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The citizenship-integration nexus from below: migrants' understanding of citizenship acquisition as a pathway to integration in Italy and Spain

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ABSTRACT

Citizenship acquisition represents a crucial step to achieve full integration in the country of residence. Yet, citizenship studies have largely addressed the relevance of institutional configuration of citizenship regimes to foster integration while sidelining migrants' subjective understanding of citizenship as a pathway to integration. The objective of this article is to gather empirical evidence of migrants' understanding of how citizenship acquisition shapes integration. It argues that the subjective dimension of citizenship acquisition is crucial to understand the citizenship-integration nexus beyond policies, institutions and legal norms. Empirical findings have been structured along three themes that are considered relevant for integration: well-being, sense of belonging, and trust. Analysis is based on 50 semi-structured interviews conducted in Italy and Spain with migrants from Ecuador, Brazil, Morocco, the Philippines, and Romania. Italy and Spain have been chosen for comparison as two countries with a similar migration history but different citizenship regimes. Results show that in both countries citizenship acquisition is related with increasing well-being and sense of trust, while the sense of belonging overlaps with a sense of non-belonging linked to discriminatory attitudes perceived in everyday practices, despite the legal inclusion through citizenship acquisition.

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1. Introduction

The process of socio-legal integration of migrants represents a significant challenge for contemporary societies. Scholars emphasise the importance of citizenship acquisition as a crucial step to achieve full integration in the country of residence (Bauböck et al. 2013; Wallace Goodman 2012). The underlying assumption of the citizenship-integration nexus is that citizenship acquisition promotes equality, social cohesion, and

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'produces belonging and enables incorporation' in the different realms of social life (Barbulescu, Wallace Goodman, and Pedroza 2023, 2). As the Migration Observatory has recently highlighted, 'naturalization might be thought of as a particularly cost-effective integration policy where the cost of naturalizing foreign citizens is close to zero, and the return – in proportion to the investment – is therefore massive' (Migration Observatory 2023, 53).

In light of the pivotal role ascribed to citizenship acquisition in the integration of migrants, citizenship studies have devoted particular interest to the question of whether liberal citizenship regimes facilitate the integration process (Bauböck and Vink 2013). While the majority of citizenship studies address the institutional configuration of citizenship regimes, migrants' subjective understanding of citizenship acquisition as a pathway to integration is largely sidelined. Empirical studies of the meaning that migrants attach to citizenship acquisition – and its relevance in the process of identification with the country of residence – are scarce (Bloemraad 2018). Indeed, is it really everything about policy, institutions and legal norms? How do migrants understand the link between citizenship acquisition and integration? Does citizenship acquisition foster a stronger attachment to the country of residence?

To answer these questions, this article explores the subjective dimension of citizenship acquisition, inquiring to what extent citizenship acquisition can 'help immigrants to feel more like equal members of society' (Solano and Huddleston 2020, 42). We analyse migrants' perspectives on citizenship acquisition and integration in Italy and Spain, two countries chosen for comparison because they share a similar history of late migration but have different degrees of openness in their citizenship regimes (Pasetti 2021).

This article aims to contribute to the current academic debate in two ways. Firstly, it highlights the often overlooked perspectives of migrants on how citizenship acquisition affects their integration into the host society. Secondly, it examines two Southern European cases that remain under-researched compared to the well-documented studies on citizenship and integration in older European migration countries like France, the Netherlands, or Sweden (Vink, Peters, and Beverlaender 2021).

The article is structured into three sections. After a brief overview of the existing literature on the institutional and subjective dimensions of the citizenship-integration nexus, the second section of the article sketches out the main features of the Italian and Spanish citizenship regimes. The third section presents the findings of the fieldwork conducted in Italy and Spain. The research is based on 50 semi-structured interviews with migrants from Ecuador, Brazil, Morocco, the Philippines and Romania[1] who fulfil the requirements to acquire citizenship in the respective country of residence. The article concludes with a discussion of the complex nature of the citizenship-integration nexus that extends beyond policies, institutions, and legal norms to encompass migrants' perceptions, understandings, and experiences.

2. The citizenship-integration nexus: the institutional versus the subjective dimension

Citizenship studies largely focused on the relevance of more or less liberal norms for migrants' integration. Liberal norms for dual citizenship and *ius soli* are considered to facilitate migrants' successful integration, whereas the correlation between liberal

citizenship regimes and migrants' interest in citizenship acquisition has been largely demonstrated (Bauböck et al. 2013; Vink, Peters, and Beverlaender 2021). As Barbulescu, Wallace Goodman, and Pedroza (2023, 1) argue, 'the procedure of naturalisation, where a migrant completes a series of requirements to obtain citizenship, […] becomes synonymous with a process of immigrant integration'.

The recent debate on instrumental citizenship has decentred the importance of the relationship between citizenship and integration, by focusing on citizenship acquisition as a strategic tool to stabilise their residence, to enhance upward mobility or to relocate to another country (Harpaz and Mateos 2019). The instrumental use of citizenship acquisition, where citizenship is conceived as clearly disconnected from identity (Joppke 2010, 2019), has been analysed in the cases of migrants of different origin in Italy (Della Puppa and Sredanovic 2017), intra-EU migrants in the context of Brexit (Sredanovic 2022) or Latin Americans in the UK (Mateos 2015). Kim (2019) describes how Korean Chinese migrants instrumentally use their 'ethnic capital' to gain better labour market and mobility opportunities within and beyond northeast Asia, leveraging their Korean passport.

Nevertheless, several quantitative studies confirm the positive effect of citizenship acquisition on migrants' integration, showing how naturalisation can be considered a strong predictor of integration (Huddleston and Vink 2015). Recent longitudinal studies have highlighted the existence of a positive correlation between citizenship acquisition and permanent settlement. Naturalisation acts as a 'catalyst for integration' (Gathmann and Garbers 2023) and is particularly relevant for the integration of migrants in precarious situations such as refugees (Kahn and Ziegler 2020). Further studies show the existence of a correlation between citizenship acquisition and migrants' socio-economic (e.g. Helgertz, Bevelander, and Tegunimataka 2014; Hoxhaj, Vink, and Breuer 2020; Huddleston 2020; Vink, Peters, and Beverlaender 2021) or political integration (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2015). Other studies have demonstrated that the significance of mobility capital conveyed through passports must be contextualised, taking into account socio-demographic characteristics and the specific categories of migrants involved (de Hoon, Vink, and Schmeets 2020).

