Between the Assumed Ends and the Required Means: How Did Brexit Impact on the Life Strategies of Poles in the UK?

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The life strategies of Polish post-accession migrants built after 2004 were based on the specific conditions then prevailing in Poland and the UK. However, conditions have changed over the years and recent events – particularly Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic – rapidly revalued migrants' accumulated resources and changed the context of their migration. They have introduced uncertainty about the adopted life strategies, mobilised to once again rethink the future and to make decisions that had often been postponed for many years. The 2018–2021 demographic statistics clearly show an exodus of Poles from the UK from over 1 million in 2017 to fewer than 700,000 by the end of 2021. Despite the correlation of dates, this is not necessarily a result of Brexit or of the pandemic. This article seeks to answer the question of how Brexit impacted on the life strategies of Poles and how could it be a catalyst in their decisions to return to the home country. It is based on qualitative research comprising 30 interviews with Polish migrants in the UK, conducted online in 2020–2021 – thus just after Brexit – and during the coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords: Brexit, migration, life strategy, Covid-19 pandemic, uncertainty, return migration

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Introduction

The influx of immigrants to Great Britain that occurred after the accession of 8 Central-European countries (the so-called A-8 or EU-8) to the European Union on 1 May 2004 has been named as one of the biggest migration waves in modern European history (Iglicka 2010; Trevena 2009). Of all the migrant groups from the new EU countries and from Central-Eastern Europe, the Poles were the most numerous and often also acted as a reference (Narkowicz 2023) for the leaders of the pro-Brexit referendum campaign in 2016 (Sudarshan 2017). The number of Poles in the UK (based on ONS data) increased from 44,000 in February 2004 to 399,000 in December 2007. In just 3.5 years, it rose nearly 10 times. Later, after a temporary slowing down during the international economic crisis of 2008–2009, the migration flows accelerated again to reach a record 1,021,000 in December 2017 (Office for National Statistics, n.d.). After that peak, the numbers started to fall sharply, reaching 'just' 698,000 in December 2021. What caused such a rapid growth and outflow? Is the currently observed wave of returns the effect of Brexit (and later the pandemic) or is it just a coincidence timewise and the true reason lies elsewhere?

Figure 1. Polish migrants in the UK 2001–2021
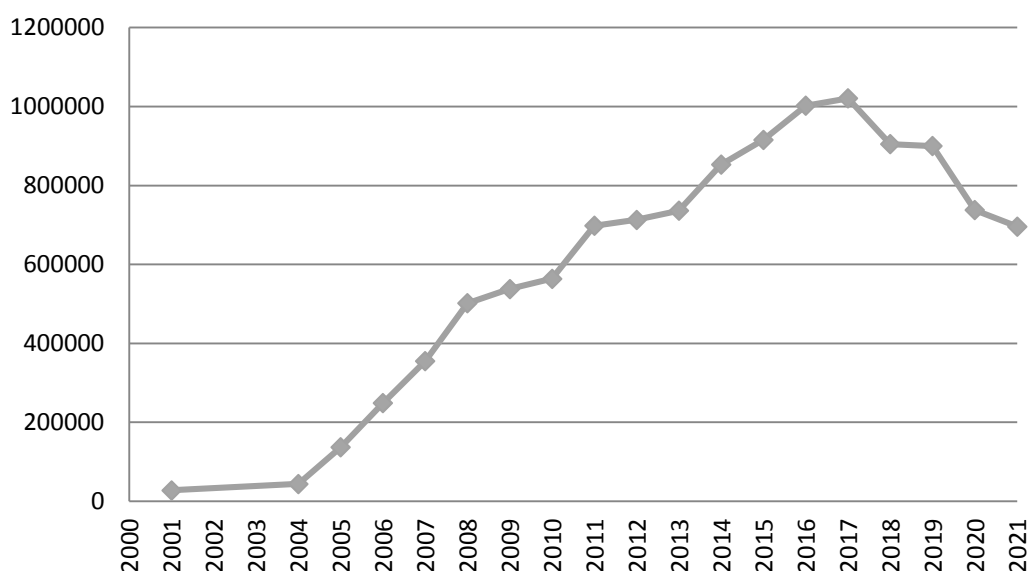
Source: ONS data.

Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska (2020: 102) posited that Brexit would not significantly affect the outflow of migrants from the UK as long as the UK economy remained strong. Through this article, based on qualitative research, I argue that Brexit has, however, had a long-term impact on migrants' life decisions and that the main reason for their decision to return was not purely economic but, rather, socio-psychological – disillusionment with the UK and British society, as well as the general 'change of atmosphere' (a phrase that appears frequently in interviews) felt on a political, media and social level. Above all, Brexit (and the Covid-19 pandemic) provided the impetus to reflect on life strategies and to make long-postponed decisions, including potential return migration. These decisions were, again, not necessarily driven by economic calculation – including a narrowing of the unemployment or wage gap – but more often by the stage of life in which post-Brexit migrants found themselves; family, housing and inheritance considerations were sometimes the deciding factors. Young people who moved to the UK as 20-year-olds in 2004, 2005 or 2006 are now approaching 40, often having already met their economic (or other) migration goals. Brexit and the pandemic were factors that

might have led to reflection about where they wanted to spend the rest of their lives (Szkudlarek 2019), something that had been not considered for years – partly, maybe, as a result of an 'intentional unpredictability' strategy (Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich 2007: 9). The result of this crisis-driven reflection is a polarisation of strategies – on the one hand, a wave of return migration visible in the ONS statistics and present in the interviews and, on the other, a significant increase, after 2016, in applications for citizenship (Trąbka and Wermińska-Wiśnicka 2020).

