

Rethinking Pan-Arab Collective Life in Hungary: Social Space, Boundaries, and Interaction

A pánarab közösségi élet újragondolása Magyarországon: társadalmi tér, határok és interakciók

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Abstract: This paper examines how cross-national Pan-Arab social relations are organized in Hungary among individuals who share linguistic and cultural references while differing in national background, migration trajectory, social position, and normative orientation. Drawing on a relational social-space perspective, the study focuses on how proximity, boundaries, and unequal positions are negotiated within this shared environment. The analysis is based on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2025 and January 2026. The findings show that Pan-Arab relations are structured through different combinations of cultural and linguistic familiarity, normative compatibility, practical accessibility, and social distance. Participants navigate national, regional, and broader Pan-Arab forms of proximity while negotiating differences in values, everyday practices, political orientations, and socioeconomic positions. Cultural familiarity can facilitate interaction while increasing exposure to judgment and social expectations, producing relationships in which relational proximity can coexist with normative distance. The analysis also identifies shifting hierarchies related to linguistic accommodation, socioeconomic resources, migration trajectories, and social evaluation. The study identifies the Pan-Arab level as a significant cross-national scale of migrant social organization and shows how familiarity and internal difference become relationally organized within the Hungarian migration context.

Keywords: Pan-Arab social space; migration; social boundaries; cross-national relations; Hungary

Összefoglaló: A tanulmány azt vizsgálja, hogyan szerveződnek a nemzeti határokon átvélő pánarab társadalmi kapcsolatok Magyarországon olyan személyek között, akik közös nyelvi és kulturális referenciákkal rendelkeznek, miközben nemzeti hátterük, migrációs pályájuk, társadalmi helyzetük és normatív orientációjuk eltérő. A kutatás relacionális társadalmi tér megközelítésére épít, és arra össz-

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pontosít, hogyan alakulnak a közelség, a határok és az egyenlőtlen pozíciók ebben a közös társadalmi környezetben. Az elemzés 30, 2025 októbere és 2026 januárja között készült félig strukturált interjún alapul. Az eredmények szerint a pánarab kapcsolatokat a kulturális és nyelvi ismerősség, a normatív kompatibilitás, a gyakorlati hozzáférhetőség és a társadalmi távolság különböző kombinációi strukturálják. A résztvevők nemzeti, regionális és tágabb pánarab közelségi formák között navigálnak, miközben értékek, mindennapi gyakorlatok, politikai orientációk és társadalmi-gazdasági pozíciók mentén fennálló különbségeket kezelnek. A kulturális ismerősség megkönnyítheti az interakciót, ugyanakkor növelheti az ítélkezésnek és társadalmi elvárásoknak való kitettséget, így a kapcsolati közelség normatív távolsággal is együtt járhat. Az elemzés a nyelvi alkalmazkodáshoz, társadalmi-gazdasági erőforrásokhoz, migrációs pályákhoz és társadalmi értékeléshez kapcsolódó változó hierarchiákat is feltár. A tanulmány a pánarab szintet a migránsok társadalmi szerveződésének jelentős, nemzeti határokon átívelő léptékeként azonosítja, és bemutatja, hogyan szerveződik relacionálisan az ismerősség és a belső különbség a magyar migrációs kontextusban.

Kulcsszavak: pánarab társadalmi tér; migráció; társadalmi határok; nemzeti határokon átívelő kapcsolatok; Magyarország

Introduction

Cross-national Pan-Arab relations in Hungary present a particular relational complexity. Arabic and overlapping cultural references can create forms of familiarity across national boundaries, while individuals within this broader category come from different national, linguistic, social, and political contexts. “Arabness” can therefore operate as a meaningful basis for recognition and interaction without eliminating the differences through which individuals position themselves in relation to one another. Research on diaspora and migrant belonging has similarly emphasized that collective categories remain internally differentiated and are continuously negotiated through boundaries, positions, and forms of identification (Brubaker, 2005; Anthias, 2008; Wimmer, 2013). This combination of shared references and internal differentiation makes cross-national Pan-Arab relations a particularly relevant site for examining how heterogeneity becomes socially organized in the Hungarian migration context.

The coexistence of familiarity and difference makes the Pan-Arab scale particularly relevant for examining how migrant relationships are formed and negotiated across national boundaries. Shared linguistic and cultural references can facilitate communication and recognition, but they do not determine the form or intensity of the relationships that develop. Individuals enter these interactions with different migration experiences, expectations, resources, and normative orientations, which shape whom they approach, the forms of proximity they establish, and the boundaries they maintain. Examining these relations as a social space therefore directs attention to the positions and relational processes through which cross-national connections acquire different meanings and functions.

The Hungarian context is of particular relevance to this relational scale. Compared with long-established immigration destinations in Western Europe, Hungary has attracted smaller migrant populations and remains relatively peripheral within broader European migration dynamics (Török, 2017; Gallai & Janik, 2025). Within this setting, migrants from Arab countries have arrived through diverse pathways, including education, employment, entrepreneurship, family reunification, and forced migration, while large, consolidated co-national communities remain comparatively limited. These conditions can increase the salience of encounters across national backgrounds and create the specific context in which broader Pan-Arab relations can develop and become empirically visible. Hungary is therefore relevant to this study not simply because of its geographical location, but as a migration setting whose demographic and migratory characteristics shape the relational possibilities examined in the paper.

Against this background, the study examines how Pan-Arab social relations are structured and negotiated among Arab migrants in Hungary. It asks: How is the Pan-Arab social space organized in Hungary, and which relational mechanisms shape proximity, differentiation, and positioning within it? The analysis draws on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with migrants from different Arab national backgrounds between October 2025 and January 2026. Focusing on relations across national backgrounds allows the analysis to consider how shared forms of linguistic and cultural familiarity interact with differences in trajectories, social positions, values, and everyday practices in shaping the organization of this social space.