On the other hand, recent literature also has called into question that citizenship acquisition is a sufficient condition to grant the expected equal opportunities in the fields of education, employment, health or housing. Ethnicity, economic resources as well as language proficiency contribute to social stratification and generate unequal access to rights, resources and opportunities that shape migrants' experiences of belonging (Bloemraad 2018). Moreover, everyday practices of membership that extend beyond the formal acquisition of citizenship gained increasing attention. As Brubaker argued, 'nation membership in a more informal sense […] is not administered by specialized personnel but by ordinary people in the course of everyday life, using tacit understandings of who belongs and who does not, of us and them' (Brubaker 2010, 65). Over the last two decades, citizenship scholars increasingly focused their attention on the subjective dimension of citizenship (Aptekar 2016; Bloemraad 2018; Miller-Idriss 2006). As several scholars showed, there is no straightforward correspondence between formal citizenship and perceived position in the national hierarchy of belonging. The latter is rather shaped by factors, such as race and gender, that extend well beyond the new legal status of citizens (Bivand Erdal, Doeland, and Tellander 2018; Money et al. 2023). Emotional attachment and subjective meanings turned into a key perspective for research on

migrants' integration (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Godin and Sigona 2022). Migrants' concern about legal stability often coexists with the emotional meanings attached to the new citizenship status (Pogonyi 2019; Yapo 2022). Recent qualitative studies have shown that strategic decisions to acquire citizenship are often accompanied by feelings of belonging to the new country of citizenship, as in the case of Italians and Spaniards in the EU or naturalised migrants in Norway (Birkvad 2019; Bivand Erdal, Doeland, and Tellander 2018; Dimitriadis and Quassoli 2022). Integration involves how migrants view their place in society and how this affects their optimism and loyalty to their country of residence (McMillan 2017, 104).

This article dialogues with existing literature that explores whether migrants perceive citizenship acquisition as a pathway to integration. We argue that focusing on migrants' perceptions provides us with a still under-researched bottom-up perspective to delve into the complex bond between the individual and the state. We aim at including the subjective dimension into the existing knowledge on the citizenship-integration nexus. To this end, this article draws upon the narratives of migrants residing in Italy and Spain to explore how migrants understand the link between citizenship acquisition and integration. Building on a previous comparative study of the Italian and Spanish citizenship regime (Finotelli, La Barbera, and Echeverría 2018), the final aim of this article is to elucidate how migrants understand citizenship acquisition as a pathway to integration in two understudied Southern European countries.

3. The context: citizenship acquisition in Italy and Spain

Italy and Spain are two Southern European countries with a late immigration history in which concerns about migration control largely predominated over integration issues. Due to the lack of legal entry channels, most migrants in Italy and Spain experienced a period of irregular residence before obtaining their first residence permit. Indeed, most migrants in the two countries have experienced more or less long periods of irregularity in their migratory trajectories before obtaining their residence permit and eventually acquiring citizenship. In both countries, the integration process is largely the result of a *de facto* labour market inclusion that is followed by the obtention of the first residence permit through a mass or individual regularisation (the so-called *arraigo* in Spain or *sanatoria* in Italy). Despite the lack of an overarching integration concept, Italy and Spain do not perform worse than their Northern European counterparts in managing migrants' structural inclusion (Ponzo 2021). In both countries, most migrants are long term residents, and the rates of citizenship acquisition are now above the European average (Eurostat 2024). Such trends underscore the evolution of Italy and Spain from latecomers into mature immigration countries with established paths towards full legal integration through citizenship acquisition. Yet, these paths are embedded in different legal frameworks.

Italian citizenship is recognised by descent to everyone born of an Italian parent irrespectively of the place of birth (*ius sanguinis*). Italian citizenship may also be acquired through residence (Act 91/1992). The general rule is that foreigners may apply for Italian citizenship after ten years of legal residence. Additionally, children born in Italy to foreign parents who live in the country can apply for citizenship when they turn 18. A reduced five-year residency requirement is available for stateless persons and refugees. Foreigners married to an Italian citizen can acquire citizenship after two years – a

requirement that is halved in case of marriage with children. A favourable treatment is foreseen for EU citizens who are subject to a reduced residency requirement of four years.

For non-EU country nationals, holding a long-term residence permit is a pre-condition for citizenship acquisition (Decree 572/1993, Italian State Council 799/1999). To obtain a long-term residence permit, non-EU country nationals are required to provide evidence of continuous residence, income exceeding the minimum yearly income, and suitable accommodation. Applicants must also provide proof of temporary employment, self-employment, or family ties. Additionally, they are required to pass a language test (Act 94 /2009), for which Level A2 (basic knowledge) is needed (Decree of June 4th, 2010). Finally, applicants for long-term residence permit must demonstrate good conduct by providing criminal records and any pending charges (Act 91/1992).

Italy is considered a liberal citizenship regime in terms of dual citizenship since it allows for dual citizenship without any restrictions (Howard 2009). It also offers rather favourable treatment to EU citizens allowing citizenship acquisition after four years of legal residence. Nonetheless, the Italian citizenship regime has been classified as 'slightly unfavorable' (MIPEX 2020) due to the lack of recognition of *ius soli* for children born to foreign parents as well as for the cumbersome and discretionary procedures to become Italian citizens, in line with the overall structural weakness of the Italian public administration (Cassese 2023).

Also Spanish citizenship is granted by descent according to the principle of *ius sanguinis* (Art. 17 Civil Code), whereas the main channel to obtain derivative citizenship is legal and continuous residence. Similarly to Italy, the Spanish legislative framework allows foreign nationals to apply for citizenship after a period of ten years of legal residence. However, in contrast to the Italian model, children born in Spain to foreign parents who are legally residing in the national territory are eligible to apply for citizenship after a period of one year from birth. This legislative provision is regarded as highly liberal and is defined as 'tempered *ius soli*'. Furthermore, marriage results in eligibility for a reduced residence requirement of only one year. A reduced residence requirement of five years is available for individuals who are stateless or refugees. While no preferential treatment is provided to EU citizens in Spain, a highly favourable treatment is established for nationals of South and Central American countries, Andorra, the Philippines, Equatorial Guinea, and Portugal who are subject to a reduced residence requirement of two years (Art. 22 Civil Code).