The main aim of this article is to investigate how – if at all – Brexit (and the pandemic) impacted on the life strategies of Polish migrants in the UK who arrived there after Poland's accession to the EU but before the Brexit referendum in June 2016. My assumption is that the crisis moments (such as Brexit or the pandemic) may lead to migrants reflecting on the reformulation of their life strategies, including making the possible decision of a return migration (Dzięglewski 2021).

Theoretical framework and key concepts

The key theoretical concept related to this article is 'life strategy' (Burski 2019; Mrozowicki 2011). The term 'strategy' implies that an individual has a plan to achieve the desired goals but under conditions of uncertainty. Dumitru Sandu wrote that a life strategy 'is not simply an action, but also a kind of perspective on the action itself. It is the perspective of the long-term relationship between the assumed ends and the required means' (Sandu 2000: 67). Often, the problem with the implementation of a life strategy is that, while its goals do not change, the conditions under which the individual tries to achieve these goals change. Thus, strategies are constantly being updated or even need to be remade. The most often, these changes are gradual and take place over a period of years – sometimes a person does not even notice them and continues to pursue his/her original aims although, from a practical point of view, it either no longer makes sense or it has acquired a different meaning. Sometimes, however, reality changes so rapidly that it is impossible not to notice the change – and these moments have a mobilising effect on rethinking life strategies. It may happen that such events even force certain steps and decisions to be taken. In recent years, Europe has experienced several overlapping events: Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and, even more recently, the war in Ukraine and rampant inflation. It is not strange, then, that the topic of functioning in moments of crisis has gathered much attention in the academic environment (Schneider, Burgmer, Erle and Ferguson 2023). Focusing on the first two events – Brexit and the pandemic – this article tries to show how they affected the life strategies of Polish post-accession migrants in the United Kingdom.

Returning to the quote from Dumitru Sandu, we perceive the aforementioned 'means' to be resources (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu and Westman 2017), thanks to Wojciech Łukowski, author of the book *Małe Miasto w Wielkim Świecie* (2023). Mobility, then, is described as resource management. The individual, in building his or her life strategy, seeks to multiply possessed resources while, at the same time, trying not to lose them (Hobfoll *et al.* 2017: 105). Emigration can also be undertaken to accumulate specific resources – for example, economic or education-related. Migration, like any rapid change, involves a significant re-evaluation of existing resources, some of which may be completely useless in the new location while others, previously useless, will prove crucial. The same is true of changes brought about by sudden, disruptive events – such as Brexit or the pandemic. This re-evaluation – the reversal of order, the time it takes to find oneself in a new reality – is associated with the anthropological term of *liminality* (Thomassen 2014; Turner 1967; van Gennep 2004). Some scholars have pointed out that Brexit fits into this pattern of liminality (Genova and Zontini 2020) because it reverses the well-entrenched and familiar order of the pre-liminal (separation) phase, goes through the liminal (transition) period and ends with a new post-liminal (incorporation) order. It also contains an

element of uncertainty, of order reversal, anti-structure and chaos characteristic of the 'in-between', transitional phase (Reed-Danahay 2020: 17).

When analysing the material collected in qualitative research from a biographical perspective, one encounters a problem with the notion of 'migration strategy' or 'life strategy' (White 2009). This is because the notion of 'strategy' implies the intentionality of action – the planning of the migration process in order to multiply or convert individuals' resources (Bourdieu 1986). However, in the statements of many of the interviewees, we often see the casualness of the migration process – they came to the UK by chance, most often at the instigation of family or friends, in order to 'try it out' and return as soon as something goes wrong or life abroad simply gets boring. Such a suspension, like an indefinitely prolonged liminal 'in-between' phase according to some authors, was characteristic of 'liquid' post-accession migrations undertaken under conditions such as the free movement of people, goods and services within the European Union (Grabowska-Lusińska 2013). This leaving of an 'open door', sometimes for years, has been called by Eade *et al*. (2007: 9) a strategy of 'intentional unpredictability'. Migrants did not consciously make final decisions; they left as many doors open as possible, did not cut family, social and often even professional ties with Poland, did not integrate into British society and were sometimes even living in two countries at the same time. This could potentially develop into a form of circular migration (Cassarino 2004; Jaźwińska and Okólski 2001; Triandafyllidou 2010); however, such an 'in-between' phase could last for years and concern people who did not travel back to Poland at all or only went occasionally for short visits (like Christmas). It was only Brexit (and the pandemic) that changed the reality and forced them to make certain decisions that had been postponed for years. Therefore, we can talk about the mobilising effect of Brexit on the life strategies of Polish migrants (Szkudlarek 2019: 84), including the decision to stay in the UK, return to Poland or eventually even go elsewhere. However, while Brexit (and the pandemic) were catalysts for these decisions, our research showed that they were not the cause of them.