The paper approaches these relations through a social-space perspective, focusing on the positions individuals occupy and negotiate, the boundaries through which proximity and distance are organized, and the hierarchies that emerge within interaction. This perspective makes it possible to examine the Pan-Arab level as a cross-national scale of migrant social organization in which cultural and linguistic familiarity coexist with internal difference. The analysis shows how different contexts of encounter, normative compatibility, social evaluation, and unequal positioning shape the relationships that develop within this space, including forms of connection that combine relational proximity with normative distance. In doing so, the study contributes to understanding how cross-national migrant relations are organized through different degrees of familiarity, attachment, and differentiation within the specific conditions of the Hungarian migration context.

Theoretical Framework

Migration, Diaspora, and Collective Formation

Migration has become one of the central areas of inquiry within the social sciences, giving rise to a broad body of scholarship that examines how migrants establish, maintain, and transform social relations across national borders. Rather than

approaching migration solely as a process of movement and settlement, contemporary research has increasingly examined the collective formations that emerge through migration, including diasporas, transnational communities, migrant networks, and other forms of cross-border social organization (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021). These perspectives highlight that migrant collective life cannot be understood through a single analytical framework but has been conceptualized through multiple, complementary approaches emphasizing mobility, social ties, belonging, identity, and transnational practices.

Among these perspectives, diaspora has become one of the most influential concepts for understanding how migrants maintain social, cultural, and political connections across borders while developing new forms of collective life in receiving societies. Contemporary diaspora scholarship no longer conceptualizes diasporas as fixed or homogeneous entities but emphasizes their internal diversity, multiple belongings, and the variety of social, political, and cultural positions occupied by their members (Bauböck & Faist, 2010). Recent research on Middle Eastern diasporas similarly demonstrates that these formations are shaped by heterogeneous migration trajectories, class positions, political orientations, religious affiliations, and transnational engagements, resulting in complex and dynamic social configurations rather than uniform communities (Abdelhady & Aly, 2022). This growing recognition of complexity also resonates with Vertovec's (2007) concept of *super-diversity*, which draws attention to the increasing differentiation that characterizes contemporary migrant populations and the multiple variables shaping migrants' experiences beyond nationality or ethnicity alone.

Building on these developments, recent scholarship has increasingly examined migrant collective life through a relational perspective that emphasizes the role of social ties, interaction, and network formation. Rather than assuming that collective categories automatically translate into cohesive social relations, this perspective explores how relationships are actively created, maintained, negotiated, and transformed through everyday interaction (Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021). Studies of migrant communities have likewise highlighted that internal differentiation constitutes an important dimension of collective life, with social relations being shaped by differences in migration trajectories, legal status, class, regional background, and other forms of social positioning (Azeredo, 2024). Such findings suggest that migrant collective formations are best understood as socially differentiated configurations whose internal dynamics require empirical investigation.

Situated within this broader body of scholarship, the present study adopts a relational perspective to examine collective life among migrants from different Arab national backgrounds living in Hungary. Rather than treating the Pan-Arab presence as a predefined community, it approaches it as a social space whose organization emerges through interaction, positioning, and ongoing processes of differentiation.

This perspective shifts the analytical focus from asking whether a Pan-Arab community exists to examining how collective life is structured, negotiated, and experienced in everyday social relations. To develop this analytical perspective, it is therefore necessary to move beyond collective categories themselves and examine the relational mechanisms through which social positions, boundaries, and forms of belonging are produced.

Community, Social Space, Boundaries, and Belonging

The concept of community has occupied a central place in sociological thought and has been approached from multiple theoretical perspectives. Although definitions vary, community is generally understood as a form of social organization characterized by relatively stable social relations, shared forms of belonging, and a degree of common identification among its members. Classical sociological discussions, particularly Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, conceptualized community as a form of social life grounded in enduring interpersonal relations, mutual obligations, and shared norms, distinguishing it from more impersonal and contractual forms of association (Tönnies, 1887/2001). While contemporary societies rarely correspond to these ideal types, the concept of community has continued to evolve beyond its classical formulation.

More recent scholarship has emphasized that communities should not be understood simply as territorially bounded or culturally homogeneous entities, but as socially constructed formations maintained through shared practices, interactions, and processes of identification (Delanty, 2003). From this perspective, community refers not merely to social contact but to forms of collective life that involve a sense of belonging, mutual recognition, and varying degrees of normative commitment among participants. Community therefore represents a particular mode of social organization rather than a generic description of all forms of interaction.

While the concept of community provides an important framework for understanding collective life, it does not encompass all forms of social organization or interaction. Individuals may share the same social environment, communicate regularly, and participate in common settings without necessarily forming a community characterized by shared identification or normative commitment. For this reason, sociology has also developed relational approaches that conceptualize collective life through patterns of positions and interactions rather than through assuming the existence of cohesive groups.

From this perspective, Bourdieu conceptualizes social space as a relational configuration in which individuals occupy different positions according to the distribution of various forms of capital and the relationships established among them (Bourdieu, 1979, 1990). Social space therefore does not refer to a physical location or a bounded social group, but to a structured field of relations in which

positions acquire meaning in relation to one another. Rather than presupposing cohesion or common identity, this perspective directs analytical attention to how social relations are organized, how actors are differently positioned within the same environment, and how these positions influence interaction. As Reed-Danahay (2017) argues, Bourdieu's concept of social space offers a particularly valuable framework for migration studies because it enables researchers to analyze migrant populations as relational configurations shaped by unequal positions, resources, and trajectories rather than as internally homogeneous collectivities.

