Brexit, a Hostile Environment, the EU Settlement Scheme and Rupture in the Migration Projects of Central and Eastern European Migrants in Northern Ireland

Marta Kempny*

This article examines the changing migration projects of Central and Eastern European migrants in Northern Ireland. It sets out the context for settlement scheme applications, linking it to broader hostile environment policies in the UK. It explores the dynamic nature of people's migration projects and how these have been challenged in the context of Brexit and the EU Settlement Scheme. The paper discusses the ruptures in migrants' narratives in relation to how they envision their future in Northern Ireland and their countries of origin, with some moving towards indeterminacy and some searching for fixity/stability in their migration projects. It examines how the Northern Irish context – and the question of the Irish border specifically – adds an additional layer of complexity to the migrants' shifting future imaginaries. The paper draws on my covert research and in-depth interviews with CEE migrants, where consent was given retrospectively. It discusses the role of the researcher in cutting the covert/overt continuum and ethical dilemmas in the field.

Keywords: hostile environment, migration strategies, Brexit, Northern Ireland

* Queen's University Belfast, the UK. Address for correspondence: martakempny@gmail.com.

Introduction

The aftermath of the Brexit vote left European migrants in the UK in an uncertain situation as to their futures in this country. Whereas, in the early stages, migration was a more fluid phenomenon, with its intentional unpredictability as the main determinant of people's migration trajectories (Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich 2007), after some time it has become a more fixed process, with people settling permanently and starting families in the UK. However, Brexit has posed new challenges to people's migration projects. Whereas before they could be free, floating between their country of origin and the UK, a new socio-political reality has re-configured the ways in which people imagine their future lives.

There is a burgeoning literature examining how Brexit has been an unsettling event which creates a lot of uncertainty and questions people's sense of belonging (Kilkey and Ryan 2021; Kilkey, Piekut and Ryan 2020; Miller 2019; Ranta and Nancheva 2019). This research expands on earlier discussions around the shift from intentional unpredictability to unintentional uncertainty in peoples' migration strategies (Kilkey 2017; McGhee *et al.* 2017; Miller 2019). Furthermore, scholars also examine the effects of Brexit on people's experiences of migration to the UK from a social welfare and public policy perspective (e.g. Currie 2016; Kilkey 2017; Sime, Kakela, Corson, Tyrell, McMellon and Moskal 2017). In this context, some authors focus on changing migration strategies and future plans (Lulle, Moroşanu and King 2017; McGhee *et al.* 2017; Trąbka and Pustułka 2020).

This paper draws on these debates and examines how migrant projects may change, focusing on a wider group of Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants in Northern Ireland, as this region of the United Kingdom has been understudied. Northern Ireland as such presents a specific context due to its geo-political situation and physical proximity with the Republic of Ireland. I centre specifically on the EU Settlement Scheme, seen as a series of interlocking events (Kilkey and Ryan 2021), which, together with Brexit and the hostile environment policies introduced by Theresa May, put into question people's migration projects. I present the findings from a research project that I conducted at a migrant centre, supporting people with applications. In the first section I provide the context for migration to Northern Ireland and then draw on existing theoretical debates on people's migration projects and existing scholarship on impacts of Brexit on migrants in the UK. I then discuss my methodology and the ethical considerations inherent in conducting covert research, before analysing the ruptures in people's migration projects as a result of Brexit – and the introduction of the EU Settlement Scheme more specifically.[1]

The context for migration to Northern Ireland: social and political issues

Northern Ireland, due to its long history of sectarian divide and the Troubles, has been excluded from the influx of foreigners. However, since 2004, the situation has diametrically changed, with new communities making their home in this country. Up until 2004, the largest ethnic minority group were the Chinese who migrated to Northern Ireland in the 1960s. Other groups came from Commonwealth countries, particularly India and Pakistan. Moreover, there is a large Portuguese and East Timorese community in Northern Ireland, showing patterns of chain migration. These communities are located in the area of Dungannon and Portadown, with many individuals working at a local Moy Park factory. Since 2004, there has been a high influx of Eastern Europeans, who migrated mostly for economic reasons. The Polish are the largest group, with approximately 30,000 nationals in Northern Ireland. However, CEE migration to Northern Ireland has shown signs of decreasing following the Brexit vote in 2016, with some people going back to their home countries. Migrants in Northern Ireland often find themselves in deeply segregated locations, such as Belfast, Derry, Lurgan and Antrim. The places where they often choose to live are demarcated by symbolic boundary markers, such as

painted curbs, flags, etc. This may have a negative effect on their relations with the local communities as they may become the targets of hate crimes and racism. According to some commentators, racism is the new sectarianism and, in a culture where social divisions and hostilities are so deeply engrained in the everyday fabric of society, migrant lives may also be affected. Nevertheless, there are visible attempts to strengthen notions of multiculturalism in Northern Ireland and ethnic shops are readily observable in different locations across the country. This is particularly visible in Belfast – migrants and refugees tend to settle in South Belfast, with a high concentration of them around the Ormeau Rd area. Nevertheless, East Belfast has become largely populated by migrant communities due to its lower rent prices.

Furthermore, the question of an invisible Irish border is significant to the individual experiences of migration. The island of Ireland is split into two parts, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These two parts are different jurisdictions and are distinct legally and administratively. However, when one travels from North to South, there is no physical border visible. Usually there are no passport controls, although there are some on cross-border buses, something which is often linked with the racial profiling of non-white, non-European passengers. However, for CEE migrants the border is generally invisible, which explains why many migrants consider the island as a single entity.