We assumed in our research that Brexit (and the pandemic) – and especially the uncertainty caused by these two phenomena – could lead to a decision to undertaking return migration. In the definition of the term formulated by Dustmann and Weiss (2007: 238) we read that it is 'the situation where the migrants return to their country of origin, by their own will, after a significant period of time abroad'. However, in the post-referendum period, despite the assurances of the UK government, it was not certain what the legal issues would look like nor that the decision to return would be entirely voluntary. This feeling of uncertainty in the context of changing conditions could lead to a rethinking of life strategies (Lindley 2006).

Methodology and interviewee profiles

This paper is based on the results of qualitative research conducted in 2020 and 2021 in the framework of the project 'The Impact of Brexit on Migration from the V4 Countries to the UK: Migrant Strategies' (2019–2023). The research was conducted simultaneously by partners from 4 Visegrad Group countries. The Polish part was carried out by the Centre of Migration Research at the University of Warsaw, which conducted 30 in-depth online ethnographic interviews with 29 migrants aged between 26 and 54 (1 interview from 2020 was repeated in 2022) with the use of an interview guide (see Table A1 in the Appendix).

The group researched consisted of those who arrived in the UK after 2004 and remained there at least until the Brexit referendum in 2016. The interviewee who was the last to arrive went to the UK in June 2016, just a few weeks before the referendum; the earliest interviewee to arrive did so in 2005. The interviewees who were in the UK for the shortest period of time had stayed there for 5 years (2016–2021) and, for the longest, 16 years (2005–2021) at the moment when the interviews were carried out. If we calculate the average of all 29 participants, the statistical interviewee arrived in 2011 and had therefore spent 10 years in the UK. All the interviewees spoke English, with some even declaring that they could hardly remember how to communicate

in Polish (which was not really true – everyone spoke perfect Polish). All the interviews were conducted in Polish.

Of the 29 interviewees, 20 were in a stable relationship and 14 were married. Two interviewees (men) were divorced (both divorces took place before they left Poland). Two women had British husbands and 1 man had a British partner. Another 2 women had foreign husbands (not British). About half of the interviewees had no children.

We initially planned to conduct traditional ethnographic research (cf. Agrosino 2007; Lune and Berg 2017; Spradley 1979) in two locations – London and a small town in the English countryside. This choice of location was due to the very different distribution of votes in the Brexit referendum (the provinces overwhelmingly voted 'leave', while London voted 'remain'). Also, migrants living in cosmopolitan and multicultural London experience a very different relationship with British society compared to those who lived in small towns. We wanted to recruit participants with a balance in criteria such as educational level, gender, family status, occupation and socio-economic position.

The date of the planned research coincided with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ban imposed on international travel, which was later extended; we therefore did not know when it would be lifted. It was then decided, in July 2020, to conduct the entire project exclusively online. Although ethnographic research using online tools, including groups on social media, already has its own history (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff and Cui 2009; Mann and Stewart 2000), we were among those who conducted it under the very specific circumstances of the pandemic (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšeli, Tomaževič and Umek 2020). The pandemic not only changed people's attitudes towards the Internet for work, entertainment, maintaining social ties and communication – this form of conducting research seemed completely natural and understandable for the interviewees. It was easy to arrange an interview because most people were at home working remotely – or not working at all – due to repeat lockdowns. This meant that recruiting interviewees was less of a problem and the 'snowball' effect in this case was to receive more migrants' profiles on social media. Interlocutors were found on Facebook groups – e.g. 'British Poles' with 136,000 followers – or by the researchers' private contacts. For interviewing, we used standard Internet communicators such as Zoom, Google Meets or Messenger.

A side-effect of this method was that the study group was expanded to include people living in very different parts of the United Kingdom, which would have been extremely difficult if we had conducted traditional fieldwork. Eleven interviewees lived in Greater London, 15 in other regions of England, 2 in Northern Ireland (Belfast) and one in Scotland. Two people (a couple) had returned to Poland in 2020 after spending 5 years as emigrants, one was preparing to return at the time of our interview and one was living in Poland but working remotely in England (this was a possibility due to the pandemic prevailing at the time). In terms of education level, those with a university degree were slightly over-represented (which might have resulted from the method of acquiring the interviewees) – 2 had PhDs and 1 was doing doctoral studies, 8 had secondary or vocational education and the rest had either a BA or an MA (or the equivalent). This did not, however, differ much from the average in the Polish migrant population in the UK, of whom 64.1 per cent had higher education (BA or MA) and 30.7 per cent secondary or vocational education, while 1.5 per cent only went to primary school (Fihel and Piętka 2007: 19). Twenty-two interviewees came from large Polish agglomerations (Warsaw, Tricity, Cracow, Poznań, Wrocław and the Katowice urban area) and 7 from smaller towns and villages (fewer than 100,000 inhabitants).