In the latter case, the long-term residence permit (Royal Decree 557/2011 transposing 2003/109/EC) is not a prerequisite for citizenship application and dual citizenship is permitted. The two-year rule is a heritage-based provision motivated by the special historical linkages with neighbouring Andorra and Portugal and colonial domination in overseas territories (Finotelli and La Barbera 2013). Nevertheless, Spanish legislation unambiguously distinguishes citizenship by descent and derivative citizenship. Only citizens by descent are protected from having their status revoked and can apply for dual citizenship without limitations.

All applicants are required to provide evidence of their legal and continuous residence, as well as of their intention to remain in Spain on a permanent basis. Additionally, they must demonstrate their integration (*arraigo*) into social, labour, and family structures in Spain (Supreme Court STS 188/2011). In 2015, a citizenship test was introduced with the objective of evaluating the applicants' linguistic competencies, as well as their knowledge

of the Spanish institutions, culture, and lifestyle (Royal Decree 1004/2015). Applicants are also required to demonstrate good conduct both prior to and throughout their period of residence in Spain (Art. 22.4 Civil Code; Royal Decree 1004/2015; Order JUS/1625/2016). While the absence of a criminal record is not automatically considered an evidence of good conduct, engagement with civic values serves as the primary indicator of good conduct (Supreme Court STS 1428/2022).

Despite differences regarding the minimum length of residence required, as well as those regarding *ius soli*, dual citizenship, and the existence of the citizenship test, the latest Migration Policy Index (Solano and Huddleston 2020) classifies both countries as 'slightly unfavorable', largely due to the restrictions imposed on dual citizenship in Spain and the *ius soli* in Italy. Yet, the most recent Eurostat data on citizenship acquisition in Europe show that their citizenship acquisition rates in 2022 were even higher than those of countries with a longer immigration tradition (Eurostat 2024), which represents a very positive outcome in terms of settlement of the migrant population.

4. Methodology

The goal of this article is to analyse how migrants understand the importance of citizenship acquisition for their integration in the country of residence. This article is based on 50 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2020 and 2023 with migrants of different nationalities of origin residing in Milan (Italy) and Madrid (Spain). The cities were selected for their similar characteristics in terms of size and migrant population. All participants fulfil the requirements to apply for citizenship by residence. To avoid comparative biases, we selected participants from five groups of regularly resident foreign nationals who are represented in the migrant populations of both countries. Selected nationalities include Ecuadorians, Brazilians, Moroccans, Filipinos and Romanians. Together they constitute about one-third of the total foreign population (Tables 1 and 2).

We selected ten participants from each of the five national groups and carried out twenty-five interviews per country of residence. While all participants fulfilled the requirements to apply for citizenship, not all of them acquired the citizenship of the country of residence (see Annex I). At the time of the interview, 25 participants obtained Italian or Spanish citizenship, 11 participants were still waiting for the result of the application process, while 14 had not applied yet or did not intend to apply. Participants have been selected taking into account length of residence, legal status and socio-demographic characteristics, including urban or rural environment of origin, gender, age, responsibility for children or other dependents, religion, mother tongue, employment in the country

Table 1. Demographic distribution of the selected national groups.

	Population	%	Population	%
Romania	1083771	21.5	1098252	18.1
Morocco	420172	8.35	833203	13.8
Philippines	158997	3.16	34647	0.57
Ecuador	66590	1.32	143000	2.36
Brasil	47318	0.94	64454	1.06
Others	3253868	64.7	3879975	64.1
Total	5030716	100	6053531	100

Source: Istituto Nazionale di Statistica and Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración (INE 2022).

Table 2. Requirements to apply for citizenship by residence.

	Italy		Spain	
	Residency	Dual citizenship	Residency	Dual citizenship
Brazilians	10 years	Yes	2 years	Yes
Ecuadorians	10 years	Yes	2 years	Yes
Filipinos	10 years	Yes	2 years	Yes
Moroccans	10 years	Yes	10 years	No
Romanians	4 years	Yes	10 years	No

of origin, educational level, and current employment (see Annex I). Participants selection also considered ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Most participants exhibit ethnic traits that set them apart from the Southern European native population, Moroccans are the only Muslim group in both countries, while Ecuadorians speak the same language as the native population in Spain even though with a different accent. In addition to the snowball technique, we contacted migrants' associations, local administrations and research institutions to identify potential participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted both in person and online and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Interviews have been conducted in Italian and Spanish, using English when participants were not fluent in the language of the country of residence. Once we obtained informed consent, we digitally recorded the interviews for subsequent natural transcription, content analysis, and translation.

The semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring migration and legal trajectories linked to issues of self-identification, attachment and belonging to the country of residence. The main issues raised in the interviews can be grouped into four thematic areas. First, on the relationship with the country of origin, asking what the interviewees miss about their country of origin. We also asked about the political and trade relations between the two countries, and how these affect their life in the host country. Second, on the migration process and legal trajectories, asking about the reasons for emigrating, the process of arriving, their previous contacts in Italy or Spain, the difficulties in regularising their legal status, and their plans to stay in the country. Third, on citizenship application, including questions about whether they have applied or plan to apply for citizenship, the reasons for doing so, how they think this affects their integration and access to rights, including voting, and their experiences with the application process, as well as reflections on belonging and dual citizenship. Fourth, on inclusion, asking how factors such as accent, culture, gender, economic or educational level affected their integration process and whether they have experienced exclusion as foreigners. Questions are also asked about their attachment to their country of origin and whether the time spent in Italy and Spain or travelling to their country of origin has affected their self-identification.

We structured the themes that emerged from the interviews according to the three dimensions that the most recent MIPEX report identifies as relevant for migrants' integration: well-being, sense of belonging, and trust. As the report states, 'inclusive policies not only increase positive attitudes and interactions between the public and immigrants, but also create an overall sense of belonging, well-being and trust' (Solano and Huddleston 2020, 17). Given that citizenship acquisition is considered by far the most inclusive policy for migrants, we show how migrants understand citizenship acquisition in terms

of well-being, belonging and trust, and how their understandings are related to the institutional context of their countries of residence.