The context of a hostile environment

Whereas Northern Ireland physically shares the island with the Republic of Ireland, administratively it belongs to the UK. From this perspective, migrants in Northern Ireland have been affected by the hostile environment legacy of Theresa May who, as Home Secretary in 2012, introduced a new approach to immigration, with a set of administrative and legislative changes designed to make life difficult for people migrating illegally in the hope that they will 'self-remove'. May's aim was to 'create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal migration... What we don't want is a situation where people think that they can come here and overstay because they're able to access everything they need' (Travis 2013). This idea was extrapolated at the level of government policy through the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016, resulting in a raft of measures preventing people from access to employment, healthcare, housing, education and other basic necessities. This led to the creation of a deeply unequal and rigidly divided society. The public and media discourses on migration to the UK have been hostile (Rzepnikowska 2019). CEE migrants have been represented as taking local jobs and stretching public services and welfare. This was exacerbated by the Brexit vote in 2016, following which there has been a spike in racist attacks against migrant communities in England. Even though the situation in Northern Ireland has been different, the awareness of discrimination and hate crime in England has affected people's sense of belonging in Northern Ireland.

In 2019, The Home Office launched the EU Settlement Scheme to enforce an obligation for EU citizens to apply for either pre-settled or settled status (https://www.gov.uk/settled-status-eu-citizens-families/what-settled-and-presettled-status-means). The deadline for applying was 30 June 2021. Those who did not apply for pre-settled or settled status have been subjected to a hostile environment. They lost the right to work and to have access to healthcare and benefits. The Home Office has provided support to EU nationals to make the scheme more accessible by contracting different community and voluntary sector organisations to help vulnerable clients with their application through the android system. However, according to some commentators, despite this, the scheme could trigger a new 'Windrush scandal'[2] if there are technical problems. The application process 'may lead to individuals being refused the Settled or Pre-settled Status, with potential consequences up to and including being forced into an undocumented status and facing potential for removal from

the UK' (Martynowicz and Radziwinowiczówna 2019). Furthermore, an obligatory criminal records check will make individuals more easily deportable.

In this context it is also worth noting that European migrant workers often engage in cross-border migration. Despite a history of conflict and underdevelopment, the Irish border region has been one of the world's most effectively integrated cross-border regions (Hayward 2020). Frontier workers may work in the Republic but live in Northern Ireland; inversely, they may live in the Republic of Ireland and work in Northern Ireland. Often referred to as cross-border workers or 'commuters', they have to return to their home country at least once a week in order to have the legal status of a frontier worker under EU law (Hunt 2019). Since 1 July 2021, a frontier worker requires a permit in order to enter the UK with a protected status. This permit allows them to access benefits and services in the UK (Home Office 2021). If successful, the applicant will receive a five-year permit. Frontier workers living in Northern Ireland and working in the Republic, on the other hand, may experience difficulties applying for settled status due to the number of absences from the UK. This may affect the migration projects of cross-border migrant workers, who had been allowed to move freely between the two jurisdictions and whose mobility has now been constrained.

Literature review

There is much existing literature on people's migration strategies and discussions of how Brexit has affected migratory patterns in the UK. McGhee *et al.* (2017) note that academic scholarship on migration strategies identifies two different trends – namely, transience and fluidity vs stability and settlement. Migrants' decisions as to whether to stay or leave the UK come about as a combination of individual and structural factors. Early research into the migration from Central and Eastern Europe to the UK highlighted the fluid, transient and contingent nature of this migration (Drinkwater, Eade and Garapich 2009). Engerbsen, in this context, refers to *liquid migration*, putting emphasis on the temporality of stays abroad (Engerbsen 2018; Engerbsen and Snel 2013). In relation to this there has been a considerable debate on migration strategies (Eade *et al*. 2007; Grabowska-Lusińska and Okólski 2009; Piętka, Clark and Canton 2013; Trevena 2013).

Research by Eade *et al*. (2007) provides a useful typology of the migration strategies and different motivations behind people's moves to the UK. The authors single out the following migration strategies. 'Storks' are circular migrants, who are usually in low-paid jobs and alternate between their stay in the UK and their home country. 'Hamsters' are short-term migrants, who work in the UK but intend to earn as much money as possible and go back home. 'Stayers' are long-term migrants, who have the intention of remaining in the UK for a long period. 'Searchers', on the other hand, are seen as global nomads, who keep their options deliberately open (Eade *et al*. 2007). Research by Piętka-Nykaza and McGhee (2016) draws on this typology and expands it further, focusing on Polish migrants in Scotland. The authors single out settlers, over-stayers, circular and transnational migrants and economic migrants.

The main reasons for migration were push factors (the high unemployment rate in post-socialist-economy countries, combined with a difficult political situation and low living standards). Many authors have emphasised that the discourse of normalcy has played a crucial role in migrant narratives. For example, Galasińska and Kozłowska (2009), Rabikowska (2010) and McGhee, Heath and Trevena (2012) focused on migration as a way of attaining normalcy in people's lives. These authors situate Polish migration within a wider economic context in the home country, where high unemployment rates and the difficulties people experience in making ends meet led to a large exodus of Polish migrants to the UK. Seen from this angle, migration is a quest for a better living standard and a normalisation of people's livelihoods. Similarly, Piętka-Nykaza and McGhee note that over-stayers have 'developed the sense of leading a "normal life" that is related to economic stability and convenience of their life in Scotland' (2017: 1425).

