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PRECARIOUS WORKING CONDITIONS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS IN SERBIA: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ONLINE ARTICLES FROM DAILY NEWSPAPER *DANAS* ABOUT THE LINGLONG FACTORY

Abstract: This study aims to analyse the precarious working conditions experienced by migrant (foreign) workers in Serbia at the Linglong tire factory in Zrenjanin. It seeks to elucidate the nature of these conditions, particularly for labourers from Vietnam and India, in the context of foreign direct investment and the already spotted violations of regulations, abuse of public authority and blatant disregard for human rights at the Linglong factory. Due to limitations in directly collecting data from the foreign workforce, a content analysis method was utilized to examine 156 articles published on the website of the daily newspaper *Danas* from January 2021 to October 2024. This period coincided with heightened media coverage of the challenges faced by migrant workers during the construction and inauguration of the factory. The categories of analysis are themes and concepts related to precariousness, including economic dimension, organisational, social, political, and living conditions, but also interpersonal power imbalances and migrant vulnerability. The findings reveal that precariousness among migrant workers is not confined to poor working conditions but is deeply embedded in a broader institutional and political context. The articles published on the website of the daily newspaper *Danas* predominantly depict negative portrayals of working and living conditions, highlighting issues such as passport confiscation, inadequate living conditions, lack of labour rights, and systemic neglect by political actors. The analysis indicates that migrant vulnerability exacerbates these precarious conditions, facilitating severe forms of exploitation.

Keywords: precarious work, migrant workers, Linglong factory, daily newspaper *Danas*, content analysis

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Prekarni uslovi rada migrantskih radnika u Srbiji: Analiza sadržaja *online* članaka iz dnevnih novina *Danas* o fabrici Linglong

Apstrakt: Cilj istraživanja je analizira prekarne uslove rada migrantskih (stranih) radnika u Srbiji u fabrici guma Linglong u Zrenjaninu. Nastoji da razjasni prirodni ovih uslova, posebno za radnike iz Vijetnama i Indije, u kontekstu direktnih stranih investicija i već uočenog kršenja propisa, zloupotrebe javnih ovlašćenja i očiglednog nepoštovanja ljudskih prava u fabrici Linglong. Zbog ograničenih mogućnosti direktnog prikupljanja podataka od strane radne snage, metodom analize sadržaja proučeno je 156 članaka objavljenih na sajtu dnevnog lista *Danas* od januara 2021. do oktobra 2024. Ovaj period se poklopio sa pojačanim medijskim izveštavanjem o izazovima sa kojima su se suočavali radnici migranti tokom izgradnje i otvaranja fabrike. Kategorije analize su teme i koncepti koji se odnose na prekarlost, uključujući ekonomsku dimenziju, organizacionu, socijalnu, političku i životne uslove, ali i odnose moći i ranjivost migranata. Nalazi otkrivaju da prekarlost radnika migranata nije ograničena na loše uslove rada, već je duboko usađena u širi institucionalni i politički kontekst. Članci objavljeni na sajtu dnevnog lista *Danas* pretežno oslikavaju negativne prikaze uslova rada i života, ističući pitanja kao što su oduzimanje pasoša, neadekvatni uslovi života, nedostatak radnih prava i sistemsko zanemarivanje od strane političkih aktera. Analiza pokazuje da migrantska ranjivost pogoršava ove nesigurne uslove, olakšavajući teške oblike eksploatacije.

Ključne reči: prekarni rad, radnici migranti, fabrika Linglong, dnevne novine *Danas*, analiza sadržaja

Introduction

The concept of precarity is particularly pertinent to migrant populations, who constitute a substantial portion of the global precariat (Standing, 2011) and who, due to the interplay of institutional environment, ethnicity, race, gender, class, and migrant status, often encounter *unexceptional precarity* (Anderson, 2007). Migrant workers' employment is commonly linked to *3D jobs* (dirty, dangerous, demeaning), in sectors such as service (including sex work), domestic work sector, construction, or agriculture, characterised by a lot of maltreatment – such as long working hours, low wages, limited access to benefits, sometimes falling victim to human trafficking, poor living and working conditions. Moreover, migrant workers are particularly vulnerable due to language barriers, discrimination, and limited professional networks. These factors increase the risk of unfair treatment, harassment, and exploitation, especially among undocumented migrants who do not possess work permits (Filipek &

Polkowska, 2020; Kaytan et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2015; Marković, 2018; Ornek et al., 2022; Porthé et al., 2010).

