

Cross-cultural adaptation and migrant integration through rural tourism: The role of NGO collaboration in a culturally immersive initiative in Poland

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Abstract

This study examines a culturally immersive integration tour for migrants through the lens of cross-cultural adaptation theory (CCAT). The initiative, as a collaboration among three non-tourism NGOs, was conducted in April 2025 in Czarny Las, a village located on the outskirts of Warsaw, Poland. It featured a series of culturally engaging activities, including traditional refreshments, a guided forest walk, a communal village-style lunch, a local folklore choir performance, and participatory community activities. The qualitative methodology included participant observation, a semi-structured interview with the organiser's representative, and asynchronous written interviews with the tour guide, the choir leader, and voluntary migrant participants. Findings reveal that the initiative relied primarily on informal trust-based collaboration, shared social values, and the flexible mobilisation of limited local resources, rather than on formal institutional arrangements. The tour created low-threshold opportunities for intercultural interaction through nature-based and folklore activities, which participants perceived positively in terms of social bonding and cultural learning. At the same time, the study identified practical and ethical challenges, including language mediation, role ambiguity, and oversights regarding dietary and religious sensitivities. Ultimately, the paper contributes to the growing literature on NGO collaboration, migrant integration, and community-based rural tourism.

Keywords: Cross-cultural adaptation; migrants; integration; rural tourism; NGO; collaboration.

Citation: Aslani, E., Ghaderi, Z., & Darvishi, G. (2026). Cross-cultural adaptation and migrant integration through rural tourism: The role of NGO collaboration in a culturally immersive initiative in Poland. *European Journal of Tourism Research*, 44, 4405. <https://doi.org/10.54055/ejtr.v44i.4723>.

Publication history:

Received: 23/11/2025; Revised: 22/02/2026; 20/04/2026; Accepted: 26/05/2026;

Published online: 01/10/2026; Volume date: 01/11/2026

Coordinating editor: Wenjie Cai



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1. Introduction

Migration is a key feature of contemporary societies, with individuals moving across borders for education, employment, safety, and improved living conditions (Dean & Edge, 2024; Dustmann & Glitz, 2011; Simpson, 2022). Yet arrival in a new country does not, in itself, ensure integration. Migrants often encounter language barriers, social isolation, unfamiliar cultural norms, and discrimination (De Roo *et al.*, 2016; Taratunina & Ispulova, 2025), all of which may hinder their integration process and negatively impact their quality of life (Sheila *et al.*, 2025). Following Penninx and Garcés-Mascreñas (2016, p. 14), integration is understood as “the process of becoming an accepted part of society”, while Ager and Strang (2008) help specify its socio-cultural dimensions through social connections, language, cultural knowledge, and participation in the receiving society.

From this perspective, migrant integration is not solely an individual task. It depends on the availability of supportive social infrastructures and on the willingness of different actors to create spaces in which newcomers can participate, communicate, and build relationships. In the field of migrant integration, NGOs frequently act as bridging organisations that connect migrants with local communities, provide culturally sensitive support, and facilitate participation in everyday social life (Muraleedharan, 2020; Ravneberg, 2024). Evidence also shows that NGOs may play enabling, coordinating, and facilitating roles within collaborative arrangements, particularly where integration requires trust-building across institutional and community boundaries (Janzen *et al.*, 2021; Lugosi *et al.*, 2023; Yan *et al.*, 2018). This makes collaboration especially important. Collaboration can generate additional value by bringing together different forms of knowledge, networks, and resources to address complex social needs more effectively than isolated actors can do alone (Barth *et al.*, 2018). However, while collaboration is central to many integration efforts, its role in tourism-based initiatives remains underexplored, especially when the collaborating organisations are not primarily tourism actors.

A growing body of research suggests that tourism- and culture-based initiatives can create low-threshold environments for intercultural learning, mutual recognition, and the gradual formation of belonging among refugees and other migrants (e.g., Burrai *et al.*, 2023; Musarò & Moralli, 2019; Ormond & Vietti, 2022). Carefully designed walks, guided tours, festivals, and community encounters can offer migrants opportunities to meet host communities beyond formal service settings such as schools, offices, or welfare institutions. Yet the literature has mostly focused on cases in which migrants act as guides, narrators, or co-creators of urban tourism experiences (e.g., Burrai *et al.*, 2023; Hoque *et al.*, 2022; Ormond & Vietti, 2022). Much less is known about rural, culturally immersive initiatives in which migrants participate as guests and learners. Such initiatives are particularly relevant when they are embedded in community-based rural contexts, where direct contact with local residents, everyday cultural practices, and place-based knowledge may create more intimate forms of exchange.

To interpret this type of initiative, this study draws on cross-cultural adaptation theory (CCAT) (Kim, 1988). According to Kim, adaptation unfolds through a stress–adaptation–growth dynamic in which encounters with unfamiliar cultural environments may initially generate uncertainty but can also stimulate learning, adjustment, and intercultural development over time (Kim, 2012; Kim, 2017). For a study concerned with socio-cultural integration through short-term, culturally immersive encounters, CCAT is especially relevant because it conceptualises adaptation as a communication-centred process shaped by engagement with the host environment, including host interpersonal communication and host receptivity (Kim & Kim, 2022; Kim, 2001). More specifically, three CCAT-informed interpretive dimensions guided the analysis: (1) opportunities for host interpersonal communication, (2) host receptivity and the inclusiveness of the communication environment, and (3) moments of stress and adaptation-related responses during the tour. Together, they allow the integration tour to be understood not merely as a leisure activity but as a structured communication space in which migrants

engage with local people, participate in shared cultural practices, and negotiate unfamiliar social meanings in relatively low-pressure settings.

This study examines a culturally immersive integration tour organised in April 2025 in Czarny Las, a village on the outskirts of Warsaw, Poland. The case is analytically important because the initiative brought together three non-tourism NGOs with different but complementary missions: Koper Pomaga, which supports migrant integration and refugee opportunities; Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich “Olszanki”, which promotes local traditions and community life; and Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich “Jaktorowskie Turzyce”, which is engaged in heritage, education, and social development (Jaktorowskie Turzyce, 2024; Koper Pomaga, 2020; Olszanki, 2024). Designed for migrants residing in Lodz, the tour included traditional refreshments, a guided forest walk, a homemade village-style lunch, a local folklore choir performance, and participatory community activities.