Ryan, Sales, Tilki and Siara (2009), on the other hand, pointed to the fact that Polish migration strategies were linked to complex considerations of how to maintain a transnational family across borders. In the case of Poland, in the early years of migration, the movers were mostly young men who travelled back and forth between the UK and Poland, as a way of accumulating enough income to maintain their family members in Poland. As time went on, the families wanted to reconnect and this encouraged female migration across the borders (Ryan *et al.* 2009). These processes were also accompanied by chain migration; extended family members would often go to the UK and would obtain practical support from their relatives already living there. Migrants would maintain transnational connections with their relatives back home through mobile communication technologies and regular visits to Poland.

Drinkwater and Garapich note that there was a 'high level of return migration since many migrants moved on a circular, temporary or seasonal basis' (2013: 2). Pollard, Lattore and Sriskandarajah (2008) estimate that approximately half of all migrants from the new accession states either went back to their countries of origin or relocated to other EU countries between 2004 and 2007. At the same time, research focusing on family patterns across borders has highlighted the importance of families in decision-making processes on whether or not to stay and settle in the UK. This body of research suggests that Polish families who moved to the UK after 2004 are likely to settle there. In this vein, some scholars argue that families' extended stay in the UK is often related to complex considerations regarding their children's education (see McGhee *et al.* 2012; Piętka-Nykaza and McGhee 2017). Genova and Zontini (2020), in this respect, note that having children in school may have made it difficult for migrants to leave the UK after Brexit. Kempny (2017), focusing on the Polish community in Northern Ireland, found the same pattern.

There is also an emerging scholarship on how Brexit has affected the migration strategies of migrants in the UK. An early study, pre-Brexit, by McGhee *et al.* suggested that: 'the UK's departure from the EU and the change in the legal status of resident Polish nationals – whatever particular shape that will take – will unavoidably impact on the two contrasting trends of 'transience' and 'settlement' (2017: 2109). Their research predicted that migrants might be ready for 'civic integration', which might mean that they are considering settling down in the UK. A more recent article by Trąbka and Pustułka (2020) offers a more fluid theoretical framework through which migrants' strategies are captured in the context of Brexit. Their typology, including 'bees', 'bumblebees', 'cocoons' and 'butterflies', points to the complexity of people's migration strategies. Bees and bumblebees are 'well-anchored in the UK and, thus, they would not be willing to move' (Trąbka and Pustułka 2020, 2668). Cocooned individuals, on the other hand, question their future in the UK. They are in a between and betwixt position, although they have many anchors with their host country. Finally, butterflies, owing to their 'transnationally transferrable capital, cosmopolitan disposition and motility' (Trąbka and Pustułka 2020: 2677) do not seem to be intensely concerned about Brexit.

In a more recent contribution, Genova and Zontini (2020), drawing on theories of liminality, explore how people's lives have been affected by Brexit. They call attention to the in-betweenness of migrant worlds, which has been exacerbated in the context of Brexit, seen as an unsettling event. Migrants have to navigate 'the transition between the old certainty of freedom of movement and the potentially uncertain future associated with a restrictive post-Brexit migrant social status' (Kilkey, Piekut, Ryan 2020: 7). Liminality is characterised by a feeling of uncertainty and ambiguity but also offers the 'possibility for re-invention' (Genova and Zontini 2020: 52). Owen (2018) also notes that Brexit represents a potential rupture and possibility of new identities and transitions.

In other works, Brexit has been seen as an unsettling event (Kilkey and Ryan 2021; Ranta and Nancheva 2019) related to people's insecurities around socio-legal statuses and making them reconsider their migration plans. In a similar vein, Guma and Jones (2019) examine how Brexit can be seen as an ongoing process of

'othering', which might be very unsettling for migrants who had felt well embedded in the UK. Similarly, Barnard, Fraser Butlin and Costello (2022: 369) note that Brexit has made people 'feel like they were "becoming a migrant" in the UK'. Kilkey and Ryan (2021), adapting a lifecourse perspective in a bid to understand the impacts of Brexit on people's migration projects, note that Brexit should be considered as part of series of interlinked unsettling events. This is a useful idea, as the introduction of the EU Settlement Scheme could be seen as yet another unsettling event linked to Brexit.

My research will adopt terms of indeterminacy and stability in my conceptual framework. In the course of my research it emerged that, whereas stability prevailed before Brexit, *after* Brexit a sort of rupture in some people's narratives about their stay in Northern Ireland was evident. I consider indeterminacy and stability to be fluid options and that people's migration strategies change over time and their life course. In my opinion, for some individuals, the EU Settlement Scheme has caused a shift from stability to indeterminacy and, for some, the other way around – from unpredictability to stability. This is in line with Genova and Zontini's (2020) notion that the liminality that came with Brexit can be liberating for some individuals. In what follows, I discuss CEE migrant strategies in Northern Ireland and how the EU Settlement Scheme has affected them. The question of migration strategies has been further compounded by the recent Covid-19 crisis and the issue of the Irish border and the geographical situation of Northern Ireland adds an additional layer of complexity to the picture. I look at the changing dynamics of thinking about one's stay in Northern Ireland and reveal ruptures in people's narratives.

Methods

This paper is based on my covert research at a migrant centre and in-depth interviews with contacts that I had developed over the course of my research on the Polish migrant community (between June 2019 and March 2021). Conducting fieldwork was not my initial intention. I was just a support-provider at a local migrant centre in Northern Ireland. I was there to make my living providing help for people applying for European Settlement status. I joined the migrant centre in the summer, when my contractual agreement with a university came to an end; the main reason why I decided to join the migrant centre in 2019 was to secure my livelihood. However, as time went on, I realised that I could not just leave aside my anthropological curiosity and I started taking fieldnotes and writing a field diary. Overall, the workplace was very much in tune with my research interests. I had studied migration to Northern Ireland for a long time. Unwillingly, I plunged into covert research. For a long time, I was afraid to ask the migrant centre for consent to conduct research there. I was their employee and as such I was worried that they would think that I was spying on the clients, thus breaching my contract. Covert research on the whole has been deemed as ethically unsound and covered researchers were disparaged (see Bulmer 1982; Herrera 1999). On the other hand, advocates of this approach have emphasised that it allows researchers to gain insights into topics that would otherwise be difficult to access (Calvey 2000; Miller 2001).