Conceptualizing collective life as a social space also raises the question of how relations within that space become organized. A relational perspective assumes that interaction does not occur randomly but is structured through processes by which individuals distinguish between those with whom relationships are established and those from whom social distance is maintained. In this sense, boundaries should not be understood as fixed lines separating predefined groups, but as social processes through which relationships are negotiated and patterns of interaction are continuously produced.

This understanding builds on Barth's (1969) influential argument that ethnic groups are maintained less by shared cultural content than by the boundaries through which social interaction is organized. Expanding this perspective, Wimmer (2013) demonstrates that boundaries are dynamic and continually shaped through everyday social practices, institutional contexts, and power relations rather than remaining fixed or given. Consequently, belonging should not be viewed as an automatic consequence of shared origin or cultural background but as a socially negotiated process through which individuals position themselves in relation to others. As Yuval-Davis (2011) argues, belonging encompasses not only formal membership but also emotional attachment, social recognition, and normative evaluations regarding who is perceived as legitimately belonging. Similarly, Antonsich (2010) distinguishes between the personal experience of belonging and the broader political and social processes that define inclusion and exclusion, highlighting that belonging is continuously constructed through interaction rather than simply inherited.

Relations within a social space are structured not only through boundaries and belonging but also through processes of evaluation and differentiation. Individuals continuously classify themselves and others by attributing social, cultural, and moral value to particular characteristics, practices, and ways of life. These evaluative processes influence patterns of interaction by shaping perceptions of similarity, legitimacy, trust, and social distance.

Lamont (1992) conceptualizes these processes through the notion of symbolic boundaries, referring to the conceptual distinctions that individuals draw in order to categorize people, practices, and social groups. Such boundaries are not merely descriptive; they also establish criteria through which individuals evaluate

themselves and others, contributing to the production of inclusion, exclusion, and hierarchy. As Lamont and Molnár (2002) argue, symbolic boundaries constitute fundamental mechanisms through which social differences become meaningful and, under particular conditions, may develop into more durable social boundaries. From this perspective, social space is understood not simply as a network of interactions but as a relational configuration in which positions, boundaries, belonging, and symbolic evaluations are continuously produced through social practice.

Analytical Framework

Building on the preceding discussion, this study adopts a relational analytical framework to examine collective life among migrants from different Arab national backgrounds living in Hungary. Rather than treating the concepts of community, social space, boundaries, and belonging as competing perspectives, the analysis considers them as complementary analytical tools that illuminate different dimensions of the same social configuration. Within this framework, the concept of social space provides the overarching analytical perspective because it enables collective life to be examined through the relationships, positions, and interactions that connect individuals rather than through the assumption of a pre-existing or homogeneous community (Bourdieu, 1979, 1990; Reed-Danahay, 2017). This relational orientation is particularly relevant in migration research, where recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the importance of analyzing migrants through their changing social relations rather than through fixed collective categories (Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021; Ryan, 2021).

Adopting social space as the primary analytical lens does not imply that communities are absent or theoretically irrelevant. Rather, it provides a broader framework within which different forms of collective organization can be examined empirically. Within the same social space, individuals may occupy different positions, develop different patterns of interaction, construct boundaries, and experience varying forms of belonging. These processes are understood as relational and dynamic rather than predetermined by shared nationality, language, or cultural background. Accordingly, this study does not assume that the Pan-Arab presence in Hungary constitutes a single community. Instead, it examines whether, how, and under what conditions communities emerge within the broader Pan-Arab social space through processes of interaction, boundary-making, and belonging.

Socio-Cultural Context

Hungary occupies a distinctive position within the European migration landscape. Unlike long-established immigration destinations such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, it has attracted comparatively smaller migrant populations and has not developed large, consolidated diaspora communities. Migration to Hungary has evolved through different historical phases. During the socialist period, the country

primarily hosted international students through educational cooperation with countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Following the political transition in 1989, migration patterns became increasingly diversified, encompassing educational migration, employment, entrepreneurship, family reunification, and, more recently, asylum-related mobility (Gallai & Janik, 2025). Although international migration has become more diverse over the past decades, Hungary continues to occupy a relatively peripheral position within broader European migration dynamics, functioning less as a traditional country of immigration than many Western European states (Török, 2017). Within this context, migrants from different Arab national backgrounds have established a diverse, though comparatively small, presence in Hungary through multiple migration pathways.

Within this migration context, the Arab presence in Hungary is characterized by considerable internal diversity. It includes migrants originating from countries across the Middle East and North Africa who have arrived through multiple migration pathways, including higher education, employment, entrepreneurship, family reunification, and forced migration. These trajectories are accompanied by variation in legal status, educational background, socio-economic position, religious affiliation, and linguistic practices, resulting in a heterogeneous population whose experiences extend beyond national origin alone. Rather than constituting a single, unified migrant community, this diversity provides a particularly relevant context for examining how individuals who share broader linguistic and cultural references navigate collective life while differing in many other respects (Abdelhady & Aly, 2022). The Hungarian case is especially valuable in this regard because it brings together migrants with diverse backgrounds within a relatively small migration setting, creating an empirical context in which broader forms of interaction among Arabs become visible without presuming either cohesion or fragmentation in advance.

The characteristics of migration to Hungary also shape the social environments available to Arab migrants. Given the relatively limited size of the Arab population and the absence of large, consolidated co-national communities, individuals from different Arab national backgrounds frequently encounter one another in a range of shared settings, including universities, workplaces, Arab restaurants, cafés, mosques, and community events. These spaces bring together people with diverse migration trajectories and social backgrounds, creating opportunities for interaction that extend beyond national affiliations. While such encounters do not necessarily imply the formation of stable communities or enduring social ties, they provide an empirical setting in which broader forms of collective life become observable. In this respect, the Hungarian context offers a particularly relevant case for examining how migrants who share broader linguistic and cultural references navigate everyday social environments while differing in many other respects. Rather than presuming either cohesion or fragmentation, this study approaches these interactions as an empirical question, examining how collective life develops within this specific socio-cultural context.