Empirical research on precarious work and precarious employment published from 2011 to 2018 mainly focused on disadvantaged groups such as women, youth, the poor, and immigrants, but more studies are needed on vulnerable populations (Kaytan et al., 2024, p. 20). Additionally, there is a critical need to explore migrant working conditions in semi-periphery and periphery countries (Wallerstein, 2004), as most research has concentrated on advanced capitalist economies (Betti, 2018; Waite, 2009), leaving gaps in understanding South-South migration and issues like Chinese labour dispatch and unfree labour (Crawley & Teye, 2024; Matković, 2021; Sambajee & Scholarios, 2023). This paper aims to make a contribution to this gap, exploring the precarious working conditions of (seasonal) migrant workers from Vietnam and India in the Chinese tire site factory Linglong in Zrenjanin, Serbia. It will do so within the context of foreign direct investment (FDI), which is important because FDI significantly shapes labour markets on the capitalist (semi)periphery.

We employ a content analysis method, focusing on secondary sources due to constraints in direct data collection from the foreign³ workforce. The empirical material of the research is articles accessed through a targeted query “Linglong workers” on the website of the daily newspaper *Danas*. The temporal scope of the analysis extends from January 2021 to October 2024, coinciding with significant media coverage of migrant workers’ hardships during the construction and inauguration of the factory.

Definition of Precarious Work

In scholarly discussions on the concept of precarity, three significant authors often referenced are Pierre Bourdieu (1999), Guy Standing (2011), and Judith Butler (2004), and based on their concepts, the most notable and influential authors on precarious labour, tried to operationalise the notion of precarity (Betti, 2018; Millar, 2017). Precarity is a broader condition that extends beyond the concept of precarious work, serving as a fundamental element in the reproduction of capitalism. Operationalising the concept of precarious work presents several

3 In this paper, the terms *migrant workers* and *foreign workers* are used interchangeably to refer to individuals who come from other countries to work in Serbia. However, foreign workers is more commonly used in local public and media discourse, while migrant workers is the preferred term in international and academic contexts, especially in studies addressing precarious labour conditions, labour migration, and migrant rights.

significant challenges, including the lack of a precise statistical definition, the inability to equate certain existing statistical categories with precarious work directly, and the difficulty in capturing a considerable amount of precarious work in surveys (Kalleberg, 2014), making the notion of precarity an elusive concept (Mai, 2017). Various theories have been proposed to explain precarious employment, including segmentation theories, efficiency wage theory, insider-outsider theory, contract theory, queuing models, and factors like declining union power and labour market deregulation. However, no single theory adequately accounts for all dimensions of precarious employment or the differences observed across countries (Duell, 2004).

The literature on precarious employment highlights two main characteristics: uncertainty and instability, affecting various aspects such as employment duration, social protection, remuneration, workplace relationships, and career paths. Most researchers focus on employment contracts or types of employment situations (non-standard/atypical employment), look at employees' income, working and surrounding environment, negative outcomes of precarious work, organisational processes, or focus on groups most likely to be in precarious work (Pósch et al., 2020; Puig-Barachina et al., 2014). However, whether one analyses employment relations or individual risk of precariousness, using either the contracts approach, choice approach, or the quality of work approach (Broughton et al., 2016), there is a consensus that precarious employment should be operationalised as a multidimensional concept, with different degrees (Duell, 2004; Vosko, 2014) or like the continuum of exploitation (Pósch et al., 2020).⁴ Recent analyses of migrant labour highlight that precariousness extends beyond mere work arrangements to include broader institutional and social contexts, where vulnerability becomes a systemic issue. Boese et al. (2013) suggest an analytical distinction between the *sites* where precarity manifests and the *sources* that generate it. They emphasise that migrant precarity is intricately tied to market regimes, migration policies, and social hierarchies. This framework is particularly relevant in the context of foreign direct investments, such as Chinese investments in Serbia, which raise the question of the relationship between economic development and the systemic production of precarity.