The members of the study group were diverse in terms of their occupation in the UK: 9 held high, stable and well-paid positions in corporations or academic units (academics, managers, a doctor, language teachers), 5 were self-employed (e.g., hairdresser, landlords living from renting apartments), while the rest had more-or-less physical jobs (in catering, factories, care services, warehouses and pubs). Oral consent was taken and

interviews anonymised in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) rules in the social sciences. Participants were informed each time about the purpose of the study and the scientific nature of the interview, as well as about their anonymity. Qualitative data included in-depth, semi-structured interviews as audio files (mp3) and transcribed interviews held as RTF documents. All these files were stored in a password-protected folder on a hard disc. All personal data were minimalised. The place of residence of the interviewees is given as cities (in the case of settlements of more than 100,000 inhabitants) or counties (fewer than 100,000 inhabitants).

In researching the impact of Brexit on the life strategies of migrants from Poland, we chose to adopt a biographical perspective and followed it during data analysis. We consciously do not use the phrase 'biographical method' (Chase 2005; Kaźmierska 2012), as we did not follow its assumption of allowing the interviewees to speak freely about their lives. However, we attempted to reconstruct and describe the person's biography – including basic facts about their life both before and during migration – in order to better understand their life decisions and strategies. The interviews were interpreted using narrative methods, focusing on each biography as a case study (de Fina and Georgakopoulou 2019). In this way, we sought to provide deeper insights into the interviewees' lives, priorities and motivations and the goals conditioning their life strategies at particular moments and phases of their biographies.

Life strategies and the impacts of Brexit

Why did they come?

Poles are a long-established migratory society and, many times in their history, emigration has been a response to economic, social and, more often than not, political problems. It is enough to mention the Great Emigration after the defeats of the national uprisings in the 19th century and, later, the wartime emigration or the dissidents during the communist era. Already before the outbreak of the First World War, there were approximately 1.9 million people of Polish origin living in the USA (Kicinger 2005: 5). In 2019, approximately 4.4 million Polish citizens lived abroad (Kilkey, Piekut and Ryan 2020: 6). These historical backgrounds have not been without an impact on post-accession migration, especially when we compare the percentage of Poles who emigrated to the UK after 2004 (*circa* 2.37 per cent) with the percentage of those from other countries of the V4 region who joined the EU on the same day – Czechs (*circa* 0.49 per cent) and Hungarians (*circa* 0.97 per cent).[1] Only Slovaks with around 1.88 per cent were close but it is true that Slovakia also had an emigration tradition with over half a million ethnic Slovaks who emigrated to the USA between 1870 and 1914 (O'Donnell 2019), while the Czech Republic and Hungary were, instead, receiving rather than sending societies (Black, Engbersen, Okólski and Panţîru 2010: 8).

However, although the history and historically driven traditions are important, there were other reasons, too. Crucial were economic and social factors. Poland after the fall of communism was a poorer country than its neighbours – according to the International Monetary Fund (n.d.), GDP *per capita* in 1990 was USD 1,629 in Poland, USD 3,312 in Hungary and USD 3,300 in Czechoslovakia. In comparison, the UK's GDP was, at that time, USD 20,884 – nearly 13 times higher than that of Poland. On the eve of the latter's accession to the European Union, in April 2004, unemployment stood at 19.9 per cent and was, moreover, geographically unevenly distributed – for example, in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship, it reached as high as 31 per cent (Statistics Poland 2005). It was also significantly higher among young people, who constituted the majority of post-accession migrants (Fihel and Piętka 2007). The minimum wage in Poland in 2004 was equivalent to EUR 177 while, in the UK, it was EUR 1,083 (Eurostat, n.d.).

The United Kingdom, as one of the 3 countries of the so-called 'old Union' (the others being Sweden and Ireland), decided to fully open its labour market from the very first day after the accession of the EU-10 countries. Several points led to the fact that the largest group was Polish emigrants heading to the British Isles. Michał Garapich (2019: 14–16) lists both push and pull factors. The former include the entry into the labour market of the baby-boomers born in the 1980s, which overlapped with the unemployment caused by systemic transformation and left young people without the prospect of finding their first job in the country, a lower level of urbanisation than in the West, coupled with an educational boom and increased pressure to move to the cities while housing was in short supply. Additionally, this made emigration a natural solution to coping with this situation. Not insignificant, according to Garapich, were the migration networks that had already been developed and the fact that many people already had contacts on the islands, whether from the old, wartime or post-war emigration or from later labour migration, often operating in the grey economy. In 1993, visas for entry into European Union countries were abolished, which greatly facilitated the movement of people. Among the pull factors should be noted, in particular, the chronic shortage of a labour force, especially in certain sectors, which characterised the British labour market during the period of intense growth between 2004 and 2008 (Garapich 2019: 16), as well as the strong position of the British pound.