First, we focused on the dimension of subjective well-being. Subjective well-being has become increasingly important for understanding migrants' integration beyond policies and institutional practices (Paparusso 2021). We operationalised the concept of well-being by identifying three sub-dimensions that emerged from the interviews. The first dimension of well-being is defined by the emotions associated withaccomplishment, which includes happiness, pride and celebration. The second dimension links citizenship acquisition with 'freedom from', which includes freedom from legal precariousness, from bureaucratic burdens, and from the fear of not being able to renew residence permit. The third one is about the emotional benefits of citizenship acquisition, which are associated with a sense of security, release, protection, stability, dignity, gratitude, and satisfaction with enhanced opportunities and self-perception.

Second, we devoted attention to belonging, meant as the individual perception and relational construction of inclusion as a member of the polity that is the central affective component of integration. Building on the literature on migrants' sense of belonging (Antonsich 2010; La Barbera 2015; Morley 2001; Yuval-Davis 2006), we operationalised the sense of belonging by identifying a set of four distinct sub-dimensions that emerged from the interviews. The first dimension of belonging is the perception of being part of the host society, which includes the feelings of being at home, more settled and integrated in the society. The second sub-dimension is context-dependent and is associated with the time spent in a country, including both the length of residence in the host country and the time spent in the country of origin. The third one is place-dependent and is connected to simultaneous and multiscale forms of attachment, which include non-exclusionary forms of emotional bonds to the country of origin and its longing, to the country of residence and to the city. The fourth sub-dimension of the sense of belonging is relational and includes the perceived obstacles in social interaction that impede feeling part of the polity despite citizenship acquisition. Non-belonging is framed as a reaffirmation of cultural difference and resistance towards the assimilationist discourse, as well as the perception of discriminatory attitudes in everyday practice that are associated with ethnic traits or foreign names.

Finally, we considered trust, building on the idea that 'compliance with the norms for moral or ethical reasons seems to be closely related to reciprocity and trust' (van Deth 2021, 213). We operationalised trust by identifying two distinct dimensions that emerged from the interviews. The first dimension of trust is linked to reciprocity and includes loyalty, social responsibility, and civic engagement. The second dimension of trust is compliance, which includes a sense of duty, acceptance of legal, social and cultural norms of the country that grants them the status of members, and interest in political participation.

5. Citizenship acquisition and well-being

5.1. The nexus between citizenship acquisition and well-being in Italy

Participants in Italy highlight that citizenship acquisition is undoubtedly an emotional moment that needs to be celebrated appropriately: 'I celebrated it. It was an honor for

me' (ITRM61N33). Similarly, another participant described the moment of the oath: 'It was exciting, look, beautiful! […] It is my second country. I felt immensely happy. Happy!' (ITEM51N26). Even participants who have not yet obtained Italian citizenship imagine its acquisition as an event that merits celebration. A Moroccan woman, for instance, articulated her feelings by stating: 'I think it is a beautiful thing. I will have citizenship!' (ITMM35S10). Similarly, a Romanian woman expressed her expectations by saying: 'Yeah, it'll be nice […]. I'll take someone out to dinner. I'll celebrate for sure' (ITRM54S19).

The emotions awakened by the ceremony are paired with a sense of liberation: 'It's liberating (*he laughs*). You're released!' (ITFH57N32). Citizenship acquisition is associated with a sense of relief that frees individuals from the administrative and time-consuming burdens of residence permit renewals. The importance of being freed from the uncertainties of administrative procedures is inextricably linked to the perception of personal and legal security that is provided by citizenship acquisition. For instance, a young Brazilian man states that obtaining Italian citizenship would significantly reduce the burden of bureaucracy.

> Everything would be much easier and I shouldn't reapply for my residence permit every year, or be worried of not being able to apply. Everything would be smoother. (ITBH21R12)

As with other participants, he recalls how the administrative precariousness goes hand in hand with the fear of entering into an irregular legal status. Furthermore, the bureaucratic process of residence permit renewal is subject to frequent changes and rising costs, which increase applicants' fear and anxiety about their capacity to meet the requirements in the future.

> Well, the fact of not having to renew, not having to fulfill other forms, not having to go through other appointments […]. [I applied for Italian citizenship because] the renewal became expensive, especially for those who have to renew it every year or every two years, or for their children … and, then, one always fears the future, what will happen? (ITMM43N30)

Well-being is also linked to a sense of accomplishment in achieving a long-awaited goal. Citizenship acquisition represents the final step in attaining a secure legal status, which is reached through perseverance: 'I experienced it as an achievement, as a chance to do something' (ITMH26N16), a young Moroccan man states. Citizenship acquisition culminates a process in which, on the one hand, applicants are required to demonstrate their capacity to meet the established legal requirements and, on the other, public institutions show their willingness to integrate new members into the polity through standardised and legally-defined procedures. A Moroccan man explains,

> I need to obtain it [the Italian citizenship] because I have children. I need to stay safe. I have to ask for a right, and when I ask for a right, I don't ask for it by force or cunning, I ask for it regularly and politely. (ITMH55N32)

Our participants refer to the sense of security that comes with citizenship acquisition as a key benefit. The new legal status provides access to a full array of rights and opens new opportunities that were previously unavailable enhancing their situation and overall well-being. As a Moroccan man highlights, 'It is not that you don't get there, but you

struggle more and you are totally excluded from other [opportunities]' (ITMH26N16). In the same vein, a Filipino man elaborates:

> If you buy a car, they'll ask you "do you have a residence permit?". You immediately think that […] you're excluded […]. But when I got Italian citizenship and they gave me my Italian ID, […] they already see that I have Italian citizenship and they don't ask me for the residence permit anymore. You are more stable, let's say, your position is more stable. (ITFH57N32)

The majority of participants feel that they eventually left behind the condition of formal inequality that characterised their previous legal status and express a sense of gratitude for having being included into the Italian polity: 'Here I am, an adopted [citizen], but I thank [Italy] so much' (ITEM51N26).

Overall, the findings of the Italian fieldwork reveal that citizenship acquisition is associated with an increase in the sense of well-being across all spheres of life. Well-being mainly emerges in three key affective dimensions: feelings of happiness, sense of stability and sense of gratitude. The release of the Italian ID is associated with happiness, joy and celebration, the sense of having achieved stability once residence is fully secured. Participants expressed that citizenship acquisition triggers a sense of relief from bureaucratic burdens, particularly from time-consuming and nerve-teasing residence permit renewal. The recognition as equal members of the polity is associated with a shared sense of gratitude towards the host country, which turns the sense of recognition into a sense of well-being.