In the late 1980s, Gerry and Janine Rodgers (1989) offered the most impactful and enduring conceptualisation of precarious work (see Betti,

4 Despite the consensus, many academic and public studies continue to use one-dimensional definitions or indicators, primarily concentrating on income levels or employment status, with long-term or full-time contracts often categorized as non-precarious employment (Kreshpaj et al., 2020, p. 242).

2018), identifying four dimensions of precarious employment: temporal (job security and the risk of unemployment), organisational (e.g. pace of work, working conditions); social (union representation, legal and social protection) and economic (adequacy of income). In examining precarious work among migrant workers, some researchers have employed a framework akin to EPRES⁵ (Porthé et al., 2010), while others have utilised Rodgers' concept (Filipek & Polkowska, 2020). A meta-analysis of 20 qualitative studies on precarious migrant workers revealed that the most frequently analysed dimensions are organisational, followed by economic and temporal dimensions, whereas the social dimension has received comparatively less attention. The analysis also identified five new dimensions of precarious work that are particularly relevant to the migrant workforce. These include: 1) *precarity as a conceptual framework for analysing other issues* (health, informal workers...), 2) *strategies of dealing with precarity* (surviving strategies, precarious immigration status trajectories), 3) *individual experience of precarious conditions* (working conditions, which brings it close to the organisational dimension but analyses them only from an individual perspective and in relation to individual experiences), 4) *reasons for the emergence of precarity* (pathways to precarity, sites and sources of precariousness, causes of precarity), and 5) *political dimension* (political immobilisation, labour citizenship, actions that can be taken by governments, civil society organisations, trade unions and employers) (Polkowska, 2019).

While Polkowska conducted an analysis of qualitative studies, Ornek et al. (2022) performed a systematic review that integrated both quantitative and qualitative research on the relationship between precarious employment and the mental health of migrant workers, encompassing a total of 65 studies published from 2003 to 2022. The review identified six key dimensions contributing to precarious employment of migrant workers: 1) *temporariness* (unstable jobs, temporary or short-term positions, and a general lack of job and income security), 2) *low income* (wages that are insufficient to cover basic needs and unexpected expenses), 3) *lacking workers' rights* (lack of essential rights, including health insurance, maternity and sick leave, access to medical care, breaks, holidays, and social security, permission to perform basic rights such as to drink water or use toilet), 4) *disempowerment* (absence of unions, unpredictable salary schedules,

5 The Employment Precariousness Scale (EPRES), initially developed in Spain in 2010 and subsequently revised in 2015, represents one of the most prominent summative measurement tools in the field (Vives et al., 2015). The EPRES is a 22-item six-dimensional scale (temporariness, disempowerment, vulnerability, wages, rights, and exercise rights).

lower payments than usual, barriers like language difficulties and inadequate knowledge of labour rights), 5) *imbalanced interpersonal power relations* (harassment, abusive treatment, authoritarian management, and unfair working conditions and treatment, physical violence), 6) *vulnerability* (fear of termination for voicing concerns, feel easily replaceable, work under inconsistent conditions, receive lower pay than non-migrants, and face discrimination and racism).

Chinese Factories in Serbia

Although the European Union is Serbia's leading economic partner, China ranks second in trade, loans, and investments. Between 2012 and 2020, Serbia attracted €21.165 billion in FDI, with significant Chinese acquisitions alongside French investments (Stanković, 2023). Since 2012, Serbia has actively promoted Chinese investment through the China-CEEC cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative, with Chinese investments surpassing \$3 billion from 2016 to mid-2022 (Ivanović & Zakić, 2023). Serbia's government has prioritised attracting Chinese FDI to create jobs and benefit elites, often overlooking environmental and labour rights issues. As Southeast Europe's top recipient of Chinese FDI (Marjanović et al., 2021), Serbia pursues these investments to maintain diplomatic ties with China (Krstinovska & Alexandris, 2023), promoting a narrative of "salvific aid" while deflecting scrutiny on human rights and environmental concerns (Prelec, 2020).