In short, one could say that such a large migration wave after 2004 resulted from a confluence of various political circumstances, socio-demographic forces in Poland and a pent-up demand in the UK for a low-skilled labour force – and far exceeded the Polish government's assumptions of 100,000 additional migrants (Okólski and Salt 2014: 24). Marek Okólski and John Salt wrote that this 'unexpected' and unprecedented scale of post-accession migration from Poland to the UK was an effect of a complex combination of circumstances which happened to coexist: 'right people, right place and right circumstances' (Okólski and Salt 2014: 32; cf. Fihel and Piętka 2009). Although economic reasons were the most important and were the basis of the vast majority of decisions to migrate, there were also other reasons why Poles chose to come to the UK.

When investigating the impact of Brexit on the life strategies of Polish post-accession migrants, we naturally asked questions about their reason for leaving. It may not be surprising that economic reasons dominated the responses but it is worth mentioning that they were not the only reasons. Often the motivations were complex and interviewees listed several factors that prompted them to migrate to the UK (Szkudlarek 2019). For many young people the difference in wages and more working opportunities were a powerful enough trigger: '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). They came to the UK to realise their dreams, as in the case of one interviewee who migrated to raise funds for a PPL(A) pilot's licence course.

Among the economic reasons, it is worth distinguishing between those related to the desire to earn money for a specific purpose (most often housing, a car, studies) and those stemming from the migration that resulted from career failures in Poland and sometimes debts. The 1990s were not only a period of poverty and painful transformation but also a time when enterprising people could quickly spread their wings in the changed socio-economic reality. The private enterprises that were set up at that time developed quickly – but then sometimes collapsed just as quickly when Western capital began to flow into Poland in a wider stream and stronger competition emerged (Krajewski 2022). Among our 29 interviewees, 2 had such a history:

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-size company employing over 100 people. So when I fell (...) that fall was also very painful. I couldn't declare bankruptcy in Poland at that time and, in saving myself and looking for a new life (...) I took 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 hump from the past (male, 54, Surrey).

For other interviewees, the motivation for leaving Poland was to study in the UK or to learn English. Some took advantage of the facilities offered to students by the European Union, especially the Erasmus programme. After the scholarship, they often decided to stay in the UK, possibly returning there after completing studies in Poland. For 2 interviewees, the departure was due to an offer to undertake doctoral studies at British universities (female, 38, Belfast; male, 34, London).

One group is made up of well-educated people with an excellent command of English and mostly from the younger generation, who could be called 'global citizens' or 'global nomads' (Kannisto 2014). Because of their specialist training and language skills, they can work almost anywhere in the world and often already had international experience before arriving in the UK. One example is a doctor who, after receiving her degree in Poland, had already worked in several countries; she has now found employment in the UK but does not rule out the fact that the UK is only a life stage and she will soon go elsewhere (female, 37, Derbyshire).

Migrants often followed existing migration networks (Haug 2008; Munshi 2020; Ryan and Dahinden 2021). Some of these had already been established in the pre-accession period and consisted of relatives and acquaintances who had worked in the grey sphere or on the basis of a visa or arrived in the UK much earlier as a consequence of the Second World War. Migration networks provided a sense of security and support and could also result in providing real help in the initial phase of migration – arranging things like housing and/or a first job and issuing the necessary documents:

> *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. The friends helped us to find a place to stay and they also helped us look around for work. They showed us agencies where we could apply for work* (female, 26, Buckinghamshire).

The question 'Why did they come?' – in light of the situation described above, in which both Poland and the UK found themselves in 2004 – is probably too trivial. The question 'Why did so many come?' is more complicated. Okólski and Salt, who posed it in 2014, also were unable to find a single answer, because this unprecedented wave of arrivals was, in their view, due to a certain coincidence that occurred in a certain place and a certain time and concerned a certain group of people – or, rather, a whole generation of young Poles. In the rest of the article, I would like to refer to this analysis by Okólski and Salt from 10 years ago to try to answer the question of how their life strategies had changed since their migration and how – if at all – Brexit impacted on them.

The impact of Brexit (and the pandemic)

As we saw in the statistics presented above, after 2016, migration trends clearly reversed and the number of Poles living in the UK fell by almost a third in just 4 years – a rate comparable to the earlier increase in that number between 2005 and 2009. How – if at all – did Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic contribute to that reversal and change migrants' life strategies? In the light of the research conducted, the answer to this question seems to us to be similarly complex, as is the search for the causes of such a large wave of migration after 2004.

Socio-psychological impact

The psychological and social dimensions of Brexit featured most strongly in our interviews and had potentially the greatest impact on the life strategies of Polish migrants in the UK. Above all, the result of the referendum was a shock that caused a re-evaluation of the previous assessment of reality. The referendum, which was victorious for those who supported the 'leave' option, came as a surprise both to those interested in British politics and to those migrants who lived in isolation from it. It was a shock to both migrants and the British.