Accordingly, the study is guided by three research questions:

1. *How did collaboration among the three non-tourism NGOs shape the design and delivery of the integration tour?*
2. *How was the tour perceived by the organiser, local actors, and migrant participants in relation to socio-cultural integration and cross-cultural adaptation?*
3. *What practical, relational, and ethical challenges emerged in implementing this collaborative initiative?*

This article makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it first extends the literature on tourism-based migrant inclusion by shifting attention away from the more frequently examined urban initiatives in which migrants act as guides, narrators, or co-creators and instead focuses on a rural, host-led, culturally immersive encounter in which migrants participate primarily as guests and learners. Second, it links community-based rural tourism to migrant integration, interpreting the integration tour as a communication-centred space of socio-cultural adaptation based on a CCAT-informed perspective. Practically, the study shows how collaboration among non-tourism NGOs can shape not only the resource base of such initiatives but also the organisational and interactional conditions through which inclusion and low-threshold intercultural contact may emerge. In doing so, it offers insight for practitioners and policymakers seeking to design culturally immersive and socially inclusive initiatives for migrant integration with limited resources.

2. Literature review and sensitising theoretical framework

This section reviews the literature most directly relevant to the study’s analytical focus and positions CCAT as a sensitising theoretical framework for interpreting the case. It concentrates on three closely related issues: socio-cultural integration as a communication-centred process, tourism-based initiatives as spaces for intercultural encounter, and the role of non-tourism NGOs and collaboration in community-based rural settings.

2.1. Tourism-based initiatives as spaces for migrant inclusion

Beyond everyday settings such as schools or workplaces, a growing body of research has explored how tourism-based initiatives can support migrant and refugee inclusion. Integration scholarship has long underscored the importance of social networks, interaction opportunities, and feelings of belonging for migrants’ socio-cultural adaptation and psychological well-being (e.g., Hu *et al.*, 2023; Kiliç & Jacquet, 2023; Wang & Shen, 2023).

A few studies have examined tourism initiatives that explicitly involve migrants and refugees as key actors in such encounters. For instance, Ormond and Vietti (2022) analysed Migrantour guided walking

tours and Roots Guide guidebooks in the Netherlands to explore how they support learning about diverse perspectives and combat xenophobia through global citizenship education. Their findings showed that such initiatives can become transformative educational tools when they present multiple perspectives, encourage reflection, and rely on inclusive narratives. Burrai *et al.* (2023) investigated a social enterprise in Leeds, UK, that engages displaced people as tour guides. They found that co-created tours can enhance refugees' confidence, skills, and sense of agency while also providing visitors with distinctive cultural experiences; however, language barriers, precarious funding, and emotional labour may limit the sustainability of these initiatives. Musarò and Moralli (2019), drawing on a participatory action-research design, showed that innovative tourism and hospitality initiatives can generate more complex representations of migrants and tourists, foster hybrid identities, and contribute to concrete intercultural projects that support social inclusion and sustainable local development. Vietti (2019) explored intercultural tourism in a super-diverse city as both a way to understand contemporary diversity and a means to promote social cohesion. The study showed that such tours can reveal hidden migration histories, encourage convivial encounters, and reframe stigmatised neighbourhoods as shared heritage.

Overall, this literature shows that tourism-based initiatives can create spaces for contact, recognition, and intercultural learning, although the forms these encounters take vary across settings and participant roles. However, these studies have tended to position migrants as guides, narrators, or co-creators of the tourism product, particularly in urban settings. By contrast, less is known about tourism experiences in which migrants participate as guests and learners, especially in rural contexts where host communities invite newcomers into their everyday landscapes and cultural practices. There also remains a limited understanding of how NGOs collaborate to design and deliver culturally immersive initiatives for migrant inclusion.

2.2. Community-based and rural tourism as platforms for social inclusion

Community-based tourism (CBT) is commonly defined as tourism that is “managed and owned by the community, for the community, with the purpose of enabling visitors to increase their awareness and learn about the community and local ways of life” (Đukić & Volić, 2017, p. 1). CBT typically involves small-scale activities in which visitors and local residents interact directly, making it especially suitable for rural areas and small settlements (Purbasari & Manaf, 2018).

CBT and rural tourism operate through several mechanisms that can facilitate social inclusion and community empowerment. At their core, they embody participatory approaches that empower residents and local organisations to design, implement, and manage tourism initiatives via bottom-up processes (Restrepo Rico & Peterek, 2024). Such frameworks help ensure that tourism development aligns with community values and aspirations and can strengthen local capacity for collective action (Sapkota *et al.*, 2024). Effective community participation rests on community cohesion, including trust, equity, transparency, sharing responsibilities, commitment, and respect for one another and authority, particularly in rural areas with underutilised tourism resources (Rop *et al.*, 2023).

CBT and rural tourism also prioritise the preservation and revitalisation of local cultural identity as core objectives of sustainable development (Rindrasih, 2018). Cultural exchange is a key mechanism through which CBT strengthens community identity while fostering intercultural understanding (Akbar *et al.*, 2021). This process is bidirectional; tourism villages and rural initiatives provide spaces where visitors and community members learn from one another, with mutual knowledge transfer opening new perspectives and reinforcing respect (Wardani *et al.*, 2023).

Collectively, this literature suggests that community-based rural tourism can provide small-scale, participatory settings in which social interaction, cultural exchange, and locally grounded forms of inclusion may emerge.

2.3. *NGO collaboration in community-based tourism and migrant integration*

A growing body of research recognises NGOs as important actors in tourism development, particularly in relation to sustainability, equity, and community empowerment. Barnett (2008) shows that NGOs can raise awareness of the negative social and environmental effects of mass tourism, amplify community voices, and influence tourism policy through ethical campaigning, although their impact may be constrained by limited funding and political restrictions. Similarly, Hummel and van der Duim (2012) found that NGO-led tourism initiatives can contribute to poverty reduction through job creation and community empowerment, while also facing challenges such as limited market access and unequal benefit distribution. Other studies also highlight NGOs' dual or multiple roles as development agents, tourism providers, sustainability advocates, and intermediaries linking different stakeholders in tourism development (Akbulut & Ekin, 2019; Becklake, 2014; Genç, 2015). However, this literature has focused mainly on NGOs' developmental and managerial roles in tourism rather than on their contribution to migrant integration through tourism-based initiatives.