The arrival of Shandong Linglong Tire Company in Zrenjanin, the first Chinese tire manufacturer in Europe, highlights significant issues regarding FDI and labour rights (ASTRA, 2022). As part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, Linglong's operations have raised concerns about the treatment of foreign workers. The case illustrates systemic problems within China's labour dispatch system in Serbia. Strengthened Sino-Serbian relations through the institutionalisation of China's labour dispatch system in Serbia led to lifted visa restrictions and laws that negatively impacted workers' rights, including ratification of the Law on Confirmation of Agreement on Social Security with China in September 2018 that regarding social insurance contribution only Chinese labour law applies to Chinese migrant workers in Serbia for the first five years of their stay⁶, and

6 While the Agreement indeed specifies that only Chinese regulations apply to Chinese workers for social insurance contributions during the first five years of their stay, it does not imply that Chinese labour law is the sole governing framework for these workers. The term *regulations* as defined in the Agreement pertains specifically to

that exempted dispatched Chinese workers from Serbian social security contributions, making Serbia unique in Europe in this regard (Matković, 2021; Wu et al., 2023). In late 2021, about 500 of 750 Vietnamese workers building the Linglong tire factory went on strike due to inadequate essentials like heating, electricity, food, and clean water. The situation received significant media attention (see Dragojlo, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2024) and condemnation from European Parliament members (ASTRA, 2022; Matković, 2021; Todić, 2023). The European Parliament passed a resolution addressing forced labour and potential human trafficking for labour exploitation in Serbia, focusing specifically on Linglong (Resolution on Forced Labour in the Linglong Factory and Environmental Protests in Serbia (2021/3020(RSP)), 2021).

The case of 750 Vietnamese workers clearly showed one of the employment archetypes used by Chinese multinational corporations (MNCs) to manage labour mobility. MNCs seek stable workforces by adapting to migrant labour changes and reducing turnover through internal transfers, agreements, and agency mediation. The “thin paternalism” archetype describes how companies control labour mobility through employment contracts that may sidestep European regulations, depending on state agreements. Matković (2021) reconstructed how and when the dispatching to Serbia took place in the case of 750 Vietnamese workers. The Vietnamese workers were not directly employed by Linglong but were dispatched through Chinese intermediary companies (Tianjin Electric Power Construction Company and Sichuan Dinglong Electric Power Engineering Co. Ltd – a well-established subsidiary of China Energy Engineering Group Corp., has operated in multiple countries, including Serbia, while Sichuan Dinglong was registered in 2020) that contracted Vietnamese labour agencies (Bao Son Labor Export Company and Song Ho Gia Lai International Company Limited). Linglong acted as an overseas contracting enterprise, engaging local Serbian firms, while the Vietnamese agencies operated as foreign labour service providers, not governed by Chinese law. The contracts provided to the workers were reportedly misleading and did not comply with either Serbian law or international labour standards. The lack of diplomatic relations between Serbia and Vietnam left them vulnerable while working in a poorly monitored duty-free trade zone in Zrenjanin. Around 500 workers went on strike, attracting media attention. Employers then moved them to five different sites in Zrenjanin, each with different conditions, after the original location was deemed uninhabitable by the labour inspectorate.

social insurance matters, thus indicating that Serbian labour law remains applicable to other aspects of employment.

Since its establishment in Serbia in 2018, China Energy Engineering Group Tianjin Electric Power Construction (CEEG TEPC) has faced legal challenges and allegations of labour exploitation and lawsuits from Serbian companies for unpaid debts.⁷ In January 2022, Serbia's Labour Inspectorate discovered that 318 Vietnamese workers were employed by CEEG TEPC without proper work permits. Additionally, while six Indian workers received permits in 2023 under a 'posted workers' arrangement, many others were misclassified (around 70), enabling the company to bypass legal employment protocols. Fourteen Indian nationals have formally submitted grievances to the relevant local authorities. Indian workers, like their Vietnamese counterparts, were lured to Serbia by recruitment agencies such as M&S International with promises of well-paying jobs, only to encounter poor working conditions marked by unpaid salaries and passport confiscation, often leading them into debt bondage. Linglong and its subcontractor deny involvement with Indian workers, claiming their contract with CEEG TEPC ended in September 2022. International companies, such as MAN Truck & Bus (a subsidiary of Volkswagen-owned commercial vehicle manufacturer Traton), have ended a tire supply and ties with the Linglong plant due to concerns over human rights violations, signalling a potential reputational risk for foreign investments in Serbia (Stahl & Dragojlo, 2024).