Data and Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design to examine how the Pan-Arab social space in Hungary is structured and how individuals navigate and interact within it.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' experiences, interpretations, and relationships within this social space. Rather than following a fixed question-and-answer format, the interviews were organized around five broad thematic areas while allowing participants considerable freedom to develop their narratives and emphasize experiences they considered significant. This design enabled the study to examine how participants interpret their positions, relationships, and forms of engagement within the Pan-Arab social space.

The interviews were conducted as part of a broader doctoral research project. The present study draws specifically on material relevant to the organization of the Pan-Arab social space, patterns of interaction and differentiation, and the distinction between pragmatic participation and more ideologically grounded forms of engagement.

Data Collection

The empirical material consists of 30 semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2025 and January 2026. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, depending on participants' availability and location, and each interview lasted about one to one and a half hours.

The interviews covered five broad thematic areas: community life; communication and language; values and culture; support and pressure; and identity and aspirations. These themes provided a common framework across interviews while allowing participants to construct their accounts in their own way and elaborate on experiences and issues they considered relevant.

Twenty-eight interviews were conducted in Arabic and two in English, according to participants' preferred language. The Arabic interviews included a range of regional dialects. Recordings were transcribed in Arabic using transcription software and subsequently checked and corrected manually, particularly where dialectal variation affected the accuracy of automated transcription. The Arabic transcripts were subsequently translated into English using an AI-assisted translation process. The translated transcripts were used in the analysis and for the selection of quotations presented in this article. The use of generative AI for translation is reported separately in the declaration on the use of generative artificial intelligence.

Sampling and Recruitment

The sample consists of 30 participants originating from 12 Arab countries: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. The sample is gender-balanced, comprising 15 women and 15 men, and

includes participants occupying different social and professional positions. Sixteen participants were students, eleven were employed, including one business owner, and three were not employed at the time of the interviews.

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive recruitment in public spaces and snowball sampling. Initial recruitment took place primarily in locations where people from different Arab backgrounds regularly encounter one another, including Arab restaurants, shisha bars, and mosques. Potential participants were approached in these settings, informed about the research, and, when they expressed an interest in participating, a separate interview appointment was arranged.

Snowball sampling complemented recruitment in these settings and was used to broaden the sample across national backgrounds and gender. Participants were asked whether they knew other individuals who might be interested in taking part in the research. Recruitment deliberately sought participants from different Arab national backgrounds rather than concentrating on one nationality or regional group.

Participants were required to have lived in Hungary for at least two years and to have experience of interacting in settings and networks involving people from different Arab national backgrounds. These criteria were intended to ensure that participants had sufficient experience of social life in Hungary and of cross-national interactions relevant to the phenomenon examined in the study.

Analytical Approach

The analysis followed an iterative qualitative process based on close reading and manual thematic coding. The interview material was reviewed repeatedly to identify recurring patterns as well as variations, tensions, and contradictions across participants' accounts. Coding was conducted manually, and emerging categories were compared across interviews to examine similarities and differences in participants' experiences, relationships, and evaluations.

As the interviews formed part of a broader doctoral research project, the analysis for this article focused specifically on material relevant to its research questions. Particular attention was paid to how participants described their interactions with people from other Arab backgrounds, positioned themselves within the Pan-Arab social space, evaluated social relationships, and described patterns of proximity, distance, inclusion, and differentiation.

The analytical categories were developed primarily from recurring patterns in the empirical material rather than through a predetermined coding scheme. At the same time, the analysis remained oriented toward the study's broader interest in social positioning, interaction, differentiation, and the distinction between pragmatic participation and more ideologically grounded forms of engagement.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the academic use of the collected material. Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, and participants were given the option to decline to answer questions or to withdraw from the study. Identifying information was removed from the material used in the analysis, and audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely. Given the relatively small size of the Arab population in Hungary, particular attention was paid to minimizing the possibility of indirect identification.

The study does not aim for statistical representativeness. Its findings concern the experiences and accounts of the 30 participants included in this qualitative study and should be interpreted within the specific Hungarian context under examination. The cross-sectional nature of the data means that the interviews captured participants' relationships, experiences, and evaluations at a particular point in their migration trajectories, and these may change over time.

Translation constitutes an additional methodological consideration. Most interviews were conducted in Arabic and involved different regional dialects before being translated into English. Although the Arabic transcripts were manually checked and corrected following automated transcription, and the English translations were used to support the analysis and presentation of quotations, some linguistic nuances may not be fully preserved due to the transcription and translation process.

Results

Structuring the Pan-Arab Social Space

The empirical findings show that the Pan-Arab social space is structured through a set of interrelated mechanisms that shape how individuals enter, navigate, and position themselves within it. Three mechanisms emerge consistently from the interviews: pre-migration dispositions, contexts of encounter, and practical constraints. Together, they produce differentiated patterns of interaction and positioning within the broader Pan-Arab social space.

A first structuring mechanism lies in pre-migration experiences, which shape how individuals anticipate and interpret relationships with other Arabs after migration. Two contrasting orientations emerge from the interviews. Some participants who described their pre-migration environments as marked by social control, moral pressure, or limited personal freedom associated co-national and broader Arab groups with these experiences and sought distance from them. P10 explained, "*In the beginning... and until now, I prefer [not] to hang out with Arabs*" (P10, female, Syrian, waitress in a Lebanese restaurant), while P23 similarly stated, "*I didn't want to be part of a Moroccan or Arab community*" (P23, female, Moroccan, student).