Research on NGOs in rural and community-based tourism remains relatively limited, but existing studies suggest that NGOs can play important coordinating and supportive roles. Shang-Pao and Fotiadis (2014) found that cooperation with NGOs was perceived by hosts as an important factor in improving social interaction in rural tourism. Ohe (2017), in a study of the Chiba Nature School in Japan, showed that NGOs can reduce the costs of managing local resources by building networks, providing training, and supporting programme development. Similarly, Jegdić *et al.* (2020) found that although NGOs are not always highly visible or formally recognised in rural tourism development, some still achieve significant results in practice. Overall, this literature indicates that NGOs can act as facilitators, network builders, and capacity enhancers in rural tourism settings. Nevertheless, little is known about how such roles operate in culturally immersive rural initiatives designed specifically for migrant inclusion.

A smaller body of research has examined NGO collaboration and partnerships in tourism-related contexts. Zada *et al.* (2025) show that NGO collaboration can strengthen the role of social media in advancing sustainable ecotourism policy, while Hoque *et al.* (2022) demonstrate that NGOs working together can move beyond service delivery towards more strategic support roles in tourism development. Together, they suggest that collaboration among NGOs can enhance organisational capacity and broaden the impact of tourism initiatives. At the same time, such collaborations remain vulnerable to structural and relational challenges, including limited long-term funding, dependence on external actors, and tensions between commercial goals and cultural values. What remains less explored is how collaboration among non-tourism NGOs shapes the design and delivery of tourism-based initiatives with explicit social integration goals.

2.4. *CCAT and socio-cultural integration in host communities*

CCAT is one of the most influential frameworks for explaining how immigrants gradually adapt to a new country (Kim, 1988, 2001, 2017). Kim (2017) conceptualises adaptation as a “stress–adaptation–growth dynamic”: encounters with unfamiliar cultural patterns generate stress, which in turn stimulates new learning and leads, over time, to an expanded “host communication competence” and “intercultural transformation”. Crucially, the theory emphasises that adaptation is not solely an individual psychological process; it is also shaped by the “environment”, particularly “host receptivity”, and by opportunities for active participation in “host social communication” (Kim & Kim, 2022). From this perspective, access to concrete occasions for “host interpersonal communication” is essential for

migrants' social integration, allowing them to practise the host language, engage in shared activities, and build interpersonal relationships that bridge social and cultural boundaries (Koirala *et al.*, 2024). The ultimate outcome of communication-driven adaptation is intercultural transformation, characterised by three key changes: increased "functional fitness", improved "psychological health", and the emergence of an "intercultural identity" (Kim, 2001).

In the present study, CCAT is used primarily as a sensitising lens for interpreting short-term interactional processes during the tour, with particular attention to opportunities for host interpersonal communication, host receptivity and the inclusiveness of the host communication environment and moments of stress and adaptation-related response. Accordingly, opportunities for host interpersonal communication refer to both structured and informal occasions in which migrants could interact directly with the local actors, exchange meanings, ask questions, participate in shared activities, and initiate or sustain interpersonal contact. This dimension, therefore, directs attention not only to whether contact occurred but also to the forms, frequency, and social texture of such interaction (Kim & Kim, 2022; Kim, 2001). The second dimension concerns the extent to which the communication environment enables participation on fair and equal terms. It includes not only openness and hospitality on the part of local hosts, but also practical conditions such as accessibility, welcoming attitudes, and sensitivity to linguistic, cultural, religious, and practical differences. In this sense, receptivity is treated not merely as an individual disposition but as a relational and situational quality of the interactional setting itself (Kim & Kim, 2022; Kim, 2001). In the third dimension, stress is understood at a micro-interactional level, referring to moments of uncertainty, discomfort, misunderstanding, or negotiation that may either facilitate or constrain adaptation-related learning (Kim, 2017). Adaptation-related responses in this study are reflected mainly in participants' curiosity, continued participation, willingness to engage, and other short-term signs of adjustment in the course of interaction. This makes it possible to analyse the tour not as a setting in which adaptation is assumed to occur automatically, but as one in which the quality of interaction and the handling of stressful moments shape whether adaptation-related learning is enabled or constrained (Kim, 2001, 2017).

From this standpoint, integration through cultural heritage represents an emerging approach through which intangible cultural heritage can facilitate migrants' connection to new places while contributing to the host country's cultural identity through co-creative methods that unite migrants and host communities. This asset-based approach can accelerate integration processes by fostering belonging, cross-cultural understanding, and social unity (Pourbahador & Arjomand Kermani, 2025).

2.5. Research positioning

Overall, the literature review suggests that the intersection of migrant integration and tourism remains an emerging and relatively under-researched field, particularly in rural contexts and in initiatives where migrants participate primarily as participants rather than as providers. In addition, as Hoque *et al.* (2022) contend, little is known about collaboration among non-tourism NGOs. More broadly, even less attention has been paid to how tourism initiatives can be conceptualised through CCAT as intentionally structured environments for migrant integration.

By examining and documenting a specific initiative, this study seeks not only to connect tourism-based migrant inclusion, community-based rural tourism, and NGO collaboration but also to show how such initiatives can be interpreted through CCAT as communication-centred spaces of adaptation.

Therefore, the article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it extends existing work on tourism and migrant inclusion by focusing on a rural, host-led, culturally immersive encounter. Second, it reveals that the significance of collaboration lies not only in pooling resources but also in shaping the organisational and communicative conditions through which intercultural contact becomes possible.

Third, it positions the integration tour as a low-threshold space for host interpersonal communication, inclusive host environments, and stress-related responses, thereby clarifying how its integrative potential can be understood theoretically as well as practically.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Case study context

This tour was designed specifically for migrants living in Lodz, Poland. It began at 9:30 AM with participants gathering at the train station and ended at 7:00 PM with the return to the origin. The destination, Czarny Las, is a village in Masovian Voivodeship, 45 km from Warsaw and 115 km from Lodz (Figure 1). It has an area of 1,760 km² and a population of over 800 (Central Statistical Office, 2021).