Methodological Framework

A content analysis method in quantitative form is used to investigate the precarious working conditions experienced by migrant workers at the Linglong tire factory in Zrenjanin. The choice of content analysis method is primarily influenced by the challenging possibility of directly gathering data from the foreign workforce. The research's empirical material consists of articles that are published on the website of the daily newspaper *Danas* from January 2021 to October 2024, i.e. in the period of media coverage of migrant workers' hardships during the construction and inauguration of the factory. Articles from online daily newspaper *Danas* were selected for analysis due to its frequent reporting on the research topic. Since its founding in 1997, *Danas* has inherited the tradition of independent media, which enables it to report on topics such as the precarious working conditions of migrant workers at the Linglong factory, which pro-regime media mostly do not report on and seldom published news are non-objective.

7 The factory is crucial to China's strategy in the European automotive supply chain, supported by the Serbian government.

The sample of analysed articles is non-probabilistic due to the researcher's choice of every population unit according to the research subject (Manić, 2017). The website of the daily newspaper *Danas* contains 221 articles obtained through a targeted query "Linglong workers". Initially, five texts were not included in the study since they were written before the period covered by the research. Of the remaining 216 texts published from January 2021 to October 2024, the analysis includes only those that (in) directly deal with the precarious working conditions of migrant workers in Linglong, not all of them. The themes of 60 texts are irrelevant. The research sample consists of 156 texts pertaining to the working conditions of foreign workers in Linglong, with 95 focusing on it directly and 61 addressing this issue indirectly. Direct texts are the primary focus of analysis, while indirect texts provide context of interest for the foreign workforce in the Linglong factory.

Units of analysis are themes and concepts. The theme indicates the topic of the article, and the concepts are dimensions of precarity that are referred to in the text. The articles' themes are defined inductively because of the impossibility of making their complete a priori predictions, particularly considering the expected differences between the topics of indirect and direct texts about precarious working conditions of migrant workers in the Linglong factory. Themes of indirect articles are media reporting about Linglong factory in Zrenjanin, labour rights in Serbia, Chinese investments in Serbia and others. Direct article themes discuss living and working conditions of workers, the government's attitude towards workers' living and working conditions, reactions of the non-governmental public to living and working conditions of workers, etc. (see Table 3).

Contrary to the inductive approach that was used to identify themes in the articles, the concepts were derived deductively from previous operationalisation of precarious work, considering the specificities of the precariousness of foreign workers, as well as secondary data sources about them (Table 1). Furthermore, the analysis aims to assess the value orientation linked to these themes, classifying them as positive, negative, or neutral.

Both authors coded the articles independently. The inter-rater reliability, as assessed by Scott's pi index of intercoder agreement, was 0.9 for themes of indirectly related articles, 0.86 for their value orientation, 0.92 for themes of directly related articles, 0.94 for their value orientation, and 0.94 for concepts (dimensions of precarity). The authors resolved disagreements through discussion.

Table 1. Conceptual categories used in the analysis of the dimensions of precarious work

Concept (dimensions of precarity)	Examples
Economic	Economic hardship, earnings, wage amount, regularity of payment
Temporal	Job (in)security, temporary or short-term contracts
Social	Labour rights: health insurance, sick leave, holidays, union representation, right to strike
Organisational	Workplace conditions: training, equipment provision
Imbalanced interpersonal power relations	Restriction of movement, passport confiscation, psychological/physical abuse
Political	Actors responsible for or involved in regulation: Serbian president, prime minister, ministries, inspectors, police, NGOs, trade unions, media, Linglong staff
Living conditions and consequences of precariousness	Housing, nutrition, clothing; extreme outcomes (e.g. suicide attempts due to poor conditions)
Migrant vulnerability	Language barriers, lack of rights awareness, fear/possibility of deportation, debt bondage
General	Mentions of poor working conditions without specific reference to some dimension of precarity

Precarious Working Conditions of Migrant Workers at the Linglong Factory

The analysis begins by exploring themes of 156 articles from the website of the daily newspaper *Danas* that (in)directly address the precarious working conditions faced by migrant workers at the Linglong factory in Zrenjanin. Content analysis of themes helps to identify the context in which interest in this issue arises. The articles that indirectly address the precarious conditions faced by Linglong migrant workers (n=61) predominantly emphasised themes such as (strained) media coverage of events that taken place at or were related to the factory (26.23%), labour rights in Serbia (22.95%), and broader issues related to Chinese investments in Serbia (9.83%) (Table 2). Within this group, a substantial majority of the articles (83.60%) conveyed a negative tone.

