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THE IMPACT OF BREXIT ON MIGRATION FROM THE V4 COUNTRIES TO THE UK: MIGRANT STRATEGIES. REPORT FROM QUALITATIVE RESEARCH 2019-2023

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Abstrakt

Wynik referendum w sprawie Brexitu z 2016 był szokiem dla europejskiej opinii publicznej. Po raz pierwszy kraj opuszczał struktury UE. Wywołało to szereg pytań i obaw szczególnie w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, z których tysiące obywateli wyemigrowało do Zjednoczonego Królestwa po ich przystąpieniu do Unii w 2004 i otwarciu dla nich brytyjskiego rynku pracy. Brexit zmienił status quo i wprowadził niepewność. W wielu przypadkach wymusił podjęcie odkładanych od lat decyzji i uregulowanie statusu pobytowego, który dzięki funkcjonowaniu migrantów w ramach wspólnego europejskiego rynku nie wymagał do tej pory żadnych regulacji. Dla części migrantów był to moment refleksji nad obraną strategią życiową, w tym rozważenia opcji powrotu do ojczyzny lub przeprowadzki w inne miejsce. Dla innych był czynnikiem motywującym do podjęcia starań o obywatelstwo brytyjskie. Brexit okazał się później tylko jednym z wielu wydarzeń kryzysowych, takich jak pandemia COVID-19, wojna w Ukrainie i rosnąca inflacja w całej Europie, które wpłynęły na strategie życiowe migrantów.

Cztery kraje Grupy Wyszehradzkiej wiele łączyło w historii, wspólnie też doświadczały problemów okresu transformacji ustrojowej i gospodarczej po 1989, a później razem przechodziły proces integracji z Unią Europejską. Wśród konsekwencji tych procesów była fala emigracji do Wielkiej Brytanii, której wszystkie kraje V4 doświadczyły, choć w różnym zakresie. Niniejszy raport z badań jakościowych przeprowadzonych w latach 2019-2023 przez cztery instytucje badawcze z poszczególnych krajów V4 powstał dzięki finansowaniu ze strony Międzynarodowego Funduszu Wyszehradzkiego. Stanowi przyczynek do analizy porównawczej.

Słowa kluczowe: Brexit, Grupa Wyszehradzka, migracje, strategia życiowa, niepewność

Abstract

The result of the 2016 Brexit referendum came as a shock to European public opinion. It was the first time a country was leaving the structures of the EU. It raised a number of questions and concerns especially in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, from which thousands of citizens emigrated to the UK after their accession to the EU in 2004 and the opening of the British labor market to them. Brexit changed the status quo and introduced uncertainty. In many cases, it forced decisions that had been postponed for years and was a motivation to regularize residency status, which, thanks to the functioning of migrants within the common European market, had not required any regulation until now. For some migrants, it was a moment to rethink their chosen life strategy, including considering the option of returning to their homeland or moving elsewhere. For others, it was a motivating factor to start obtaining British citizenship. Brexit later proved to be just one of many crisis events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and rising inflation across Europe, that affected migrants' life strategies.

The four Visegrad countries had much in common in history, and together they experienced the problems of the post-1989 period of political and economic transformation, and later went through the process of integration into the European Union. Among the consequences of these processes was a wave of emigration to the United Kingdom, which all V4 countries experienced, albeit to varying degrees. This report on qualitative research conducted between 2019 and 2023 by four research institutions from each of the V4 countries was produced with funding from the International Visegrad Fund. It contributes to a comparative analysis.

Key words: Brexit, Visegrad Group, migration, life strategy, uncertainty

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Introduction

Brexit was one of the most important events in Europe in recent years and an unprecedented fact in the entire history of the European Union. It affected not only the UK itself, but also particularly impacted the societies of countries belonging to the "new Union," EU-10, including the four countries of the Visegrad Group, from where hundreds of thousands of people emigrated to the UK after their accession to the EU in 2004, taking advantage of the free movement of people within the EU structures.

Migration and migrants were also one of the key elements of the referendum campaign, and the demand for "regaining control" over borders and the flow of people into the country was among the main arguments raised by supporters of leaving the EU.

In 2019 to 2023, within the framework of a strategic grant from the International Visegrad Fund, a consortium of 4 leading research institutions of the V4 countries conducted a qualitative research project on the impact of Brexit on migrants' life strategies. This report is a summary of the results of the research carried out in each national group, and therefore is left divided into 4 parts having separate authors. In addition to that, the project produced one joint comparative article authored by all engaged researchers and four articles published in academic journals, one in each of the 4 countries. During the course of the project, a blog was also created, where researchers provided ongoing commentary on events related to the topic of Brexit and its impact on migrants from V4 countries: www.v4brexit.com.

Similar studies have been conducted earlier, but they focused on different questions or they covered different areas: CEE*Youth*: The Comparative Study of Young Migrants from Poland and Lithuania in the Context of Brexit (DAINA NCN 2017), projects within the framework of the HAS Excellence Cooperation Programme Mobility, or the research project YMOBILITY on Latvian, Polish and Slovak migrants living in London in the face of Brexit (Lulle, Dvorakova, Szkudlarek 2019). Aleksandra Szkudlarek published the outcomes of the Polish part of their research also in CMR Working Papers (Szkudlarek 2019).

Post-accession migration to the UK in a historical context

Britain's post-war migration history was associated with the breakup of the British Empire after the end of World War II and decolonization processes (Holmes 1988). When Elizabeth II ascended the throne in 1952, Britain still possessed more than 70 overseas territories, including much of Africa. Upon the queen’s death on 8 September 2022, the country had only 14 overseas territories, the largest being the sparsely populated Falkland Islands, over which the UK had fought a war with Argentina in 1982. Britain's imperial past and global rather than continental perspective played a role in its integration into Europe from the very beginning of the UK's presence in the EU, that is from 1973, and also laid the foundations for British Euroscepticism. The country never joined the Schengen zone nor wanted to replace the pound with the euro. On the other hand, to most Europeans the imperial system of weights and measures and left-hand traffic were exotic and strange. In January 2016 a poll by YouGov conducted on a sample of 1733 British people showed that 43 per cent of them agreed that the

Empire was something good rather than something bad. In the same time 63 per cent of the UKIP voters agreed that the empire was a good thing[1].

The disintegration of the Empire triggered an influx of people from former colonies and from the nations of the Commonwealth. Notably, Indians and Pakistanis constituted the largest groups of migrants after 1945. Non-Europeans outnumbered the traditionally largest group of immigrants to Britain who came from the then poorer and underdeveloped Ireland. In 2003 there were over 466,000 individuals in the UK who had been born in India (ONS 2003[2]).

The reason for this post-war Commonwealth migration was primarily the state of British society and the labour market after the end of World War II. The war itself was a big trigger for migration, as it moved over 2 million Commonwealth men out of their countries, and many of them stayed in Britain for some time. The post-war period was characterized by serious labour shortages caused by destruction and the necessity to rebuild destroyed infrastructure, the Marshall plan for Europe and delayed demobilization of soldiers. Some working-age men and women had been killed during the war. Compared to other European and non-European countries, Britain also had a relatively low birth rate: the UK population grew by only 8.2 per cent between 1971 and 2006, from 55.9 million to 60.5 million (Blanchflower, Saleheen, Shadforth 2007: 1).

Migration soon began to be controlled. The post-war influx of Commonwealth immigrants resulted in the enactment of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962, a document that placed restrictions on immigration. Control was further tightened by the 1971 Immigration Act (Salt, Bauer 2020). But despite that, migrant numbers grew and their share in the population rose from 4.3 per cent in 1951 to nearly 13.4 per cent in 2011.[3] Indians became the largest migrant group in the country after they overtook the Irish[4] in 2003 and held that position until 2015, when Poles in turn became the most numerous group. However, several years later the situation changed once again and in 2019 Indians returned to the first position as the most numerous non-British-born group in the UK as the number of Poles decreased. This sudden emergence of Poles as the largest immigrant minority and Polish as the third language spoken in Great Britain after English and Welsh was the effect of the post-accession wave of Central-Eastern European migration that followed the 2004 enlargement of the EU.

The United Kingdom was one of only 3 countries in the so-called 'old Union' that decided to fully open their labour markets to workers from the 10 new countries admitted to the European Union on 1 May 2004[5]. Two of the new members, Malta and Cyprus, were part of the British Commonwealth, three were countries that had regained their independence after the breakup of the USSR, four were countries of the Visegrad Group and the last was Slovenia, which had gained independence after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Bulgaria and

[1] Accessed 16.01.2023.
[2] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationality (accessed 15.01.2023).
[3] https://www.migrationwatchuk.org/briefing-paper/48/a-summary-history-of-immigration-to-britain (accessed 18.01.2023).
[4] In 2000 there were 495,000 people born in the Republic of Ireland, 433,000 born in India and 271,000 born in Pakistan (ONS).
[5] The other two being Ireland and Sweden.

Romania's accession was postponed until 2007, and thus the wave of Romanian and Bulgarian migrants was delayed. In the Accession Monitoring Report May 2004 - June 2005 published by the Home Office in August 2005, we read that during the first year after the 2004 EU enlargement, 232,000 immigrants from A-8 (or EU-8) countries[6] applied to the Worker Registration Scheme (Home Office 2005). However, the large scale of the influx by migrants from the new EU countries caused the UK to decide to introduce restrictions on Romanian and Bulgarian workers on 24 October 2006, i.e. before the next EU enlargement, (Fihel, Piętka 2007: 6). Despite that, the number of Romanians in the UK rose from 24,000 in 2007 to 427,000 in 2019 (ONS).

According to the aforementioned 2005 Home Office report, nationals of the EU-8 countries contributed to the success of the UK economy whilst placing a very small burden on the welfare system or public services (Home Office 2005). They helped to fill the gaps in the labour market, particularly in certain sectors: hospitality and caring, food and manufacturing, agriculture, and administration. In many cases they supported the provision of public services as bus, lorry and coach drivers, care workers or specialists. Equally positive was the Centre for Economic Performance of the London School of Economics report *Brexit and the Impact of Immigration on the UK* (Wadsworth et al. 2018: 2). Among other conclusions it states that 'the areas of the UK with large increases in EU immigration did not suffer greater falls in the jobs and pay of UK-born workers' (p. 2). Later we read that 'we cannot be precise about the size of the losses from restricting immigration following a Brexit. But we can confidently say that the empirical evidence shows that EU immigration has not had significantly negative effects on average employment, wages, inequality or public services at the local level for the UK-born' (p. 16.).

EU accession of Central and Eastern European countries and the opening of the labour market to workers from that region meant that the inflow of migrants from EU countries admittedly increased significantly compared to the previous period, while the inflow of migrants from non-EU countries fell sharply. The annual number of new migrants from EU and non-EU countries levelled off in 2013 (this and the following 3 years also saw the highest numbers of new migrants in the UK), the next major change emerging in the period after the Brexit referendum, when the numbers of non-EU migrants became larger once again. Recently, this has been partly reinforced by the influx of British National (Overseas) status holders from Hong Kong and war refugees from Ukraine, who have been granted special visa path.

Post-accession migration from the V4 to the UK – similarities and differences

On 1 May 2004, the four Visegrad countries accessed the European Union. The fact that these countries joined on the same day was no coincidence, but rather the result of centuries of shared Central-Eastern Europe history, and particularly of the similar post-war fates of the region. With the arrival of the post-Yalta order after the Second World War, all four countries found themselves in the Soviet sphere of influence and became part of the Warsaw Pact. All of them had a dramatic history of resistance against the imposed system – suffice to mention the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the Prague Spring in 1968, the Solidarity movement and

[6] I.e. countries of the 2004 accession without Cyprus and Malta.

martial law in Poland in 1981-1983. In 1989, the entire region freed itself from Soviet domination and entered a period of transition as a result of the first partially free elections in Poland on 4 June 1989, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in November 1989 and the so-called 'Triangle Table' negotiations in Hungary. On 1 January 1993, Czechoslovakia broke up into two independent states: the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Immediately after the fall of communism, the entire region declared its willingness to integrate with the West and join the European Union –- the membership negotiation process began on 31 March 1998 for Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, and on 15 February 2000 for Slovakia.

The political transformation was difficult and painful in all the Visegrad countries, even though each started from a slightly different economic level – the situation was relatively better in Hungary and the Czech Republic, and worse in Poland and Slovakia. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 1990 GDP per capita was USD 1629 in Poland, USD 3312 in Hungary and USD 3300 in Czechoslovakia. By comparison, the UK's GDP per capita in the same year was USD 20,884, more than six times that of Czechoslovakia and Hungary and almost thirteen times that of Poland. The economic and political reforms also involved the transformation of the labour market, which had to switch to a free market economy; privatisation, sometimes carried out chaotically; and changes in agriculture, including in land ownership. The mismatch between workers' skills and the needs of a competitive labour market was also a problem (Andrejuk, Fihel 2018: 199).

The effects of these changes included the huge unemployment that affected some countries in the region. In April 2004, i.e. a month before accession to the European Union, unemployment in Poland reached 19.9 per cent (GUS), and was even higher among young people. It was also unevenly distributed: the less-developed peripheral regions experienced unemployment to a far greater extent than, for example, large cities. A similar situation was seen on the Slovak labour market with 18.6 per cent unemployed, while Hungary and the Czech Republic recorded much lower unemployment: 5.9 per cent and 8.8 per cent respectively.

Outward economic migration, especially to Western European countries, including the UK, was observed in the all countries of the region after 1989. It was made possible primarily by the abolition of short-stay visa requirements and thus legalisation of residence in Schengen countries for up to 90 days. In some sectors, opportunities for legal employment emerged - for example *au-pair* visas and permits issued for seasonal work, which were extremely popular at the time, especially in Poland and Slovakia (Black et al. 2010: 7), and a large but difficult to measure grey market also developed (Andrejuk, Fihel 2018: 201). The huge differences in wages made it very profitable to travel for work, even for wages below the minimum hourly salary in the West. In June 2004 the gross monthly minimum wage in Poland was the equivalent of €175.25, €115.01 in Slovakia, €206.73 in the Czech Republic and €201.90 in Hungary. At the same time, it was €1236.65 in the UK, among the highest in the EU.

High unemployment and wages almost ten times lower than in the destination countries meant that after the labour market in three EU countries (UK, Sweden, Ireland; and also Norway, which remained outside the EU) opened on the very first day after the EU-10 accession, one

of the largest migration waves in post-war European history began (Iglicka 2010: 2). Richard Black et al. write in the introduction to their collective work that, given such great differences, this wave was almost inevitable (Black et al. 2010: 7). The scale of this migration can be illustrated by the fact that while in 2004 one million Poles had stayed outside Poland for more than two months, in 2016 the respective number was already 2.5 million (Garapich, Grabowska, Jaźwińska 2018: 209). Around 900,000 of them chose the UK as their migration destination. The wave can be easily observed in the statistics of applications for the NINo, UK's social insurance number, from foreign nationals. In 2002/2003 none of the V4 nations was present in the top 20 national groups (the number of Indian applications being the largest). In 2004/2005 all of the V4 nations except Hungarians were in the top 20, with 171,380 Polish applications outnumbering those from Indians (45,980) almost 4 times. The numbers of Slovak (26,370) and Czech applications (12,700) were also significant (Fihel, Piętka 2007:12).

From the outset, differences were evident in the scale of migration from the different countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which was largely due to the migration history and habits of their populations, followed by differences in the levels of economic development and unemployment. Poland, like e.g. Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, was predominantly a migrant-sending country, while since the communist years and even earlier, in the 19th century and the interwar period, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were settled and migrant-receiving rather than migrant-sending societies (Black et al. 2010: 8). This is reflected in the numbers, although the proportions are also often forgotten: the more than one million Poles residing in the UK in 2017 (ONS) represented about 1/40th of the Polish population. But the 101,000 Slovaks accounted for only slightly less of their 5.4-million nation. The number of migrants from the Czech Republic and Hungary was much lower: 52,000 and 98,000 respectively (ONS 2016). For historical reasons, moreover, the destination countries for Czech and Hungarian migrants were primarily Germany and Austria. The exodus from Hungary to the UK was somewhat delayed, and in the post-Brexit referendum era, this is the only V4 migrant community in the UK that has been growing rather than declining (ONS). Additionally, an important part of this migrant group is made up by ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries, i.e. Romania, Ukraine, Serbia, who, however, are not usually counted in migration statistics from Hungary.

Thus, as may be seen, there are both similarities and significant differences in the migration histories of the Visegrad countries after 1989. This gives a good basis for a comparative study[7].

Short history of Brexit and its implications for migration

British Euroscepticism has been present from the very beginning of the UK's integration with the European Communities in 1973. Only a year after Britain joined the European Communities, exiting the organization was already being considered. After the 1974 elections, when Labour Party leader Harold Wilson became prime minister for a second time,

[7] A separate comparative article will be published in frames of this project.

he announced a renegotiation of the terms of membership, fulfilling one of his election promises (Musiał-Karg 2016: 8). During that time it was the Conservative Party who represented more pro-European attitudes than the Labour Party. When the Tories won the next elections under Margaret Thatcher, they negotiated the so-called 'UK rebate' or 'UK correction' at the Fontainebleau European Council in 1984. It reduced part of Great Britain's contributions to the common EU budget, which was explained by structural differences between the UK and EU-6 economies. The 1990s saw the formation of two anti-European parties: the Referendum Party, which opted for renegotiation of the country's relations with Europe, and the UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party), which aimed to withdraw the UK from all EU structures. The latter managed to send MPs to both the British Parliament and the European Parliament. On 23 January 2013 David Cameron, then prime minister of the United Kingdom, gave a speech in which he called for a new vision of Europe meeting British expectations to be built. At the same time he declared that he personally opted for remaining in the EU. Holding a referendum to decide on Britain's membership in the EU became one of the Conservative Party's election promises, which Cameron, re-elected prime minister in 2015, decided to fulfil. One of the first readings of the newly elected Parliament was the European Union Referendum Act 2015, which after three readings in the House of Commons and approval by the House of Lords came into force on 1 February 2016. A day later the Prime Minister announced that the referendum would take place on 23 June 2016.

Many, especially in continental Europe, tend to forget that the 2016 referendum was not Britain's first vote on leaving the European structures. In 1975, having won the October 1974 general election, the Labour Party fulfilled its campaign promise and held a referendum under the Act to provide for the holding of a referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Economic Community. This 'forgotten' referendum is worth mentioning not only because it was one of only three popular referendums in British history (the other two being the Alternative Vote referendum of 5 May 2011 and the Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016), but mainly because it shows the change that took place in British society between 1975 and 2016. Much of this change was related to migration and was reflected in the main themes of the two campaigns.

First of all, in the 1975 referendum campaign only the Liberal Party took an unequivocally pro-European stance, while both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party split on the issue with constant internal disputes (Musiał-Karg 2016: 8). The results of the referendum may also be surprising from today's perspective, as they seem to be the reverse of the 2016 results. With a turnout of over 64 per cent, as many as 67.23 per cent voted to remain in the European Common Market. Equally interesting from the perspective of the 2016 referendum was the distribution of votes across the UK, as the least supporters of remaining in the EU were located in Scotland (58.40 per cent voting to remain) and Northern Ireland (52.40 per cent voting to remain), while 68.80 per cent of the English voters opted to remain. The only areas where supporters of leaving won were the Shetlands and the Western Isles (Butler, Kitzinger 1976: 264). Women were more Eurosceptic than men, and similarly, the young were more opposed to the EU than older people (the exact opposite of the 2016 results).