Another reason why I continued conducting covert research was that I also felt that, working with vulnerable clients, for me to ask for their consent to my research at the time of our appointment would not be a viable option. They were coming to the centre to obtain practical support with securing their immigration status in the UK. The last thing they needed was to feel awkward and uneasy in the context of participant observation. I also did not think that interviewing them was an option, as that might also cause them a degree of anxiety. I realised, too, that they may feel obliged to participate in my research as, to them, I was in a position of power – I was the one who was helping them to secure their legal rights in the UK. Throughout my employment there I faced a gamut of ethical considerations as to whether or not to conduct covert research. However, in the end, I decided that this kind of research would allow for a greater understanding of the impact that the introduction

of the EU Settlement Scheme was having on migrant communities in Northern Ireland in the context of a hostile environment and the impact of Brexit, with the ultimate potential to inform policy-makers.

Inherently, fieldwork involves a continuum of concealment and disclosure (Herrera 1999: 331; Scheper-Hughes 2004) and I decided to cut this continuum by asking my management for retrospective consent. To my surprise, my manager gave me official consent and I shared the final draft of this article with the board of the migrant centre. Furthermore, I decided to follow the British Sociological Association's (2002) statement of ethics, which says that, where research consent was not obtained prior to the start of the study, it should be obtained post-hoc. As a result, apart from contacting the migrant centre, I also contacted some of my previous clients, asking whether I could include my observations in a research article. Their consent was obtained through a phone call. I either contacted people directly – asking for their consent in either Polish or English – or I asked my Romanian interpreter friend to ask Romanian-speakers for their consent to me describing certain situations and their ideas about the EU Settlement Scheme. The question remains as to what extent retrospective consent can be seen as informed consent. However, I also believe that conducting overt observation would cause reactivity problems and people might avoid disclosing certain information with me. When retrospective consent was not granted by those who did not wish to participate in the study, I have not included any field material relating to them in this paper. Furthermore, in order to protect people's anonymity, I have used pseudonyms.

When conducting covert research, it is necessary to balance ethical considerations towards informants with the importance of the research itself. I strongly believe that this research would not have been possible if I had tried to gain consent from the offset of the project and therefore retrospective consent is justified in this context. In addition, it is worth emphasising that I did not take notes on any specific situations but only on general trends among migrants, in order to ensure the anonymity of my informants. My clients came predominantly from working-class backgrounds and, on many occasions, they had limited knowledge of the English language. I focused on CEE migrants because I felt that they shared a similar background. They all came from post-communist countries with similar socio-economic and political histories. Their situations were also similar in that they were mostly economic migrants who came to Northern Ireland in order to undertake employment and improve their living standards. My participants came mostly from Poland, Romania and Hungary, although I also had several Slovakian and Lithuanian clients. In order to learn more about people's attitudes, I also conducted 10 in-depth interviews in Polish and English with people who had applied to the EU Settlement Scheme or were considering applying at the beginning of 2020. I spoke to Polish, Slovakian, Hungarian and Romanian nationals, who worked in a variety of sectors, including blue-collar workers and professionals. I re-interviewed five of them to find out whether their attitudes had changed since the initial interview.

I conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of my data (Braun and Clarke 2019) with the aim of gaining insight into people's experiences, views and perceptions regarding Brexit and the EU Settlement Scheme. I see my research as 'context-bound, positioned and situated' (Braun and Clarke 2019:591). From this point of view, 'qualitative data analysis is about telling "stories", about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the "truth" that is either "out there" and findable from, or buried deep within, the data' (Braun and Clarke 2019:591). As such, I did not use a codebook or a coding frame but treated the process of analysis as something creative and fluid. I was writing up themes as they emerged from the data, using induction rather than deduction in my analysis. My coding approach was reflexive, seeking to obtain a more-nuanced understanding of people's changing migration strategies than a traditional deductive approach would allow.

From stability to indeterminacy

The EU Settlement Scheme has put into question some people's migration strategies. In their applications for settled status, many of my participants usually highlighted the fact that their choice to apply was strategic. The spike of racist incidents in the UK in the aftermath of Brexit (Rzepnikowska 2019) and the increasingly anti-immigrant discourses in the media and public debate have put people off from settling permanently in the UK. Furthermore, increasing fears about possible structural and economic problems following the Brexit vote have made migrants reconsider their migration strategies. In addition to this, the complex situation in Northern Ireland and people's fears about the situation post-Brexit (the issues of the Irish border, the possible unification of Ireland and social unrest in general) have forced them to think up alternative solutions in respect to their migratory pathways. As Rzepnikowska found, the wave of hostility post-Brexit 'revealed the extent of racism and xenophobia which affected not only Polish nationals but also other migrants and settled ethnic minorities, including British citizens' (2019: 61). She points out that racism has been institutionalised in the UK for a long time, even before the Brexit vote. It was expressed through the debates 'over immigrant numbers, media scares about scroungers, policies like Prevent which stigmatise whole communities' (Burnett 2017: 89). This links to the question of how safe and at ease some migrants may feel here.