Table 2. Themes and value orientation of indirect articles on migrant workers' precarity at the Linglong factory (%)

Theme	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Media reporting about the Linglong factory in Zrenjanin	6.56	1.64	18.03	26.23
Labor rights in Serbia	-	-	22.95	22.95
Chinese investments in Serbia	-	1.64	8.19	9.83
Legal aspects of the Linglong factory construction in Zrenjanin	-	-	6.56	6.56
Event or person of the year 2021	1.64	-	4.92	6.56
Arrival of migrant workers in Serbia	-	-	4.92	4.92
Foreign reactions to events related to the Linglong factory	-	-	4.92	4.92
Reactions of animal welfare societies	-	-	3.28	3.28
Other	3.28	1.64	9.83	14.75
Total	11.48	4.92	83.60	100

The most frequent themes in direct articles about the precarious conditions faced by Linglong migrant workers (n=95) included reactions of the non-governmental public to migrant workers' working and living conditions (30.53%), descriptions of workers' working and living conditions (27.36%), and the government's stance (22.1%) (Table 3). Direct articles were also very critical: 82.11% of them had a negative orientation. Taken together, these findings indicate that reporting by the newspaper *Danas*, both direct and indirect, was overwhelmingly negative in tone, reflecting widespread concern over labour exploitation, institutional silence, and the broader implications of foreign investment practices.

Table 3. Themes and value orientation of direct articles on migrant workers' precarity at the Linglong factory (%)

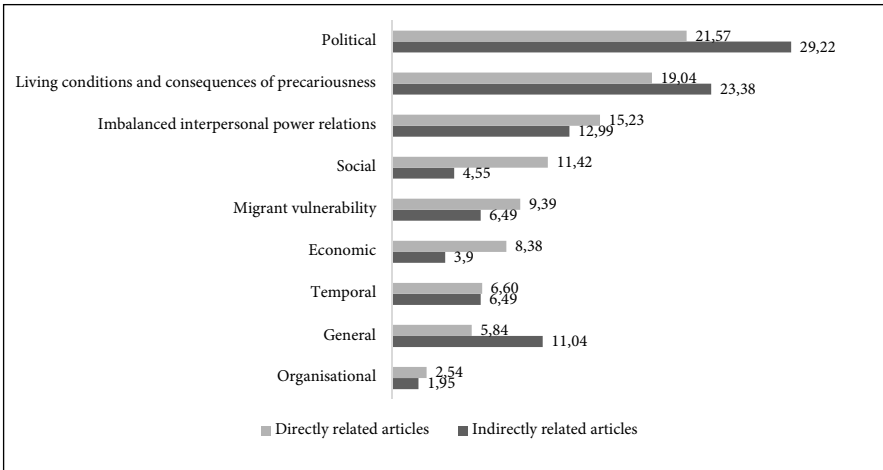
Theme	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Reactions of the non-governmental public to migrant workers' working and living conditions	-	-	30.53	30.53
Living and working conditions of migrant workers	-	9.47	17.89	27.36
Government's attitude towards migrant workers' working and living conditions	-	1.05	21.05	22.1
Media reporting on migrant workers' working and living conditions	-	-	6.32	6.32
Migrant workers' strike	-	2.11	4.21	6.32
Humanitarian aid to migrant workers	1.05	3.16	1.05	5.26
Other	-	1.05	1.05	2.1
Total	1.05	16.84	82.11	100