Also the 1975 campaign may be surprising from today's perspective. First of all, it was dominated by supporters of remaining in the Communities. Almost all of the major British press titles supported the 'remain' option, as did the Church of England. Both sides were heavily influenced by the process of disintegration of the empire ongoing at the time. The main slogan of the pro-exit campaign was 'out – and into the world', which emphasized that Britain had global rather than continental tasks and interests. Proponents of leaving argued that ties with the countries of the former empire could not be severed and replaced artificially by ties with Europe. In other words: Britain could not leave the British Commonwealth. In contrast, supporters of the Union argued that in a united Europe, Britain could play a leading role, and that together it would be easier to face challenges such as the Cold War, the Northern Ireland crisis, the fuel crisis and the high inflation caused by it, especially the rapidly rising food prices. Waves of strikes had swept through Britain in the early 1970s and the country was hit by the worst stock market crisis since 1929.

There are many obvious differences between the 1975 and 2016 campaigns and results, but one issue was similar: both were about 'taking back control', although very different things were meant by that slogan. In 1975, it was primarily about retaining control of the economy, imports and exports, and maintaining a leading role in the world as a former imperial metropolis. Migration was then a marginal topic that was virtually absent from referendum discourse. In 2016, the 'take back control' slogan primarily meant regaining control over immigration, which had been excessive according to opponents of remaining in the EU (Gamble 2018). This difference was even reflected in the language – Eurosceptics were often called 'anti-marketeers' up to the late 1980s, while during the 2016 campaign it was common to call them 'anti-immigrants'.

'Taking back control' over immigration was such a dominant issue in the 2016 campaign that voting 'for' or 'against' the EU was in social consciousness almost tantamount to voting 'for' or 'against' immigration (Meleady, Seger, Vermue 2017). In their detailed analysis of British media coverage of the 2016 EU referendum campaign, Martin Moore and Gordon Ramsay state (2017: 63) that immigration was the second most-covered policy issue after the economy, with 4,383 press articles referring to that topic during the campaign period. In 16 of the 18 months, it was considered the top issue with the British press (Moore and Ramsay 2017: 63). According to the authors, images related to the topic of immigration often appeared on front pages of the main newspapers, including in the *Daily Express* (21 times), *Daily Mail* (20 times), *Daily Telegraph* (21 times) and *The Sun* (13 times) – in only the 10 weeks that were covered by the analysis (p. 65). Moreover, from the middle of the campaign onwards, the topic of immigration rapidly gained a greater presence. Moore and Ramsay also analysed how what was said by politicians and leaders of the 'leave' option contributed to making the topic of immigration one of the crucial axes of the discourse. These statements and articles included allegations that immigrants were causing a crisis in the NHS; taking British children's places in state schools; contributing to an increase in violence and crime, including organized crime with foreign connections; taking jobs away from British people; creating a housing crisis, including pushing property prices up; depressing wages; bringing diseases to Britain, etc.

The Brexit referendum overlapped with the refugee crisis in Europe. Articles appearing in the British press, also in the context of Brexit, often contained drastic images of crowds walking the Balkan route. Not all of them were related to Brexit, of course, but sometimes the two topics intertwined in one text, as the EU was blamed for not dealing properly with the crisis. Furthermore, front pages contained pictures of overcrowded school classrooms, queues in front of doctor's offices and jobless people begging in the streets. Other images showed criminals and prisons (Moore, Ramsay 2017: 79-83).

Not all articles contained negative opinions towards migrants, but the majority did. Out of the total 307 texts studied, 222 presented only negative attitudes, while only 17 were entirely positive (Moore, Ramsay 2017: 98). According to the 18 March 2016 Ipsos Mori poll, immigration was the most important issue facing the UK (44 per cent of respondents expressed this opinion), ahead of the crisis in the NHS (38 per cent).[8]

This aspect of the campaign resulted in increased incidence of racist and xenophobic violence and hate speech, which was particularly visible online (Abranches et al. 2021). In the preface to the report *Racial violence and the Brexit state* by the Institute of Race Relations we read that 'in the post-referendum period, racial violence and harassment, as this report shows, became widespread' (Burnett 2016: 2). As Albornoz, Bradley and Sonderegger put it, 'in the immediate aftermath of the vote, social media outlets started denouncing episodes of intolerance and abuse towards immigrants' (2017: 2). Police statistics showed a rise in hate crime cases in the week before and the week after the vote: an increase by 42 per cent in the week from 16 to 30 June 2016 compared to the same period of 2015, with a peak of 289 cases reported on 25 June 2016.[9]

The largely anti-immigrant 'leave' campaign and post-referendum atmosphere was mentioned by almost all our V4 interviewees and for some it was the strongest experience connected to Brexit that they had had. Most used the term 'wave' to describe examples of intolerance or abuse that they observed or heard about in the media, including social media. Albornoz et al. stated that 'the leave victory served as a public revelation that anti-immigrant views across the country were more widespread than was previously believed, this caused the norm to shift, rendering anti-immigrant attitudes more acceptable' (2017: 4). Our research proves that this was also observed by the majority of migrants.

The results of the referendum became clear on the morning of 24 June 2016 and sent shockwaves through Europe and the world. The British pound dropped to a 31-year low against the US dollar and more than $2 trillion was wiped out from stock exchanges around the world (Hobolt 2016: 1261). Prime Minister David Cameron resigned, in Scotland voices calling for repeating the Scottish Independence Referendum arose, and there appeared the threat that Brexit could mean the breakup of the UK (Hepburn, Keating, McEwen 2021: 24-25). Eventually a parliamentary election was organized by the new Conservative Party leader, Theresa May, to strengthen her position in negotiations. Anti-Brexit protests gathered

[8] https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/publication/1970-01/ipsos-mori-research-highlights-march-2016.pdf (accessed 17.01.2023).
[9] https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-36746763 (accessed 17.01.2023).

hundreds of thousands of people in the streets, with 13 large marches from July 2016 to October 2019. Opposition to Brexit remained alive even after Brexit finally happened on 1 February 2022. For example, an anti-Brexit protest was organized in London on 22 October 2022, where slogans advocating for rejoining the EU appeared. The biggest of these were the anti-Brexit rallies of 23 March 2019 and then again of 19 October 2019, which were also among the largest manifestations in British history – the organizers of the two events claimed that they were attended by up to a million people each.[10]

Brexit meant invoking Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, which stipulated a 2-year negotiation period if a country addressed the European Commission with the intention to leave EU structures, and Brexit was initially planned for 30 March 2019. But as it turned out, this date would be postponed three times: to 30 June 2019, then to 31 October 2019, and finally to 31 January 2020 due to problems with obtaining acceptance for the negotiated withdrawal agreement from the British Parliament.

'Migration was a defining issue in the UK's June 2016 referendum on EU membership' – we read on the home page of the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford.[11] What aspects of migration changed because of Brexit? Of course, this qualitative methods research project aims to respond to that question by showing the perspective of the migrants themselves, but it is pertinent to briefly enumerate the legal aspects of the Withdrawal Agreement too.

The first important change was the reinstatement of border controls. Of course, the UK had not been part of the Schengen area, but since 1 October 2021 EU national ID is no longer accepted and all travellers are requested to present a valid passport. As the UK has left the single market, customs have been reinstated. On the EU side the effect was immediate and all controls and taxation were imposed from the first day after Brexit, while on the UK side this process was delayed, and some changes will not happen until 2023 or later (such as sanitary and phytosanitary control of foods arriving from the EU). For migrants already residing in the UK, especially those with their own companies trading in goods between the UK and EU, this meant big changes. This was also the case for people who regularly sent or received parcels to or from their home countries.

The second major issue was the need to legalize residence in the UK, which resulted from the end of free movement of people. Those who had come to the UK and settled there before 31 December 2020 had to apply for settled or pre-settled status by 30 June 2021. Those who did not register could not legally live, work, rent housing or use the UK health service after Brexit. Pre-settled status was given to all EU citizens who had come to the UK before 31 December 2020. Settled status was granted to those who had spent at least 5 consecutive years in the UK, including at least 6 months over any 12-month period.[12] The main practical difference between the two statuses is that in the case of pre-settled status, migrants are

[10] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/oct/19/peoples-vote-march-hailed-as-one-of-greatest-protest-marches-in-british-history (accessed 17.01.2023).
[11] https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/projects/migration-and-brexit/ (accessed 17.01.2023).
[12] https://www.gov.uk/settled-status-eu-citizens-families/what-settled-and-presettled-status-means (accessed 18.01.2023).

allowed to spend 2 years outside the UK without losing their status, while holders of settled status can stay abroad for 5 years and keep their status. If they wanted to return to the UK after exceeding such a period, they would need to apply for a visa in the normal way. Settled status is also required in order to apply for British citizenship.

As the UK had left the EU, mobile phone operators were no longer obliged to offer free roaming. This meant considerable increases in the prices of connections between the UK and Europe. For example, from 1 January 2021 prices for outgoing calls from the UK to Poland on the Orange mobile network were PLN 4.94 (about EUR 1.10) per minute.[13]

Of course, the examples shown above concern changes most strongly felt by those who were already in the UK. The situation is quite different for those who are planning to come after Brexit. In the case of both work and of study reasons, such people need to apply for a visa. Furthermore, medical services (except in situations where health and life are endangered) are no longer free of charge, including for example visits to a dentist. Additionally visa applicants have to hold a work permit. A visa costs a lot of money: a student visa, for example, costs £363 plus a healthcare surcharge. The costs of a skilled worker visa are even higher. Moreover, newcomers will be excluded from some social benefits that pre-Brexit EU migrants were eligible for.

Methodology

The main aim of this qualitative research project was to provide a comparative analysis of the impact which Brexit had on the everyday lives of members of 4 migrant groups: Polish, Slovak, Hungarian and Czech, and establish how, if at all, it influenced life strategies of the migrants. To achieve this goal, each of the four research teams was to conduct 30 in-depth ethnographic interviews and supplement the obtained data with participant observation in the UK. We thus carried out 120 interviews as part of the project. They were conducted on the basis of an interview scenario that included questions covering potential social, legal, economic and political impacts of Brexit. Some interviewees were contacted again after one or two years and a follow-up interview was done.

There were no age limits for interviewees, but we targeted people who had lived in the UK for a minimum of 5 years, arrived there after 2004 (although this criterion was not always respected in the Slovak sample) and remained in Great Britain at least until the Brexit referendum in 2016. We tried to balance the respondent group in terms of age, gender, occupation and family status. We also looked for interviewees from the Greater London area (50 per cent) and from outside this area (50 per cent). Furthermore, we gathered basic data on the place of origin in Poland, Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia; the year of migration to the UK; occupation and residency status in Britain (including how this status changed over the migration period). All data were anonymized according to GDPR standards in social sciences.

[13] https://orange.binaries.pl/bw//20155/0/11335/0c36b0f3-cb87-4f94-9e47-944f9b2da7ff.pdf (accessed 17.01. 2023).

The interviewed persons were informed that the interviews were being recorded and about the purpose of the research.

During the study we attempted to respond to research questions in several fields related to Brexit and its potential impact on lives and life strategies of the migrants: social, economic, legal and political. We also decided to add a general research question on uncertainty: whether Brexit was connected to that feeling and in what aspects it manifested itself.

In our research, we adopted a biographical perspective, but without using the classical biographical method (Chase 2005; Kaźmierska 2012). This perspective helped to provide the context of migration and show the dynamics of changing life strategies. However, we did not collect 'life stories' by allowing respondents to speak freely about their lives. Instead, in the interviews we focused on aspects that are important in decision-making processes: in particular on motivations for migrating and the dilemmas associated with Brexit and the pandemic, but also on economic or family reasons for a potential revision of life strategy.

The methodology presented above was disrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. We planned our first research trip to the UK for May 2020, which ultimately did not happen due to border closures and restrictions imposed on mobility. Moreover, consecutive waves of the virus and its variants forced us to postpone the research several times, which was exacerbated by the internal regulations of our own research institutions. In 2020 and at the beginning of 2021 it was difficult to predict how the sanitary situation would develop and when research abroad would be allowed again. Meanwhile, Brexit was becoming a more and more distant issue both in time and in people's minds, which were preoccupied with the much more current topic of the pandemic. This is why in autumn 2020, still uncertain about the situation, we finally decided to move the entire project, including the interviews, online.

This is how, despite having no plans to do so, we came to carry out our research using digital ethnography methods. Although we were not pioneers of online ethnography (Garcia et al. 2009; Miller, Slater 2001; Hine 2000), we were certainly among the first to do it in very changed circumstances. The pandemic forced everyone to stay home and it moved entire companies, schools, institutions and sectors online. Remote work became a standard and no longer surprised anyone, and neither did conducting ethnographic interviews online. People of all ages quickly gained familiarity with communicators such as Google Meets, Messenger, Zoom and Skype. Lockdown also kept people inside their homes, close to their laptops, so it was much easier to find time for an online meeting and arrange an interview.

We did not use all the available digital ethnography methods like online participant observation or social media profile analysis: we only used Internet communicators as a substitute for face-to-face interviews. We first looked for contacts on migrants' social media groups, such as 'British Poles' with 136,000 followers, 'Angliai magyarok' with 14,000 followers, 'Londoni magyarok' private group with 4,400 followers, 'Czech&Slovak Corner UK' with 5,700 followers and 'Czech&Slovak People in the UK' with 5,000 followers. We also used private contacts. Surprisingly, this method of reaching respondents worked very well. Interviewees sent us the social media profiles of possible next interlocutors, and sometimes they acted as intermediaries in arranging further interviews. The possibility to turn

the camera on or off gave more comfort and anonymity to the interviewed persons and the threshold of trust seemed much lower than in the case of a live meeting.

Finally it is worth mentioning that the pandemic not only imposed a change on our research methodology by forcing us to use digital ethnography: COVID-19 also impacted the studied group. It was impossible to talk only about the uncertainty caused by Brexit when at the same time the feeling of uncertainty caused by the pandemic was much stronger. There were other issues, like freedom of mobility, economic stability and reasons for a potential return to the home countries that were impossible to investigate in disconnection from this new threat. Failing to include the context of the pandemic in our research would therefore have been wrong and artificial (Żołędowski 2022). In this also we were not the first: for example, in the report *The impacts of Covid-19 and Brexit on well-being* written at the Wales Centre for Public Policy (2021) we read that 'Covid-19 and Brexit will both have short-term, medium-term and long-term negative implications for the Welsh economy, and in turn, for well-being' (p. 4).

POLAND

(Wojciech Bedyński)

The history of Polish migration to the United Kingdom is not recent. Individual Poles had been coming to the British Isles for centuries (the most famous included Jan Łaski the Younger and Józef Boruwłaski), but the history of the Polish emigration to Great Britain began during the partition period. After both of the failed national uprisings of 1830 and 1863, thousands of former insurgents and other political refugees emigrated to the West, forming what is called the Great Emigration. They mainly ended up in France, but some chose England. Britain became a refuge once again during the Second World War, especially after the defeat of France in June 1940. The Polish government-in-exile was located in London, and thousands of Poles, mostly military men willing to continue fighting for the independence of their homeland alongside the Allies, found themselves in the UK. In 1945, there were about 100,000 Poles in the British Islands, more than half of whom were soldiers (Mąkosa 2018: 138). The post-war reality and Poland's passing into the USSR's sphere of influence meant that a significant number of them chose not to return to their country after Germany's surrender. The United Kingdom reacted to this by introducing a special law on the resettlement of Poles (The Polish Resettlement Act) in 1947, which allowed Polish soldiers and all other Polish 'displaced persons' to stay in Britain legally. As a result, by 1951 there were already some 160,000 Poles living in Britain (Fihel, Piętka 2007: 9; Burrell 2009: 2-3). This wartime and post-war group would not be without its consequences for post-accession migration, as a number of those coming after 2004 would have family ties to Poles who had already been living in the UK for decades. On the other hand, tensions and misunderstandings could be observed between the long-settled 'old' emigration and the new economic migration (Janeta 2012: 21-23).

Poland therefore has a long tradition of emigration, not only to Britain. From 1880, emigration overseas to both Americas intensified, as landless peasants from the Russian partition and Galicia in particular headed there. By the time of the First World War, there were around 1.9 million Poles living in the USA (Kicinger 2005: 5). In the interwar period, Poland was impoverished and struggled to integrate three partitions that were very unequal in terms of economic development; furthermore it was later affected by the great economic crisis of 1929 and the early 1930s. At this time, many people decided to leave – both permanently, most often to France, the USA, Argentina and Canada, and for temporary labour migration, most often to Germany. In addition, more than 70,000 Jews migrated to Palestine before the war as part of the Zionist movement. In total, around one million people left Poland between 1918 and 1939 (Kicinger 2005: 7). Even during the communist era, when Poland was theoretically a 'country without an exit' with heavily guarded borders and severe restrictions on issuing passports, around 400,000 people left the country for good (Stola 2010: 10).

However, it would be post-accession migration to the UK, including in particular migration by Poles, that would turn out to be one of the largest migration waves in the history of Poland and post-war European history in general (Iglicka 2010: 20; Treverny 2009: 1). Between May 2004 and March 2007 alone, the number of Poles who registered in the Workers Registration

Scheme run by the Home Office amounted to 391,640. These were largely young people, with as many as 83 per cent aged between 18 and 34, mostly male (61.4 per cent of the newcomers) and single (Fihel, Piętka 2007). Due to both transport accessibility and the size of the labour market, a significant number of them chose London (30.3 per cent in 2004; afterwards this percentage slowly began to decline), while the least chose Northern Ireland. Compared to pre-accession migration, the employment structure of Poles in the UK also clearly changed: far more people started to take up unskilled positions, and fewer worked in managerial and professional positions (Drinkwater, Eade, Garapich 2006).

The dynamics of Polish post-accession migration to the UK can be observed in data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), although we should keep in mind that the Office analyses population numbers according to specific criteria. If we take the country of birth as the basis, then Poles born already in the UK (for example, children of immigrants) will not appear in the statistics, and if we take citizenship, then those who have already managed to change it would not appear, even if they came to the UK after 2004 and felt Polish. There also existed a group of people who functioned in two countries at the same time, adopting a strategy of circular, incomplete or fluid migration (this term has already gained its own literature, cf. Okólski 2001; Engbersen, Snel 2013; Jancewicz, Salamońska 2020).