There are certain parts of Northern Ireland where hate-crime rates remain high; this is particularly visible in working-class loyalist estates in localities such as Dungannon. It is common practice to write racist graffiti on people's houses ('No foreigners'), to leave dead rats on people's doorsteps and burn their cars, etc. Although, in Northern Ireland, the rate of hate crime against migrant communities post-Brexit did not increase, an awareness of these incidents in the UK made some migrants feel unwelcome. Marinela, a 23-year-old interpreter from Romania, said:

> *I was speaking to my friend from England and she told me that, on the day of Brexit, people were celebrating in the pubs and shouting racial slurs. It makes me feel uneasy when I think that Northern Ireland is part of the UK. The situation here is different but still I am not sure if I want to live in such a country. I've applied for settled status but I will wait and see.*

Marinela is well embedded in Northern Irish society; however, Brexit has made her question her intention to stay in the UK. This corresponds well with what Grzymała-Kazłowska refers to as the 'processual, uneven and relative character of "settlement", the flexibility of attachment and the reversibility of anchoring (i.e., a possibility of disconnecting from previous anchors' (2018: 253). Interestingly, Marinela *did* stay in Northern Ireland. When her father died in Romania in 2020, she decided that she had to support her mother financially and that going back to her country of origin was not a viable option. This supports Kilkey and Ryan's (2021) argument that a lifecourse perspective is indeed useful in understanding how migrants have been affected by unsettling events related to Brexit.

When I spoke to a 37-year-old Polish male, who has a wife and a child in Northern Ireland, he reflected on his EU Settlement Scheme application: 'Yes we did apply for the EU Settlement Scheme but in fact I have been discussing with my wife that we should think of some contingency plans. If the situation here gets worse, then it might be worth moving down South[3] or going back to Poland'.

Michał is well settled in Northern Ireland and has actually been studying for the citizenship test. He had obtained permanent residence and had the intention to naturalise as a British citizen. He then applied for the EU Settlement Scheme and put off his citizenship application for a later point in time. Both his son – aged 3 – and his wife have British citizenship. This links back to the issue of intentional unpredictability and keeping one's options open. He considered moving to the Republic of Ireland. When I asked Michał why he would do

that, he said, 'I don't know, I think that the attitudes towards foreigners are better. Although, if you think about it, the Republic of Ireland is backward, about 20 years behind the UK'. Furthermore, Michał mentioned that the Republic of Ireland is Catholic and the people have a Catholic mentality and are perhaps more welcoming towards Poles than the local Protestant communities. Even though he is not a strong believer himself, he did highlight the important role of religion in crafting out people's spaces of belonging and non-belonging. This example depicts the interviewee's ability to actively re-imagine his migration strategies in the context of interlinking unsettling events – namely Brexit and the introduction of the EU Settlement Scheme. In 2021, Michał was still not sure about his future plans nor had he yet applied for British citizenship. He told me that the situation was even more unpredictable because of Covid-19, with a major health crisis and an economic recession underway. He commented that crisis and contention around the Northern Irish protocol may awake old hostilities between the two dichotomous communities – Protestant and Catholic – causing social unrest.[4]

Furthermore, the question of the Irish border plays an important role in migrants' imaginings of the future and the projections of their migration plans. Andrzej, a self-employed handyman in his 40s who runs his own company, said that he has not yet applied for his settlement status. He told me that it was not an issue for him and that he could postpone his application; if he did not get settled status, he would register his company down South and possibly move there. Andrzej has had quite strong links with the Polish diaspora in NI; he was originally a teacher in Poland and also taught geography at a Polish Saturday School. He was quite well settled in Northern Ireland. However, with Brexit and a requirement to legalise his stay in Northern Ireland, he decided to wait and see what he should do. Another interviewee, Anniko, a Hungarian national aged 46 who is employed as a cleaner in Belfast, stated that her plan was to stay in Northern Ireland permanently, as her 20-year-old son and her partner were living and working there. However, she had not applied for settled status at the time that the interview was conducted. At the point when there were difficulties with passing the Brexit legislation, she expressed her hope that Brexit would not happen at all. She also said: 'Well, if Brexit does take place, then what's the difference, to go back to Orban's Hungary or stay in the post Brexit UK where people wanted to leave the EU and don't like migrants?' She held off applying for settled status and, provided that there is still plenty of time left to apply, said she might as well do it when she is ready. Her migration strategies also shifted from the need for stability to one of indeterminacy. Anniko was disappointed with the outcome of the referendum and was no longer sure if she wanted to stay in Northern Ireland.

Both Anniko and Andrzej finally applied for settled status. When I spoke to them in early 2021, they justified their decisions by pragmatic reasons. In Anniko's case, moving to Hungary would be difficult, as she would have a hard time finding employment. Andrzej's company, on the other hand, was growing and prospering; he already had a network of contacts around Northern Ireland and had build up his reputation there. This is in line with Kilkey and Ryan's (2021: 243) idea that 'professional attachments, developed over time in one place, could hinder return or migration elsewhere'.

Another point worth mentioning here is that a settled status allows migrants to leave the country for five years and not lose their rights, whereas a pre-settled status enables people to remain just two years outside the UK. This is an important change when compared with permanent residence, which allowed people leaving the country for up to two years. It may in itself affect people's migration strategies as now it allows for greater fluidity and mobility, given the five-year period. My friend, Joanna, a 37-year-old female from Slovakia, told me:

In fact, had I known that they would have changed the law I wouldn't have applied for British citizenship under the old rules. I wanted greater flexibility, you know, leave the country for three years without worrying about losing my rights. As a PhD graduate, I want to leave my options open and spend two years here, three years there, just to obtain the useful postdoc experience without losing my rights here.