Analysis of the directly related articles indicates the primary emphasis on Vietnamese labourers (74%). Workers from India are featured in 9% of the articles, 6% pertain to Chinese workers, and remaining articles discuss two groups of migrant workers. Analysis of the temporal distribution of articles published in *Danas* reveals a notable surge in media attention concerning the topic of precarity in November 2021, when over half of all articles (53.7%) were released. The majority of articles (more than 70%) were published in 2021, followed by a sharp decline in subsequent years. This sudden explosion of media interest at the end of 2021 immediately coincides with a protest by Vietnamese workers, who went on strike due to the lack of basic living conditions such as heating, electricity, food and clean water. Although there have been previous reports of poor working conditions in Chinese factories in Serbia, such as the January 2021 demonstration at the Bor gold and copper mine, the Linglong case has attracted much wider attention, not only from the domestic public and media, but also from international actors, including members of the European Parliament. At the end of 2021, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on forced labour and possible human trafficking in Serbia, aimed precisely at the Linglong case. This trend shows that the issue of worker precariousness briefly gained traction in public discourse in late 2021 due to exploitation at a previously unprecedented level. However, media interest waned quickly, despite migrant workers' unchanged working and living conditions, illustrating the "wave" reporting pattern where topics receive intense coverage for a short time before fading. This reflects a reactive media discourse on the precarity of migrant workers, lacking a sustained examination of labour exploitation in foreign investment projects, and highlights deeper patterns of political and social neglect regarding the rights of marginalised labour groups.

Dimensions of Precarity: Hyper-precarious Lives

Chart 1 illustrates the various concepts identified in articles from the newspaper *Danas* concerning the precarious position of foreign workers employed at the Linglong factory construction site. Each dimension of precarity is quantified based on its frequency of occurrence in the analysed articles categorised into two groups: those that explicitly address the precarity of these workers, focusing on issues such as working conditions, rights violations, and systemic challenges, and those that reference the topic indirectly, typically within the context of broader discussions about investments, political developments, or international relations.

Chart 1. Prevalence of precarity dimensions in newspaper articles that (in)directly address workers' precarity at the Linglong factory (%)



The political dimension and living conditions are clearly reflected in both sets of texts, with these themes appearing in 21.57% and 19.04% of directly related articles, and in 29.22% and 23.38% of indirectly related articles. This distribution suggests that the precariousness experienced by foreign workers is not solely viewed as a result of inadequate working conditions, but rather as a reflection of deeper structural issues, the intricate relationship between labour exploitation and the mechanisms of political power and institutional neglect.

A closer examination of the political dimension reveals the roles and actions of various actors responsible for regulating the working conditions of foreign workers. Discussions often highlight key figures, including the President, Prime Minister, ministers, labour inspectors, and international representatives like the Chinese ambassador in Serbia and European Parliament members. Critiques of institutional inaction are evident in phrases like “the state closes its eyes” and “no one reacted.” Trade unions, NGOs, and the media also contribute to the discourse on accountability. This highlights that the conditions faced by foreign workers result not only from private business practices but also from a broader institutional context and political decisions, framing the migrant workers’ positions as a systemic issue of neglect and complicity rather than an individual failure.

The dimension of living conditions and consequences of precarity highlights the severe material deprivation faced by foreign workers. Ar-

ticles described inadequate and makeshift accommodations, such as barracks and containers, where workers often lack heating, basic sanitation, and essential infrastructure. The absence of necessary living conditions (insufficient food, inadequate clothing, and sleeping without mattresses) leads to dire consequences, including exhaustion, illness, mental breakdowns, and even suicide attempts. This precarity extends beyond work hours, merging living and working spaces into a cycle of hyper-precarious lives (Lewis et al., 2015).

The presence of dimension of imbalanced power dynamics is particularly pronounced in articles that focus on the precarious position of foreign workers (15.23%). Imbalanced interpersonal relations manifest in narratives detailing the confiscation of workers' passports, forced labour, restrictions on freedom of movement, prohibitions on communication with journalists, and instances of threats and psychological pressure. Workers are frequently portrayed as trapped in camps, without the ability to leave the area, even when they wish to return to their home countries. The management and security personnel of the Linglong factory are identified in articles as key enforcers of this control, leaving workers in a state of complete dependence. These factors illustrate an extreme power imbalance in which foreign workers are not only subjected to labour subordination but are also physically and legally disenfranchised. The concept of precariousness cannot be understood solely as employment instability; rather, it signifies a form of discipline characterised by unfreedom, which places workers on the fringes of law and rights.