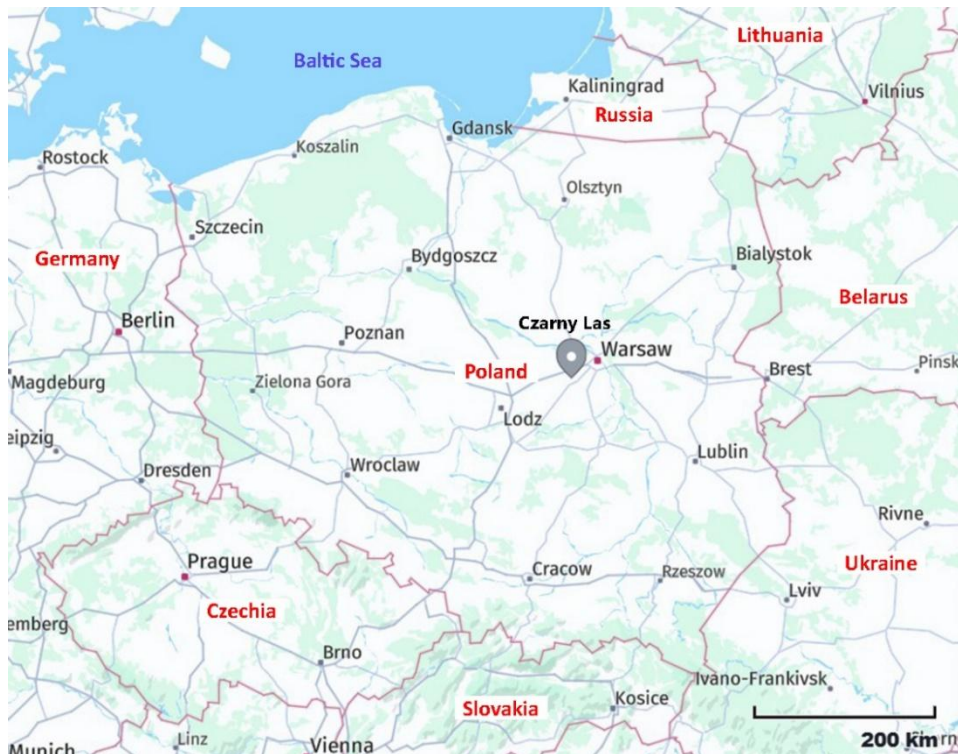


Figure 1. Geographic location of Czarny Las in Poland

A description of the tour steps is shown in Table 1.

3.2 Research design

This study uses a qualitative case study combining participant observation with semi-structured and asynchronous written interviews with the local actors and migrant participants in the tour, thereby increasing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. First, participant observation was conducted during the integration tour in April 2025, allowing the researcher to observe the setting, activities, and interactions as they unfolded. Second, in June, a face-to-face, semi-structured interview was conducted with a representative of Koper Pomaga, the lead organising NGO. Third, written responses were collected in July from the local volunteer who acted as the tour guide and the choir leader, both of whom preferred to answer the interview questions in writing. Finally, during August and September, migrant participants were invited to respond voluntarily to a Google Form with open-ended questions shared in the trip's Facebook group to collect their responses.

Table 1. *The tour steps and their description*

No	Step	Description
1	Advertisement	The tour was promoted through a post on the Koper Pomaga's Facebook page.
2	Registration	Participants filled out a Google form to register for the tour. After receiving a confirmation email, the Koper Pomaga representative asked participants via email and text message to deposit 60 PLN (approximately 15 EUR) for the train ticket via the link to the organisation's account.
3	Number of participants	A total of 21 participants from different nationalities participated.
4	Preparation before the trip	First, the representative asked the participants to join a Facebook group via email and text message so that they could make the necessary arrangements before starting the trip.
5	Heading to the destination:	The participants gathered at the Lodz railway station at the appointed time and took the train to the Czarny Las station. Koper Pomaga had arranged for three vans to transport them to the desired location where the tour would begin.
6	Welcome Reception	Participants had the opportunity to enjoy local drinks and sweets at a villa, introduce themselves, and prepare for the start of the tour.
7	Guided Forest Walk	A local volunteer who is not an official tour guide pointed out native flora and explained the Czarny Las ecosystem and nature.
8	Homemade Village Lunch	After a nearly two-hour walk, participants gathered in a multi-purpose hall and were treated to local food, drinks, and sweets.
9	Local Folklore Choir Performance	Then, a women's choir and dance group performed some folklore songs for the participants. The participants were impressed by the performance and joined in the performance.
10	Donating a souvenir	The representative presented the hosts with a handmade collage poster as a souvenir, featuring a picture of the participants and their countries' flags.
11	Participatory Games	Before leaving the venue and while waiting for the vans to arrive, participants had the opportunity to enjoy group games and football with local children.
12	Returning to the origin	The participants were transported in two groups by van and minibus to the train station and from there returned to the origin of the trip.

The multi-month gaps may have introduced some degree of recall bias, particularly in relation to the details of specific interactions and sequences of events. However, the purpose of the follow-up data collection was not to reconstruct the event in minute detail but to capture the organiser's, participants' and local actors' retrospective reflections on motivations, perceived meanings, memorable moments, and outcomes. This limitation was partly mitigated through triangulation with the participant observation conducted during the tour, as well as by comparing the perspectives of the organiser, local actors, and migrant participants.

Collected data were then analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis was primarily inductive, whereas the interpretation of themes was theory-informed by CCAT as a sensitising theoretical framework. More specifically, three dimensions guided this interpretive stage: opportunities for host interpersonal communication, host receptivity and the inclusiveness of the host communication environment, and moments of stress and adaptation-related response. Rather than being applied as fixed deductive codes, these dimensions served as analytical lenses for examining how migrants interacted with hosts, participated in communicative and cultural activities, and reflected on moments of discomfort, learning, and adjustment. For this purpose, the responses from the organiser's representative were first transcribed verbatim. To analyse the data, MAXQDA software was used. These

transcripts were then open-coded along with the written responses of other participants, allowing themes to emerge inductively. The codes were grouped into categories based on semantic and conceptual relationships (Aslani & Kaczmarek, 2025). To enhance analytical rigour, two researchers independently reviewed and coded the dataset. Any differences in coding or theme interpretation were subsequently discussed until agreement was reached. Triangulation was ensured by comparing findings from the interviews with observational data, increasing the validity and trustworthiness of the results.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1. Participant observation

Participant observation formed the first stage of data collection in this study. It is a research method in which the investigator immerses themselves in a social setting or group, observing and participating in its activities and culture over an extended period to gain an intimate familiarity with the participants' practices and beliefs (Musante & DeWalt, 2010). In this study, it was conducted once, during the integration tour, by the corresponding author, who took part in the full-day event as a participant observer. The observation covered the main stages of the tour and focused on interactions between the organiser, local actors, and migrant participants. Field data were recorded through observational notes written during and immediately after the event.

Recognising that the researcher's background and social position influence the research process, this study explicitly acknowledges the researcher's positionality (Berger, 2015). The corresponding author, a foreign PhD student living in Poland, registered for and participated in the tour after learning about it from a friend. This insider-outsider positionality provided both empathy toward participants' experiences and some practical distance from the organiser and the local host community. This dual position enabled a critical perspective that a local observer might overlook while also creating potential blind spots, such as a lack of understanding of the language and interactions between the organiser and local community members. The researcher's role was thus both participatory and interpretive.