5.2. The nexus between citizenship acquisition and well-being in Spain

Also participants in Spain perceive citizenship acquisition as a significant source of well-being. Citizenship acquisition is accompanied by a distinctively positive emotional state, characterised by feelings of pride and satisfaction: 'I don't remember anything, just the happiness I felt in that moment' (ESFH40N14). Participants repeatedly and consistently share the strong positive emotions associated with obtaining the Spanish passport. 'I was very excited. I can't explain why. When I took my passport, I told the girl: if it wasn't for the pandemic, I would shower you with hugs' (ESBH45N14), a Brazilian man says.

Others refer to the feeling of pride associated with the issuance of the Spanish passport: 'When I got the document, I thought that I wouldn't need to renew it [the residence permit] anymore. I took it full of pride for my nationality'[2] (ESEM49N20). Pride is associated with the feeling of satisfaction that results from the accomplishment of a challenging goal and the relief that comes with entering a new phase of life in which the precariousness of residence permit renewal is left behind. Citizenship acquisition is associated with an increase of opportunities for self-fulfilment. As a Filipino man explains, 'I felt stronger and luckier in life, […] that I have more power to achieve my goals in life' (ESFH40N14). Even participants who have not yet applied for citizenship anticipate the happiness and pride one may experience: 'Having the nationality is more special, you are more important […]. Because you're happy, you're out, you know. It's a pride' (ESFM44R17).

Similarly to the Italian case, citizenship acquisition in Spain is linked to happiness and well-being, first and foremost, because it means achieving legal security. Such an

achievement brings personal peace of mind and represents reaching stability in the country of residence. Well-being is also linked to a sense of security, which is negatively defined as freedom from fear of not being able to renew the residence permit and finding oneself in a situation of administrative irregularity. Participants recall the fear and the sense of deprotection they experienced when living in Spain with a foreign passport. A Filipino woman states, 'When I didn't have Spanish nationality, I was scared. Something was missing. I only had a Philippine passport, and I'm not from here' (ESFM43N16). In a similar vein, an Ecuadorian man remembers the preoccupation linked to the renewal of residence permit that is no longer an issue: 'I've already forgotten to worry about renewing my papers' (ESEH46N22). This sense of security is also imagined as a future benefit to those that have not applied yet. A Filipino woman explains that she expects that the increased sense of security will have a positive impact also on her personal relationships, give her more freedom and create better opportunities to integrate: 'I feel stability not only with my partner, but also because if I want to change jobs I can do so and become more settled' (ESFM29R6).

Finally, well-being is linked to the satisfaction of having achieved formal equality. As a Filipino woman puts it, 'I was very happy when I saw my passport with the photo. My colleagues and I are almost the same. I still have Filipino blood, but with regards to politics and papers we are the same' (ESFM43N16). Citizenship acquisition also functions as an 'insurance' to protect against xenophobia and provide a sense of safety and protection against racist street harassment and labour discrimination.

> Although I have an Asian face, I am Spanish (*she laughs*). You feel safer. You can't treat me like that because we are equal. […] Now I am Spanish and you can't mistreat me anymore because we have the same rights. […] They tell me: "go back to your country" in your face and I say: "no, I am Spanish". (ESFM40N17)

Participants explain that the recognition of formal equality implies full access to rights. 'Now, as a Spanish citizen, I can enter other spaces that were officially off-limits to me before' (ESBH45N14). Participants especially mention easier access to bank loans, administrative authorisations to open a business, and renting a house. Participants who held an irregular legal status and experienced extreme exploitation and serious rights violations, consider citizenship acquisition a way to recover their personal dignity. Citizenship acquisition is represented as a relief of leaving behind the suffering experienced in the migration process. 'It's a relief! I'm like you and the others. I am no longer an immigrant (*she cries*)' (ESFM39S12), a Filipino woman says.

Some participants establish a direct link between being a migrant and a sense of being undervalued: 'When I had the foreign document, I felt undervalued' (ESFM40N17). Participants also associate citizenship acquisition with an improved self-perception and the expectation of better conditions in the Spanish labour market.

> You see yourself as less than them. […]. In terms of knowledge, language, everything, you are less because you are an immigrant. In the hotel industry, you are less than Spaniards: when they hire you, they pay you less. They asked me if I had Spanish nationality. According to that, they gave you a salary. As an immigrant, you work a lot and get paid little. Filipinos who work in a restaurant don't enjoy the same [working] conditions. (ESFM39S12)

As in Italy, the narratives collected in Spain reveal that citizenship acquisition is connected to an overall sense of well-being. Well-being emerges as a positive emotional state for a long-awaited accomplishment that is connected to satisfaction, pride and feeling lucky. It is also associated with a newfound sense of security, thematized as freedom from fear of losing one's residence permit. Participants in Spain understand citizenship acquisition as a desired recognition that triggers well-being because it makes them formally equal to the native population.

6. Citizenship acquisition and sense of belonging

6.1. Citizenship acquisition and sense of belonging in Italy

The straightforward relationship between citizenship acquisition and well-being contrasts with a more nuanced description of how citizenship acquisition affects participants' sense of belonging in Italy. Sense of belonging is not triggered by citizenship acquisition alone but also depends on the time effectively spent in the country. Participants suggest that the longer you live in a country, the greater the entitlement to belong. As a Filipino man notes, 'I left the Philippines when I was 18 years old, now I am 57, so I have lived my life more here than there. […] Since I live here, I think I'm more Italian than Filipino' (ITFH57N32). Likewise, a young Moroccan man argues,

> Sure, I'm Italian on paper, of course, but I feel it inside. Having the [Italian] document gives you an advantage, it puts you on the same level of any Italian. This for sure, but it's something I felt in some way even before. (ITMH26N16)

An important role is also played by the relationship with the country of origin. The majority of our participants have memories of their past life in the country of origin before migration that are important in the construction of their identity. A Moroccan woman says,

> When they ask me 'what's your nationality?', I say Italian-Moroccan, because I am Italian. The papers say so and I grew up in Italy, but I spent the first 10 years of my life there [in Morocco] and I still have memories. (ITMM43N30)

The attachment to the country of origin and to the country of residence co-exist and are not perceived as mutually exclusive in the narratives of our participants. 'I feel Italian, I feel Filipino. Because I have been here for 32 years now' (ITFM61S32), a Filipino woman says. Even more poignantly, a Romanian man says, 'I can't help but having two citizenships, because I am a citizen of both countries. I mean, I truly, deeply feel like a citizen' (ITRM54S19).