In a similar way, when I was working at the migrant centre, I spoke to some Romanian people at a car wash. I told them about the new regulations, with the help of an interpreter. They had difficulty documenting their legal status in the UK, as they did not pay NI contributions and did not have bank accounts. However, applying for a pre-settled status did not require much proof back then. I encouraged them to apply. They reacted enthusiastically when I told them that they can leave the country for two years and not lose their status. In their case, they were commuting back and forth between the UK and Romania and their work was seasonal only. From this perspective, one can say that the new regulations in the first instance may actually encourage migrants to embrace fluid/malleable migration strategies. The problem with this is that, at some stage, they will have difficulties applying for a settled status, having left the country. They will not have enough evidence to document five years of continued stay. Nevertheless, many migrants do not think about their migration choices from a long-term perspective but are flexible and adjust to the demands of a given situation.

In search of stability

The previous section examined how people's strategies in terms of migration shifted from their settlement/sedentarism in the UK to fluidity/malleability in the context of hostile environment policies, Brexit and the EU Settlement Scheme. I agree with other authors such as Owen (2018) that the introduction of the EU Settlement Scheme has enabled migrants to re-imagine their sense of belonging and re-invent their future plans, while bringing in possibilities for new transitions. In what follows, I examine how people's strategies have shifted from the idea of lasting temporariness/indeterminacy to one of stability. I believe that, in this context, where Brexit 'entails a complex blend of uncertainty and ambiguity' (Kilkey, Piekut and Ryan 2020: 7) some people need to crystallise their plans to secure their future in the UK. This pushes them to develop specific settlement plans.

An example of this was Irena, who embodied the classical 'hamster' migrant type. She originally went to Northern Ireland in 2007 to earn enough money to get a house in Poland and return there. Irena was a psychiatric nurse in Poland and is working as a cleaner in Northern Ireland. During her stay there, she managed to save money and had her own house built but then decided to sell it. Instead, she invested in a flat for her daughter – who lives in Poland – and is herself now renting accommodation in Belfast. Both Irena and her husband applied for settled status. When I asked Irena more recently whether she had an idea of when she would go back to Poland, she told me that she definitely wanted to work in NI for the time being: 'I think that we will stay here until retirement. Now that we have secured our settled status, I feel secure here'. When I asked her why she is not going back to Poland, she said that it was unrealistic of her to expect to be able to re-integrate into the job market, which further reinforces a point that I made earlier about employment being a crucial factor in people's decisions on whether to stay or to leave. We spoke again in 2021, when she said that her son, in his late 20s, had applied for pre-settled status so that he could join her in Northern Ireland. He is a graduate of a university psychology department in Poland although he did not secure a job in his profession. He had been working in Northern Ireland previously but was moving back and forth between there and Poland. As Irena said, 'He could not be around for long anywhere'. Nevertheless, the introduction of the EU Settlement Scheme and strict immigration rules made her son re-think his situation and decide to stay in Northern Ireland.

This is just another example of when family considerations play an important role in people's decisions about whether or not they would like to stay long-term in Northern Ireland. Such was the case for Kristof, who was a cross-border worker living in Drogheda (in the Republic of Ireland, near the border) and working in Newry, Northern Ireland. He had originally worked in the Republic but then took up employment in Northern Ireland and took over his relatives through chain migration in 2015. They all settled in Newry. He told me that, initially, he was planning to apply for the frontier-worker permit, as he had already settled in well in Drogheda. He did not make any plans to move to Newry as he thought that it would be a better option to live in the Republic for time being rather than moving to Northern Ireland, which is administratively part of the UK, where people voted for Brexit. However, in 2020, he decided to move to Northern Ireland. He told me that he feared that, should he lose his employment in Newry, he would be at risk of losing his cross-border status and would be unable to settle in the UK with his family should he wish to do so in the future. He commented that the new points-based visa system to be introduced in January 2021 would make it difficult for people to migrate to the UK. These examples are in line with Kilkey *et al.*'s (2020: 9) argument that a 'mix of professional, family and emotional investment in the UK' was of crucial importance to people's decisions to stay in the UK.

However, a caveat is necessary here. While people may want to consolidate their stay in the UK through applying for settled status, this process, on the other hand, is bureaucratic and causes a lot of anxiety for people. This is particularly noticeable in the case of the homeless, of working mothers or of people on benefits who find it difficult to provide proof of their stay in the UK as they had not contributed to national insurance for some time. This raises further fears about family fragmentation as a result of new legal regulations. Often lengthy waiting times undermine migrant agency, leading to a kind of governmentality of 'stuckedness' (Hage 2009). From this perspective, waiting can be seen as a passive condition, making time feel 'numb, muted, dead' (Crapanzano 1985: 44). My research participants often expressed their vexation with the system and their fears in relation to the legality of their stay in NI in the future ('Is it going to be OK do you think? Will they not kick me out? Thank you so much, I was afraid that they would turn my application down').