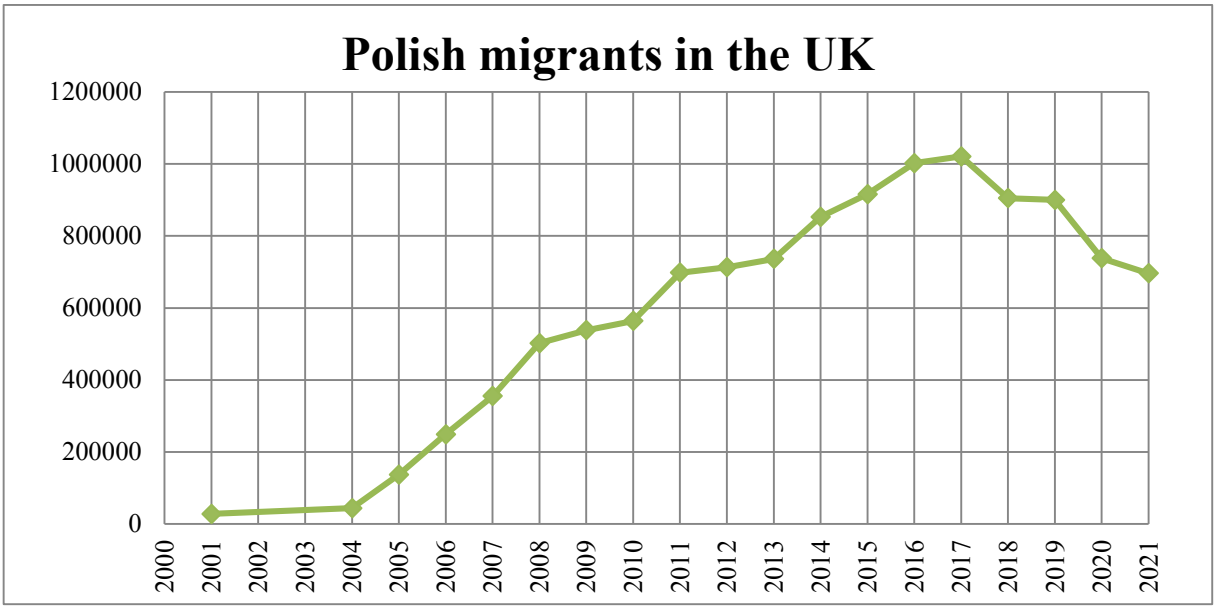
Despite these problems in determining the precise number of Poles present in the UK, certain trends concerning the analysed wave of post-accession arrivals are clear regardless of the criterion adopted. For the purposes of this study, we will use the number of people by declared nationality (Table 2.3 in the data of the Office of National Statistics). The starting point is February 2004, when there were 44,000 Poles in the UK, making up the 20th largest nationality group in the country. If we went back three years, we would see that in February 2001 the respective figure was only slightly lower at 28,000. In December 2004, i.e. by the end of Poland's first year in the EU, there were already 69,000 Poles living in the UK. Over 9 months an increase of 25,000 had occurred, which is higher than for the previous 3 years taken together. By the end of 2005, there were already 137,000 people in the UK who declared Polish nationality, so the number had almost doubled in a year and Poles had become the 3rd most numerous nationality. At the end of 2006 there were 249,000 Poles in the UK and at the end of 2007, 399,000. Thus in the first 3.5 years after accession, the number of Poles in the country increased by 355,000 people. In December 2008 Poles numbered 502,000. In 2009 there were 538,000 Poles and in 2010, 564,000.

The growth of the number of Polish migrants in the UK was markedly slower in the period from 2008 to 2010. This was related to the economic crisis of 2007-2009, caused by the collapse of the US mortgage market and the wave of bank failures (including Lehman Brothers), which hit the UK particularly hard. Between the beginning of 2008 and the end of the first quarter of 2009 there was a 6 per cent fall in GDP, and the country took the next five years to recover and reach the level of GDP from the end of 2007 (ONS). Unemployment rose significantly, from around 5 per cent at the start of 2008 to around 8 per cent between 2009 and 2013, to fall back to pre-recession levels only in December 2015. It is worth mentioning here that Poland came through this crisis relatively unscathed. Admittedly, there was a decline

in GDP growth, but Poland was the only country in the EU that did not experience a recession (Żukrowska 2015).

Once the worst of the crisis had passed, the growth in the number of Poles picked up again. In December 2011 there were already 698,000 Polish nationals living in the UK, so there had been an increase by a further 134,000 over that year. At the end of 2012 they numbered 713,000, rising to 736,000 at the end of 2013, 853,000 in December 2014 and 916,000 at the end of 2015. The years 2015-2017 saw the peak of the migration wave. In December 2016, there were already 1,002,000 Poles in the country, and as many as 1,021,000 at the end of 2017 (cf. Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak, Pszczółkowska 2020: 102). After 2017, the number of Poles started to decrease noticeably: in December 2018, there were only 905,000 Poles in the UK, dropping to 900,000 in December 2019 and 738,000 in December 2020. Compared to December 2017, this is a decrease of 283,000 or 27.7 per cent. In June 2021, the number of Poles in the UK fell below 700,000 (ONS).

Table 1. Number of Poles in the UK (based on ONS data 2001-2021)



Source: Office of National Statistics, www.ons.gov.uk (accessed 18.01.2023)

Data collection

As part of our research on the impact of Brexit on the life strategies of Polish migrants in the UK, we conducted a total of 30 in-depth ethnographic interviews with 29 individuals in 2020 and 2021 (one interview was repeated in 2022). The interviewees were 10 men and 19 women aged between 26 and 54. All the interviewees came to the UK after Poland joined the European Union in 2004, 2 of them shortly after the Brexit referendum in 2016. 2 had returned to Poland after the referendum and a third was preparing to return at the time of the research, while another moved to a different European country in 2019. In no case was Brexit the stated reason for the return. 11 of the interviewees lived in London or its immediate

vicinity, the remainder in other UK cities, including 1 in Scotland (Edinburgh) and 2 in Northern Ireland (both in Belfast). Of the interviewees, 17 were living in cities with populations over 100,000, including 11 in the London metropolitan area, and 12 in smaller towns and cities. 21 people had either a bachelor's or a master's degree, including two who had a PhD and one who was completing a PhD. 8 people had secondary or vocational education. Some over-representation of people with higher education may be due to the way interviewees were sourced (see below), but the difference is not large compared to the average across the migrant population (Fihel, Piętka 2007:19). The migrants came from various places in Poland, but the vast majority (22 people) were from large Polish agglomerations (Warsaw, Poznań, Cracow, Tricity), and only 7 from smaller towns and villages. This also may have been due to the method of selecting interviewees imposed by the pandemic.

Our method of conducting the study was largely forced by the pandemic. As it was impossible to travel to the UK, in mid-2020 we decided to conduct all the interviews online. We sourced interviewees via Facebook – an announcement that we were looking for interviewees for the project was posted on several migrant groups, and we posted similar announcements on our personal profiles. The response exceeded our expectations: many more people than we needed came forward. Additionally, the respondents often recommended other people after the interview, giving a 'snowball effect' (which was in fact unnecessary as we had a sufficient number of people willing to be interviewed). In our opinion, the success of this method of obtaining interviewees was due to several overlapping factors. First, the pandemic was in full swing, so a lot of activity had moved to the Internet. Therefore, no one was surprised to be interviewed in this way. The interviewees themselves also admitted that they found this formula more convenient – it was much easier to arrange, the interview was more flexible, discreet and comfortable. There was also always the possibility of pausing it and continuing later. Secondly, something that might be termed migrant loneliness also played a role (van den Broek, Grundy 2017). For many migrants, the Internet is a natural environment for maintaining social ties with family and friends, and this has been the case since they left. Thirdly, many of them had the need to vent, to talk about their migrant experience and their lives. The biographical perspective of our research was also very much welcomed by the interviewees themselves. Only one interview was conducted during an in-person, face-to-face meeting – this was held with a couple who recently decided to come back.

A typical interview lasted for about 1 to 1.5 hours. All of them were conducted and transcribed in Polish, and then anonymized according to GDPR standards in social sciences. We do not provide names and in the case of settlements with a population under 100,000 inhabitants we give the name of the county or shire instead of the town name.

Results

When conducting the interviews, we asked about the reasons for migrating. The economic motive should be mentioned first, as it is relevant for the majority though not all of the respondents, and not all of them mentioned it as the most important. Very often financial reasons coexisted with a desire for adventure and a desire to improve English skills or gain international experience. Purely financial reasons were held mainly by the earliest migration,

which started just after Poland's EU entry and the opening of the British labour market (Okólski, Salt 2014; Garapich 2019: 14; Szkudlarek 2017: 56-59). The most important pulling factor was the significant wage gap, even after taking into account differences in the costs of living; the pushing factors included the entry of the 1980s baby boomers into the Polish labour market, which over a period of just five years increased the share of working-age population from 47.1 per cent in 2000 to 50.1 per cent in 2005; the education boom, including a particular emphasis on learning English, which was considered a gateway to social advancement and resulted in more than 77 per cent of 18-24 year olds being able to communicate in English in 2012; housing problems; and finally massive unemployment, unevenly distributed across the country (Okólski, Salt 2014).

In case of two interviewees, the reason for emigration was the failure of companies established after 1989. The first years of the political transformation were conducive to entrepreneurship, and resourceful people often managed to develop very extensive businesses in a short period of time. This was particularly true for free-market trade. Soon, however, conditions began to change as companies with foreign capital and large retail chains started to arrive in Poland, competition increased and aggressive marketing entered the scene. New entrepreneurs often lacked the capital and knowledge needed to compete effectively:

> My brother and I established a company together in the 90s. I messed up my studies because of that. We traded in computer equipment. It was a good living back then. Because it was all about opening borders and coming out of communism. It was only later that the market changed, competition started to enter. When conditions change completely, you have to adapt or leave the market. We chose the second option, we closed the company. And then there was something casual here, something casual there... And, you know, it wasn't possible to bring in too much meaningful income. So I realized that either I could work in Poland for £1.5 an hour, or I could work here for £6 an hour. This is why I decided to come. (Male, 47, Edinburgh)

Sometimes these financial troubles of enterprises founded after 1989 resulted in a spiral of debt that lasted many years. Polish legislation and economic practice often made it difficult to declare a company bankrupt – as was the case for one interviewee:

> My start in life was in the 1990s. While at university, I started a company. And that company grew very quickly, it became a medium-sized company (…). So when I fell, and I fell in 1999, that fall was also very painful. I couldn't declare bankruptcy in Poland at that time, and in saving myself and looking for some kind of new life [...] I got a job. Unfortunately, this past situation was chasing me all the time. I couldn't disentangle myself from the growing debt because in those days there was no bankruptcy procedure for a civil partnership. I was constantly on the run from the debt collection system, even though I was already pursuing a career in another industry and even though I was earning more and more. But still, I was unable to deal with this hitch from the past. (Male, 53, Surrey)

It is worth mentioning that not only did this interviewee's leaving Poland result in an 'escape' from debt, he also managed to legally and successfully resolve this aggravating issue in his life. After 6 months in the UK, he was able, on the basis of EU legislation, to legally carry out insolvency proceedings in the UK, which proved relatively easy.

Sometimes a departure for financial reasons was due to a very specific goal for which the interviewee wanted to raise funds. In the case of one (Male, 41, Oxfordshire), this was an aircraft pilot course, which had been his dream since childhood. If he remained in Poland, it

would have been difficult for him to raise the sum of PLN 20,000-30,000 needed for a PPL(A) licence, as almost his entire salary was spent on daily living costs. That is why, in 2005, he decided to leave Poland for the UK, and after just one year he was able to set aside funds for a pilot training course. In another case (female, 26, Buckinghamshire), the emigration took place just after high school graduation as this respondent wanted to earn money for further studies. What was initially meant to be a summer earning trip resulted in permanent emigration. She completed her studies in the UK.

Studies were another possible motivation. Again, the cases may be overrepresented due to the method of data collection, but education was certainly also a reason for many people's arrival in the UK. British universities have a leading position on the global education market[14], and in some cases the European Union offered the opportunity to bypass tuition fees, which were often an inhibiting factor in the decision to undertake studies in the UK. The language in which classes were held, which is increasingly commonly known by graduates of Polish schools, was an additional factor. Three of the interviewees came primarily to study, and for one it was an additional motivation.

Three female interviewees came to the UK because they had a British or international partner or because their Polish boyfriend was already working in Britain.

In the case of most interviewees, however, it is hard to pinpoint one particular reason for coming, and the economic motive was not the main one at all (cf. Szkudlarek 2019: 22). More often it was not just one but many reasons at once that pushed them out of Poland: the desire to earn money was mixed with the desire to have an adventure abroad (this is especially true for young people), the desire to improve their English, or to gain experience.

Also worth mentioning is a group of 3 people who could be called 'global nomads' (cf. Kannisto 2014). The popular term 'digital nomads' (Makimoto, Manners 1997; Müller 2016) does not fit to them because they do not work entirely remotely. However, their specialised training and excellent English skills give them the option to work almost anywhere in the world and they have taken advantage of this. One example is a doctor (Female, 37, Derbyshire) who has worked or volunteered in many places around the world. She works in England not because of the salary, but because of the better working culture (presence of nurses, fewer hours and on-call time, better organisation of the clinic). However, she does not rule out that her stay in the UK will be just a stop on her journey and that in the future she will move somewhere else. Two other persons are working for international, global companies, having already worked in Canada, the US or the Netherlands. As they say, they could apply for a transfer to another location anytime.

Finally, it is important to mention a certain adventurousness that characterises many of the migration stories. At the time of leaving, the migrants rarely planned to migrate for good or

[14] 4 out of 10 best academic institutions in the world are British: universities of Oxford and Cambridge, University College London and the Imperial College London – according to QS World University Ranking 2023: https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2023 (accessed 23.06.2023).

for a longer period of time. Most often they imagined their departure as short-term economic migration. Furthermore, the decision to leave was not fully planned, and was often taken on impulse or as a result of opportunity. In our view, however, this adventurousness did not necessarily represent a strategy of 'intentional unpredictability' (Eade et al. 2007: 9; Szkudlarek 2019: 20). Indeed, the authors of the term refer to it as 'openness of migration plans' (Eade et al. 2007: 9). And yet, the spontaneous nature of the departure to the UK 15 years ago does not at all imply that the migrant is still open to change at present. Rather, that openness was due to their young age and the conditions at the time.

> My mother thought she would go for two weeks, and it turned into eight years [...] if someone had asked me a few years before I left [whether I was going to emigrate] I would have tapped my head and said 'never!' (Female, 35, London)

> I wanted to go, see what it's like and come back. But I liked it and stayed. For 14 years. It was an impulse, I didn't even think about whether I would have a job. (Female, 42, County Durham)

The post-accession migration of Poles was strongly networked. Only in several cases did the interviewees look for jobs through agencies (Polish or British). Most of them knew somebody who was already in the UK when they came and helped them to settle in and find employment, or at least advised them on how to do so (Munshi 2020; Ryan, Dahinden 2021; Haug 2008).

> This ex-employee of mine here arranged a room for me with some Canadian friend of his who had moved to England earlier. Thanks to this, I was able to arrange things in such a way that I would pay him for the first month not in advance but in arrears. (Male, 53, County Surrey)

> A friend I knew from Poland was already putting me up. (Male, 33, London)

> The year before we left together in 2015, my boyfriend had been in England for 2 months and already had friends he was staying with at the time. And when we left together in 2016 after high school graduation we also stayed with these friends. That was our kind of starting base. Those friends helped us find a place to stay and they also helped us look around for work. They showed us agencies where we could look for work. (Female, 26, Buckinghamshire)

When we listened to some of the migrants' stories, a kind of migratory loneliness was visible. A number of interviews describe a rather solitary life in the UK, focused solely on work and occasional visits to the countryside. Social life is realized mainly online with friends and relatives who were left behind in Poland. These migrants rarely made friends with British people. They described them as closed and inaccessible, especially towards migrants. On the one hand they perceive the British as polite and kind, but on the other hand they claim they do not permit a closer relationship to form.

> Supposedly there is no dislike, everyone is very polite and very well-mannered, but there is this glass ceiling, a barrier between strangers and one's own and I usually end up in this group of strangers. It's the same in almost every setting, almost every group I find myself in. (Female, 40, London)

We got this impression especially when we listened to interviews with people who had returned or were considering it. Most of them worked or were working in warehouses, factories, shops and in social care – they rarely encountered British people in these places and their colleagues were also migrants, often non-Europeans:

> I only worked with Somalis, Pakistanis and Indians. I had nothing to talk with these people about. To them, 3 questions were the most important: do you have children, how old are you and do you have a husband? And nothing else interested them. (Female, 35, London)

Louise Ryan and Anne White have written that 'decisions [to return or to stay] are influenced by the nature of the very ties and networks which link Poles in Poland to Poles abroad' (2008: 1468). And indeed, when we talked to people, often the types of relationships and the people that they formed them with determined the dividing line within the migrant group. Some of them met and socialized with British people and foreigners alike. Forming closer social ties in the place of migration was often linked to a desire to stay in the UK for a longer period, sometimes to a decision to apply for citizenship. Very often in this group were people who had finished their studies in the UK and made friends at university. Others were working in senior positions (managerial or professional) and were more likely to get to know British people more closely at work. Of course, language proficiency was a key prerequisite in that situation.

> I have international friends, British people too. A little bit because I work in this language tourism, I have met a lot of people from different countries. The university is also very international, we have students from 104 countries, but also among the staff I think there are representatives of 52 countries, so generally a very international environment. (Female, 40, London)

Another factor that was helpful in getting involved in the local social life was having an international intimate relationship. We spoke to two women and one man who have British partners, one woman who has a Spanish partner and one who has a Belgian husband. In all these cases, this automatically meant having an international (or British) social environment. Having children in Britain (also with Polish partners) naturally leads to new relationships when the child starts going to a British school. On the other hand, childless Polish couples in the UK often experienced loneliness as a couple and had problems with making closer friendships due to the amount of work and also to their specific work environment:

> We had friends, but we didn't form the kind of relationship and bond with anyone that lets you just go to pubs and meet up. I had a short episode with this Slovak, he spoke very good Polish. And then there was Rafał, from the factory. We sometimes met after work. But quite rarely, because it was difficult to get along at all. Because we worked second shifts, someone else worked different hours. So no, we didn't have any closer relationships. Just to have a chat with someone in between, when we lived with someone. (Male and Female, 38 and 35, London)

The topic of aging parents left behind in Poland often came up in the interviews. They were sometimes an important part of migrants' life strategies. In the case of one interviewee, her mother was left alone in Cracow after the death of her father. This migrant was attempting to persuade her mother to come to England. If she succeeds, it will probably mean permanent migration. If not, she may need to return to Poland, at least for some time. In this case, Brexit has significantly changed the situation, as with settled status she would only be able to spend 5 years outside the UK (or 2 years in the case of pre-settled status). After this time, she would lose that status and, if she wished to return to the UK, would have to apply for a visa.

Almost all of our interviewees said that they deliberately did not seek to socialise with Poles living in the UK. The reasons varied. Some hoped that they would learn the language faster if

they did not mix in a Polish environment, for others the motivation was to learn about other cultures. Often migrants complained about the relations that existed between Poles at work: that they tried to 'score' over each other or put obstacles in the way of others. Some wanted to 'escape the Polish mentality'. Contact with other Polish people was limited to housemates (very often houses were rented by a group of Poles), Poles working in the same workplace or – rarely – Poles encountered via participation in Polish parish activities (e.g. choir).

> I didn't care at all about looking for contact with Poles here. I was more interested in just getting to know other cultures in order to get into this British culture. And it's kind of pointless to live in a country and live only in your community, the one from Poland. Then you don't learn anything. You're not assimilating at all, you're just moving a piece of your life somewhere to emigrate and trying to pretend that you're living the same life as in Poland. I, on the contrary, was running away from the Polish mentality and had absolutely no desire to spend time with Poles in a Polish environment. (Female, 38, Manchester)

With respect to Brexit, it should be noted at the outset that the vast majority of interviewees declared that it had not had a particularly strong impact on their lives or future plans. The visible effects of Brexit (e.g. problems with the availability and quality of products in shops, queues at petrol stations, roaming prices, the return of customs duties, compulsory passports when crossing the border) are felt and attributed to Brexit, but do not significantly affect the life decisions of migrants who are already in the UK (although of course they are of paramount importance for those who would now be planning to move to the UK to work or study).