These positions are also shaped by pre-existing representations of migrant communities. Several participants arrived with narratives portraying Arab diasporic spaces as sites of gossip, conflict, or mistrust, transmitted through relatives, friends, earlier migrants, and wider transnational networks. Such migration imaginaries provide interpretative frameworks through which future social relations are anticipated before they are directly experienced (Salazar, 2020). Initial positioning within the Pan-Arab social space is therefore shaped not only by post-migration encounters but also by expectations formed before migration.

An opposing orientation emerges among participants for whom the Pan-Arab social space represented familiarity, accessibility, and immediate support, particularly during the early stages of migration. P06 explained, *“I wanted to meet any Arab who could help me... just to survive daily situations”* (P06, male, Egyptian, PhD student).

Here, shared language, cultural familiarity, and expectations of mutual assistance make the Pan-Arab space a practical resource for navigating the uncertainties of settlement. Initial engagement does not necessarily reflect strong collective identification; it can emerge from immediate social and practical needs. Avoidance and attraction therefore represent different modes of entry into the same social space, shaped by experiences and expectations formed before migration.

A second structuring mechanism concerns the spaces of encounter, which play a decisive role in organizing interaction. The majority of participants first encountered other Arabs in institutional or circumstantial settings, such as universities, dormitories, workplaces, or refugee reception facilities. In these environments, relationships emerged through shared participation in everyday settings rather than through deliberate social choice. P08 recalled, *“At the university... that was the first place [I met Arabs]”* (P08, male, Tunisian, student), while P18 described meeting *“Palestinians... Iraqis... Syrians in the camp”* (P18, male, Palestinian, shop owner, refugee trajectory).

These environments produce proximity before affinity, meaning that interaction precedes selection. This finding is consistent with relational approaches to migration, which emphasize that opportunities for social connection are shaped not only by individual preferences but also by the institutional and everyday settings through which migrants become connected (Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021).

By contrast, a smaller number of participants encountered other Arabs in ideological or organized spaces, where interaction was based on prior alignment rather than coincidence. P04 described one such setting as *“a spontaneous solidarity group”* (P04, female, Tunisian, MA student/trainer).

Unlike institutional settings, where contact is largely shaped by circumstance, these spaces are entered through shared commitments and voluntary participation. As a result, interaction is selective from the outset, bringing together individuals who already share political, ideological, or social orientations. This reduces the

uncertainty associated with initial encounters and facilitates the development of more cohesive and stable relationships. The distinction between imposed and chosen encounters is therefore central, as it influences not only how relationships begin but also the quality and durability of the social ties that emerge.

A third structuring mechanism concerns how individuals organize their relationships between co-national networks and the broader Pan-Arab social space. Co-national groups often constitute an immediate source of social connection, but participants differ considerably in the extent to which they remain embedded within them. For those who do, shared dialects, cultural references, and implicit social norms can facilitate trust and reduce the need to negotiate meanings and expectations. P09 described this closeness directly: *"The Sudanese community is very, very connected... we meet regularly... support each other"* (P09, male, Sudanese, assistant research fellow).

Regional proximity constitutes another layer in this organization of relationships. Regional distinctions within the Arabic-speaking world are expressed through linguistic practices and processes of identification, particularly in the historically salient distinction between the Maghreb and Mashreq (Hachimi, 2013). Similar distinctions appear in participants' narratives in Hungary, where dialectal familiarity, cultural references, and social codes were reported to facilitate interaction across national boundaries. As P23 explained, *"I feel more comfortable with North Africans... we understand each other better"* (P23, female, Moroccan, student).

Co-national, regional, and broader Pan-Arab relations thus provide different combinations of familiarity and social distance. Co-national networks generally offer greater linguistic and cultural familiarity, but they can also reproduce more strongly the expectations and forms of regulation associated with the society of origin. Regional relationships retain a degree of proximity while loosening some specifically national expectations. The broader Pan-Arab level extends this possibility further: for some participants, it complements existing networks, while for others it provides an alternative environment in which Arabic communication and cultural familiarity remain possible with less exposure to co-national social control. These are not successive stages but overlapping relational possibilities that participants navigate according to their orientations and needs.

This broader level becomes particularly significant for participants who deliberately distance themselves from co-national networks. Such distancing does not necessarily imply a rejection of Arab social relations more generally. Some participants instead seek to reduce forms of judgment, competition, or social control associated with co-national environments. P06 observed, *"Arabs... help each other if they are not from the same country... but within the same nationality, competition appears"* (P06, male, Egyptian, PhD student).

Here, social distance itself becomes a relational resource. Difference in nationality can loosen some co-national expectations while preserving sufficient linguistic and

cultural familiarity for interaction and mutual support. The broader Pan-Arab level therefore creates a relational configuration in which proximity and distance can coexist rather than representing simply a weaker form of national belonging.

Across these mechanisms, Arabic operates as a recurring condition of accessibility. It facilitates initial contact across national boundaries, while dialectal familiarity can reinforce co-national and regional proximity. As P33 explained, “*When you hear Arabic, you automatically go [to] talk [with them]*” (P33, female, Sudanese, PhD student).

Arabic thus provides a common communicative entry point without determining the relationships that subsequently develop.

Boundary-Making and Selective Interaction

Relations within the Pan-Arab social space are organized through processes of negotiated compatibility, through which participants establish different degrees of proximity according to the forms of interaction they consider acceptable and comfortable. The empirical material shows that these evaluations can cut across national boundaries: participants from different Arab countries may develop close relationships when their everyday practices and normative orientations are compatible, while shared nationality does not necessarily produce proximity when these orientations diverge. Boundary-making therefore operates through the practical negotiation of difference within the space, particularly around everyday norms, social exposure and gendered interaction, as well as political positions and events.