People who are marginalised and do not have access to support systems in Northern Ireland will be negatively affected by such a wait. This is in lines with Jancewicz *et al.*'s (2020) argument that Brexit had a polarising effect on migrants in the UK, with some settling, while others found that Brexit added 'another layer of uncertainty' to their previously vulnerable situation. This has been visible in the case of several Romanian Roma male participants, who were circular migrants, moving back and forth between Northern Ireland and Romania. They were working at a local car wash, earning cash in hand. They were initially going to apply for pre-settled status. However, after their difficulty with presenting the relevant documents about their stay to the Home Office, they decided to go back home permanently. With a hostile environment, Brexit and introduction of the EU Settlement Scheme, there have been indeed visible patterns of return migration. In this case, there was a rupture between imagining one's future as fluid and contingent and thinking about stability, even if it effectively meant severing ties with Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

My research suggests that the series of interlocking events, including Brexit, the introduction of hostile environment policies and EU Settlement Scheme, have affected people's migration strategies in a myriad of ways. Whereas some of my findings seem to be in line with McGhee *et al's* (2012) argument about the shift from indeterminacy to stability in how migrants envision their futures in the UK, I argue that this situation has equally led to other scenario – whereby migrants who may have seemed well settled in the UK are actually rethinking their migration strategies. These examples yield interesting insights into 'how the Brexit process, and

its implications, can destabilise and unsettle individuals' sense of home and belonging' (Miller 2019: 8) and is in line with scholarship that sees Brexit as a liminal space, offering the possibility of liberation and re-invention.

My research has clearly shown that, on one hand, the introduction of the European Union Settlement Scheme questions people's taken-for-granted realities and may actually lead people to rethink their life projects. This was particularly visible in the cases of my participants, Andrzej, Anniko and Maciek. On the other hand, it may consolidate people's stay in Northern Ireland, as we have seen in the cases of Irena and Kristof. The EU Settlement Scheme, seen from this angle, invokes uncertainty and passivity although, on the other hand, it activates the individual imagination, allowing people to think creatively about their future lives in/outside Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, the EU Settlement Scheme itself causes a lot of anxiety and uncertainty, particularly for the most vulnerable sections of the community. This impacts on their sense of belonging in Northern Ireland and possible decisions regarding return migration.

The case of Northern Ireland and the invisible border adds an additional complexity to the picture. On the one hand, the Irish border allows people more flexibility in their migration plans as they can move South and find themselves under EU jurisdiction. It is worth highlighting here that such mobility does not necessarily mean a process of uprooting. Many of these migrants consider the island of Ireland as one region and feel connected to this particular island, rather than to the UK itself. On the other hand, cross-border workers who work in the North and live in the Republic may find themselves moving to Northern Ireland long-term. Regardless, people in this context are seen as active agents who navigate geopolitical spaces to adapt to the unsettling nature of Brexit and its implications.

Finally, due to time and space constraints, I have focused in this paper mostly on the migration projects of those who remain in Northern Ireland. I have merely signalled that the introduction of the EU Settlement Scheme could have a negative impact on vulnerable and marginalised individuals who find it difficult to document their stay in the UK and decide to return home. However, further research is needed to examine in depth the mechanisms that lead people to return to their home countries.

Notes

[1] I am using here term 'migration project' rather than 'strategies' to highlight the fluid nature of people's migratory pathways, which leaves scope for re-invention and improvisation.

[2] The 'Windrush' generation arrived in the UK from Caribbean countries between 1948 and 1973. The Windrush scandal 'began to surface in 2017 after it emerged that hundreds of Commonwealth citizens, many of whom were from the "Windrush" generation, had been wrongly detained, deported and denied legal rights' (Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, n.d.).

[3] People in Northern Ireland often refer to the Republic of Ireland as 'down South'.

[4] There were incidents of loyalist youth riots over the Irish Sea border in Northern Ireland in 2021, which included the use of iron bars, bricks, masonry and petrol bombs.

Acknowledgements

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID ID

Marta Kempny https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4407-3677

References

Barnard C., Fraser Butlin S., Costello F. (2022). The Changing Status of European Union Nationals in the United Kingdom Following Brexit: The Lived Experience of the European Union Settlement Scheme. *Social & Legal Studies* 31(3): 365–388.

Braun V., Clarke V. (2019). Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health 11(4): 589–597.

British Sociological Association (2002). *Statement of Ethics*. https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/23902/statementofethicalpractice.pdf (accessed 9 May 2022).

Bulmer M. (1982). Ethical Problems in Social Research: The Case of Covert Participant Observation, in: M. Bulmer (ed.), *Social Research Ethics: An Examination of the Merits of Covert Participant Observation*, pp. 3–12. London: Macmillan.

Burnett J. (2017). Racial Violence and the Brexit State. *Race and Class* 58(4): 85–97.

Calvey D. (2000). Getting on the Door and Staying There: A Covert Participant Observational Study of Bouncers, in: G. Lee-Treweek, S. Linkogle (eds), *Danger in the Field: Risks and Ethics in Social Research*, pp. 43–60. London: Routledge.

Crapanzano V. (1985). *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa.* New York: Random House.

Currie S. (2016). Reflecting on Brexit: Migration Myths and What Comes Next for EU Migrants in the UK? *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 38(3): 337–342.

Drinkwater S., Garapich M. P. (2013). *Migration Plans and Strategies of Recent Polish Migrants to England and Wales: Do They Have Any and How Do They Change?* Norface Discussion Paper No. 2013–23. https://www.norface-migration.org/publ_uploads/NDP_23_13.pdf (accessed 9 May 2022).

Drinkwater S., Eade J., Garapich M. (2009). Poles Apart? EU Enlargement and the Labour Market Outcomes of Immigrants in the UK. *International Migration* 47(1): 161–190.

Eade J., Drinkwater S., Garapich M. (2007). *Class and Ethnicity: Polish Migrant Workers in London*. Guildford: Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism.