By far the strongest emotions among interviewees were caused by the June 2016 Brexit referendum and campaign. Almost all interviewees emphasized the wave of xenophobia and resentment towards migrants that swept through the media and British society at the time. For most people it came as a surprise, as they had not encountered it before. Among the exceptions were people who declared that they had already experienced discrimination by the British before the referendum:

> You know, it didn't get it straight away either, because they are all very correct here, polite. And I actually didn't realise right away that at least in my job, in this environment where I work, they have a problem with Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe, that is Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland. It wasn't until sometime later, when a girl from a Western European country came. And it turned out that she got promoted very quickly. […] When people are from, I don't know, Belgium, Holland, Western Europe, it's much easier for them to get promoted. It's much easier for them to get along. And yet Eastern Europe is treated a little bit neglectfully. (Female, 38, Bristol)

The referendum was perceived very differently depending on the environment. Migrants who lived in places like London or Scotland mostly did not experience this wave of xenophobia outside what they encountered in the media. Those who lived in the provinces or worked with anti-immigrant English people experienced it personally:

> There were a few older Englishmen who wore 'vote leave' badges on their uniforms. And they happened to behave very rudely if they heard migrants talking among themselves in their native languages (...) he would sometimes point out to me that this is England, this is an English store and you should speak English here. (Female, 26, Buckinghamshire)

Similarly, those who mixed in an international and cosmopolitan environment told of the shock their British friends felt when the results were announced. In some places, such as London, Oxford and Cambridge, the 'leave' campaign was almost invisible:

> I was in a very specific place in this context, because afterwards, when I read the polls, London, Oxford and Cambridge were the places where there was a lot of support for 'remain', and I also saw that in person. For example, when you walked along the Thames people had these big signs in their gardens with 'remain', on a blue background. From what I remember 'leave' was on a red one and I didn't actually see any red signs. It was 'remain' everywhere, in the windows and in the gardens. At the university in general it was very one-sided, in the sense that I didn't meet anyone who wanted to leave, or at least no one said it out loud, because I have the impression that it would be very frowned upon in that environment. Even at that centre in Oxford, our directors were English and they were puzzled, they said that the very fact that there was a referendum was unthinkable and that they were ashamed of their country after all. There was this pro-EU climate generally. (Female, 37, Oxfordshire)

Several migrants recounted that after the referendum their British work colleagues came to apologise to them for their country and were no less shocked and fearful than the migrants themselves. Many interviewees perceived the referendum campaign as largely focused on the topic of migrants and saw the vote as in some sense a vote 'for' or 'against' migrants. The result was therefore felt personally by them, as they realized that they were not actually welcomed by a large part of British society. One interviewee from London (Male, 33), who has a British girlfriend, settled status, and mixes mainly in an English and international environment, noted that for him the 'perceived effects of Brexit were twofold: firstly, he felt that he was not so welcome by the general public here, and secondly, that quite a few of his international friends returned to their home countries after the referendum'. The other interviewee (Female, 37, Derbyshire) said:

> I think such anti-immigrant attitudes were there before, Brexit just brought them out. People were like that before. Unfortunately, the British, not all of them, but a large proportion, are xenophobic, they are racist. It's been in their mentality for a very long time, very deep, and Brexit just brought it out.

The immediate impact of the referendum was that uncertainty was experienced, not only by migrants. Neither the British public nor the migrants knew what arrangements would be made in the Brexit agreement and what Brexit would actually mean, for example for the labour market and the functioning of migrants within it. One interviewee was in the process of changing jobs at the time. She had handed in her notice and sent out her CV. She had done this several times before the referendum and never had a problem finding a new job. It was very different now, because nobody really knew what provisions would exist for the employment of migrants.

> And after the referendum, unfortunately nobody called me [with a job offer]. Yes, it was just because of that, the referendum and they knew there was Brexit. A lot of companies didn't know how to approach it, whether there would be any work permits. Nobody knew anything, that was about it. That's when I felt such discrimination. (Female, 38, Bristol)

This changed atmosphere, especially in the period before and right after the referendum, was the most-remembered experience and had a psychological impact on life strategies of most if not all of the interviewees. The first reaction of some was even to consider going back

themselves. One interviewee (Female, 38, Bristol) said that if she had ever thought of returning to Poland, it was after the referendum result was announced.

Impacts of Brexit other than the social were less strongly highlighted by interviewees. They included various economic aspects of everyday life, mainly: shortages of certain products in shops and a deterioration in their quality, queues at petrol stations, fluctuations in the exchange rate of the pound, the return of mobile roaming charges, and high prices of parcels sent to Poland due to the reintroduction of customs fees and controls. In turn, the departure of some migrants resulted in problems with obtaining contractors for certain services, including handymen, construction workers and hair dressers. However, these issues were not important enough to have a decisive impact on life strategies, especially as most of them proved to be short-lived and, by the time of the interviews, were a thing of the past (for example, the fall in the value of the British pound or shortages of truck drivers, which were solved by issuing short-term visas).

> Yesterday I saw queues at all petrol stations. Just like during communism in Poland. The British government doesn't want to admit it, but that is Brexit. A lot of people who drove trucks have decided to return to Poland. (Female, 42, Northampton)

The third aspect is legal issues and those related to status as a migrant. As long as the UK was in the European Union, most people had no incentive to regulate their legal status. The free movement of people, goods and capital made it possible not to worry about these issues. It was possible to spend one's whole life in the UK and not apply for pre-settled or settled status or British citizenship. The post-Brexit reality forced migrants to take steps to legalise their continued residence. So it was a mobilising factor, and even the act of submitting an application for a particular status is itself an action that influences life strategy. It was a step made in certain direction already. Indeed, a holder of pre-settled status who wishes to apply for settled status cannot spend more than six months a year outside the UK for two consecutive years. Therefore, it is not possible to go to Poland and later, after a few years, decide to return to the UK, because then one becomes subject to the normal visa procedure. The application procedure itself was described as straightforward and non-problematic. Almost all of the interviewed people have obtained settled status, as they arrived in the UK before 2016.

3 of the interviewees plan to apply for British citizenship. This is an expensive process (costing around £1,500 in total) and requires examinations in UK history and culture, and English language to be passed. Most interviewees consider such a step to be pointless, as settled status gives the same sense of security, and the cost and amount of paperwork in applying for citizenship are not – in their view – worth it. Undoubtedly, however, Brexit was the reason why some people started to consider applying for citizenship. Most argued for security.

> We still have presettlement the status for the first 7 years. We could apply for settlement, but we haven't done that yet. One year after that we can apply for citizenship. We plan to do that. Firstly because you can have two citizenships, secondly, we would like to buy a house and it's nice to be settled enough to be able to pay off the house for the rest of our lives. And thirdly, I travel a lot professionally. And if something happens in, say, Stockholm, the British embassy will stand up for my colleague from the

> desk next to mine, and the Polish one will stand up for me. And while I don't expect terrorists in Stockholm, I do believe that the British one is more effective at taking care of international interests. (Female, 40, London)

The return migration wave, which is clearly visible in the ONS data, is also present in migrants eye's, in our interviews. In virtually all of them we can spot information about returning friends or mentions of the fact that after the referendum and during the pandemic a lot of people (not only Poles, also other Europeans) left the UK. However, these two factors should not be taken as the immediate reason for these departures, but rather as showing that life in the UK is no longer as profitable as it used to be and that the situation in Poland has improved. In addition to this, there are family-related issues and often simply the fact that the migration plan has been carried out – for example, enough funds have been secured to buy a house in Poland or start a new business.

> Most came here just to earn money for a flat, for example. For a few years. They go back because they have completed their plan. By contrast, this year even those who have lived in England for a long time are returning. Precisely because of the combination of Brexit and the pandemic. I mean everyone is saying that England is no longer an attractive place to live. Because previously they were treated very well, I mean the British generally viewed Poles very positively because they worked hard. Whereas after Brexit that changed. Suddenly the Poles became the ones taking the jobs, the intruders. This is visible especially in unskilled jobs. (Male, 41, Oxfordshire)

Based on the interviews we conducted, Brexit does not appear to be the main reason for deciding whether to return to Poland or stay in the UK. Both Brexit and the pandemic were factors that prompted reflection on the situation and may have accelerated certain steps, for example preparing to return or applying for citizenship. However, the direction in which these steps are oriented is the result of something else, which includes the reasons that were behind the decision to migrate to the UK, the current personal situation, family situation in Poland (for example aging parents), the possibility of finding a well-paid job in Poland, plans for the rest of one's life, etc. The words of one interviewee who was preparing to return at the time of the interview are a good example:

> Now, after 15 years, I have started to think about going back. I see what the situation is and I also see that Poland has changed a bit, that you can earn better now. And I also always wanted to live in the Polish countryside. (Female, 41, Belfast)

Conclusions

The results of our study on a group of 29 Polish migrants are very similar to the findings described by Aleksandra Szkudlarek, who analysed the possible strategies of Polish migrants in the face of Brexit (2019). The gap in time between the two studies (2016 versus 2020/2021) and the different territorial coverage seem to be an important context. Szkudlarek conducted her 2016 research (before and after the referendum) in Brighton and London, while we sought to reach Poles across the UK. While her respondents expressed uncertainty and anxiety freshly after the referendum, our interviewees retained these feelings only in their memories, and uncertainty about the details and mechanisms of Brexit was no longer present. What remained was only a general uncertainty about the future and uncertainty related to other events, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic. In the 2016 results, there were no references

to xenophobic incidents and hate crimes against migrants, which may be due to the territorial limits of Szkudlarek's research (indeed, in our interviews from London this aspect also seemed marginal – quite the opposite to interviews from the provinces, in which it actually arose as the primary association of Brexit and the referendum). The mobilising aspect of Brexit was important: mobilising interviewees mainly to perform the administrative tasks necessary to legalise residence in the new conditions, but also to rethink their life decisions (cf. Szkudlarek 2019: 83-91). The period of 'permanent suspension' associated with not having to make any administrative moves as long as the UK remained in the European Union is over. Even the acquisition of settled status is already a step in a specific direction and therefore a decision of some kind (holders of the pre-settled and settled statuses have limits on time spent outside the UK, and exceeding them means losing that status).

Also from a more distant time perspective, it can be said that Brexit has not had a decisive impact on migrants' life decisions (cf. Szkudlarek 2019: 100). However, as there has been (or still is) a wave of returns to Poland, it is worth asking why this is happening. In our view, it is primarily the result of a cycle of migration. The young people who left for the UK usually as singles in their twenties are now at a different stage of life: they have made some savings, gained experience and sometimes started a family. At the same time, a significant part of them have led rather lonely lives in the UK, even when living as a couple. They maintained relationships mainly online, with friends and family who had stayed in Poland. They rarely established deeper relationships in the UK, even with other Poles, and still more rarely with British people. Over time their homesickness grew, especially as their parents grew older, and brothers and sisters got married and had children. Visits in Poland for holidays were often a festival of social life, followed again by a long period devoted to work and possibly visiting the immediate area of where they lived in the UK. For many interviewees, who are now approaching 40, the time was ripe to decide where they wanted to spend the rest of their lives.

It is also significant that the situation has changed a lot since the interviewees left their home country. The picture outlined above of 2004, when unemployment in Poland reached 20 per cent and the minimum wage of EUR 175 was seven times lower than the minimum wage in the UK, has long ceased to be true. Today, the wage gap is much smaller: in Poland the minimum monthly salary is EUR 743 (2022), while in the UK it is EUR 2221 (2022), which is only just under three times as much as in Poland. Registered unemployment in Poland in November 2022 was 5.1 per cent (GUS) versus 3.7 per cent in the UK (ONS). The social and economic problems associated with the political and economic transformation have become less visible.

It seems that Brexit had a primarily psychological impact on Polish migrants – disillusionment with British society and the UK as a country has appeared. Almost all the interviews contained mentions of discrimination, of resentment from the British, which was rekindled by a referendum campaign that largely focused on the topic of migration. This is confirmed in recent research by Dr Katarzyna Narkowicz and Dr Aneta Piekut within the 'Migrant Essential Workers' project. In 2020-2022, 28 per cent of the 1,105 respondents claimed to have experienced various forms of discrimination in their work environment, and as many as 37 per cent of those working in healthcare felt that they were treated worse than

others because they were immigrants from Eastern Europe. Only 66 per cent of the group surveyed by Narkowicz and Piekut explicitly stated that they planned to stay in the UK. 13 per cent planned to return to their home country in the near future and 20 per cent were unsure (Narkowicz, Piekut 2022, podcast). The researchers noted that decisions to return or consider this option 'solidified during the pandemic but had been brewing since Brexit'.

In conclusion, it is hard to say unequivocally to what extent Brexit contributed to the change in the life strategies of migrants from Poland. The coincidence of the time when migration trends reversed with almost exactly after the announcement of the referendum results makes it tempting to hypothesise that this was a direct impact of Brexit. Migrants themselves actually unanimously declare that Brexit has not influenced their life decisions. On the other hand, our research shows that the impact of Brexit was evident in the migrants' surroundings, ranging from changes in atmosphere as a result of the referendum campaign, having to formalise their legal status, experiencing some economic impact (queues at petrol stations, shortages and smaller range of products in shops and lower quality of products, price increases, fall of the pound), and difficulties with moving between countries (the need for a passport, a significant increase in the price of phone calls and parcels). In our view, Brexit, and in particular the referendum campaign, contributed to disillusionment and discouragement with the UK and may have been one of the elements that mobilised people to make long-delayed decisions: either to return, or to 'go the extra mile' and, for example, apply for citizenship. The impact of Brexit was therefore more psychological than practical, which is not to say that it was not important in redefining migrants' life strategies.

List of interviewees PL

	Gender	**Age**	**Place of residence in the UK**	**Interviewed (year)**
1	M	33	London	2020 (2022)
2	M	53	County Surrey / London area	2021
3	M	47	Edinburgh	2020
4	M	34	London	2021
5	M	38	London	2020
6	M	41	Oxfordshire	2021
7	M	32	County Durham	2020
8	M	48	Leeds	2021
9	M	34	Bristol	2021
10	M	52	London	2021
11	F	35	London	2020
12	F	37	Derbyshire	2021
13	F	42	County Durham	2021
14	F	38	Belfast	2021
15	F	26	Buckinghamshire / London	2021
16	F	40	London	2021
17	F	39	Manchester	2021

18	F	41	Liverpool	2021
19	F	38	Bristol	2021
20	F	39	West Yorkshire	2021
21	F	35	Hampshire	2021
22	F	41	Belfast	2021
23	F	51	London	2021
24	F	47	County Durham	2020
25	F	34	Nottinghamshire	2021
26	F	37	Oxford shire	2021
27	F	42	Northampton	2021
28	F	38	Manchester	2021
29	F	36	London	2021

HUNGARY

(Ágnes Erőss and Katalin Kovály)

Brief introduction to the recent history of migration from Hungary to the UK

The population of Hungary is considered relatively immobile compared to other European countries. In contrast to other countries in the region, in Hungary the volume and dynamics of emigration were not significant until the late 2000s, as migration processes typical for post-communist countries started with a significant delay (Hárs 2016). Based on the data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, approximately 350,000 Hungarians have moved abroad since 1989. Importantly, neither the economic collapse after 1989, nor the country's EU accession in 2004 resulted in significant out-migration. It was the 2008 global economic crisis and its local consequences that were followed by increasing out-migration.[15]

The published estimates of the number of Hungarian emigrants vary between 195,000 and 335,000 in the 18–49 age group (Moreh 2014). According to the 2016 Microcensus, there were 265,000 households in Hungary whose members were temporarily or permanently abroad and whose permanent home is or was in Hungary.[16] Based on the mirror statistics from destination countries, the UN Commission on Population and Development prepares an annual estimate of the population living abroad. According to this, in 2019 there were 632,000 people born in Hungary living in countries around the world. This number was 514,000 in 2010 and 555,000 in 2015,[17] showing a clear migration trend. The main factors recognized as contributing to out-migration from Hungary were rising household debt (Moreh 2014: 85), unemployment, and low salaries; however, in surveys conducted after 2010 unfavourable career perspectives and general political atmosphere were also mentioned (Kováts 2014).

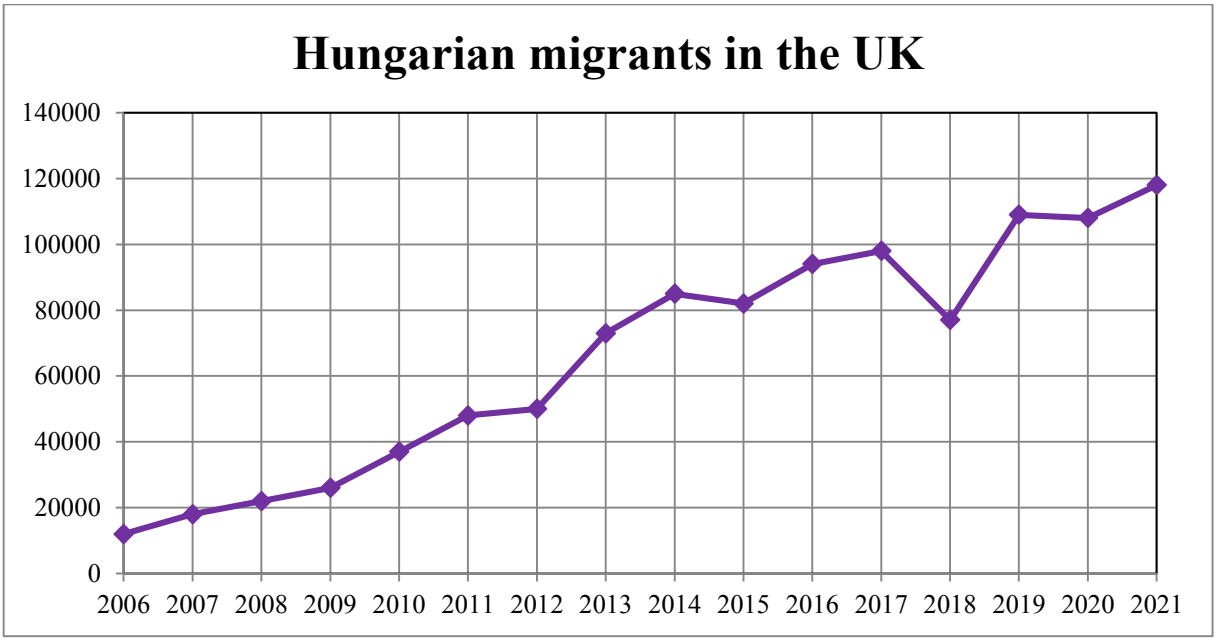
Traditionally, the main destination countries for Hungarian nationals have been Germany and Austria, due to historical links and geographical vicinity. Prior to 2008, the United Kingdom was not among the favoured destinations, which is reflected in Eurostat statistics: in 2004 54,714 Hungarian nationals were living in Germany, while only 6,021 were registered in the United Kingdom (Moreh 2014: 80). In the post-2008 period a significant change could be observed in the destination countries: among others, the United Kingdom has become more and more popular.

Due to the varying data collection and statistical methods used by different states and migration organizations, it is very difficult to precisely determine the number of Hungarians living in the UK. Reliable data about emigration from Hungary are also limited, and it is rather the mirror statistics of destination countries that provide a basis for a realistic estimate (Gödri, Soltész, Bodacz-Nagy 2014). Below we list some estimates of the number of Hungarians living in the UK.

[15] http://www.iom.hu/migration-issues-hungary (accessed 10.01.2023).
[16] Central Statistical Office in Hungary (2018).
[17] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division (2019). International. Migrant Stock 2019 (United Nations database, 2019).

According to the calculations of Chris Moreh (2014), both the stock and flow numbers of Hungarians increased between 2002 and 2014. He estimates the number of Hungarians in 2014 at around 80,000. According to data from the United Kingdom's Office for National Statistics, the number of Hungarians residing in the UK rose continuously between 2006 and 2017 reaching almost 100,000 in 2017 and dropped to 77,000 in 2018, while since 2019 it has been rising again and reached 118,000 in 2021.[18]

Table 2. Number of Hungarians in the UK (based on ONS data 2006-2021)



Source: Office of National Statistics, www.ons.gov.uk (accessed 18.01.2023)

The online magazine Portfolio estimated the number of Hungarians in the United Kingdom at around 250,000 both in 2017 and in 2018, based on an analysis of EU statistics and bank transfers.[19] The Annual Population Survey (APS) estimated the number of people born in Hungary and residing in the UK in 2019 at around 100,000 (many experts and observers found this number to be an underestimate). However, taking into account various UK databases, many sources consider that the most probable number of Hungarians permanently residing in the UK was around 100,000 in 2020. Nevertheless, we assume that there was additionally a sizeable group of Hungarian citizens who remained undocumented, working seasonally and circulating between Hungary and the UK, and simply remained invisible in the statistics. This might explain the huge discrepancies in data reported by different sources. We also consider this plausible, because according to the British Home Office approximately 170,000 Hungarian citizens have applied for settled status so far. This number can also be considered the number of Hungarian citizens living and working permanently in the UK (as at the end of 2021).