3.3.2. Semi-structured interview with the organiser

As the second stage of data collection, a face-to-face interview was conducted with a representative of Koper Pomaga, the lead NGO responsible for organising the tour. The interview was guided by open-ended questions focusing on motivations, perceived benefits, challenges, and the broader meaning of the integration tour. The conversation lasted about 30 minutes and was audio-recorded with her consent.

3.3.3. Asynchronous written responses from local volunteers and migrant participants

As the third stage of data collection, asynchronous written responses were collected from the local volunteer who acted as the tour guide and the choir leader involved in the folklore performance. Both were invited to participate in interviews, but preferred to respond in writing to a semi-structured set of questions.

For participants, a Google Form containing a set of open-ended questions was shared in the trip's Facebook group, and the participants were invited several times to complete the link voluntarily. This strategy ensured that the invitation reached the entire tour participant population. Although the study aimed for complete coverage of the group, in practice, data relied on self-selection. Ultimately, nine participants answered the questions, representing almost half of the total participants in the tour.

Asynchronous written responses were used primarily for pragmatic and inclusivity-related reasons. The participants and local actors were geographically dispersed after the event, the group was linguistically diverse, and arranging synchronous follow-up interviews was not always feasible. This format allowed respondents to answer at their own pace and in a lower-pressure environment, which was particularly

useful in a multilingual and potentially vulnerable participant group. At the same time, this approach limited opportunities for spontaneous probing and follow-up clarification.

3.3.4. Interview guideline

Four specific interview guidelines, comprising two sections, were developed. The first part collected background information tailored to respondents' roles: for local actors, we recorded age, gender, and education level; for foreign participants, we additionally recorded nationality, length of residence, and reason for residing in Poland. The second part addressed substantive topics. For local actors, it covered motivations for NGO collaboration; division of responsibilities and planning processes; logistical challenges and how they were resolved; preparation and delivery of key activities (forest walk, village lunch, choir performance, and participatory games); observed interactions with the participants; and perceived outcomes for the organiser. For participants, it addressed motivations, expectations, and satisfaction; the perceived cost-effectiveness of the tour; and interactions with local hosts.

3.4. Participants' profile

The profiles of the participants in this study are presented in Table 2. They included three representatives of local NGOs and nine migrant participants, five male and seven female, aged 26-40 years.

The migrants came from different parts of the world, including other European countries (Germany, Belarus, and Ukraine), Asia (China, Hong Kong, India, and Iran), and the Caucasus (Azerbaijan). Their reasons for staying in Poland were multifaceted, ranging from work and study to political or economic displacement from their home countries and a general interest in living in Poland. The length of their stay in Poland varied considerably, from one year to seven years, indicating that the tour was attractive to both newcomers and relatively long-term migrants.

Table 2. *The profile of the respondents*

	Gender	Age	Educational level	Nationality	Length of residence	Reason for residing in Poland
The organiser's representative (OR)	Female	34	Master	-	-	-
The choir leader (CL)	Female	40	Master	-	-	-
The tour guide (TG)	Female	29	Bachelor	-	-	-
Participant 1 (P1)	Male	36	Master	German	5	To find out what life is like in another country
Participant 2 (P2)	Male	29	Master	Belarusian	3	Political and economic situation in my country
Participant 3 (P3)	Female	35	Bachelor	Ukrainian	3	War in Ukraine
Participant 4 (P4)	Male	35	PhD	Chinese	2	Study
Participant 5 (P5)	Female	34	PhD	Chinese (Hong Kong)	3	Interesting city, affordable rental cost
Participant 6 (P6)	Male	28	Master	Azerbaijani	1	Work
Participant 7 (P7)	Female	26	Bachelor	Belarusian	4	Family, work, and a low budget for life
Participant 8 (P8)	Male	27	Bachelor	Indian	7	Work
Participant 9 (P9)	Female	28	Master	Iranian	2	Study

This profile suggests that the event was particularly attractive to a highly educated and mobile population. The group's diversity was not only cultural but also in terms of their migration status and integration stage, enhancing the potential for intragroup cultural exchange alongside initial interactions with Polish hosts. It is worth noting that participants were drawn primarily from the

existing Koper Pomaga community, a sample already somewhat engaged with support networks, which may have positively influenced their acceptance of the initiative.

4. Findings

4.1. Collaboration based on friendship and shared values

The collaboration was not a formal strategic partnership but an organic initiative born from pre-existing personal relationships. The organiser repeatedly emphasised that they initiated the partnership because *“our foundation had some friends in this area.”* (OR) This pre-existing trust lowered the barriers to collaboration.

The primary motivator was a shared, albeit distinct, desire to bridge communities. Each NGO had clear, complementary goals: Koper Pomaga aimed for bidirectional integration: *“We wanted to show the foreigners the Polish countryside... [and] show Polish people that foreigners are great, friendly people.”* (OR) The local NGOs were also driven by a passion for cultural and environmental preservation. The choir leader was inspired by a love for Polish folk songs: *“I always loved to sing, and Polish folk songs just have something about them”* (CL), while the tour guide was motivated by a desire to protect and share her local environment: *“I love nature and am passionate about protecting it. The first step... is understanding it and educating others.”* (TG)

Taken together, this theme suggests that the collaboration was driven not by formal partnership structures, strategic planning, or external funding requirements, but by pre-existing interpersonal trust and a convergence of values among organisations with differing primary missions. In this sense, the initiative was grounded in relationships rather than formal institutional arrangements. Personal ties lowered the threshold for cooperation, while shared commitments fostered a common purpose that aligned diverse organisational roles. At the same time, the informal nature of this collaboration may also indicate a degree of fragility, as its success depends heavily on goodwill, familiarity, and voluntary commitment rather than on formalised procedures or long-term structural arrangements.

4.2. Accessibility, low-threshold participation, and resource bricolage in tour organisation

Arrangements were handled through what was described as the *“standard way”* (OR) of communication, including phone, email, and a Messenger group chat. She reported no significant financial or logistical challenges, highlighting instead the smoothness of coordination and the reliability of participants. Rather than simply indicating organisational smoothness, this points to a grassroots mode of coordination that relied on familiar, low-cost, and widely accessible communication practices. The organiser’s initial concern that coordinating *“such a diverse group might be challenging”* contrasted with their later observation that *“everyone was responsible, punctual, and behaved wonderfully”* (OR), suggesting that the group’s shared goal and mutual respect helped lower practical and interpersonal barriers to participation.