A first mechanism concerns normative compatibility as it is expressed through everyday practice. When participants refer to “mentality,” “way of thinking,” or “lifestyle,” these categories do not refer simply to abstract beliefs. They describe differences that become consequential in ordinary interaction, particularly through the practical expression of religiosity. Drinking alcohol, participating in mixed-gender gatherings, expectations concerning interactions between women and men, acceptable topics of conversation, and the kinds of social activities individuals are willing to share can all influence whether closer relationships become comfortable or difficult. These preferences vary considerably between participants and exist along a continuum rather than as fixed divisions between clearly defined groups. As P13 explained, “*It depends on the mentality... not because he is Arab or not*” (P13, female, Algerian, researcher).

Normative compatibility, however, does not correspond to a single scale on which some participants are more restrictive and others more open. Boundaries are drawn from different positions, and practices that create comfort for some participants can become sources of discomfort for others. Participants with less conservative lifestyles may experience more religious or socially restrictive environments as limiting, while more religious participants may avoid settings and practices that conflict with their own expectations. P23 stated, “*I don’t feel comfortable with their way of thinking... it’s*

too conservative for me" (P23, female, Moroccan, student), whereas P33 explained, *"I don't feel comfortable in places where people drink a lot... it's not my environment"* (P33, female, Sudanese, PhD student).

These contrasting positions show that boundaries emerge through mutual evaluation rather than a single normative standard. Normative proximity can consequently become more consequential than national proximity: participants may establish close relationships across national backgrounds while maintaining distance from co-nationals whose everyday practices and expectations differ from their own.

A second mechanism concerns the balance participants negotiate between social understanding and normative exposure. The linguistic and cultural familiarity available within Arab networks can make interaction easier, but the same familiarity also makes participants' practices more legible to others who understand the social meanings attached to them. This becomes particularly consequential where information and reputation circulate through co-national and broader Arab networks. Participants may therefore seek relationships that provide sufficient familiarity to feel understood while limiting their exposure to judgment, gossip, or expectations concerning how they should behave. As P24 explained, *"Sometimes they ask very personal things... and I don't feel comfortable answering"* (P24, female, Syrian, student).

National difference can introduce distance from the reputational dynamics associated with co-national environments while preserving sufficient linguistic and cultural familiarity for interaction. P26 described this strategy directly: *"I just keep some distance... I don't need to be close to everyone"* (P26, male, Algerian, student).

Distance here is not simply withdrawal but a way of calibrating relationships within the space: participants regulate what they disclose, how closely they engage, and which networks they allow access to different aspects of their lives. The relevant boundary is therefore not only between connection and disconnection, but between different degrees of socially acceptable proximity.

This negotiation of proximity also has a gendered dimension. Across several women's accounts, the management of social exposure is connected to expectations around interactions between women and men. For some participants, involvement in Arab networks is accompanied by concerns about monitoring or judgment concerning whom they interact with and how those interactions are conducted. Participants may therefore regulate relationships and contexts of interaction to maintain greater control over their social participation. As P32 explained, *"Sometimes you feel that you have to be careful how you interact... not everyone understands the limits"* (P32, female, Yemeni, student).

Yet gendered boundaries do not operate through a single normative position. Some participants themselves prefer forms of gender separation in accordance with religious or social convictions, including restrictions on mixed-gender gatherings or closer cross-gender relationships. For others, these same expectations are experienced as restrictive and become a reason to seek different social circles. Gender

therefore intersects with the normative compatibility described above: the question is not simply whether men and women interact, but whether participants recognize similar expectations concerning the forms, contexts, and limits of that interaction.

A third mechanism concerns political boundaries that connect relationships in Hungary to histories and events extending beyond the immediate migration context. Unlike the normative boundaries discussed above, these divisions do not necessarily emerge through interpersonal interaction. Participants may approach particular national groups through collective memories, political tensions, or narratives formed before they encounter one another in Hungary. The Pan-Arab social space therefore brings into proximity individuals whose countries of origin are themselves connected through histories of conflict, displacement, and unequal relations, and these histories can remain consequential for interpersonal relationships after migration.

This appears in some Syrian participants' accounts of Lebanese people, where reservations are connected to narratives of discrimination and mistreatment experienced by Syrians who sought refuge in Lebanon during the war. Nationality can therefore become associated with a collective history through which potential relationships are interpreted before personal compatibility can be established. P24 expressed this boundary directly: *"I can't be friends with Lebanese [people]... for me it's not possible"* (P24, female, Syrian, student).

Political boundaries, however, are not only carried over from previous contexts; they can also be activated or intensified by contemporary events. The war in Gaza became particularly significant in several participants' accounts, affecting identification as well as expectations of solidarity within Arab social relations. P18 explained, *"When the war started in Gaza, I didn't feel Arab anymore... I felt only Palestinian"* (P18, male, Palestinian, shop owner).

In this case, the immediate effect described by the participant concerns identification rather than a direct rupture in interpersonal relationships. Across other accounts, however, Gaza also became a topic through which political commitment was evaluated in everyday interaction. Practices such as boycotting particular products, publicly expressing support, or posting about the war on social media could become indicators through which participants assessed one another's degree of engagement. Perceptions of insufficient involvement could generate criticism or distance, while shared commitment could strengthen existing relationships or create new forms of proximity. Political events can therefore temporarily reorganize the criteria of compatibility within the Pan-Arab social space, making expressions of solidarity themselves part of the negotiation of relationships.