[18] Office for National Statistics, 2021.
[19] https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20180527/nem-hogy-megoldodik-tovabb-no-az-angliai-magyarok-rejtelye-286742 (accessed 11.01.2023).

Regarding geographical distribution, in 2018 nearly half of the Hungarian population was concentrated in London (16 000), South East (17 000) and East England (11 000).[20]

Data collection and methodology

While it was clear that our research cannot be representative, when compiling the pool of interviewees we nevertheless paid attention to diversifying the sample according to age, occupation, education, and place of living in Hungary and in the UK (capitals, larger towns, smaller settlements). Additionally, we collected data from ethnic Hungarians who had migrated from neighbouring countries (Ukraine, Romania) to the UK, as they are a particular group of transnational migrants, and recorded separately in some UK statistics.

In the course of our research, 30 interviews were conducted between June 2020 and July 2021, exclusively online either as video or voice calls, through different platforms (Skype, MSTeams, Viber, Facebook Messenger, GoogleTeams, WhatsApp). In general, we did not encounter serious technical problems; however, when we talked to people with young child/children who were also staying home during COVID, scheduling the interview sometimes required more flexibility (e.g. late-night calls). Sometimes the interview was interrupted either by a technical problem, or an incoming call, a crying child or a delivery. Additionally, especially in 2020, we observed that to some of our interviewees, probably because they felt deprived of human contact, these conversations meant opportunities for chatting, and it was sometimes challenging to balance between a friendly, casual talk and keeping a 'professional' tone. We used exponential discriminative snowball sampling to select interviewees.

We interviewed 25 people, and in 2021 we conducted follow-up interviews with 5 of them whose life story we found rather typical or the quite the opposite, or who embodied a particular age or professional group. The interviewees arrived in the UK between 2006 and 2015, and they had spent at least 5 years in the UK at the time of the interview. Their age ranged from 23 to 63. We interviewed 15 women and 10 men. 16 had either a university or a college degree, 2 were pursuing university/college studies in the UK at the time of the interview, and the others had graduated from high school. In line with previous international research findings (Przybyszewska 2021, Aziz 2015), all of them except 4 (a dentist, a teacher, a linguist and an engineer) were employed in lower positions than they used to work in Hungary (as bar tenders, delivery staff, receptionists). However, each of those 4 highly educated people who were working in their original professions in 2020 had taken some years to find a job that fitted their qualifications or to climb the career ladder until they achieved a position equivalent to their pre-migration one in Hungary. Almost half of the interviewees lived in London or its surrounding area, others mainly in East and North England, and one in Scotland, which more or less reflects the spatial distribution of Hungarians in the UK. When it comes to place of origin, 5 were born in Transcarpathia (Ukraine), 1 in Romania, 1 in Latvia, while the others were born in mid-sized towns in Hungary (and typically moved to Budapest to study or work), and 3 in Budapest. In sum, the pool of interviewees represented a broad spectrum, with a well-balanced gender, age and geographical distribution.

[20] Office for National Statistics, 2019.

Results of the analysis of interviews

The first major topic we asked the interviewees about was the reasons for migration and the expectations they had had. Typically, there was no single motivation for migration, but earning money was mentioned by each of the respondents. This is in line with the (relatively few) studies that have investigated Hungarians living in the UK, mainly through analysis of on-line surveys (Kováts, Papp 2016) and/or interviews (Irimiás, Michalkó 2016). These studies found that the majority of Hungarians came to the UK to seek employment and accumulate money to help their families or start their own independent lives. For our interviewees, besides the economic motivation seeking adventure (8) and personal motivations (8) played equally important roles in migration (a friend invited him/her, or s/he followed a partner or spouse). 7 respondents chose the UK intentionally to develop their career: they either wanted to undergo professional training and learn from the best (e.g. chef, barista, croupier, student), or they worked in a niche profession, either underpaid or with no job openings in Hungary (e.g. special engineering tasks). In some cases, external (geo)political circumstances were also mentioned as factors pushing people out from their place of origin. One young man (who is ethnic Hungarian) left Ukraine when the war in the Donbas erupted in 2014, while two respondents from Hungary mentioned that the systemic discrimination of women and the anti-LGBTQ political campaign were additional factors which drove them to leave their country. Learning English was explicitly mentioned as a driver of migration only in four interviews; however, at some point in the conversation almost all the interviewees talked about their (usually not good enough) language skills, told stories related to the stubborn Hungarian accent, and recalled their long struggle to (more or less) learn the language.

Regarding expectations before arriving in the UK, only two interviewees mentioned that they were interested in the UK, its history or culture. For the majority London was 'the closest metropolis one could reach from Budapest by plane' (Male, 36, London), attractive not only as a cosmopolitan city, but as a 'place to gain knowledge/professional training' (Male, 28, London). Interestingly, the UK also appears in interviews as a place in which it was easy to find employment even with very poor English knowledge. None of the interviewees ever imagined that they would have an easy life right upon arriving to the UK; however, each of them was determined to earn money, pursue their dream career, or learn and grow professionally.

The second group of questions focused on the impact of Brexit on society and whether it affected the interviewees as migrants. At first, the respondents claimed that Brexit had had no impact on their personal life, everything had gone on in the same way as before the Brexit vote: 'It doesn't affect my future life here at all' (Female, 37, Oxfordshire) or 'It will only be difficult for those who come to England after Brexit. I¶m safe' (Female, 24, Berkshire). As for bureaucracy, under the rules in force at the time when the interviews were being conducted, Hungarians (and other EU citizens) who had been living in the UK before Brexit became official (31 January 2020) or during the transitional period (between January and the end of December 2020) could easily complete the necessary paperwork that allowed them to stay in the UK without any restrictions. Namely, they had to apply for settled or pre-settled status by

30 June 2021. According to our respondents, this process was not particularly complicated; it could be done simply and quickly, online or by using a paper application. If any problems arose, they could rely on the efficient help of office staff, administrators.

However, when we asked directly about specific fields of life (economy, workplace, travelling), the interviewees were able to name some changes. In 2020, 4 respondents mentioned the following economic issues that they could link directly to Brexit or that they had experienced since the Brexit vote: weakening of the British pound, increasing prices of some (imported) food products, and the prices of travelling home and roaming. In 2021, when we conducted the follow-up interviews, three of the respondents noted the above-mentioned issues. Additionally, they not only complained about the prices of plane tickets, but also mentioned less-frequent connections, which make travelling less convenient, meaning that they might travel home less frequently. Several interviewees also mentioned that it would be more difficult to travel abroad after Brexit (e.g. an ID card would not be enough to enter the UK, but a passport would be needed). Some also mentioned that they knew people, not only Hungarians, but also Czechs or Poles, who had decided to return to their homelands because of the weakening pound: 'I had a Czech colleague, he said that after that, he would have earned euros in the Czech Republic, and the euro kept its value, the pound fell. He said that it's not worth it for him to work here, he has an apartment at home, he could do the same thing at home', and further: 'there is a 100-200 euro difference between the two, that's not money, I'd rather go home and work there' and he went home.' (Male, 40, London). Those who were working in the hospitality sector (restaurants, hotels) experienced difficulties with filling the lower positions (dishwasher, kitchen help) soon after the Brexit vote. If they were managers, it also affected them: 'After Brexit, the immigrant influx stopped, from which we hired the trained workforce, and it slowly stopped almost entirely.' (Male, 34, London). Only one interviewee mentioned a possible negative impact of Brexit on those who are not UK citizens: her husband, who used to work in the IT sector, lost his job in December 2019 and had not yet found a new position at the end of June 2020 when we conducted the interview. According to the respondent, during a job interview the HR worker directly asked whether her husband was a UK citizen, but he was not. They assumed that the husband did not get that job because of him not being a citizen:

> […] if you can choose, citizen or non-citizen, then of course they should choose that [the citizen]. So if it was this, this is a good question because, he... because he said that he thought..., maybe, so that's... that's a disadvantage then.' (Female, 34, Buckinghamshire).

However, we must point out that besides this possible case, the interviewees could not think of any negative effects and had not faced any issues in their workplaces. Rather, they reported that employers were supportive and dealt with the necessary paperwork (if there was any).

It is important to point out that when answering our questions about the consequences of Brexit, the interviewees almost without exception noted that it was difficult to distinguish whether a given change was the effect of Brexit or of COVID. Half of the interviewees were employed in industries that COVID hit especially hard: the hospitality sector (chef, cleaning lady, concierge), and other services (shop-assistant, masseur, private doctor, beautician). One of our male interviewees (34, London), who used to work as a chef, mentioned that '2016 was

a shock: it meant the end of the cheap but reliable and educated labour force.' He was sure that the UK would find another source of labour, but the decline in the sector, especially after 2018, was apparent. For example, he mentioned a friend of his who owned a restaurant chain with 10 units before 2016, but needed to close 4 by 2018, and invested a lot of capital in preventing the closure of the remaining 6. The possible coping strategies included temporarily returning to Hungary (2 of the interviewees did so in 2020) while dealing with the citizenship and other paperwork remotely, switching to the delivery sector (2 of the interviewees), finishing previously interrupted education (1) or temporarily relying on social benefits (mainly in the case of single mothers).

When it comes to Brexit and its impact on Great Britain, the interviewees quite unequivocally claimed that for many who voted for Brexit it was more about (unwanted) migrants than about leaving the EU. Some could empathise with those who had voted for Brexit because 'there are so many migrants in the country that you can barely see any English people in the streets' (Female, 24, Berkshire), or 'I would rather call the police before getting out of my car in some neighbourhoods in London.' (Male, 45, Lanarkshire).

Thus, as they put it, for 'ordinary people' Brexit was not about leaving the EU, but was a decision about the fate of immigrants. But which immigrants? According to some responses, the British had voted for Brexit because Eastern Europeans were 'stealing' their jobs and the EU was 'stealing' their money (Female, 32, London), while others mentioned that the problem was not with Eastern European migrants, but with migrants from (mostly) Africa (Male, 36, London), who lived on social benefits and avoided work (Male, 45, Lanarkshire). 'I'll be honest, I cheered for Brexit, for closing the gates. That those parasites who come to Great Britain just to get benefits, should go home.' (Male, 36, London).

The interviewees thought that economically, Brexit would temporarily hurt the UK (loss of markets, outmigration of multinational companies headquarters, etc.), but 'as always in history, the UK will overcome all this' (Male, 45, Lanarkshire), and Great-Britain would be stronger economically after Brexit, because 'people who are really needed will be allowed to enter the country.' (Male, 40, London). It must be noted that EU citizens have lost a number of benefits. Workers now have to comply with stricter residency rules, and they face a heavier administrative burden, which affects tens of thousands of Hungarian migrants as well.[21]

For those interviewees who lived in London and in large cities Brexit was a shock: as they said, they lived in a bubble, never met anybody who had voted for Brexit, and their UK employers and friends were also in shock. One of our female interviewees (33, London), who used to work as an *au-pair*, recalled that the father of the children was working for a BBC TV channel, and after the referendum he lamented it in his TV show, giving 'their nanny' as an example of a person affected by Brexit, and to whom 'we should be very grateful' for instance for looking after his naughty sons. Another of our respondents (Female, 49, London), who also lives in London, but has been working as a delivery person in the bigger London area since COVID, recalled her first trips to the countryside. She would see the red and white flag

[21] https://dailynewshungary.com/hungarian-students-hit-hardest-by-brexit/ (accessed 12.01.2023).

of England in front of houses and not the Union Jack, which she took as a sign of English nationalism. In contrast, she claimed that:

> It is pretty good in London. So here you don't really experience what I experienced in the countryside, what I told you about, in the English flag zone. It's absolutely fine in London. I mean, I don't feel Brexit on my skin, that there will be Brexit here soon. I don't feel anything at the moment. I'm not experiencing, nothing negative comes. (Female, 49, London, 2020)

Some of our interviewees also felt deceived by the image of a cosmopolitan Britain:

> It was a bit of a bad dream, and I still think so to this day. (…) I'm a British citizen too, right? And let's say, when you get the curriculum to prepare for it [citizenship exam, you read about] the British image, right? Everybody has this image, which is an infinitely inclusive, very cosmopolitan image, but behind it, at the same time, there is xenophobia and I don't know what else you can find deep down in the British mindset. I knew that there was obviously such a thing [xenophobia], I just didn't think that it would be in such a proportion. So this Brexit was definitely a disappointment to me, that they don't see two steps ahead. I would have thought about them – that is, I still think so – that either they made a terrible mistake and there will be a lot of crying in 10 years or 20 or even 30 years, or that they are so far-sighted and so professional that they made a very significant and smart, wise decision, but now, in the current situation, the British image has been slightly damaged by this whole Brexit. And I think for all Europeans. They let us [Europeans] down a bit anyway. (Male, 34, London)

The other major fault-line between Brexit voters is their demography: according to our respondents, older people typically voted for the Brexit and young people, who could directly benefit from EU membership (education, travel), were against leaving the European Union. One respondent recalled a memory:

> Oh, it was very funny. When my ex-boyfriend and I were just moving into the house, a very sweet, elderly couple came to our door, and we got a gift basket from them. And they said, 'We are the new neighbours and you are very welcome', and they introduced themselves and asked us where we were from. And my ex-partner is Romanian and I am Hungarian, and we said that, and then the lady looked at us very kindly and she said, 'We voted for Brexit…' They pushed the basket into our hands and walked away immediately. So... it was very interesting. But again, I think it's age-dependent. Because, you know, it was a pretty old couple, they have a different approach to foreigners and to Brexit. (Female, 23, London, 2020)

Another important age-related issue is educational migration. We should mention that young people who plan to study at UK universities are also affected by the changes. Prior to Brexit, the EU banned discrimination on the basis of citizenship and it gave EU students 'domestic' tuition status. After Great Britain left the EU, the ban was lifted and EU students were given a new 'overseas' status. In consequence, financial conditions have also changed: while the UK was a member of the EU, the maximum university tuition fee was £9,250 (EUR 10,200), reduced student loans were available and there was no need for separate health insurance or a visa. Since Brexit, however, these advantages have been discontinued and the costs of studies are significantly higher.[22] It will also no longer be possible to apply for a student loan. Those

[22] After Brexit tuition fees can range from £25,000 to £40,000 (EUR 38,000-44,000). Another £348 (EUR 386) is required for a visa, and one also has to pay the Immigration Health Surcharge, which is an extra £470 pounds (EUR 520) compared to pre-Brexit time. Previously, the tuition fees could be covered in full by a student loan, which was used by 85-90 per cent of the Hungarian students studying in the UK and which is now unavailable

who decide to study in the UK must apply for a student visa, which means an extra cost. Furthermore, no agreement has been reached on the mutual acceptance of higher education diplomas. In practice, this means that the diplomas of EU citizens who have already worked or studied in the UK before 1 January 2021 will continue to be automatically accepted. However, those arriving after 1 January 2021 are required to have diplomas that are recognized by the appointed UK authority, which is a significant change. Moreover, the United Kingdom will not participate in the Erasmus program in the future (it was found to be too expensive).

As a result, the number of Hungarian students studying in the UK has fallen dramatically since Brexit. In 2021, 95 per cent (!) fewer Hungarian students started university in the UK compared to the previous year. 'While in the year 2020–2021 around 705 students out of around 1,100 applicants were admitted, in the 2021–2022 academic year only 450 students applied, out of whom 190 were admitted but ultimately only 60 began their studies,' Soma Pirityi, co-founder of the Hungarian Youth Association (HYA), is quoted as saying.[23] According to him, before Brexit there were 2,500–3,000 Hungarian students studying in the UK every academic year, brought together by organizations such as the Milestone Institute, the HYA or the New Generation Centre, which have the aim to bring home to Hungary students who have graduated from top-ranked British universities. HYA estimates that after Brexit, this process will cease: after 2021, a maximum of 1-2 Hungarian students will arrive per university.

The facts described above were confirmed by one of our interviewees, who graduated from a university in London:

> I wanted to do a one-year master's course, because here a master takes only one year. So I was of the opinion that one year is nothing, especially after three years, which I have already done… And so far the tuition fees have been the same as for the English. And for that you had a student loan with very, very favourable conditions. But this has now been abolished….. And that's why I didn't enrol for a master's degree. I think that's why a lot fewer people come to study here. I have friends who wanted to study here, but they aren't coming here anymore. Due to the unfavourable conditions. They're either staying in Hungary or going to other countries to study. (Female, 23, London, 2021)

Consequently, it can be stated that Brexit has affected not only trade or labour migrants, but also university students, which has also triggered new social processes in both countries.

We also asked our respondents about how they felt emotionally in the period of Brexit voting. We were especially interested in whether they felt uncertainty and if so, how they coped with it. Five respondents did not follow the news at all prior to the voting, and the others claimed that they talked about it occasionally with colleagues, friends. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority stated that even after the referendum they did not feel uncertain or stressed, as it became clear very rapidly that the process would not be short. They were also very confident that since they had been living and working in the UK for years, had paid taxes, some had

(https://444.hu/2021/08/30/a-brexit-miatt-veget-er-a-brit-egyetemeken-tanulo-magyarok-sikertortenete – accessed 12.01.2023).

[23] https://www.napi.hu/nemzetkozi-gazdasag/angliai-kinti-tanulas-felsooktatas-brexit-diak-oktatas-vizum-tandij-hungarian-youth-association.745947.html (accessed 15.01.2023).

bought a private property and were paying a mortgage, some had children, they would not be 'kicked-out from one moment to another'.

> In any case, I had a doubt and a little fear of what would happen. What would happen if they really voted for Brexit? Then would we have to go home? But more and more information revealed that those who are already here, who are working properly, who are doing their things well, would not be in any danger...Since then, I haven't worried at all. (Male, 36, London)

But to be on the safe side, all the interviewees applied for and, except for 4, were granted settled status. 6 of them mentioned that they had already started the application process for British citizenship and one of the interviewees was already a citizen. As he noted:

> I bought my own safety (…) I had permanent residency status long before that, I had it done for Brexit, I think I had it from 2016, which is, among other things, the anteroom for citizenship. From then on, we were forced to take action, because we couldn't know what was coming, and since then they tightened things up pretty hard. So we got it done just in time. After Brexit, a much more nationalist narrative will come into force from a political point of view. So it definitely had to be done as soon as possible, and I think it's a perfect, good decision to this day. (Male, 34, London)

The feeling of safety or the fear of uncertainty are crucial here: however much the respondents trust the system, they want to be on the safe side and receive a legal guarantee. Importantly, at least three of them mentioned that they needed British citizenship not only to secure their status in the UK, but that a British passport would enable them to travel more easily to Australia, New-Zealand or the USA. They planned to keep their Hungarian citizenship, and thus their EU passport, and together those two documents would enable them to 'travel all around the world, to visit friends all around the globe whom I met in London.' (Male, 28, London).

Nevertheless, the value of an EU passport, and thus of Hungarian citizenship, has also increased in the eyes of many, as it allows simple travel within the European Union. This is true not only for Hungarian migrants themselves: their spouses and partners who are UK citizens would like to apply for Hungarian (or other EU) citizenship to maintain access to unrestricted travel and other EU benefits.