Financially, the tour was also organised in a way that made participation relatively accessible. The trip was kept low-cost by limiting the budget to paying the Rural Housewives’ Association for hosting and meals, while each participant covered their own train ticket. One participant explicitly highlighted *“I liked the price of the trip”* (P4) as a reason to join, while several later described it as *“cheap”* (P2, P3), *“reasonable”* (P1), and *“affordable”*. (P4, P6) In this sense, affordability should not be seen merely as a practical feature but as a condition of low-threshold participation that enables migrants to join without a substantial economic burden.

At the same time, the initiative points to a kind of resource bricolage — namely, the creative mobilisation of limited but diverse financial, social, and human resources already available, which were creatively combined to make this initiative possible. As the choir leader explained, *“We use our own*

means that our organisation gains from selling our produce, we also use subsidies provided by the State". (CL) Similarly, the involvement of an untrained but locally embedded volunteer as a tour guide illustrates how community knowledge, civic commitment, and informal networks substituted for more formal tourism infrastructure. Furthermore, for both the organiser and the choir, this was the first time hosting a group of foreigners in the village, which further underlines the experimental and improvised nature of this urban-rural NGO collaboration.

Overall, this theme highlights how accessibility-orientated design, affordability, and the flexible recombination of local resources contributed to a more receptive and inclusive communication environment. In CCAT terms, these conditions mattered not simply as organisational features but because they lowered barriers to participation and helped make host-migrant interaction more practically and socially accessible.

4.3. A tour for intercultural encounters and social bonding

Across all accounts, the trip functioned as a space for intercultural encounters and social bonding. The organiser explicitly wanted both *"to show the foreigners the Polish countryside"* and to show Polish people that *"foreigners are great, friendly people"* (OR), foregrounding mutual contact as a goal. Observation notes indicate that, before the start of the tour and at the organiser's suggestion, all participants briefly introduced themselves, including their age, nationality and reason for staying in Poland, a simple ritual that lowered initial social barriers and framed the day as an opportunity for mutual learning. One of the participants emphasised the *"atmosphere between the participants"* (P4), describing conversations about traditions, similarities and differences, studies, work and home countries during the walk and breaks. Several explicitly framed these exchanges as *"very informative"* (P4) and *"a great opportunity to socialise with Polish people and other nationalities as well."* (P1)

Interaction with locals occurred through both structured and informal activities. Foreign participants asked questions during the forest excursion, joined the folk dance, chatted in English and Polish, and were hosted by a family who opened their home and provided snacks and drinks. These encounters were largely narrated as warm and hospitable: locals were *"very nice people, hospitable, creative"* and *"sang and danced folk songs for us."* (P4) The observer recorded that during the choir's performance, some participants suddenly became excited and joined them to perform a local dance. The choir members also welcomed them (Figure 2). The choir leader expressed, *"It was unexpected, sure, but we all absolutely loved that the foreigners were so open and seemed eager to learn a few bits of our culture."* (CL)



Figure 2. Participants performing a folk dance with members of the choir (Photo credit: Ehsan Aslani)

Observation notes show this sociality extending beyond the formal programme, as the participants played football with local children (Figure 3) and engaged in a board game and table football with each other. Even while waiting for the minibus, a local child on a bicycle approached the participants and asked in English how they were doing and what their nationality was. After returning to the starting point, following a spontaneous invitation, several participants decided to continue their socialising with each other over drinks and dinner. This is a strong indicator of successful short-term social tie formation.



Figure 3. *Participants playing soccer with local children (Photo credit: Ehsan Aslani)*

These accounts align closely with CCAT's emphasis on host interpersonal communication. They show how repeated, low-stakes encounters with local residents, combined with opportunities for informal conversation and shared activity, created concrete occasions for interpersonal engagement across social and cultural boundaries. In this sense, the tour functioned as a short-term communication space in which adaptation-related processes were supported through direct social contact and the initial formation of interpersonal ties.

4.4. Nature and folklore as universal connectors

The trip offered participants a multisensory experience of rural Poland that combined environmental education with everyday landscapes. The tour guide explicitly used nature to overcome language barriers: "*Nature is there – always, all around us... native flora and fauna don't need you to speak the language.*" (TG) The guided walk through the forest foregrounded ecological elements such as a seasonal river, insects, and vegetation, with the guide explaining "*what grows here*" (TG) and how it fits into the local ecosystem. The observer noticed that participants were particularly surprised when a wild boar piglet appeared on the road ahead of the group. Another participant said they "*picked pine cones and made syrup out of them*" (P6), which became a highlight and a memorable event for him. The observer recorded that the Koper Pomaga's representative invited participants to gather again later to make and taste the drink, linking local knowledge to future social interaction. The observer also noticed that one of the participants saw some litter on the ground and picked it up to throw it in the trash later. Regarding her motivation, she stated, "*I really care about the environment.*" The organiser stated, "*We wanted to show the foreigners the Polish countryside, folklore, and traditional food. We also wanted to show Polish people that foreigners are great, friendly people.*" (OR)

Based on the observations, beyond the forest, participants encountered the village's material culture: they asked about the bus stops decorated with large paintings, learning that they were created by a local artist and served as a memorial to him. The choir performance further deepened the immersion in folk culture. Local women and children performed songs and dances, which participants described as "*Polish*

ethnic music" (P8), *"national dance"* (P7), and a *"concert that the residents... put on for us."* (P4) Participants recalled the atmosphere, the *"delicious treats"* (P4), and the handicraft, including a photo-based collage presented to the host as a token of appreciation (the observer), as collectively constructing a vivid, memorable experience of *"the nature of the Black Forest, the history of this region"* (P4), *"people"* (P8, P9), and *"Polish tradition."* (P3)

From a CCAT perspective, the nature-based and folklore activities offered in a rural setting can be understood as elements of the host communication environment that reduced linguistic demands and made participation more accessible and less intimidating. Rather than requiring extensive verbal competence, these shared sensory and cultural experiences provided entry points for host interpersonal communication and helped create conditions in which unfamiliarity could be encountered in relatively low-pressure ways.

4.5. Ethical sensitivities and inclusion gaps in practice

Alongside overall positive narratives, the data reveal moments where issues of inclusion, communication, and ethics surfaced. Language was a recurrent thread. The guide perceived herself as handling bilingual communication effectively, *"switching between Polish and English"* and needing help only for *"a few words"*. (TG) The observer confirmed that she sometimes had to rely on the Koper Pomaga representative for translation. At the cultural level, hosts expressed uncertainty about how foreigners would respond to local folk culture and noted the need to translate song lyrics to make performances meaningful. The choir leader admitted that they *"weren't sure how you [participants] would respond"* and found it *"something new"* (CL) to have to explain and translate lyrics for an international audience.