Many, as they admit, existed in bubbles, especially those living in London or university cities like Oxford – revolving in a metropolitan, academic or international environment and among young people, they did not realise how many supporters of Brexit there were in the country:

> *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' in blue. From what I remember, the 'leave' was in red and I didn't actually see any red signs. It was everywhere 'remain' – in windows and in 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 (...) our directors were English and they were puzzled that the very fact that there was a referendum was unthinkable and they said that they were ashamed of their country after all. There was such a pro-EU climate in general* (female, 37, Oxfordshire).

The referendum and the campaign were so focused on the topic of migration and migrants that a significant number of interviewees perceived the outcome of the vote as a kind of expression of the will of the British people as regards their stay in the UK. Poles suddenly felt unwelcome by much of British society (Kilkey *et al.* 2020: 9). They also felt discrimination and racialisation at being perceived as part of the 'Eastern European' group by the British (Lewicki 2023). As the largest group of migrants from EU countries, they were often the group referred to in the campaign. This reflection was widespread and unexpected as, until then, most of the migrants lived in the belief that British society is open, tolerant and benefits from migrant labour: 'I felt that I was not so welcome by the general public here' (male, 33, London).

Many interviewees stressed that the English culture, in which civility, tolerance and openness are important values, distorted the true picture. The referendum was a test which showed that, in fact, the majority of the population was against migrants.

The people we spoke to emphasised that, during the referendum campaign and after the announcement of the results, both in the media and on the streets, a 'wave' of anti-immigrant rhetoric could be observed – which, in some cases, affected the way that people behaved. Migrants no longer felt comfortable speaking Polish in public on the phone, in a shop or on public transport (Rzepnikowska 2019). In workplaces, they started to be reminded to speak to each other in English:

> *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 we should speak English here* (female, 26, Buckinghamshire).

Police statistics actually show an increase in hate crimes immediately before and immediately after the referendum (Home Office 2016). This was due to the prominence of the topic of immigration in the referendum campaign, which largely focused precisely on immigrants and their role in the UK's situation. In their extensive analysis of the media coverage of the 2016 EU referendum campaign, Moore and Ramsay (2017) noted that, in the 18-month period leading up to the referendum, the topic of immigrants in the context of Brexit came up 4,383 times in the media – and in 16 out of 18 months could be considered the most important topic in the campaign. A study by Carr, Clifton-Sprigg, James and Vujić (2020: 2) shows how hate crimes increased as a result of the referendum campaign by 15–25 per cent and was the highest in areas that voted to leave the European Union. In 2016/2017, a total of 80,393 hate crimes were recorded in England and Wales which, compared to 62,518 in 2015/2016, was an increase of 29 per cent (Carr *et al*. 2020: 9). However, it is worth mentioning also that there exist studies which, from a long-term perspective, show a decrease in anti-immigrant rhetoric as a result of Brexit (Schwartz, Simon, Hudson and van-Heerde-Hudson 2020). This does not change the fact that, during the campaign period and just after the referendum, the increase in anti-immigrant attitudes in British society and in the British media was visible and felt by Poles living in the UK and which is also reflected in our research:

> *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 part, are xenophobic, they are racist. It's been in their mentality for a very long time, very deep – and Brexit just brought it out* (female, 37, Derbyshire).

The unexpected result of the referendum brought uncertainty about what migrants' existence would be like in the new reality. Although the British government was quite quick to respond by reassuring them that EU nationals who were in the UK at the time would be able to stay legally, there was uncertainty at the outset – for example, about the regulation concerning employment for nationals of other countries. One interviewee, who had just been in the process of changing jobs at the time, recalls:

> *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).

It is worth mentioning that the interviewee is a highly qualified professional and has never previously had trouble finding employment or experienced a lack of response to CVs sent out.

To most of our interviewees this socio-psychological aspect was the most important factor in their perception of Brexit, especially the experience of British xenophobia and the anti-immigrant slogans appearing during the campaign. This feeling led to disillusionment with the United Kingdom as a country and affected migrants' comfort when trying to function in British society.

Economic impact

The interviewees most often did not see any direct economic impact of Brexit on their lives (except the lady in the above quote, who had problems with finding a new job as a consequence of uncertain rules on employing foreigners). The weakening of the British pound after the referendum results were announced was temporal and the value of the UK currency in 2022 in relation to the Polish *zloty* was more or less equivalent to the rates

from May 2016 (National Bank of Poland, n.d.). Our interviewees did not record any fears about their life savings, especially because some of them were not saving their earnings but had already used them to buy a property in the UK or in Poland.

Migrants, instead, observed the indirect economic effects of Brexit, the pandemic and, later, the war in Ukraine – which they attributed to these factors. They felt, therefore, a deterioration in the economic situation of the UK itself. Supply problems caused by a shortage of lorry drivers and panic buying were particularly acute. In September 2021, there were long queues at most petrol stations in the country:

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

Similar images were emerging in the UK in February 2022, following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Not only was there a shortage of fuel but empty shelves in shops were a frequent image appearing both in the media and in observation. Interviewees also noted a deterioration in the quality of some products and a significant increase in prices. However, although inflation affected all of Europe, migrants who retained daily contact with their home country were aware that Poland had not experienced similar shortages of supplies.