Finally, regarding future plans, seven interviewees intended to return to Hungary in the near future (2-4 years). They were either tired of London and the British weather, or they wanted to raise their children near their grandparents. One of them wanted to open his own business in Budapest. One young woman felt that she could never advance her career and she was afraid that she would always remain 'just' a waiter if she stayed in the UK. 3 other interviewees were considering returning when they retired. All the other respondents wished to stay in the UK or (as British-Hungarian citizens) move overseas. Among the reasons for not returning to Hungary, besides financial issues some mentioned that in Hungary they could not find a job easily without a diploma and would generally find it more difficult to advance their career:

> It's good that our parents are home, but this will sound ugly now, there is nothing and no one at home to go home for. Because I feel that if I had to go home from here, I would have to go back to school, because I obviously wouldn't be able to get a good job or hardly any job at all with my high school leaving exam. Or I would barely have a salary, because I only have a high school diploma, right? I

should go back to studying again. Now in Hungary, how can you support yourself in a way that lets you study without starving in the meantime?" (Female, 24, Berkshire)

Some mentioned the general atmosphere in Hungary (frustration, depression, envy), which was holding them back from returning. Others mentioned politics and especially the anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ campaigns that they could not endure (either because they were LGBTQ or because they had lived in London and become used to different cultures and languages over the years).

Conclusions

Based on the 30 interviews we conducted in 2020 and 2021, it is safe to say that the events and consequences of Brexit cannot be completely separated from those of COVID. What is more, according to our interviewees Brexit did not have a significant impact on the everyday life or future plans of Hungarian migrants who had been living in the UK for several years. The COVID pandemic was the process that forced them to switch jobs and complicated their travel plans. Nevertheless, our interviews show that only few people have decided to return or were considering a return to Hungary in the next 1-4 years, while the overwhelming majority had by 2021 obtained settled status and in some cases applied for British citizenship. Our results are confirmed by the relevant UK statistics, according to which 170,000 Hungarian had applied for settled status by the end of 2021. Thus, the UK remains an important migration destination for Hungarians. However, it must be noted that students, who are an important source of migrant population from Hungary, are facing significantly increased tuition fees and student visa requirements, and consequently a sharp decline in the number of applications has already been registered.

Although there was some uncertainty among Hungarians living in the UK after Brexit, it has now dissipated. According to the Hungarian migrants we interviewed, Brexit was much more a vote on unwanted immigration than on leaving the European Union. The overwhelming majority of respondents believed that Brexit was a mistake that would cause economic difficulties in the UK, but they were confident that the country would overcome those hardships. They could recall only few situations in which they had experienced incidents that could be linked directly to their citizenship or place of origin, but they never faced any physical aggression or discrimination. Quite the opposite: respondents, especially those who lived in London, talked about the empathy of their landlords, colleagues, employers and friends.

Nevertheless, we must highlight that the importance of Hungarian citizenship, and especially of the EU passport, has increased after Brexit.

List of Interviewees HU

	Gender	**Age**	**Place of residence in the UK**	**Interviewed (year)**
1	Female	42	London	2020 (follow-up 2021)
2	Female	24	Berkshire	2020
3	Female	33	West Yorkshire	2020
4	Female	63	West Yorkshire	2020
5	Male	50	East Riding of Yorkshire	2020
6	Female	24	London	2020
7	Female	32	London	2020
8	Male	36	London	2020
9	Female	23	London	2020 (follow-up 2021)
10	Female	37	Oxfordshire	2020
11	Male	40	London	2020
12	Male	36	London	2020
13	Male	28	London	2020
14	Female	55	Buckinghamshire	2020
15	Male	52	Cheshire	2020
16	Female	32	Norfolk	2020
17	Male	30	Manchester	2020
18	Female	33	London	2020
19	Female	34	Buckinghamshire	2020
20	Female	49	London	2020 (follow-up 2021)
21	Male	45	Lanarkshire	2020
22	Male	34	London	2020
23	Male	28	London	2020
24	Female	43	London	2020 (follow-up 2021)
25	Female	38	London	2020 (follow-up 2021)

SLOVAKIA

(Jana Pecníková and Petra Strnádová)

As this international project was launched in late 2019, just before coronavirus started spreading around the world, fundamental changes had to be made to the original project design after the outbreak of COVID-19, mainly in terms of the research methodology, implementation framework and scheduling. As for the research subject, there were suddenly two targets in the viewfinder instead of one, as it was impossible to ignore an event that to a large extent had overshadowed the original one. Therefore, the pandemic had to be considered too, although Brexit did remain the major focus of the study.

Project objectives and methodology

Following our predecessors who studied the impact of Brexit on EU citizens living in the UK (Lulle et al. 2017; Becker, Fetzer 2018), and in order to make our qualitative research unique and sharply focused, in our research we decided to include only migrants from the V4 countries, i.e. Poland, Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia. Due to the outburst of the global COVID-19 pandemic shortly after the project was launched, the originally planned field research involving in-person interviews conducted in the UK had to be replaced by exclusively online ones. In consequence, the whole process consisting of the search for participants, arranging of online meetings, the actual interviews and their recording, took place online. Obviously, this one fact had a big impact on how participants were selected as, for example, the opportunities for spontaneous meetings with migrants at events organized by Slovak expat organizations were lost. Therefore, only migrants within the reach of the researchers' personal contacts and of social networks could be involved. Ultimately, the research sample comprised 21 women and 9 men between the ages of 23 and 67, with 11 participants living in London and 19 based outside London.

The very fact that the interviews had to be conducted online was another difficulty, as over time people started to get tired of virtual meetings and their readiness to work with us under such conditions fell significantly. To remedy this, the original restriction that the date of migration had to be 2004 or later, i.e. after Slovakia joined the EU, was set aside. On the other hand, this brought an unexpected positive result of including a perspective of the participants whose migrant experience covered a longer stretch of time. This put them in a position to compare the situation before and after Brexit, as well as before and after Slovak EU accession.

The approach used in the interviews was biographical, i.e. they addressed the migrants' personal history (with respect to migration), present (with respect to Brexit) and future (with respect to both Brexit and migration). However, the final shape of the thematic areas and questions included in the semi-structured in-depth online interviews was also affected by the pandemic, which to a large extent had replaced Brexit as the cause of the migrants' concerns and, as such, needed to be duly reflected. In spite of this, all of the interviews focused on the social, economic, legal, and political aspects of the migrants' life before and after Brexit in

the UK. The recordings and transcripts were made and saved in compliance with the GDPR and with ethical standards, i.e. with the interviewees' full consent.

The last step was the analysis of collected data. Naturally, the data were mostly of a qualitative nature and as such, they were arranged according to the thematic areas set out in the interview questions. Thematic areas were chosen, the general results/most frequent answers identified and relevant citations added so as to illustrate either the typical, or the noticeable results that stuck out from the 'mainstream' majority. It should be noted that the most frequently cited participants are immigrants from the pre-EU era, whose longer life in the UK gave them the advantage of deeper first-hand experience with British society, and thus made their comments on Brexit and its impact more 'expert' and legitimate. In addition to the qualitative analysis, the measurable/calculable part of the data was processed in order to provide a quantitative dimension to the research outcomes and give yet another perspective.

Research outcomes

In the first thematic area, we tried to identify the expectations migrants had prior to their arrival in the UK, and to find out whether they saw them as met. Unsurprisingly, most of the participants claimed that their major expectation was a better job for higher pay than in Slovakia. Practically all the participants confirmed that this expectation had been fulfilled, even those few who had not seen it as a priority before their arrival in the UK. Many of them highlighted their appreciation of the opportunities for climbing the career ladder even without an academic degree, merely through hard work. One of the respondents put it very plainly:

> The main reason for my leaving Slovakia was money and getting to know another culture... Life is certainly better in the UK. Look, I was able to get an amazing job even without a university degree. (Female, 32, Hampshire)

On the other hand, some of them had gone to Britain primarily to learn or improve their English language skills (the respondents from the pre-EU wave often did so through *au-pair* programmes) or to study, or for a variety of specific individual motivations. In most cases, the original intention was to stay for a limited period of time (1-3 years), which was repeatedly prolonged and eventually led to long-term/supposedly permanent residence. Such a trajectory is evident in this interviewee's life-story:

> It was a classic. A close friend of mine came here earlier, and she found an *au-pair* family for me... It was a chance to travel, learn the language, see the world and go back – that was the original plan. In Slovakia, I wanted to study acting. I was not admitted at first, but they said I should try again the following year. But I did not, I stayed in England. (Female, 40, London)

At this point, we find it important to mention that although the vast majority of Slovak *au pairs* (and not only) were female (cf. Bahna 2011; Búriková 2006; Búriková, Miller 2010; Williams, Baláž 2004), due to the absence of other reasonable opportunities there were also some men who tried to find such an 'unconventional' job in the UK before Slovakia's EU accession. Obviously, the temporary migration allowed by an *au pair* visa represented a strategy used to overcome the downsides of the economic transformation (Hess 2001). For

many reasons, such an experience was highly appreciated and regarded as an important investment in the future (Wiliams, Baláž 2004).

> I came to England in 1999. The biggest reason was to learn English... yes, there were financial reasons too... I went to England with some 20 pounds. I applied for an *au-pair* job, there were no other options at that time. Guys were not wanted but I managed to find a family... And that was my plan – 2 years, certainly not more. (Male, 44, London)

The single representative of the pre-1989 migrants offered a life story based on the anti-regime dissidence of her parents, which was typical for that generation. Still, her own life behind the Iron Curtain took a more conventional course of a young woman seeking the 'standard' values of love and education, unrestricted by politics or ideology.

> I left Czechoslovakia along with my parents in 1978, at first for Germany. Emigration was allowed, or even forced upon such 'problematic elements' as us – people who came into conflict with the regime... But I wanted to try what it would be like to live in England or the US, so I applied for a scholarship and went to London for a year... In London I met my future husband, so after returning to Germany, I finished my studies hastily and came back here in 1983. We got married and since then I have been living here. (Female, 67, London)

The second thematic area dealt with the changes that had occurred in British society after Brexit and with the migrants' assumed uncertainty about further developments related to it. Nearly half of the participants said they had not observed any (noticeable) changes at all. Those who had mostly voiced concerns about the legislative/administrative securing of their residence in Britain after Brexit. As for any uncertainty that the participants might feel about the course of social developments in Britain, denials prevailed, i.e. no uncertainty related to this aspect was acknowledged. Only a few participants were critical of the British government and feared social polarization. Nonetheless, most of them shared the belief that these factors were just temporary and that British society was stable enough not to be shaken by Brexit.

> I believe the loss of the possibility to study and work in Europe is a big negative for British youth. It seems Britain will go back to its old isolationism. From my point of view as a translator, before Brexit a more open approach to translating literature had finally appeared. Now, when they close off again, it is likely they will be less open to cultures from the outside... and it is not clear yet whether the authors who would like to come and present their books in the UK will need a visa... (Female, 67, London)

It is true that the situation has already become more complicated, e.g. for musicians, and studying and performing now means much higher fees, visa, etc., which will severely limit cultural exchange. Moreover, as the interviewee above commented, this is nothing but bad for both sides. Another respondent said:

> Some of the older generation still believe that what they had been promised by the pro-Brexit politicians – clearing the UK of ALL the immigrants – will actually happen and they will earn all the money the foreigners had deprived them of. They would not admit they have been misled. (Female, 30, Merseyside)

The third thematic area focused on the interviewees' private and professional lives, and how they were influenced by Brexit. Most answers showed no worries about unemployment or other significant changes in their living standards or lifestyles.

> No such thing that I am from Slovakia and now we have Brexit and something is going on. I have been here for so many years that I have a right to remain – I have actually applied for one. As my son is British, they simply cannot send me home *[laughs]* – but if they did, I would be happy to go... Our bosses are just fine, they told me if there was anyone sending me home, they would say the office could not exist without me *[laughs]*. (Female, 38, London)

On the other hand, some replies were rather contradictory, first explicitly denying and later implicitly admitting the impact of Brexit on the participants' lives. However, some job losses were attributed to the pandemic rather than to Brexit.

> At first, it had no impact on us, the employer said it doesn't matter that I'm from Slovakia, I don't have to worry, the job is safe, everything's fine. But later, as the Brexit process went on, people got colder. Even if someone had known you for years, suddenly – you are from the EU, a strange approach. But later on they got used to it and now that England has finally left the EU, we do not feel any substantial consequences. (Male, 42, London)

We also heard answers indicating unplanned, but ultimately beneficial turning points in individual careers, like in the following example, which also provides some unreferenced statistics:

> As for my present job as a nanny, Brexit had no impact on me, and as for my future job, it is just likely to be beneficial *[smile]* as more people will need a psychotherapist... But many people have lost their jobs, many cannot find one... My husband says some 700,000 people have left London, but again, we don't know if it was because of Brexit or corona... (Female, 40, London)

The fourth thematic area focused on the participants' view of Brexit. According to most of them, it was the wrong decision, although some showed understanding and sympathy with the British motivation for leaving the EU. They even criticised the EU for drawing on the UK budget and redistributing it to less-developed countries (including Slovakia, i.e. their own homeland). They also believed this extra money would now stay in Britain and help create more jobs. It is obvious that these were the views of the post-2004 migrants, while those who had come to the UK earlier tended to classify such opinions as the impact of the leave campaign, which they thought to be brainwashing and propaganda.

> Before the referendum, I lived in a bubble where all of my friends and colleagues wanted to vote for Britain to remain in the EU. According to a survey before the campaign, only 1 per cent of the British considered the EU a problem! So, I was under the illusion that such a disgusting pro-Brexit campaign packed with lies could not be successful. For me, the result was the utter shock of a lifetime. (Male, 42, Manchester)

As noted by another interviewee, polarization in British society was immense and the country was split to the core. Most migrants believed until the very last moment that the majority of the British favoured the EU, so the result was a real shock to them. Again, the most interesting observations came from the oldest participants, who made some disturbing conclusions about the consequences of the pro-Brexit campaign.

> What spilled out then – hideous xenophobia, even racism, which I had not noticed in England before, robbed me of many illusions. What I had valued about England before – great tolerance, a blend of so many cultures... but obviously, racism and xenophobia were there all the time, only they were supressed and people did not dare to show them. And suddenly, the floodgates opened and the wave of hatred

> against migrants from South Asia and the Caribbean, cumulated in the local people over the years, had spilled over migrants from the Central and Eastern Europe. (Female, 67, London)

Another respondent commented on the older generation in the UK, who were suffering from what he even called 'culture shock', which was supposedly the result of the new EU citizens from Eastern Europe flooding to the UK after the latest EU enlargement. In this context, an important remark was made about the migrants allegedly refusing to acculturate, which was perceived as a threat by the local population.

> As for me – I was surprised, I thought the English would not vote to leave the EU. But it was politicized, they made the EU an enemy and a scapegoat: what is bad is the foreigners and the EU... People who have been alive almost from the time of the British Empire, the 70- 80-year-olds, voted to leave. They did not like the Polish shops, a lot of foreigners in the towns ... they have had foreigners for a long time but with the EU, the borders were open and in 5 years there were many new ones and this was a culture shock for the English. (Male, 44, London)

A memory of the referendum night by one of the interviewees that is both interesting and emotional provides an insight into a more subtle psychological process of 'becoming aware' of Brexit and its importance. By comparing her own, originally very superficial and ignorant, view of the events to the one of her interested and well-informed husband, she drew a very strong and touching picture.

> Yes, I was aware of both the referendum and propaganda, but I am not interested in politics. My husband is, however, very interested, he talks about it a lot and wants to have discussions – and he took it very hard. On the referendum night, he did not go to sleep, he was waiting and I was like – why don't you sleep? Why do you care so much? I just wasn't aware how serious the situation was. Finally, he went to sleep in the morning and when we saw the result, he started to cry – which was a shock for me. That's why I remember it so clearly – his crying, his reaction was a bigger shock to me than the referendum itself. I considered it terribly exaggerated. I wanted to support him in his grief but I only managed to say – are you really crying because of that? Only some 2 years later, I was like – I got it... (Female, 40, London)

The fifth thematic area covered the interviewees' current migration strategy or, specifically, whether they intended to remain in the United Kingdom. We found out that 26 of the interviewees wished to stay, while 4 were considering their options. However, none of them declared the intention to go back and live in Slovakia. They only considered a temporary return as an option should they need to take care of their ageing parents/relatives, or a longer stay during retirement. In the event of a deteriorating situation in Britain – possibly as a result of Brexit – they would prefer moving to another country in Western Europe (or the 'Western world').

> I am not planning to return to Slovakia in the near future. One reason is the agenda of the new Slovak parliament, which is hostile towards the LGBTQ+ community. On the other hand, if my mother or my sister and her family need help, I am ready to come. I keep in touch with them and we visit each other quite frequently... My pension is my biggest worry as I don't know what it will be like when Brexit really happens... Moving to France or Spain could be my retirement plan… I don't want to lose Slovakia and I feel European. That's why I want to keep my Slovak, i.e. European passport. (Male, 42, Manchester)

In the case of the oldest participant, Brexit would have an impact on her daughter's migration strategies rather than her own, and she makes some interesting implications and references to her past and COVID. In general, Brexit has actually caused the value of Slovak citizenship (and passport) to rise significantly in the eyes of all its holders. The reason is its European 'quality', legal validity and the sudden importance of having proof that one is an EU citizen.

> When the results of referendum were released... [my daughter] phoned me and asked, mum, can we get Slovak citizenship? We did not have it before, I never tried to renew it,[24] but for her the chance to live and work anywhere in Europe was a thing that goes without saying and she could not imagine not having it. So, that was the main motive for why I renewed my Slovak citizenship, which automatically made my daughter eligible too... (Female, 67, London)

Tyrell et al. (2018) claim that a person's age at the time of a key life transition such as migration is crucial for understanding the ways in which they become involved in new regimes and societies. For the young people who were born in CEE countries, but lived in the United Kingdom for most of their formative years, their understanding of what it means to belong in Britain was subjected to deconstruction as a result of Brexit and, soon after, due to the pandemic, during the crucial time of their transitions to adulthood.

> We discussed it several times, whether we should apply for a British passport, but I have always come to the conclusion that I would keep the Slovak passport because it is a European one. Even now I will not apply for citizenship because the English passport has lost that fabulous colour... currently, it is a worthless piece of paper... But for the first time after those many years, I ask myself the question whether I want to stay here for good. So far, we´ve stayed here because of our daughter, she goes to school... But if things keep going in this direction, perhaps we will have to take it seriously and consider leaving the UK. Not for Slovakia though... we were considering Switzerland, we have acquaintances inviting us there... (Male, 44, London)

> It is more likely we could live in Vienna, although none of us speak German... I don't know at the moment, and it is definitely due to Brexit that my husband and I started to discuss it, because we both love London, we are really happy here, but we started to feel a bit – they don't want us to be here. And this has changed our view of where we'll live in the future. On the other hand, we have the pandemic now so we can do nothing about it... (Female, 40, London)

Through questions on the sixth theme we tried to find out whether individual migration strategies had been affected by a change in the locals' attitude to migrants. Again, most of the younger participants had not observed such a change and some of them were even worried about a potential influx of the immigrants. Conversely, some people with a longer history in the UK admitted they had been verbally attacked by (intoxicated) locals immediately after the referendum.

> At work, we are a multinational team, a huge open plan office with just a few British people, but after the announcement of the referendum results it was like at a funeral, people were crying and everyone was saying sorry. On the same day, it happened to me for the first time in my life that a drunk Brit in the bar 'sent me home'. Since then, I experienced similar verbal abuse 3 more times. (Male, 42, Manchester)

[24] As dissidents, her parents and she herself had lost their citizenship upon eviction from (former) Czechoslovakia.