Challenges related to training and tour management also emerged. The tour guide faced a practical hurdle: *"Getting everybody's attention to listen when I was talking."* (TG) This points to a need for basic guide training or support tools. In addition, a notable tension emerged with the translator [the Koper Pomaga's representative]. The tour guide noted, *"I think the translator did not like that I was managing without her,"* suggesting potential role ambiguity or friction within the volunteer team. (TG)

Religious and dietary sensitivities also emerged. The observer reported, at the beginning of the tour, a group of local people distributed business cards promoting Christianity (Figure 4), suggesting an element of unsolicited proselytising within an ostensibly secular, leisure-orientated event.

Later, the observation report describes how pork was served without first enquiring about participants' dietary restrictions. Only after consumption did the observer realise the dish contained pork, and given his own diet, he reflected that it would have been better if they had asked about the participants' diets before the ceremony, signalling a missed opportunity for cultural and religious accommodation.

These moments of hesitation and oversight illustrate that the quality of the host communication environment depends not only on opportunities for contact but also on whether interactional settings are genuinely inclusive and sensitive to difference. From a CCAT perspective, the tensions surrounding language, religion, and food can be understood as moments of stress that exposed the limits of host receptivity in practice. Such moments did not automatically lead to adaptation-related learning; rather, their significance depends on how they are recognised, mediated, and addressed in the design of future encounters.



Figure 4. *Distribution of business cards by a group of local people promoting Christianity (Photo credit: Ehsan Aslani)*

4.6. High satisfaction and a successful experiment: a replicable model

The outcomes were overwhelmingly positive across all stakeholder groups, indicating that the initiative met its expectations. All nine participants expressed high satisfaction. They found the tour “affordable” (P4, P6), “incredible” (P5), and a “great opportunity to socialise”. (P1) Their unanimous willingness to participate again signals a strong demand for such initiatives.

The organiser confirmed, “You could say it was a kind of successful experiment!” (OR) She noted regarding the participants: “The feedback was very positive. Everyone really enjoyed the trip. It was a very nice and memorable experience.” (OR) Both the tour guide and choir leader expressed a willingness to participate in future events, indicating that the experience was positive and empowering for them as well.

Read through a CCAT lens, participants’ high satisfaction, willingness to repeat the experience, and reports of new friendships and positive emotions are best interpreted as short-term adaptation-related indications rather than as evidence of long-term intercultural transformation. More cautiously, these responses suggest that the tour created conditions conducive to continued host interpersonal communication and further engagement, while also indicating that participants experienced the communication environment as welcoming and worthwhile.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article examines how three non-tourism NGOs collaborated to design and deliver a rural integration tour for migrants in Czarny Las and how this initiative was experienced by both the organiser and participants. In Czarny Las, collaboration did not emerge from a formal project framework or donor programme but from dense social ties between Koper Pomaga and local rural associations. These informal, trust-based relationships made it possible to organise a relatively complex, multi-stakeholder event and allowed them to circumvent the limited financial resources that are a significant challenge facing NGO organisers (Barnett, 2008; Hoque *et al.*, 2022). This supports arguments that NGOs often mobilise social capital and bridging networks that neither state nor market actors can easily create (Hoque *et al.*, 2022; Ravneberg, 2024). At the same time, in line with Fry and Islar (2021), the case suggests that such friendship-based collaborations can be fragile if not

accompanied by clear role definitions and shared expectations, as evidenced by minor tensions between the tour guide and the translator.

The findings also contribute to research on CBT and rural tourism. Existing studies show that rural tourism can support local development, strengthen social interactions, and sustain cultural heritage when local communities are actively involved (Restrepo Rico & Peterek, 2024; Rindrasih, 2018; Sapkota *et al.*, 2024). In this case, the two Rural Housewives' Associations played a central role in designing and delivering the experience: they provided local food, led the cultural performance, and helped host participants in the village. The tour thus aligns with a CBT model in which residents are not merely service providers but co-creators of the tourism narrative. In line with Ohe (2017) and Jegdić *et al.* (2020), the case illustrates how NGOs can coordinate multiple actors using local resources in sparsely populated rural areas. It adds, however, an integration dimension that is rarely foregrounded in rural tourism research: the village landscape and cultural practices serve as tools for building bridges between long-term residents and new arrivals. In this sense, the rural setting mattered not only as a tourism context but also as a communication environment that made host-migrant encounters more direct, place-based, and socially grounded.

In terms of migrant integration, the tour can be read as a low-threshold intervention that operates through social contact, informal learning, and reflection. Integration research points to the importance of social networks, interaction opportunities, and feelings of belonging for migrants' socio-cultural and psychological adaptation (Hu *et al.*, 2023; Wang & Shen, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2016; Zou & Deng, 2022). Participants in this study emphasised the group atmosphere, conversations with other migrants and locals, and the opportunity to experience a natural and cultural landscape as the most meaningful aspects of the tour. These findings resonate with Ormond and Vietti (2022) and Burrai *et al.* (2023), who show that tourism initiatives involving migrants and refugees can challenge stereotypes and create spaces for critical reflection. Unlike those studies, which centred on migrants as guides or co-creators of tours, our case focused on migrants as guests and learners in a rural context. In line with CCAT, the results suggest that even when migrants are not in leading roles, carefully designed tourism experiences may support adaptation-related processes by creating concrete opportunities for host interpersonal communication within a generally welcoming communication environment.

Nature and folklore emerged as important mediating elements in these encounters. The guided forest walk, the appearance of a wild boar piglet, the explanation of local flora, and the folk choir performance provided shared points of reference that were not heavily language-dependent, allowing participants with different linguistic competencies to engage. This supports arguments that culture and heritage create embodied and affective experiences that are important in migrant integration (Pourbahador & Arjomand Kermani, 2025). At the same time, the need to translate song lyrics and explain cultural references underlines that such universal connectors are never entirely self-explanatory; they require deliberate mediation to avoid exoticising or oversimplifying local culture. From the perspective of CCAT, initiatives that reduce linguistic demands and prioritise shared sensory experiences as forms of host interpersonal communication appear to mitigate the perceived stress of contact. By making adaptive learning more accessible to participants with varying levels of language proficiency, such initiatives effectively support the adaptive dimension of the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic.

