contexts and needs of the affected regions. This lack of preparedness underscores the urgent need for these countries to develop and implement comprehensive strategies to support effective communication and integration of migrants and refugees. The improvement of infrastructure and the expansion of training for community interpreters would also place these countries in a better position to deal with future waves of migration or other types of ‘cascading crises’, constituting the kind of forward planning that researchers on humanitarian interpreting rightly regard as crucial. Further research on all three levels – macro, meso and micro – identified by Pöchhacker (2022), as well as active involvement of community interpreting scholars in discussions with authorities and other key stakeholders, could be essential to improve the situation, which still relies too much on *ad hoc* solutions. Finally, further investment in interpreter training programs is crucial to address these challenges and ensure that the needs of all service users are met efficiently and equitably.

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About the authors

Jonathan Maurice Ross is Associate Professor in the Department of Translation and Interpreting Studies at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, where he teaches applied and research-oriented courses. He has also contributed to in-service training for community interpreters. His research interests include telephone interpreting, community and non-professional interpreting in Turkey, and audio-visual translation. He has been the local (Turkish) coordinator on a multilateral European project about training non-professional interpreters and has conducted community interpreting-related field research in Turkey and Scotland. Articles by him have appeared in *The Translator*, *Target*, *Across Languages and Cultures*, *Parallèles* and other international and Turkish journals and anthologies.

Tamara Mikolič Južnič is Associate Professor and Head of the Translation Studies Chair at the Department of Translation of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), where she teaches courses in specialized translation and languages for special purposes. She was the lead researcher in two EP projects on Dissemination of best practices in conference interpreter training between EU and non-EU languages. She has authored two monographs, co-edited several volumes and published articles in the fields of translation studies, pragmatics and contrastive analysis. Currently, her research interests include community interpreting, translation history, translator and interpreter training and corpus-based translation and pragmatic studies.