In some cases, migrants' sense of belonging is multi-scalar (Morley 2001). It articulates itself around the tropes of a country, a nation, a region, or around smaller units like a city or a specific neighbourhood. A Romanian woman states, 'It has become my city, full stop. As I always say, I am not Italian, but I am Milanese' (ITRM54S19). Our participants use these geographies of self-identification to connect their self-representation to their migratory process. For instance, living in Italy and expecting to remain in the country in the near future increases the relative importance of obtaining Italian citizenship. A Moroccan woman says,

> Since there is the possibility of having both [citizenships], why should you let one aside if you can have both? Why should you deny your origins if you can keep both of them? Since I live here, I consider the Italian one [citizenship] more important. (ITMM43N30)

Migrants' sense of belonging (and non-belonging) is also shaped by everyday practice. By granting the status of citizenship, the Italian state recognises an individual as a legitimate and equal member of the society. Migrants feel that citizenship acquisition changes the natives' gaze towards them. A Brazilian woman says, 'With citizenship […] they look at you a little differently, don't they? With another regard because you are part of society' (ITBM67N38). Yet, everyday practice is also described as a place where feeling out of place persists, preventing them from rooting and projecting themselves in the Italian context despite the change in the legal status. It is the case of a Brazilian woman, for instance, who is aware that obtaining the Italian passport cannot automatically make her welcome among natives:

> I still don't feel at home, but I don't want to be more Italian or more Brazilian, I want to […] feel good where I am. It doesn't matter if it's here in Italy or if it's, I don't know, in Ireland or anywhere else. I want to feel welcomed and good, that's my idea. And for now, to be honest, I don't feel like that yet. (ITBM38N1)

Ethnic traits, accent, and cultural differences play an important role on how interviewees are perceived and treated, regardless of their legal status. One of the reasons for applying for Italian citizenship is the desire to be protected from racism: 'Italy […] always speaks badly of foreigners, while Italian citizens are much better and have the right to do whatever they want. This somehow racist discourse would push me to acquire citizenship' (ITRM63R18).

Yet, the perception of not being treated as equal in everyday life, for instance at workplaces, for many persists also after citizenship acquisition: 'Even if you are Italian, you will still be a foreigner to them, always!' (ITRH55S32). Many participants feel that they are still perceived as foreigners: 'When they ask me whether I am Filipino or Italian, I reply "Why? Can't you see I'm Italian?"' (ITFH57N32). The same participant highlights that being perceived as non-members is not only a matter of ethnic traits, but also of having a foreign name:

> It's true that if you go to Spain, if you go to France, they see you as an Italian citizen. [The passport] can help you, but they can see you're a foreigner because of your name and they immediately understand that you are not Italian. (ITRH55S32)

In the same line, a Moroccan man explains: 'I got it [the Italian citizenship] to avoid renewals, so I got rid of an administrative obstacle, but the gaze and the judgment of people never goes away, because they can see your name' (ITMH26N16).

Overall, among participants in Italy the sense of belonging emerges as a multifaceted picture where the citizenship-integration nexus is described by migrants taking into account, at the same time, the length of residence and other non-exclusionary forms of attachment to the country of origin and the city of residence. In some cases, the length of residence is perceived to be more important than citizenship acquisition for their integration in Italy. Nevertheless, despite their new legal status, migrants' sense of belonging appears to be undermined by the perception of discriminatory attitudes that are associated with ethnic traits or foreign names.

6.2. Citizenship acquisition and sense of belonging in Spain

The sense of belonging is a recurrent emerging topic also in the narratives of our participants in Spain. They are explicit in describing the connection between citizenship acquisition and their sense of belonging. They explain that the acquisition of the new legal status turns into an instrument of legal integration that strengthens their attachment to Spain. In particular, obtaining the status of citizen formalises the institutional recognition of inclusion into the host society. An Ecuadorian woman says,

> Holding the nationality [of the country of residence] is a symbolic act that represents a lot. You gain more stability. And you don't have to do so much paperwork. This makes you feel more integrated and that you belong a bit more. (ESEM36S8)

Participants refer to the increased feeling of 'being settled' (*arraigados*). A Brazilian man explains, 'I haven't enjoyed the nationality yet because I obtained it yesterday, but I feel more settled' (ESBH45N14). The same participant explicitly links holding the national identity card with the sense of belonging: 'With the [national] document … I feel more *madrileño* now, more Spanish' (ESBH45N14). In the same vein, a Filipino woman says: '[I want to remain in Spain] for the rest of my life (*she laughs*). I feel Spanish, and because of my work I feel even more Spanish. What else do I want? I'm in luxury here' (ESFM43N16). Participants mention that they received better treatment from the police when they showed their national identity card, which reinforces the idea that acquiring Spanish citizenship is a pathway to integration. 'One day, in the subway, the police asked me for my ID, and when they saw that it was a Spanish ID card, they let me pass. I felt that I belong here' (ESFM43N16), a Filipino woman recounts.

On the other hand, most participants identify themselves as 'foreigners' despite having acquired Spanish citizenship. Citizenship acquisition is understood as a means of achieving full legal integration. However, it does not erase the importance of the country of origin, as a proxy for culture, values and systems of belief. 'My nationality is just a document, but I always feel Filipino' (ESFH58N20). Even those who have not yet applied for citizenship state:

> When I will get the nationality, I will not say "I am Spanish", because my traits are not Spanish. […] I did not sever my relationship with Ecuador and my traits also show that I am not from here. I use many more Ecuadorian than Spanish words and I keep my accent […]. I keep this proximity with Ecuador and I did not stop feeling it as part of my life. […] This is why I will continue to be a foreigner here. (ESEM36S8)

Moreover, in some cases, citizenship acquisition does not alleviate the feeling of permanent uprooting.