The following answers confirm what was said above, i.e. that anti-immigration rhetoric and the message of re-taking power and control over national affairs from the EU were clearly the determining aspects of the Brexit vote, while public attitudes to immigration and the EU turned increasingly negative as the referendum campaign progressed (Clarke, Goodwin, Whiteley 2017). The sharp increase in the number of hate crime and online 'xeno-racist' incidents recorded by the police in the month after the referendum was another clear sign of racist hate, with many white migrants, especially Poles, reported as victims (Burnett 2016). As a result, self-regulation or even self-censorship may have developed, e.g. as regards using a native language in public.

> When I was in the shops or in the street, I phoned my mother and felt uncomfortable speaking Slovak, so I stopped phoning in public for some time because there were incidents of people being physically or verbally attacked when speaking a foreign language. As if xenophobia against the other people, which used to be suppressed by the Brits, was suddenly released after Brexit. Whatever people thought of the migrants before, they had to keep it to themselves... Now it was like – away with you! I was reading a Slovak book on the subway and I realized I felt awkward, I didn't want those people to see I was reading a Slovak book... as if I was suddenly sticking out in the crowd. (Female, 40, London)

The seventh thematic area concerned the potential financial uncertainty resulting from Brexit, and its impact on migration strategy. The assumption that Brexit would have an impact in this area turned out to be unconfirmed, however. Only one respondent acknowledged that his financial situation had deteriorated, and did not even link this directly to Brexit, in his interpretation the reason being COVID.

> Recently I was told that because of COVID, we would be dismissed at the end of March, so I have started looking for a new job after 15 years in finance... It's because COVID has caused profits to go down terribly... For the first time after some hundred years my bank recorded a loss, and downsizing is the easiest way because shareholders want to see share price at a certain level... That's why I have lost my job, it is savings, it has nothing to do with nationality, the bank would not risk such a scandal these days. (Male, 42, London)

Some participants were worried about food and housing price increases, or the unavailability of certain foodstuffs because of the renewed international trade barriers, including on postal services.

> With my family both in Slovakia and Italy,[25] we used to send each other parcels, which is now becoming much more complicated... everything is checked, duty is payable, it will no longer be worth doing something like that in future... The prices are also rising in the shops, certain things were not available right after Brexit – but actually, that happened during the corona crisis so I don't know what had a bigger impact on the situation. We are not starving, that's for certain, but it is obvious some foodstuffs were out of stock... (Female, 40, London)

Next, we tried to find out how the media addressed Brexit and whether they specifically covered migrants from the V4 countries. Most of the participants confirmed that Brexit had been strongly represented in the British media, but that the media showed no interest in its impact on immigrants from small countries like Slovakia. On the other hand, the responses of the older migrants included reports of perceived propaganda or manipulative rhetoric and media discourse, which started long before Brexit and had an impact on their lives in the UK,

[25] Her husband is Italian.

and had furthermore also undermined their trust in the open nature of British society. The oldest interviewee talked about the Conservative party and its 'leave' campaign, which was present in the media long before the referendum, and about a part of society that has always been against the European integration of Great Britain. Along with most of our respondents, she thought they were a minority, just isolated voices, and that 'nobody would mean it seriously, after all'. Only later did she find out that while people in her 'social bubble' shared her view, that kind of bubble was not the prevalent one.

> It started around here in the 1990s, when my husband was teaching at the School of Slavonic Studies... When there were talks about all of those countries that were going to join the EU, it was decided – incomprehensibly to us – that these languages would be reduced at universities... We were also personally affected as my husband was forced to retire early as a professor and then they offered him a job again, but only as a language teacher. That was very unwelcome and humiliating... At a time when those countries were supposed to become EU members and when we were expecting greater interest in getting to know them, their history, literature, culture – for me this was the first signal that what I had always admired about England – their being open towards the cultures of other nations – that it was rather shallow, in fact. (Female, 67, London)

At the end of each interview, we asked the participants to evaluate the situation in Britain and the country's future prospects. In this case, most answers were positive and optimistic, although several respondents painted a darker picture. Again, the factors dividing them were age, time of migration and length of their residence in the UK: those with the higher scores on the factors above found it difficult to see positives.

> Although I am not... how to put it – vengeful... and I do not – I mean the Brits who were in favour of Brexit – I wish them no harm, only that they should go through what they have voted for. So that what they want for others, they will have for themselves, because it seems they are not looking towards the future, what it's going to mean for them as well. (Male, 44, London)

The most sceptical conclusion of an interview was presented by the oldest participant, who used a sad joke to illustrate and explain her lack of optimism; note that this was before the war in Ukraine started.

> But wherever you look, terrible things are happening. We can see a sharp fall in political culture in general, this growth of populism... around here, everything used to be based on a gentlemen's agreement, but the number of gentlemen has been plunging so now the prime minister can be a notorious liar... I remember the classic joke, when Kohn[26] wants to find a better place to live during the Second World War. So he goes to a travel agency and after spinning the globe for a while, he looks at the travel agent and asks 'excuse me, don't you have another globe'? So this is where we have got. (Female, 67, London)

Conclusions

The migration wave from the V4 countries to Great Britain that followed the EU enlargement of 2004 allowed unprecedented numbers of 'new Europeans', including Slovaks, to enter the UK. Like most migrants, they were ready to work hard so as to earn the better life they had envisioned back in their home countries. From all the interviews conducted within the

[26] A usual Jewish name appearing in many jokes and anecdotes.

framework of our project, however, we learnt that their stays, intended to be temporary, were prolonged and eventually turned into long-term ones, often with a life-long potential. Their reasons for coming to the UK have a common subtext: better job opportunities, better remuneration, and opportunities for climbing the career ladder thanks to their performance (rather than connections) and for development in an open, multicultural environment.

All of the Slovak interviewees agree that the 2016 decision of British voters for the UK to leave the EU was wrong. However, there is a dividing line between them that reflects the time of their arrival in the UK. Namely, there is a significant difference in the views and attitudes to the perceived causes and effects of Brexit between the young(er) representatives of the migration wave after 2004 and those who emigrated in the late 1990s, or even earlier.

Lulle, Moroşanu and King (2017) refer to 'liquid migration' as an offshoot of Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity. This term, along with the related notion of 'rupture' (Hörschelmann 2011), the term for a sudden change, and the continuous process of 'becoming' (Worth 2009) representing youth and young adulthood, helps understand the social and spatial mobility of young EU citizens, including Slovaks. All of our interviews actually proved 'becoming' to be a universal phenomenon, regardless of the migrants' age, time of migration or personal perception (or lack of it) of Brexit as a rupture in their personal journeys.

Marshall (2018), Cohen (2020), Wihtol de Wenden (2020) and others to underline the fact that compared to local standards, 'the invaders from the East' (Marek 2019) were ready to work for lower pay and to accept poorer working conditions, which caused fear of job loss on the part of the locals. In addition, the events of 2016 are proof that despite the lack of legitimacy of such fears – statistically, the locals were actually being promoted as a result of the migrant influx[27] – the snowball effect occurred and Brexit finally came to a pass.

All in all, our research shows that Brexit did not alter the migration strategies of the majority of Slovak migrants, especially those from the post-EU-admission migration wave. They did not intend to come back to Slovakia and did not perceive any immediate negative impact of Brexit, believing that such a 'traditional country' as Britain would survive and overcome any potential trouble resulting from Brexit. The minority who hold different opinions have been quoted in order to illustrate their assorted views and experiences based on their long-term residence in the UK. These include disillusionment with the once-held belief in the openness of British society towards different cultures and increased perceived value of Slovak citizenship, even in the eyes of long-term migrants. While respondents did not intend to change their legal status, not to mention their place of residence, they had suddenly come to view their legal/administrative connection to the home country as an important last thread on which the European aspect of their personal identities is hanging.

[27] Research suggests that the overall labour-market effects of migration from Eastern Europe may have been beneficial to most of the UK-born workforce as many moved to higher-status occupations (Becker, Fetzer 2018).

List of interviewees SK

	Gender	**Age**	**Place of residence in the UK**	**Interviewed (year)**
1	Female	23	Birmingham	2021
2	Male	36	Scotland	2021
3	Female	28	Birmingham	2020
4	Female	32	Hampshire	2021
5	Female	33	Northumberland	2021
6	Female	53	London	2021
7	Female	29	London	2021
8	Male	37	London	2021
9	Male	39	Brighton	2020
10	Female	33	London	2021
11	Male	57	London	2021
12	Female	49	Scotland	2021
13	Male	35	Hampshire	2020
14	Female	42	Oxfordshire	2021
15	Female	38	London	2021
16	Female	41	Derby	2021
17	Female	33	Cumbria	2021
18	Female	53	London	2021
19	Male	34	Bristol	2021
20	Female	33	Bournemouth	2021
21	Male	41	Cambridgeshire/Cardiff	2021
22	Female	30	Cumbria	2021
23	Female	31	Bristol	2021
24	Female	40	Northumberland	2021
25	Male	42	Manchester	2020
26	Female	38	London	2020
27	Female	40	London	2021
28	Male	44	London	2021
29	Female	30	Merseyside	2021
30	Female	67	London	2021

CZECH REPUBLIC

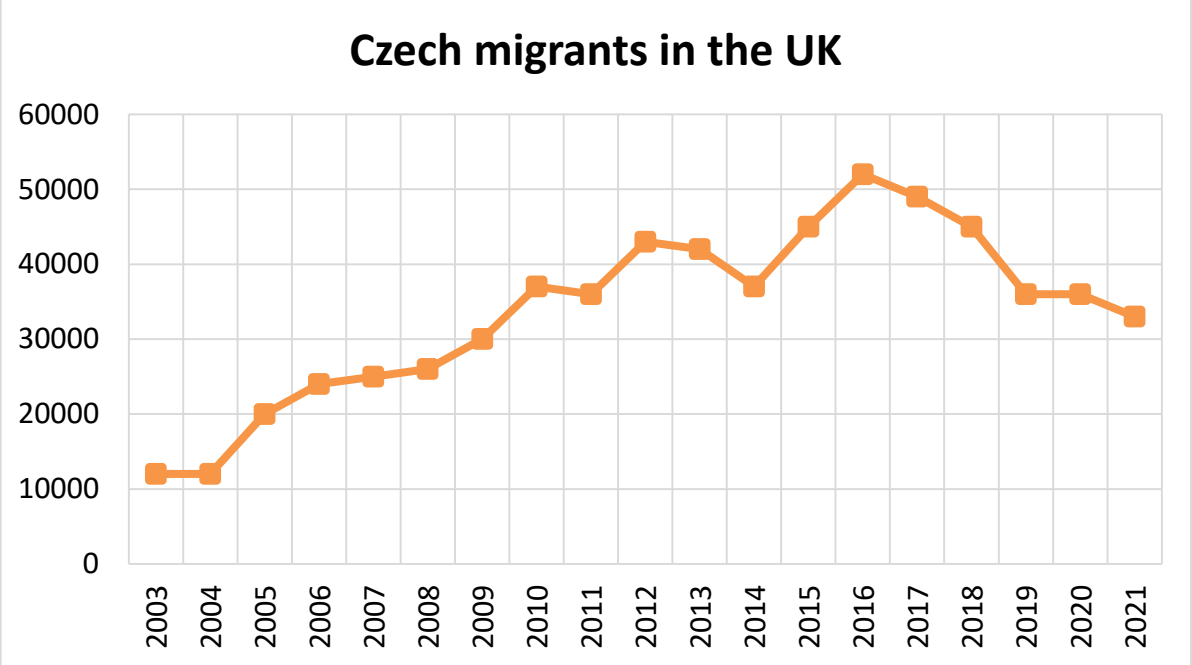
(Karel Čada)

Introduction

The UK is the prime Czech migrant destination in Europe and the third-largest Czech migrant recipient worldwide after the USA and Canada. Even though the Czech minority in the UK is marginal in size compared to other CEE minorities, its presence there has historically been repeatedly fortified with inflows of new migrants (Janurová 2018).

Czech migration to the UK began in the early 1990s, after the fall of communism and the opening of borders in Eastern Europe. The first Czechs who came to the UK were often students, professionals or businesspeople seeking new opportunities. According to data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the number of Czech nationals living in the UK increased significantly between the 1990s and 2021, with some fluctuations along the way (see Table 3).

Table 3. Number of Czechs in the UK (based on ONS data 2001-2021).



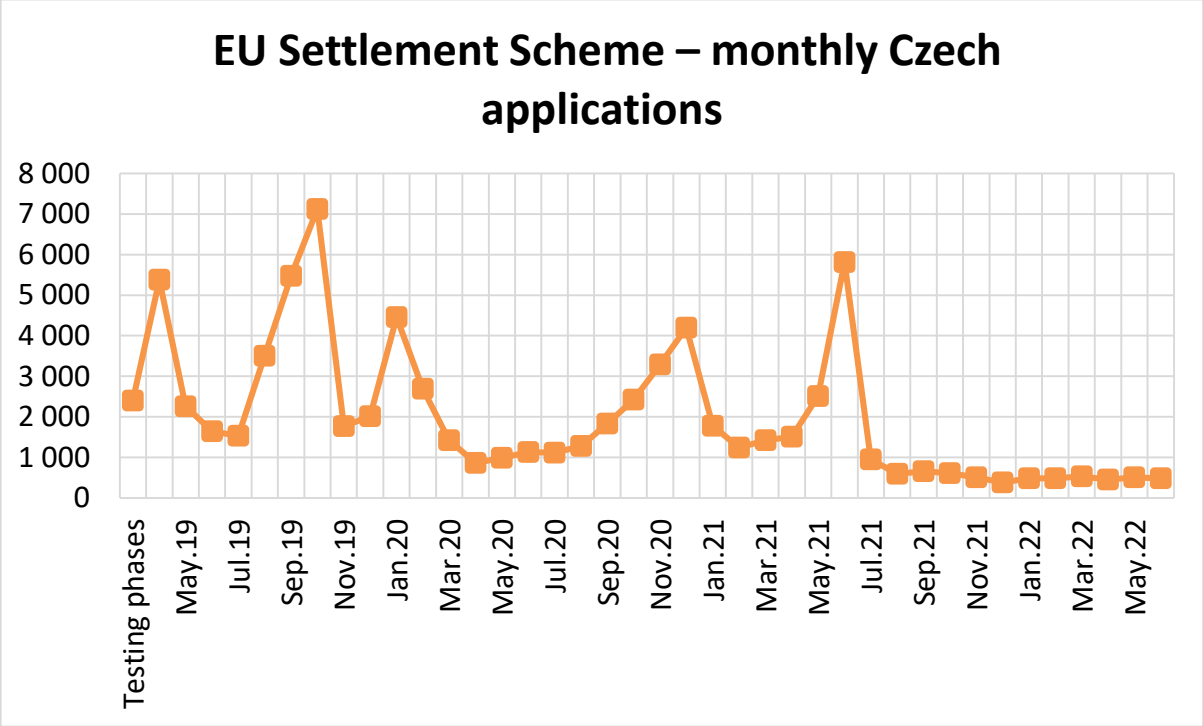
Source: Office of National Statistics, www.ons.gov.uk (accessed 18.01.2023)

In 1995, there were only 3,000 Czech nationals living in the UK. The 2001 UK Census recorded 12,220 Czech-born persons residing in the UK. By 2004, the year the Czech Republic joined the EU, that number had risen to 18,000. Between 2004 and 2011 the number of Czech nationals living in the UK more than tripled, reaching a peak of 56,000 in 2016. According to the 2011 UK Census, there were 44,455 Czech-born citizens living in the UK. Of these, 34,615 (or 78%) were living in England, 6,455 (or 15%) were living in Scotland,

2,150 (or 5%) were living in Wales, and 1,235 (or 3%) were living in Northern Ireland. In 2021, there were 33,000 Czechs in the UK (see Fig. 1). The Czech-born population is evenly spread all over the UK apart from Greater London, Manchester, Birmingham and the south of Scotland, where the concentration of Czechs is slightly higher.

According to the British Home Office, approximately 76,740 Czech citizens applied for settled status between August 2018 and June 2022. Of these, 65,780 (or 85%) were living in England, 4,106 (or 5.3%) were living in Scotland, 3,430 (or 4.5%) were living in Wales, and 1,040 (or 1.4%) were living in Northern Ireland. Czechs represented approximately 1.3 % of all EU applicants. The number of applications fluctuated from month to month, reaching a peak of 7120 in October 2019.

Table 4. Number of monthly Czech applications for EU Settlement Scheme (based on ONS data)



Source: Office of National Statistics, www.ons.gov.uk (accessed 18.01.2023)

The reasons for the Czech migration to the UK vary. Many Czechs came to the UK to study or to work, as there are often better job opportunities and higher wages than in the Czech Republic. Others came for personal reasons, such as to be with family members who have already migrated to the UK.

Pařízková (2011) states that Czechs prefer the UK because of cultural proximity and before leaving they do not anticipate any significant culture shock. Economic motives are seen as the predominant motive for migration (Vavrečková, Musil, Baštýř, 2007). However, Janurová (2018) points out that the reasons for Czech citizens to migrate to the UK are not purely economic, and mentions that motives such as gaining new experiences, studying, career

advancement, a partner (i.e. reunion), children-related considerations (securing better living conditions) and social reasons (better living standards, prospects, language, etc.) also play a role.

Czech Roma migrants represent a specific case of migration to the UK. This is a complex issue that has been evolving since the 1990s. The Roma community in the Czech Republic has faced significant discrimination and exclusion, including limited access to education, employment and housing. Many Czech Roma have sought to leave the country to escape these challenges, with some choosing to migrate to the UK. The reasons for their migration vary, but often include seeking better economic opportunities, as well as a desire to escape discrimination and persecution (Guy 2003; Uherek 2018).

Data collection and methodology

Our research was not representative; however, we paid attention to diversifying the sample by age, occupation, education and place of residence in the Czech Republic and in the UK.

Between May 2020 and January 2022, we interviewed 26 people, 4 of them twice. All interviews were conducted online as either video or voice calls, through different platforms (Skype, MSTeams and GoogleTeams), and the interviewees were at home at the time of the interview. Respondents were found through social media platforms (such as the Facebook pages 'Češi a Slováci v Anglii', 'Češi a Slováci v UK', 'Češi ve Skotsku'). Scheduling the interview sometimes required flexibility; moreover, the interviews were sometimes interrupted. The average interview length was around 40 minutes.

The age of the interviewees ranged from 22 to 55. We interviewed 15 women and 11 men. 16 had either a university or a college degree, 2 were pursuing university studies in the UK at the time of the interview, while the rest had a high school leaving exam. Most respondents were employed in qualified positions (consultant, IT specialist, psychotherapist, lecturer and researcher); however, some respondents worked in lower positions (nanny, warehouse operator, health care worker and flight attendant). With respect to geography, 8 interviewees lived in London or its surroundings, 3 were resident in Scotland, three in south England, the rest in other areas.

Roma and unqualified migrants were underrepresented in our sample. For this reason, we decided to supplement the corpus of data with media texts and social media posts to capture a broader spectrum of experiences of Czechs living in the UK.

Results

Because of the relatively low unemployment in the Czech Republic, economic reasons were not the main motivation mentioned by our respondents. This is in line with Janurová's (2018) findings that reasons for migration to the UK are not purely economic. In our sample, we identified three typical trajectories: (1) looking for adventure; (2) from au-pair to own family; (3) looking for a better life.

The first trajectory, *looking for adventure,* is associated with the motivation of improving language skills and experiencing life abroad. Migrants were looking for opportunities for 'a change of scenery and to get away from the Czech mentality' (Female, 27, London) or 'a job outside Czechia regardless of the place' (Female, 37, Edinburgh). The respondents came to the UK in their early twenties. Their narrative of migrating to the UK indicates that their choice of destination was coincidental. They had not been interested in the UK before leaving, they had no plan. However, they succeeded on the labour market in some way. Some of them established businesses in the UK. Many of them have plans of going back to the Czech Republic someday; however, those plans are vague and they are more a declaration then a realistic option.