Migrants have also felt the effects of Brexit such as the return of high mobile roaming costs and customs fees when sending parcels to and from Poland. For some time, major posting companies such as DHL or DPD temporarily stopped accepting shipments due to confusion over new procedures. Migrants sometimes used private announcements by people offering to take parcels in a car going to Poland or back:

Before, I was often sending a parcel to Poland. Something for my nephews or for my parents. After Brexit there was a problem with that. A lot of companies suspended sending (...). Then there were a lot of announcements on Facebook from people driving cars, saying they would take a parcel to Poland for £30. Now I've stopped sending at all, because I don't know myself what can and what can't be sent. It's easier to just buy on websites and order with delivery to a Polish address (female, 41, Liverpool).

Legal impact

Brexit has necessitated certain steps to legalise residence in the UK and obtain status, whether settled or pre-settled. Although the process of applying for status itself was described as uncomplicated by all interviewees, the change in the legal situation had a number of legal and psychological consequences. First of all, applying for a status was already a certain directional decision – especially in the context of the previous strategy of 'intentional unpredictability'. With pre-settled status, one could not spend more than 6 months outside the UK in any 12-month period, as this meant having to renew their pre-settled status – this was before the end of the transition period (31 December 2020). After 1 January 2021, such individuals who wished to return to the UK would have to apply for a visa which, in turn, incurs high fees. It was already a serious limitation of free movement, even if only in migrants' consciousness.

Applying for British citizenship involves significant costs (around £1,500) and the need to pass exams. Some migrants have chosen to take this step in a bid to achieve greater feelings of safety and also because, in the case of Poles, it is possible to have dual citizenship – acquiring British citizenship does not make it necessary to relinquish one's Polish passport and therefore the European one.

Of the 29 people surveyed, only 3 declared a desire to apply for British citizenship. The others claimed that they would be content with settled status. Interviewees mentioned that, just after the referendum result, there

was uncertainty about their legal status – but now the settled status gives them enough security. For those with UK-born children, having a UK passport is most common, which adds to the sense of security of the whole family. The value of the Polish (European) passport has risen sharply as it continues to provide free movement in all EU and Schengen countries.

Political impact

The UK's exit from the European Union has also changed the political perspective on migration. When Poland joined the European Union in 2004 and, later, the Schengen Area in 2007, Poles enjoyed free movement within the EU. They could legally reside, study and work in all Community countries. Some migrants took advantage of this opportunity provided by the coexistence of both Poland and the UK in the EU structures and, in the course of their emigration, completed shorter or longer periods of residence in yet other countries (e.g. one interviewee had spent 1.5 years in Amsterdam). This freedom – and the always open possibility to move elsewhere – has been severely undermined by Brexit.

Another political aspect of Brexit was the issue of re-evaluating migrants' opinions on the condition of the political class in both countries. Some interviewees spoke of their weariness and disillusionment with Polish politics as an argument for their migration. Issues such as the attitude of Polish politicians towards women's rights, abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, as well as migrants and refugees, were mentioned. Polish society was portrayed as parochial, traditional, limited, conservative and closed to modernity. Migrants were frustrated that they lived among a majority who had extremely different views from their own. British society, on the contrary, appeared open, cosmopolitan, tolerant and modern. Meanwhile, Brexit – and especially the referendum campaign – was a major disappointment, undermining just such an image of British society:

> *Well, when I was leaving Poland, it seemed to me that one of the reasons I was doing that was that people make electoral decisions so completely contrary to my value system that it was hard for me to understand their intentions. I live now in a town where the Conservative Party scores the highest, in a town where, if there was another Brexit referendum, my neighbours would vote for Brexit once again. The feeling that I live among people who think completely differently from me still accompanies me, even though I have travelled all over Europe* (female, 35, Hampshire).

Why are they coming back?

As our research shows, Brexit has been an important contributor to rethinking life strategies and the coincidental timing of the currently observed wave of returns from the UK is a fact. However, Brexit alone cannot, in our view, be taken as the main cause of return migration. Poles are also returning from Ireland, which remains in the EU although, for full data, we have to wait until 2026 when the next Irish population census will be released.

Poles also stopped coming to the UK. The reversal of migration trends and the exhaustion of the wave of new arrivals had already happened before the referendum. The new National Insurance Numbers (NINo) issued for EU-8 nationals had already started to decline in 2015. Among all nationalities, the decrease in the quantity of new numbers issued was the greatest among Poles – for example, from September 2017 to September 2018, 46,000 new numbers were issued to Poles, 26 per cent less than in the same period in 2016 to 2017. In 2019, 43,000 new numbers were issued, 10 per cent less than in 2018 (Department for Work and Pensions 2023).