> You are always a foreigner, because now I am neither from here nor from there. When I go to my homeland nobody greets me anymore because they don't know me. And here, even if I hold the Spanish nationality, I will always be a foreigner, because we are not from here. (ESEH46N22)

Participants who arrived during childhood, went to school in Spain, and have a native-like accent perceive a greater discrepancy between the legal status achieved through citizenship acquisition and the social misrecognition that shapes the sense of non-belonging. These incongruities are even more frustrating when non-belonging is also experienced in

the country of origin: 'When I go to Morocco, they call me "shitty Spaniard" and when I am in Spain, they call me "shitty Moor". So [I belong to] nowhere, neither one nor the other place' (ESMH36N31). The Spanish national document provides them with equal access to rights, but they acknowledge that neither social perception nor its internalisation cannot change from one day to the next. 'Being treated well is a cultural issue', an Ecuadorian woman says (ESEM54N20). Despite the many benefits of citizenship acquisition, participants in Spain are well aware that full social integration does not depend on papers but on the attitudes of the host society. Cultural change is called for: 'When it comes to applying for nationality, it is all pros. But stereotypes are always there if society doesn't change 100%' (ESMH29S24).

As it occurs in the Italian case, the new legal status is not a guarantee of substantive equality. Many participants recall that holding the Spanish national document does not erase the stereotypes, especially the perception of racism and xenophobia that mark their everyday experience. Skin colour, accent, and ethnic traits are perceived as indelible signs of non-belonging that prevent their full social integration: 'We are brown-skinned and my daughter is the same as us. She is not going to be white because she was born here' (ESEM49N20). Likewise, as a Brazilian man states, 'I don't think they will ever remove [the foreigner label] from me, even if I obtain Spanish nationality' (ESBH40R6). Holding the national identity card is not enough to make one feel part of the national community. Participants' sense of belonging to Spain is constructed around the perception of their own physical characteristics as permanent signs of 'foreignness'. These narratives reveal participants' perceptions of the Spanish national 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) as based on whiteness and nativism.

Participants in Spain explicitly link citizenship acquisition with the feeling of being more integrated, more rooted and settled. Their narratives associate the sense of belonging with the new legal status. At the same time some participants vindicate their ethnic, cultural and national origin as a non-renounceable source of difference. On the other hand, when asked about their sense of belonging, they reveal a double sense of non-belonging both in the country of residence – in spite of citizenship acquisition – and in the country of origin. As in the case of Italy, participants remark that the Spanish national document does not erase the label of foreignness associated with skin colour or accent, which triggers a sense of non-belonging in everyday practice.

7. Citizenship acquisition and trust

7.1. Citizenship acquisition and trust in Italy

The interviews conducted in Italy surprisingly show that citizenship acquisition is linked to trust, sense of responsibility, and reciprocity. Citizenship acquisition is described as a duty that results from the time spent in the country:

> Citizenship is […] a duty in some way. Like getting to the end of the road […]. Since I have lived in this country for so long, [obtaining] citizenship was something natural to do. Absolutely, it was a duty for me to do this. Not an obligation! A duty, something that had to be done. (ITRM54S19)

Citizenship acquisition also makes migrants feel that they have to behave as 'good citizens'. This sense of duty is expressed in many ways. For some participants, these duties

stem directly from the acquisition of the new legal status. As a Filipino man explains, 'If you have to take the citizenship of a nation, you have to give your faith, your trust, your loyalty and so [to take the oath] it's fair, because once they give you the citizenship, it also includes the benefits' (ITFH57N32). Inclusion in the polity triggers gratitude and loyalty in return for the trust that the state has placed in them. On the contrary, if citizenship is not granted, some migrants may not feel compelled to give it back to the host society, 'because, they say: well, I'm not Italian' (ITFH57N32).

The idea of 'good citizen' is inextricably interwoven with the length of residence, which generates a sense of gratitude and moral responsibility to make a return to the host society. A Moroccan man says,

> To me, integration is the day you think you can do something because you know that one day your children will live in this country. You feel it is your country because your children will live in this country. So, you do everything you can, as much as you can, to improve the social situation. (ITMH26N16)

Citizenship acquisition after years of daily interaction within Italian society increases their sense of responsibility towards the country of residence:

> Now I can feel it on me and I say to myself 'why don't we change? […]. This is what changed [after citizenship acquisition]: I feel more responsible. I really feel responsible to make a contribution. It is wrong to criticize if you do nothing. (ITMH46N22)

Citizenship acquisition can trigger a sense of responsibility to make things change for the better as part of a common societal endeavour. Being part of the society as a citizen brings with it the right to participate and to get involved with a greater commitment to do so. A Brazilian woman, for instance, argues that voting is the 'right' thing to do:

> Living here, I felt that also voting was my duty, to cast my vote. To really be a citizen, not half a citizen. Because I also had to express my thoughts by voting. And it is the correct thing. You have to do what is correct. (ITBM67N38)

The fieldwork conducted in Italy shows that citizenship acquisition is understood as the culmination of an integration process that implies a responsibility to contribute to Italian society as a reward for the newly acquired membership. Such a responsibility is not only a consequence of the formal acquisition of Italian citizenship but is clearly linked to the time spent in the country.

7.2. Citizenship acquisition and trust in Spain

The idea that citizenship acquisition contributes to integration through an enhanced sense of responsibility and trust also emerges in Spain. Participants provide a surprisingly rich description of how citizenship acquisition strengthens their sense of duty and their willingness to behave as 'good citizens'. Some participants articulate a sense of indebtedness to Spain: 'I have a great debt to Spain for the way they welcomed me' (ESBH40S6).

Participants also show a clear awareness of the importance to comply with the norms. An Ecuadorian woman says, 'We always wanted to do everything legally. […] I keep all the documentation' (ESEM54N20). They express the idea that 'new' citizens have to be twice as good as natives (ESMH29S24). 'The only thing I know is that I have to behave well' (ESEM49N20), another Ecuadorian woman explains. A Filipino woman points to

the eventuality of losing Spanish citizenship as a major difference between natives and migrants who acquired citizenship:

> Since I wasn't born here, anything that breaches Spanish nationality [requirements] can make me lose it. That's why I'm more careful to get it right. I am more obedient to the rules in Spain. I always do things according to the rules. (ESFM40N17)

For some participants, the introduction of the citizenship test to assess the knowledge of Spanish institutions, culture and lifestyle is well justified because 'in this way they are aware that they must respect the country and comply with its laws' (ESEM54N20). Similarly, our participants support the idea that the absence of a criminal record represents a reasonable requirement for citizenship acquisition. A Brazilian man argues, 'if you are already here with a record, how are they going to give you the nationality? The country cannot allow it. If you are here, you have to stay here properly' (ESBH45N14).