Across these processes, boundary-making operates less through fixed national divisions than through the continuous negotiation of acceptable proximity. Normative compatibility can override national similarity, familiarity can simultaneously facilitate understanding and increase exposure to judgment, and

political events can alter the criteria through which relationships are evaluated. The significance of the Pan-Arab social space therefore lies partly in the multiple relational positions it makes available: participants can deepen, limit, or redirect relationships across national boundaries while remaining connected to a broader Arabic-speaking social environment.

Hierarchies and Forms of Differentiation

Hierarchical differentiation within the Pan-Arab social space emerges through unequal demands for adaptation, recognition, and social status. These inequalities do not form a single or stable hierarchy in which particular national groups consistently occupy higher or lower positions. Rather, different dimensions become consequential in different interactions: linguistic accessibility can determine who is expected to accommodate whom, migration and socioeconomic positions can affect social recognition, and moral evaluations can assign different forms of value to individuals and groups. Participants may therefore occupy relatively advantaged positions in one dimension while being disadvantaged in another.

One of the clearest forms of differentiation concerns the unequal linguistic work required to sustain communication across varieties of Arabic. Although Arabic facilitates interaction across national boundaries, participants do not experience this accessibility in the same way. Maghrebi varieties are frequently described as less easily understood by participants from other Arabic-speaking regions, placing greater pressure on Maghrebi speakers to modify their speech, simplify their vocabulary, or move toward forms of Arabic perceived as more widely intelligible. Linguistic difference therefore becomes hierarchical when responsibility for mutual intelligibility falls disproportionately on particular speakers. P15 described this unequal accommodation directly: *"I softened my dialect... later I stopped... they don't [make] the same effort"* (P15, female, Tunisian, PhD student and receptionist in a Lebanese restaurant).

The frustration expressed here concerns the unequal distribution of communicative effort rather than linguistic difference itself. Participants respond differently to this expectation: some continue adapting their Arabic, others reduce their accommodation, while some prefer English in cross-national interactions. Linguistic hierarchy is therefore produced through asymmetrical expectations concerning whose speech is readily intelligible and whose is expected to change.

A second dimension of differentiation concerns socioeconomic position and the status meanings attached to migration and national background. Participants do not evaluate socioeconomic position solely through individual income or occupation; countries of origin can themselves become associated with economic privilege, mobility, or vulnerability. Participants contrast, for example, migrants associated with wealthier Gulf countries with those from conflict-affected contexts, showing how broader

regional inequalities can shape everyday relations within the Pan-Arab social space. P15 referred to *“some Arabs from wealthy countries”* as having a *“superiority complex”* (P15, female, Tunisian, PhD student and receptionist in a Lebanese restaurant).

Perceived economic privilege becomes socially consequential through differences in everyday opportunities. Greater financial resources can reduce dependence on forms of employment and economic adaptation experienced by less privileged migrants and facilitate lifestyles shared with others in similar positions. Socioeconomic similarity can therefore shape clustering within national groups themselves rather than simply separating nationalities. As P32 observed, *“Rich Egyptians stay with rich Egyptians”* (P32, female, Yemeni, student).

At the other end of the spectrum, national backgrounds associated with conflict and displacement can become perceived as markers of lower-status occupational or migration positions. P28 described this perception directly: *“They saw Yemenis as workers... not equals”* (P28, male, Yemeni, programmer).

Socioeconomic differentiation can thus become attached to nationality itself, linking national background, migration trajectory, occupation, and broader regional inequalities. These associations do not establish a fixed ranking between national groups, but they can influence how individuals are perceived and positioned within everyday interactions.

A final dimension of hierarchy concerns representation and the moral evaluation of what constitutes an acceptable or desirable way of being Arab. Participants evaluate one another through practices that acquire moral significance, including honesty, discretion, dress, religious practice, and everyday conduct. Yet these evaluations do not follow a shared standard: one social circle may value practices another criticizes. They operate as symbolic boundaries through which particular practices and ways of life acquire different forms of moral and social value (Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Moral hierarchy is therefore contested rather than organized around an established model of the “good Arab.” P17 expressed one such position: *“Values... I see them as Islamic values”* (P17, female, Omani, PhD student).

These internal evaluations coexist with forms of external categorization over which participants have considerably less control. Some describe being identified collectively as Arab by wider society, regardless of whether this corresponds to their primary identification. P04 explained, *“I am kind of put in that category. And this is coming from [members of] Western society, who identify us as ‘Arabs.’ So even if I don’t see myself as Arab, Western society identifies us as Arab. And you are all [perceived as] similar”* (P04, female, Tunisian, MA student and part-time customer service worker).

This produces a tension between internal differentiation and external homogenization. Within the Pan-Arab social space, participants distinguish among nationalities, dialects, socioeconomic positions, migration trajectories, values, and forms of conduct, while externally these differences may be collapsed into a broader Arab category. This is consistent with a relational understanding of boundaries

in which categorization is shaped not only by self-identification but also by how individuals and groups are positioned by others (Barth, 1969; Wimmer, 2013). The consequences become particularly visible when participants connect wider political developments to changes in how Arabs are treated in Hungary. P20 observed that “[b]orders were closed, refugees were treated badly. Since that time, Hungarian political attitudes toward Arabs changed” (P20, male, Tunisian, chef in a hotel kitchen).

External categorization can therefore make individual self-representation difficult to separate from representations attached to Arabs collectively, without producing a common internal model of desirable Arabness. Participants continue to disagree over the values, practices, and forms of conduct through which a positive position should be constructed. Hierarchy within the Pan-Arab social space consequently involves not only unequal linguistic and socioeconomic positions, but also competing claims over legitimate forms of Arabness under conditions in which participants simultaneously differentiate themselves from one another and are categorized together from outside.