The case also surfaces important inclusion challenges and ethical tensions. The distribution of Christian promotional leaflets at the start of the tour and the serving of pork without prior inquiry into dietary or religious restrictions show how well-intentioned initiatives can inadvertently reproduce exclusion or discomfort for some participants. These moments are largely absent from the participants' own narratives, but they are clearly evident in the observation notes. They echo broader concerns in integration and NGO literature about how bridging activities may inadvertently privilege majority

norms if sensitivity to religious, cultural, and dietary diversity is not systematically integrated into planning (Kiliç & Jacquet, 2023; Muraleedharan, 2020). Rather than viewing these incidents as failures, we interpret them as learning opportunities that highlight the need for explicit ethical guidelines in future integration tours, including clear boundaries around proselytising and explicit consultation about food and religious practices. From a CCAT perspective, these moments of discomfort can be seen as instances of stress; it is the way organisers adjust and redesign subsequent tours that determines whether similar stressors will foster new learning and deeper engagement or, conversely, withdrawal and distance. More specifically, they show that host receptivity depends not only on willingness to welcome newcomers but also on whether the communication environment is designed in ways that are linguistically, culturally, and ethically inclusive in practice.

5.1. *Practical implications*

The consistently high levels of satisfaction expressed by both migrants and organisers suggest that the tour was not only a pleasant one-off event but also a promising prototype for future integration-orientated initiatives. Participants' willingness to repeat similar activities and stay in contact with new acquaintances indicates that the experience appears to have generated positive emotions and new social ties, some of which may extend beyond the day itself. From a CCAT viewpoint, they could be interpreted as short-term adaptation-related responses.

For NGOs and policymakers, the findings suggest several concrete implications. First, the case shows that effective integration tours can be organised with modest financial resources by leveraging existing social capital between NGOs. Small grants or municipal support that cover transport, modest honoraria for local hosts, and minimal coordination costs could substantially increase the scalability of such initiatives without overburdening NGOs or participants. Second, the case underscores the importance of clear role definitions and basic training for volunteers acting as guides, translators, or facilitators, particularly around group management, inclusive communication in multilingual settings, and conflict resolution. Such training can help prevent misunderstandings within the organising team and ensure that migrants experience the tour as a safe and welcoming environment.

Third, the findings highlight several design principles that can inform future tour planning. Integration tours should be co-designed with migrants and local actors wherever possible so that expectations, sensitivities, and interests are jointly articulated in advance. Involving migrants in decisions about destinations, activities, and communication formats can enhance their sense of ownership, while consultation with local hosts can help align the tour with existing community capacities and priorities. Fourth, the case underlines the importance of explicit ethical and inclusion protocols. Future tours should implement clear guidelines that prohibit proselytising during integration events and require organisers to collect information about dietary restrictions, religious practices, and accessibility needs in advance (e.g., via registration forms). Such procedures can help ensure that food, symbols, and activities are inclusive rather than inadvertently marginalising certain groups. In CCAT terms, such measures are important because they strengthen host receptivity and make the communication environment more inclusive.

Fifth, flexible scheduling, small group sizes, shared meals, and ample time for informal interaction all contributed to lowering participation barriers and enabling meaningful host interpersonal communication. Organisers in other settings may prioritise multisensory, low-anxiety activities such as guided walks, simple games, or participatory cultural performances that do not heavily depend on language and allow migrants with diverse linguistic competencies to participate on an equal footing. Embedding moments of structured introduction and reflection (e.g., sharing reasons for migration and debriefing at the end of the tour) can further support critical learning and a sense of belonging.

Finally, the findings point to the value of simple monitoring and follow-up mechanisms. Short post-tour feedback forms, optional follow-up gatherings, or online groups can help organisers track whether new social ties and feelings of belonging are sustained over time and identify areas for improvement.

5.2. *Theoretical implications*

Theoretically, this study advances scholarship at the intersection of community-based tourism, migrant integration, and NGO collaboration in several ways. Drawing on CCAT, the study shows how migrant-orientated and community-based rural tourism initiatives may create opportunities for host interpersonal communication, inclusive host environments, and moments of stress and adaptation-related responses. The study also highlights the role of NGOs as intermediary actors, mobilising tourism not only for sustainable destination development but also as a vehicle for migrant integration. Moreover, it expands knowledge in the field of non-tourism NGO collaboration by highlighting the motivations, challenges, and outcomes of partnership in tourism-based integration initiatives.

5.3. *Limitations and directions for future research*

Like all qualitative case studies, this research has limitations. It focuses on a single tour in one Polish village and involves a relatively small number of participants, many of whom were already connected to Koper Pomaga. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalised statistically to all migrants in Poland or to all NGO-led tourism initiatives. The use of asynchronous written interviews, while practical for geographically dispersed respondents, limited opportunities for probing and may have favoured more articulate or motivated participants. A further limitation concerns the temporal gap between the integration tour itself and the follow-up interviews and written responses, which may have affected respondents' recollections, although the follow-up data collection was intended to capture retrospective reflections rather than reconstruct the event in minute detail. In addition, the first author's positionality as a foreign PhD student and tour participant may have shaped both observations and interpretations, despite efforts at reflexivity and triangulation. Moreover, the analysis captures only a snapshot of participants' experiences; from a CCAT standpoint, more cautiously, the study is better suited to identifying short-term opportunities for host interpersonal communication, variation in host receptivity, and moments of stress and adaptation-related response than to demonstrating long-term cross-cultural adaptation.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting comparative studies across different rural contexts and countries, incorporating the perspectives of a larger and more diverse group of migrants and host community members, and using longitudinal designs to trace whether and how such tours have lasting effects on social networks, feelings of belonging, and integration trajectories. Additionally, they could work on NGO collaboration in tourism and pay greater attention to how informal trust and more formal collaborative arrangements are balanced over time. Further studies might also explore more systematically the role of migrants as co-designers, co-organisers, or guides in rural integration tourism, building on the insights of Ormond and Vietti (2022) and Burrai *et al.* (2023). Quantitative or mixed-methods approaches could be employed to measure changes in attitudes, perceived social support, or well-being before and after participation in integration tours. Finally, comparative work between NGO-led initiatives and those organised by municipalities or private tour operators would help clarify what is distinctive about civil-society-driven models of integration tourism.

Funding

This paper was supported by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange [STER NAWA - Internationalisation of Doctoral Schools Programme; grant number BPI/STE/2023/1/00019/U/00001].

Ethics declaration

Before data collection, all participants were fully informed about the purpose of this study and how their answers would be used and stored. They were also assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that the results would be reported in a way that protects their privacy.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Koper Pomaga, especially its representative, Mariia Nowacka, for the valuable support and cooperation provided throughout this research.

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