Among the duties, voting is mentioned by some participants as a key element: 'I believe I should vote where I live. My political participation should be in the context where I live' (ESBM63N32). Voting is also meant as a contribution to social change. A Brazilian man states, 'If I live here, the political options concern me even though I am Brazilian. I feel like doing something to change' (ESBM42R3). Vote is also understood as a tool for integration: 'You can't ask the citizenry to feel integrated and then, when it comes to decide who their rulers are, they have no decision-making capacity' (ESMH36N31).

Among participants in Spain, the dimension of trust is mostly conceived in terms of legal compliance. Obedience to the law is described as a major responsibility linked to citizenship and behaving as 'good citizens' is a way to express gratitude to Spain. In this respect, the citizenship test is seen as a tool to foster migrants' civic integration, which is meant as the acceptance of the legal, social and cultural norms of the country that grants them the status of member.

8. Conclusions

This article makes a novel contribution to citizenship studies by analysing how migrants understand the importance of citizenship acquisition for their integration in Italy and Spain. We argue that the subjective dimension of citizenship acquisition is crucial for understanding the citizenship-integration nexus beyond policies, institutions and legal norms. To this end, we explore to what extent migrants perceive citizenship acquisition as a pathway to integration. Our analysis of empirical findings is structured around three key dimensions that are deemed crucial for integration: well-being, sense of belonging and trust (Solano and Huddleston 2020).

In both countries, citizenship acquisition is associated with a sense of well-being, belonging and trust in the country of residence. However, the way in which these three dimensions are defined by migrants does not depend solely on the norms governing citizenship acquisition. It is also shaped by contextual factors, such as the efficiency of the bureaucratic system, the length of residence, the legal relevance of the social, labour, and family settlement as well as the different civic traditions.

Both in Italy and Spain, the narratives retrieved suggest that citizenship acquisition triggers a sense of well-being in all spheres of life. Well-being is associated with the

happiness for a long-awaited achievement that is expressed through shared references to pride, feeling lucky, joy and celebration. In Italy, participants insist that citizenship acquisition produces a sense of release from the bureaucratic burdens of residence permit renewal. Moreover, participants in Italy argue that holding the Italian national document fosters well-being because it erases the label of second-class citizens. In contrast, participants in Spain more clearly thematize well-being as freedom from fear of losing the residence permit. The relevance of bureaucracy for the perception of Italian respondents compared to Spain may be related to the cumbersome bureaucratic procedures that characterise not only the process of citizenship acquisition but also the overall functioning of the Italian public administration. By contrast, the freedom from fear that emerged in Spain may be related with the frequent experience of random controls that has been reported for Spain during the period of the economic recession and afterwards (Echevería 2020). Compared to Italy, Spanish respondents associate well-being more directly with a sense of recognition that is linked to the achievement of formal equality with the native population.

Our results also show that citizenship acquisition is crucial in shaping migrants' sense of belonging in both countries. However, migrants' narratives show differences that can be partly explained by the differences in the national legal frameworks. In Italy, citizenship acquisition does not exclude other forms of belonging, such as the attachment to the country of origin. This is likely due to the general norm that permits dual citizenship. The 10-year rule can also explain why Italian participants often elaborate on the relevance of the length of residence for their sense of belonging. They sometimes describe the time spent in Italy as more important for their integration into the host society than citizenship acquisition. In Spain, on the other hand, the connection between citizenship acquisition and integration is made more explicit. Citizenship acquisition is clearly perceived as a tool to feel more integrated and more settled (*arraigados*) in the country of residence. This finding could be explained by the importance attached to the proof of social, labour and family settlement (*arraigo*) within the Spanish citizenship regime as a prerequisite for citizenship acquisition. Despite these differences, in both countries the sense of belonging is intertwined with a sense of non-belonging due to perceived discrimination in everyday life linked to their skin colour, foreign name or accent, which persists regardless of their legal status.

Finally, in both countries, citizenship acquisition enhances integration by fostering a sense of trust in the country of residence and raising the awareness that being part of the political community implies a moral responsibility to contribute to a better society and comply with its norms. Most participants in Italy feel that they are bound to make a return to the host society. With the acquisition of Italian citizenship, they feel called to contribute to social change. In contrast, participants from Spain mostly understand trust in terms of legal compliance. Obedience to the law is presented as an important duty towards Spain. Behaving as a good citizen thus becomes a way of demonstrating their gratitude. Their narratives reveal an underlying conception of integration as adaptation to the legal, social and cultural norms of the country that recognise them as full members of society. Migrants' understandings of the citizenship-integration nexus not only challenge the idea that there is a disconnection between citizenship and identity, but also suggest that there is a link between migrants' sense of responsibility towards

the country of residence and the different civic and legal traditions, which certainly deserves further attention from scholars.

Overall, migrants' narratives on the importance of the citizenship-integration nexus in Italy and Spain show that integration is embedded in a complex constellation where the understanding of citizenship 'from below' intersects with factors such as the functioning of bureaucracy, length of residency, and civic traditions. Our results point to the relevance of a more integrated approach to the understanding of the subjective dimension of citizenship acquisition that accounts for both institutional and other contextual factors. In line with the findings of recent quantitative studies (e.g. Helgertz, Bevelander, and Tegunimataka 2014; Hoxhaj, Vink, and Breuer 2020; Huddleston 2020; Vink, Peters, and Beverlaender 2021), our results also point to the importance of the length of residence in shaping the perceived relationship between citizenship and integration, which should be further explored. Finally, our research shows that the perception of being still considered foreigners in everyday practice often jeopardises the formal equality achieved through citizenship acquisition. More research on how these relationships vary across nationalities of origin and countries of destination, including immigration latecomers, as well as in everyday practice, is therefore needed to further delve into the complexities of the nexus between citizenship and integration.

Notes

1. Fieldwork has been conducted in the context of the R&I project 'The subjective dimension of citizenship' (CIVITES) funded by the Spanish Agency of Research, https://civitesproject.com/.
2. In Spanish, in contrast to English and Italian, the term used to describe membership into the polity is not citizenship but 'nationality'.

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Data availability statement

The empirical data referred to in this article available upon request to the corresponding authors, but are not public due to privacy restrictions.

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