The second trajectory, *from au-pair to own family*, was taken by some female respondents who started their careers as au-pairs or decided to study in the UK. There is a common au-pair trajectory. These respondents came to the UK as au-pairs and changed families many times until they met their British partner. They then started a family and worked in different administrative positions. In our sample, four respondents had British partners. These respondents all planned to stay in the UK, but they also stressed the importance of regular visits to the Czech Republic where their parents or siblings lived.

A few respondents mentioned the difficulty of finding a job in the Czech Republic; however, they come from specific regions in Czechia that were experiencing socio-economic problems. Roma migrants are a special case of migrants who took this trajectory of *looking for a better life*. In the 1990s, Czech Roma were facing several problems associated with social transformations, such as the reform of the welfare system, which in the context of growing structural inequalities, high unemployment and discrimination on the labour market meant that they found themselves in an even more complicated situation. Accession to the European Union and the opening of the free labour market accelerated the departure of many Romani people to Britain.

The anthropologist Jan Grill (2019) described their motivation thus:

> It might be summarised with the expression they themselves used, feder dživipen – a better life, there is an effort to seek a better future. (…) Migration to Britain is related to the search for a society where you do not have the constant stigma of race and racial discrimination that they have experienced and are experiencing in Central and Eastern Europe.

The second group of questions focused on the impact of Brexit on society and whether it affected the interviewees as migrants. In most cases, the respondents claimed that Brexit had no impact on their personal life: 'nothing has changed, and I do not observe any changes in my surroundings' (Male, 51, Berkshire) or 'Brexit has no immediate effect on me in a way that I would notice in my everyday life' (Male, 25, Staffordshire).

However, we identified different sources of insecurities related to Brexit. Some of them were derived from the nature of the job the interviewees had and connections with Europe. Two respondents worked in UK branches of European firms and one respondent worked in a project funded by the EU. They did not feel any insecurity related to their migrant status;

instead, their insecurities stemmed from Brexit's consequences for the field in which they worked.

Another source of insecurity was bureaucratic issues. One respondent mentioned that he was 'angry because of the bureaucratic issues that [he] has to face because it makes [him] feel a little bit less part of Britain' (Male, 44, Edinburgh). Another interviewee recollected that she had felt angry when she realized that she was not eligible for a car insurance contract because she held an EU driving licence. The emotional aspect of bureaucratic concerns is very important. Both respondents mentioned 'feeling angry'. Even though nothing important had changed, there did emerge small reminders that life in the UK would be different than before Brexit.

Bureaucratic issues were a significant source of problems during the COVID-19 pandemic. Paradoxically, respondents complained more about issues on the Czech side. Since Brexit, the UK has not been part of the EU health protection system and during the pandemic Britain fell automatically into the red category with strict travel restrictions. Our respondents expressed anger that they were treated as 'second-class citizens' and demanded fair travel conditions:

> I live in the UK and have all my family in the Czech Republic, I haven't seen them for a year and would love to travel home and back without any constraints. I am employed in the UK and don't have enough holiday leave to afford to be quarantined on both sides. (Female, 35, London)

However, the post-Brexit transition was not this smooth for the all Czechs living in the UK. According to Tomáš Kostečka, the director of a compatriot association of Czechs in Great Britain, up to 7,000 people who were not eligible for settled status or who could not prove their eligibility could return to the Czech Republic. 'Despite all the efforts of the Czech state and partner organizations to help these people, we estimate that the total number of people affected by Brexit could be around six to seven and a half thousand,' Kostečka told Czech television.[28] These were mainly people who were working in the grey economy in Britain and had trouble proving their claim to settled status. 'The Czech community has noted dozens of cases of citizens who have already returned to the Czech Republic due to complications caused by Brexit,' Kostečka added. However, according to the Foreign Ministry, the number of such people should not exceed several dozen, or several hundred at most.

The other issue that might have complicated the process of applying for settlement status is the lack of valid documents. 'A lot of people found out that their Czech documents have expired. It is time-consuming and costly to get new documents, and there is also anxiety about whether they will be able to stay' - the director of a charity working with Czech Roma in Peterborough stated.[29] In February 2019, the Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs, in cooperation with the Office of the Ombudsman, published a handbook entitled *Returns from Abroad* for Czech citizens who wanted or needed to return to the Czech Republic from England after Brexit. However, the vast majority of Roma living in the UK have stayed in the UK: 'It's not just the economic benefits, but also the feeling of security. It's similar for my

[28] https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/svet/3371888-o-povoleni-k-pobytu-v-britanii-pozadalo-asi-73-tisic-cechu (accessed 11.02.2023).

[29] https://www.denik.cz/staty-mimo-eu/britanie-romove-brexit-20210122.html (accessed 11.02.2023).

family, who came to England 20 years ago with the idea that they could live a decent life here' - the director of the charity indicated.[30]

However, this is not the case for all Czech Roma living in the UK. Some of them described their experience after Brexit much like non-Roma Czechs did: 'I've lived here for 5 years, I applied for settled status, which took me 10 minutes. My son is studying law at university, so we are fulfilling a little dream here in the UK' - one of them told the Czech media.[31]

Respondents noticed economic consequences of Brexit in everyday life: the weakening British pound, the increasing prices of some imported products and the shortage of goods:

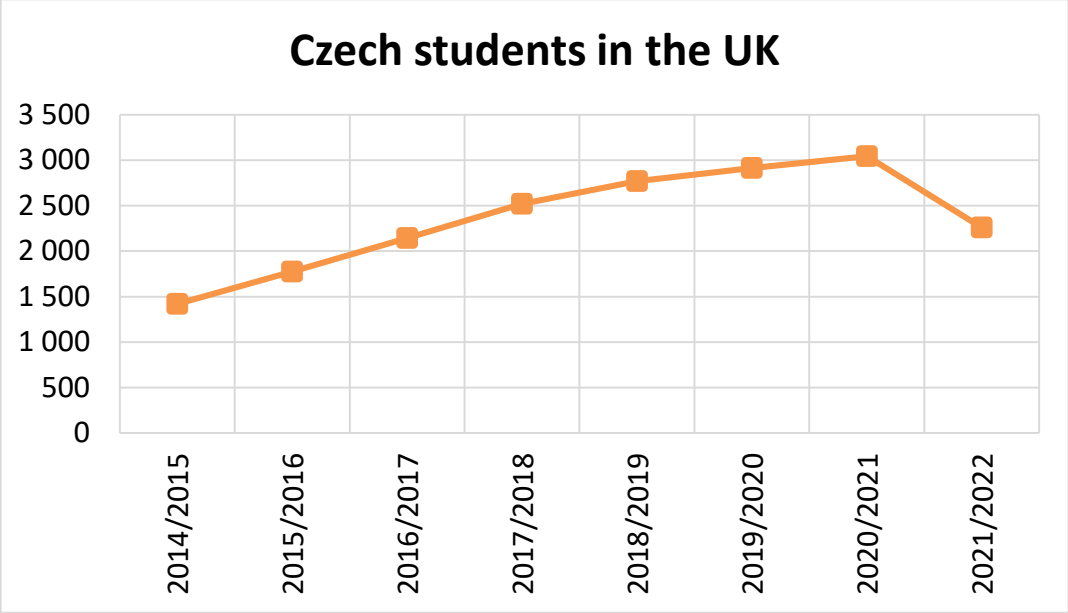
> In everyday life, I notice the influence of Brexit especially in stores, as the product range has shrunk and there are not so many foods to choose from. At the same time, I notice that prices are going up. (Female, 49, Brighton)

It has been estimated that there has been a drop in interest in studying in the UK because of the loss of eligibility for UK government student loans. From the 2021/2022 academic year, if Czech students want to complete a full standard study programme in the UK, they are subject to the rules on tuition fees and student loans that the UK currently has for so-called 'third-country nationals'. In practice, this means that they pay higher tuition fees than the British do and are not eligible for the government's student loan, which is interest-free and can only start to be repaid once they have completed their studies. Students eligible for pre-settled or settled status under the EU Settlement Scheme are an exception and are treated like British students. This situation is evident in the numbers of Czech students in Great Britain. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, in 2021/2022 there were 2,260 Czechs studying at British universities, which was almost one thousand less than in the previous year (see Table 5).

[30] https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/cesti-a-slovensti-romove-v-britanii-zahaneji-obavy-z-brexitu-radi-jim-nositel-radu-britskeho-imperia-74857 (accessed 12.02.2023).

[31] https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/cesti-a-slovensti-romove-v-britanii-zahaneji-obavy-z-brexitu-radi-jim-nositel-radu-britskeho-imperia-74857 (accessed 12.02.2023).

Table 5. Number of Czech Students in UK.



Source: Higher Education Student Statistics: UK 2021/2022, www.hesa.ac.uk (accessed 18.01.2023)

Furthermore, financial costs are not the only ones that matter. Bureaucratic rules associated with studies in the UK have also become unbearable for some students:

> Towards the end of the year, I started dealing with my student loan and the paperwork associated with my residence permit again. I got caught in a crazy spiral of bureaucracy. I couldn't apply for pre-settled status because I didn't have housing in the UK and I wasn't even living there before the end of 2020. It was too early to apply for a visa, the application system wasn't working yet. It was an administrative trap. I sat working on it for about four days, writing one email after another. Even the school didn't know what to do. They repeatedly told me I didn't need a visa. In the end, I had to postpone my studies again; after the New Year, the visa process would not meet the deadline required by the school. (…) The European Union has 27 other countries. Studying in Britain doesn't have as many advantages as it used to, I don't see why young people should want to study there as their first choice.[32]

Experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions illustrated another very important facet of Czech migration to the UK after Brexit. Because of cheap flights and basically no restrictions, our respondents' lives had been straddled between the Czech Republic and the UK. They were used to travelling between the two countries and considered themselves citizens of both countries. They described the travel restrictions imposed by the Czech side due to COVID-19 as absurd and framed them as a political decision: 'the Czech government is prioritizing political considerations over health and social considerations, and is grossly, illegally denying its citizens their rights' (Male, 29, Brighton).

During the pandemic, a group of Czech citizens living in the UK sent a petition demanding the easing of travel restrictions to the Czech Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Health had classified EU countries into three categories (red/orange/green). Red countries were those

[32] https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/brexit-a-pandemie-ani-prijaty-student-nema-skolu-v-britanii-jistou-138994 (accessed 12.02.2023).

with the highest danger of infection with COVID-19. Since Brexit, Great Britain was not part of the EU and automatically fell into the red category with the associated strict restrictions on travelling (at least five days of quarantine in the Czech Republic in addition to two weeks after going back to the UK). The authors of *We demand reasonable regulation of travelling from Great Britain to Czechia*, as the petition was entitled, wanted the Czech Minister of Health to change the status of the UK from red to orange. To support their cause, they presented data showing that the situation in the UK was like the one in Denmark and the Republic of Ireland. The online petition gained 1658 signatures in eight days. The highest numbers of petitioners (according to their self-declarations) came from London (250), Prague (78) and Manchester (51). Petitioners could also add comments on the publicly visible forum. Most of them stated that they missed their families (in both countries) or expressed anger that they were being treated like 'second-class citizens' and demanded fair travel conditions.

People in unqualified jobs were more profoundly affected by the pandemic. This was also the case for the Roma community:

> Most Czechs work in factories or cleaning services and often through employment agencies, which closed during April and May, leaving many people without income. Some received 80 per cent of their lost wages, others were able to claim Universal Credit, but many people found themselves without any resources and became dependent on the help of charities. The COMPAS Charity, which I represent as director, helps Roma with food, hygiene products and hot meals. We are currently helping more than 20 homeless people and 40 families with young children.[33]

It appears that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was largely class-determined. While middle-class Czechs living in the UK perceived the loss of certain civil rights (such as free travel between their country of residence and their country of origin) as an injury, for low-status migrants in precarious jobs the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences posed a strong existential threat.

According to our respondents, the atmosphere in the UK changed significantly after Brexit. One respondent recollected that his colleagues mentioned several times that the British health care system was overloaded, and that this was caused by the influx of migrants. Another mentioned a story about Romanian language use in his workplace: 'Once there was a group of Romanians talking loudly in the office and another client told me in a whisper: They should be speaking English here' (Male, 34, Bournemouth). Another respondent described how his former boss had told him 'that foreigners steal jobs and women' (Male, 44, Edinburgh). On the other hand, Czechs working in qualified positions also heard expressions of support: 'I was actually reassured several times that immigrants were necessary for the UK, for example during my psychotherapy class' (Female, 34, Edinburgh). Another respondent, living in Brighton, had the experience that the locals tended to apologize to her for what had happened due to Brexit.

[33] https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/rozhovor-koronavirus-romove-britanie-navrat-do-ceske-republiky-petr-torak.A200519_153325_domaci_lre (accessed 12.02.2023).

In autumn 2016, the Czech media widely discussed the Zdeněk Makar killing. The incident took place on the evening of 21 September 2016, when the 31-year-old Czech migrant, who was working in England as a catering manager at the Royal Institute of British Architects, was returning from work. He was confronted by Raymond Sculley at the diner where he stopped to eat and allegedly made an inappropriate joke about his nephew. Sculley grabbed him by the neck, but Makar broke free. When he later left the restaurant, Sculley followed him out into the street and attacked him with repeated blows with a bicycle lock chain, which were fatal. Even though this case had nothing to do with Brexit and the attacker probably did not know Makar's nationality, the media constructed an image of hateful Englishmen settling scores with immigrants from Central and Eastern European countries. Even the Czech prime minister asked his British counterpart Theresa May to take action to stop what his government considered violence against Czechs in the wake of Britain's decision to quit the EU. 'The Czech government finds it unacceptable to see Czechs attacked because of their origin and treated as second-class citizens' - the Czech Prime minister declared. These media images and political reactions further reinforced the discourse of a Britain hostile towards Central or Eastern European migrants.

On the other hand, our respondents were very often sympathetic to pro-Brexit voters. They agreed that there were too many migrants in the UK. They used the narrative that the UK had been too generous in accepting migrants into the country and that Brexit was a way of preventing people from coming in, and especially those who would take advantage of the generous system. Czechs living in the UK very often defined themselves in opposition to Polish migrants: 'Poles in particular separate themselves from British society' (Female, 27, London). Integration into British society is an important sign of a good migrant and part of the identity of Czechs living in the UK. Many of them emphasised that they did not have Czech friends and did not socialise in the Czech community. Even though some of them admitted to following internet fora or Facebook groups for Czechs living in the UK, they stressed that they did so for practical reason (such as travelling during COVID-19 restrictions) and not because of any emotional involvement or sense of belonging. 'After all those years, I feel like I'm a part of British society, but I try to keep Czech traditions (such as typical dishes) so that my son knows Czech culture' (Female, 41, Harpenden). This is a typical example of Czech identity – to act British in public and to maintain a Czech identity in private.

Qualified migrants who lived in big cities particularly often described Brexit as a shock which they shared with their British employers, colleagues and friends: 'I did not follow the referendum mostly because I did not believe that the UK might leave. But it was an emotional shock for most of my British friends too.' (Female, 41, Harpenden). The shock was all the greater since a lot of them had celebrated British culture as open, non-judgemental and tolerant. Although they described the situation after Brexit as emotional disillusionment, they did not blame the British. A dominant narrative was to blame British politicians as short-sighted, corrupt, too ambitious, or too obsessed with their own games.

For the vast majority of Czech migrants, Brexit meant applying for settled status. They found this process very easy and convenient and did not complain about it. Some respondents declared that Brexit had accelerated their efforts to obtain British citizenship: 'I never felt

uncertain or stressed about the whole process and for me, nothing really changed. I only had to think about my status (…) I will apply for citizenship next year.' (Female, 32, Nottingham). However, other respondents found applying for citizenship too expensive and were satisfied with settled status. The costs of citizenship represent an important class division between different socio-economic groups of Czechs living in the UK.

Finally, regarding *future plans*, ten interviewees planned to stay in the UK, two planned to migrate to Australia or New Zealand, while the rest planned to return to the Czech Republic in the near future (1-5 years). However, their plans were not concrete and the vast majority of respondents were not doing anything to make them real. Their stated intentions were more a declaration than a plan.

The respondents who planned to go back to Czechia stated that Brexit had not affected their plans and emphasized different reasons for such a move. Family reasons were the most important. Two Czech couples mentioned that they wanted to raise their children, once they had them, in the Czech Republic. A young woman had decided to study for a medical degree, which was much cheaper in the Czech Republic. Older respondents planned to return when they retired. They found that living in the Czech Republic off their British savings might be more comfortable than staying in the UK.

The respondents who intended to stay mentioned they had British families. Their children had British friends, and they were much more socialized to British culture. People living in big cities such as London or Edinburgh emphasised that these cities were more cosmopolitan and open than the Czech Republic. However, they also highlighted the benefits of dual citizenship, which broadens the spectrum of possible choices.

There were factors other than Brexit pushing Czechs back to their country. Reasons mentioned included the housing crisis and the impossibility of buying a flat in cities like London, the high financial costs of getting university degrees and the rising prices. However, Brexit also has some emotional aspects for the migrants because of the moments in which they felt like 'second-class citizens'. Brexit also reinforced their sense of dissociation from other Central and Eastern European migrants and increased their frustration and distrust of politics.

Conclusions

In sum, the Brexit stories of Czechs living in the UK were less dramatic than we expected. However, we identified various sources of insecurity related to Brexit: bureaucratic issues, economic consequences in everyday life and emotional consequences related to identity and sense of belonging.

Experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions illustrated another very important facet of the Czech migration to the UK after Brexit. The COVID-19 pandemic showed us the fragility of the transnational lifestyle in which individuals can develop strong social bonds in several countries. Brexit strengthened the effect of the pandemic on the life of Czechs in the UK. When in 2020 we interviewed Czechs living in the UK, they were not

worried and did not believe that travelling could become more difficult. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was largely class-determined. Middle-class Czechs living in the UK saw it as the loss of certain civil rights. For migrants in precarious jobs, the pandemic posed a strong existential threat.

Brexit was also associated with increasing hostility of the British towards Central and Eastern migrants. Czech migrants attributed the racialized discourse on Brexit to its representation in British media. Another emotional aspect of Brexit was being made to feel like 'second-class citizens'.

Combined with the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit also increased existing inequalities. It had a greater impact on vulnerable groups, such as Czech Roma in Great Britain. Their economical and legal insecurity became much stronger, and their experience of Brexit brought more intense emotional burdens. They viewed the future with stronger existential fears.

List of interviewees CZ:

	Gender	**Age**	**Place of residence in the UK**	**Interviewed (year)**
1	Female	32	Nottingham	2020
2	Female	41	Greater London	2020
3	Female	29	Greater London	2020
4	Male	34	Bournemouth	2020
5	Male	22	south England	2020
6	Male	44	Scotland	2020
7	Female	34	Scotland	2020
8	Female	30	Scotland	2020
9	Male	33	Wales	2020
10	Male	45	Oxford	2021
11	Female	30	London	2021
12	Male	25	Burton upon Trent	2021
13	Female	55	London	2021
14	Female	27	London	2022
15	Male	51	Berkshire	2022
16	Female	35	Essex	2022
17	Female	49	East Sussex (Brighton)	2022
18	Male	25	London	2022
19	Male	26	London	2020

20	Female	40	London	2020 (follow-up 2022)
21	Male	35	Manchester	2020 (follow-up 2022)
22	Female	30	London	2020
23	Male	29	Edinburgh	2021 (follow-up 2022)
24	Female	41	London	2021 (follow-up 2022)
25	Male	37	Cardiff	2022
26	Female	36	London	2022

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