Furthermore, the social dimension of precarity, present in 11.42% of directly related articles, and in 4.55% of indirectly related articles, notably the lack of adherence to established legal and normative frameworks, suggests that the employment situations of migrant workers frequently occur outside of any institutional protection. The social dimension highlights violations of fundamental labour rights, including the practice of working without contracts or with invalid documentation (such as the absence of a start date), the inability to utilise sick leave, unpaid overtime, and limited access to healthcare services. The articles also include instances of dismissals linked to efforts to organise a union and attempts to reassign workers who voiced dissatisfaction to different construction sites.

Migrant vulnerability is evident in the 9.39% of directly related articles, and in 6.49% of indirectly related articles through various interconnected forms of insecurity. Workers do not know the language of the host country, are unaware of their rights, and do not know where to seek help. A number have incurred debts for employment in Serbia (some as high

as 5,000 euros), placing them in debt bondage, and precarity of place – vulnerability to removal from a country (Banki, 2013). Cases have been reported where passports are withheld, visas expire, and workers find themselves “trapped” with no option for return. In other words, beyond legal insecurity, there are also emotional and existential concerns, characterised by fears of the unknown, repression, deportation, and financial devastation.

The economic, temporal, and organisational dimensions of precarity are the least represented in articles that explicitly address the precarity of migrant workers in Linglong factory, accounting for 8.38%, 6.6%, and 1.95%, respectively, and even less in indirectly related articles. This can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it may suggest an inadequate in-depth exploration of specific work arrangements, employment conditions, and workers’ rights within the media, given that precariousness is a multifaceted phenomenon that transcends political factors and the poor living conditions often associated with migrant workers. Secondly, the limited representation of these aspects of precarity might indicate a normalisation of fundamental exploitation in public discourse, as if unpaid wages and lack of training and equipment are no longer perceived as a problem, but as an expected part of the work regime for this population.

Conclusion

The precarious working conditions experienced by migrant workers at the Chinese Linglong tire factory in Zrenjanin, Serbia, underscore a broader narrative of exploitation that characterises the intersection of global capital and local labour markets. This study has employed a content analysis of articles published in the online daily newspaper *Danas* to illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of precarity faced by these workers, particularly those from Vietnam and India. By analysing media coverage from January 2021 to October 2024, the research provides insights into the lived realities of migrant labourers within the context of FDI and the socio-political landscape of Serbia.

The analysis of media portrayals of foreign workers in Serbia shows that precariousness is not limited to working conditions but permeates a wider institutional, political, and social context. *Sites of precariousness* (see Boese et al., 2013) in this case are clearly recognised in the working and living conditions: the factory and accommodation function as closed areas of control, where the confiscation of passports, prohibition of movement, threats, but also extremely bad living conditions (cold, hunger, lack of

basic hygiene) are manifested. Also, institutional passivity and exclusion from the labour and health protection systems point to legal and administrative structures as additional areas of vulnerability. The media reporting records attempts at resistance (workers' strikes), but also the rapid suppression of those initiatives, thus confirming the existence of a firm hierarchy of power within the labour regime.

On the other hand, the *sources of precariousness* include a combination of migration policy, market logic and the political economy of foreign investments. The role of FDI in the contemporary socio-political landscape of Serbia is crucial for understanding why and how the precariousness of these workers is naturalised and institutionally tolerated. The political elite in Serbia uses FDI as a means of economic legitimacy and foreign policy balancing, with foreign companies (in this case, from China) presenting themselves as partners in development, often while consciously ignoring labour standards and oversight. Such an economic-political alliance produces a situation in which labour rights are subordinated to the strategic interests of the state and political elites at any cost. In addition, migrant vulnerability (workers' indebtedness, legal insecurity, ignorance of language and rights) indicates that migration policies and their instrumentalisation by employers further deepen their subordination.

Finally, migrant vulnerability functions as a mediator of precarity, enabling deeper and more severe forms of exploitation. Migrant vulnerability operates both as a source, structurally rooted in migration regimes, debt cycles, and legal exclusions, *and* as a site, where these vulnerabilities are enacted and reproduced through spatial confinement, restricted mobility, and social isolation. In sum, the analysed articles show how precariousness simultaneously takes place locally (in physical, legal and social space), but is also a product of political decisions, market strategies and global economic relations.

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