Among important reasons why fewer Poles started to come to the UK were the already mentioned economic factors: the narrowing of the wage gap, the levelling off of unemployment, the flexibilisation of the labour

market in Poland and the entry of multinational corporations into the Polish market, which gave migrants the opportunity to use their experience and language skills acquired in the UK. Demographic factors have also added to this – above all, in the fewer young people entering the labour market. It can therefore be said that, just like the post-2004 departures, the post-2016 returns were a combination of a number of overlapping circumstances.

The change in the conditions of Poles in the UK – triggered primarily by Brexit, the pandemic and then the war in Ukraine – and rampant inflation, seem to have largely ended the 'intentional unpredictability' phase and mobilised migrants to rethink their life strategies. This coincided, in many cases, with other factors – the attainment (wholly or partially) of assumed migration goals, the ageing and illness of parents left behind in Poland and the starting of families, etc. An important push factor was the increase in property rental prices – which accelerated in the UK (particularly in London) following the end of the Covid-19 pandemic: from November 2021 to November 2022, rental prices increased by 4 per cent on average (Office for National Statistics, n.d.). It seems that some migrants who have already spent several or more years in emigration have come to the conclusion that they do not want to live in rented accommodation all their lives and that it is worth making a more long-term decision about where to live. One migrant, whose father recently died and left a house in a village in south Poland, said:

> *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).

Migration trends also have an element of fashion. Just as, after 2004, it was fashionable among young people to go abroad, especially to the United Kingdom and Ireland, now there is a noticeable trend among Polish emigrants to return. The 'herd effect' has also been visible among interviewees, who noticed that many of their friends, hairdressers, handymen or family decided to leave the UK after 2016 (or during the pandemic). These return-migration examples which the migrants observed in their vicinity also contributed to their own reflections on their life strategy. This is reinforced by the fact that, in many cases, Poles never fully integrated in the British society, having most of their social ties still in Poland and living a transnational life (Fanning, Kloc-Nowak and Lesińska 2020; McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017; Ryan, Sales, Tilki and Siara 2007). Anne White and Louise Ryan have written that 'such decisions [whether to return or stay] are influenced by the nature of the very ties and networks which link Poles in Poland to Poles abroad' (2008: 1468). Since the networks were never really transferred to the UK, it was just a matter of time before the decision to return was made.

Conclusions

While Brexit (and later the pandemic) were triggers for reflections over up-to-date life strategies and impulses to take action, they were not themselves important factors in making the decision to return. They had a mobilising effect which led to such reflections but were not the reasons for decisions. The wave of returns was caused primarily by the coincidence of factors similar to the one described by Okólski and Salt in 2014: 'Right people, right place and right circumstances'. Young people who left Poland reached a stage of their lives when some decisions were to be made. All or some of the migration goals were accomplished. Meanwhile circumstances have changed significantly since 2004: the wage gap has narrowed, unemployment has almost levelled off and a new, much less numerous, generation has entered the labour market in Poland, making it more capacious and flexible. For the same reasons, the influx of new Polish immigrants to the UK ended.

Brexit – and later the pandemic – was, however, an important moment for reflection. The decision which had been maturing could have been postponed for years. During this time, migrants still followed the proven strategy of 'intentional unpredictability', allowing themselves to spend more and more time without determining whether they would settle for good in the UK or start preparations to return. Brexit motivated them to take action – however, applying for a settled or pre-settled status, even if described as an easy procedure, was already a step towards certain decisions.

Of all the impacts which Brexit had on migrants, the socio-psychological impact appears to be the most commonly experienced. Many interviewees expressed the feeling of being unwanted by the majority of the UK's population; this appeared in relation to the referendum campaign. These 'soft' factors, which the migrants described as a 'changed atmosphere' or 'reluctance', affected their wellbeing in the country. Narkowicz' and Piekut's (2022, *podcast*) research on migrant essential workers proved that decisions to return 'solidified during the pandemic but had been brewing since Brexit'. Also in their survey, the socio-psychological impact of both Brexit and the pandemic appeared to be crucial – 28 per cent of the participants reported being discriminated against in the workplace.

Brexit itself was not the main reason why some Polish migrants decided to return after 2016. Nevertheless, the referendum and the referendum campaign mobilised migrants to reflect on their future in the changed circumstances. This mobilisation was then repeated via subsequent events, including the pandemic, supply problems caused by the shortage of lorry drivers and the introduction of Brexit-related changes such as the necessity to possess a valid passport when crossing the UK–EU border. In many cases, this reflection led to the conclusion, which we often heard, that it does not make sense anymore.

Note

1. This is the author's own calculation based on ONS data – the highest number of migrants from each country was taken into account for the period 2004–2021 (Office for National Statistics, n.d.).

Funding

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Appendix

Table A1. List of interviewees

	Gender	Age	Place of residence in the UK	Year interviewed
1	M	33	London	2020 (2022)
2	M	54	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	Oxfordshire	2021
27	F	42	Northampton	2021
28	F	38	Manchester	2021
29	F	36	London	2021