Normative Distance and Relational Proximity

P07 described two apparently contrasting orientations: “*I was trying to stay away from [avoid] making a small [Arab] community,*” while she also explained that “*the people I could keep close to were Arabs, not Europeans*” (P07, female, Jordanian, graphic designer). These two statements from the same participant capture a recurring tension in the empirical material: an expressed desire for distance from Arab social environments can coexist with sustained proximity to Arabs in everyday relationships. Rather than treating this discrepancy simply as an inconsistency between discourse and practice, the interviews suggest that distancing and proximity can concern different dimensions of social experience. Participants may seek distance from particular norms, expectations, or forms of social control associated with Arab or co-national environments without necessarily seeking distance from the linguistic and cultural familiarity available through relationships with other Arabs.

P07’s account makes this distinction particularly visible. Her initial distancing was connected to features of the social environment she wanted to leave behind rather than to an unconditional rejection of relationships with Arabs. After migration, encounters with Arabs whose values and lifestyles were closer to her own complicated this initial position. Cultural familiarity could be retained without reproducing all the normative expectations from which she had sought distance. She also identified forms of cultural proximity with people from other societies she perceived as more collectivist, while Arab relationships offered an additional layer of intelligibility through language and shared references. Migration therefore did not simply reproduce or dissolve previous forms of social proximity; it enabled them to be selectively reconfigured.

The persistence of Arab-centered relationships should consequently not be read as evidence that participants fail to realize their stated preference for distance. Statements of distance articulate what participants reject, the social expectations from which they seek autonomy, and sometimes the kind of social life they imagined migration would make possible. Everyday relationships, by contrast, develop through actual encounters and through the forms of compatibility and accessibility available within the migration context. Participants can therefore maintain culturally intelligible relationships without accepting all the normative expectations they associate with an “Arab community.”

The apparent contradiction between discourse and practice thus reveals a particular mode of engagement rather than simple inconsistency. Continued interaction with Arabs does not necessarily indicate collective identification or a desire to reproduce social environments associated with countries of origin, just as expressed distance does not necessarily result in relational disengagement. *Normative distance and relational proximity can coexist*, allowing participants to preserve forms of familiarity, communication, and connection while selectively negotiating the terms of their participation in the Pan-Arab social space.

Conclusion

This study has examined how Pan-Arab social relations are organized in Hungary across national, linguistic, cultural, and social differences. The Pan-Arab level emerges as a meaningful scale of interaction in which individuals from different Arab backgrounds establish and negotiate relationships across these differences. Shared language and cultural references facilitate interaction, but the relations that develop within this space are also shaped by values, lifestyles, migration trajectories, socioeconomic positions, and expectations concerning social interaction. The Pan-Arab social space is thus organized through different combinations of familiarity, compatibility, accessibility, and social distance.

One of the most significant patterns concerns the balance between cultural intelligibility and normative distance. Shared language and cultural references can provide a degree of mutual understanding, while differences between participants can create room to negotiate expectations they associate with particular social environments. This is visible across national, regional, and broader Pan-Arab relations, which can offer different forms and degrees of proximity. In some cases, interaction with Arabs from other national backgrounds allows participants to retain cultural familiarity while reducing exposure to specifically co-national expectations, judgment, or social control. This possibility does not produce a general preference for cross-national relations; rather, it illustrates how participants navigate the space according to different combinations of familiarity, compatibility, and autonomy.

These possibilities are shaped by boundaries and unequal positions within the space itself. Dialectal differences can place greater communicative demands on some speakers than on others, while socioeconomic resources, migration trajectories, political orientations, religiosity, and moral evaluations influence recognition and relational proximity. National backgrounds may also acquire different status meanings through associations with wealth, conflict, displacement, or particular forms of migration. These hierarchies do not produce a single stable ordering. Their relevance changes according to the interaction and the criteria through which participants evaluate one another, meaning that relatively privileged and disadvantaged positions can coexist within the same social space.

The Hungarian context gives these cross-national interactions particular significance. The relatively small size of the Arab migrant populations and the limited consolidation of many co-national communities create conditions in which individuals from different Arab backgrounds encounter one another in universities, workplaces, religious spaces, cafés, restaurants, and other everyday settings. At the same time, different migration trajectories and orientations toward settlement or onward mobility affect how participants invest in the relationships that emerge from these encounters. The Pan-Arab scale therefore acquires particular relevance in Hungary alongside co-national and other forms of social connection, while remaining shaped by the demographic and migration conditions of this specific setting.

The analytical relevance of examining the Pan-Arab social space lies in bringing these different relational processes into the same field of analysis. Contexts of encounter, selective proximity, boundary-making, and unequal positioning interact in shaping how relationships develop and what they can provide. Cultural and linguistic familiarity facilitates access to the space, but the forms of connection that emerge depend on how this familiarity intersects with values, resources, trajectories, and the positions individuals negotiate in relation to others. Some relationships develop into stronger forms of trust, attachment, and community, while others remain pragmatic, selective, temporary, or limited to particular situations. Examining the Pan-Arab level in this way highlights a cross-national dimension of migrant social organization in which familiarity and difference are continuously negotiated rather than resolved.

The configuration identified in Hungary cannot be assumed to operate in the same way across migration contexts. Population size, the consolidation of co-national networks, migration histories, and the institutional environments in which migrants encounter one another may alter both the relevance and organization of cross-national relations. Comparative research across different migration settings could examine how these conditions reshape the boundaries, hierarchies, and forms of proximity identified here. Such comparison would help clarify the conditions under which the Pan-Arab scale becomes particularly significant in migrants' everyday social lives and how this relational space changes across different contexts.

Ethics statement

The research was conducted with informed consent. Participants' names and identifying details were anonymized.

Data availability statement

The interview data are not publicly available due to confidentiality and participant protection considerations.

AI statement

Generative AI tools were used only for language editing and readability support. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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