Engbersen G. (2018). Liquid Migration and Its Consequences for Local Integration Policies, in: P. Scholten, M. van Ostaijen (eds), *Between Mobility and Migration: The Multi-Level Governance of Intra-European Movement*, pp. 63–76. Cham: *Springer Open.*

Engbersen G., Snel E. (2013). Liquid Migration: Dynamic and Fluid Patterns of Post-Accession Migration Flows', in: B. Glorius, I. Grabowska-Lusińska, A. Kuvik (eds), *Mobility in Transition: Migration Patterns after EU Enlargement*, pp. 21–40. Amsterdam: *Amsterdam University Press.*

Galasińska A., Kozłowska O. (2009). Discourses of a 'Normal Life' Among Post-Accession Migrants from Poland to Britain, in: K. Burrell (ed.), *Polish Migration to the UK in the 'New' European Union: After 2004*, pp. 87–105. London: Routledge.

Genova E, Zontini E (2020). Liminal Lives: Navigating In-Betweenness in the Case of Bulgarian and Italian migrants in Brexiting Britain. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 9(1): 47–64.

Grabowska I., Okólski M. (2009). *Emigracja ostatnia?* Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.

Grzymała-Kazłowska A. (2018). From Connecting to Social Anchoring: Adaptation and 'Settlement' of Polish Migrants in the UK. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(2): 252–269.

Guma T, Dafydd Jones R (2019). 'Where Are We Going to Go Now?' European Union Migrants' Experiences of Hostility, Anxiety, and (Non-)Belonging During Brexit. *Population, Space and Place* 25(1): e2198.

Hage G. (2009). *Waiting.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Hayward K. (2020). Life and Work Across the Irish Border through Brexit. *Annales des Mines* 3: 101–105.

Herrera C. D. (1999). Two Arguments for 'Covert Research' in Social Research. *British Journal of Sociology* 50(2): 331–341.

Home Office (2021). *Frontier Worker Permit Scheme Guidance.* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/976162/frontier-workers-v2.0ext.pdf (accessed 9 May 2022).

Hunt J. (2019). *Frontier Workers Left in Brexit Limbo.* https://www.freemovement.org.uk/frontier-workers-left-in-brexit-limbo/ (accessed 9 May 2022).

Jancewicz B., Kloc-Nowak W., Pszczółkowska D. (2020). Push, Pull and Brexit: Polish Migrants' Perceptions of Factors Discouraging them from Staying in the UK. Central and Eastern European Migration Review 9(1): 101–123.

Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (n.d.). *Windrush Scandal Explained.* https://www.jcwi.org.uk/windrush-scandal-explained (accessed 9 May 2022).

Kempny M. (2017). Between Transnationalism and Assimilation: Polish Parents' Upbringing Approaches in Belfast, Northern Ireland. *Social Identities* 23(3): 255–270.

Kilkey M. (2017). Conditioning Family-Life at the Intersection of Migration and Welfare: The Implications for 'Brexit Families'. *Journal of Social Policy* 46(4): 797–814.

Kilkey M., Ryan L. (2021). Unsettling Events: Understanding Migrants' Responses to Geopolitical Transformative Episodes through a Life-Course Lens. *International Migration Review* 55(1): 227–253.

Kilkey M., Piekut A., Ryan L. (2020). Brexit and Beyond: Transforming Mobility and Immobility. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 9(1): 5–12.

Lulle A., Moroşanu L., King R. (2017). And Then Came Brexit: Experiences and Future Plans of Young EU Migrants in the London Region. *Population, Space and Place* 24(1): e2122.

Martynowicz A., Radziwinowiczówna A. (2019). Brexit, EU Settlement Scheme and the Forced (Im)Mobility of EU Citizens in the UK. https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centre-border-criminologies/blog/2019/04/brexit-eu (accessed 9 May 2022).

McGhee D., Heath S., Trevena P. (2012). Dignity, Happiness and Being Able to Live a 'Normal Life' in the UK: An Examination of Post-Accession Polish Migrants' Transnational Autobiographical Fields. *Social Identities 18(*6): 711–727.

McGhee D., Moreh C., Vlachantoni A. (2017). An 'Undeliberate Determinacy'? The Changing Migration Strategies of Polish Migrants in the UK in Times of Brexit. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43(13): 2109–2130.

Miller J. M. (2001). Covert Participant Observation: Reconsidering the Least Used Method, in: J. M. Miller, R. Tewksbury (eds), *Extreme Methods: Innovative Approaches to Social Science Research*, pp. 13–21. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Miller R. G. (2019). Unsettling Home During the Brexit Process. *Population, Space and Place* 25(1): e2203.

Owen C. (2018). *Brexit as Rupture? Voices, Opinions and Reflections of EU Nationals from the Liminal Space of Brexit Britain.* Sussex Centre for Migration Research Working Paper No. 94. Brighton: University of Sussex.

Piętka E., Clark C., Canton N. (2013). 'I Know that I Have a University Diploma and I'm Working as a Driver': Explaining the EU Post-Enlargement Movement of Highly Skilled Polish Migrant Workers to Glasgow, in: B. Glorius, I. Grabowska-Lusińska, A. Kuvik (eds), *Mobility in Transition: Migration Patterns after EU Enlargement*, pp. 133–154. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Piętka-Nykaza E., McGhee D. (2017). EU Post-Accession Polish Migrants' Trajectories and their Settlement Practices in Scotland. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43(9): 1417–1433.

Pollard N., Lattore M., Sriskandarajah D. (2008). *Floodgates or Turnstiles? Post-EU Enlargement Migration Flows To (and From) the UK*. https://www.ippr.org/publications/floodgates-or-turnstilespost-eu-enlargement-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk (accessed 9 May 2022).

Rabikowska M. (2010). Negotiation of Normality and Identity Among Migrants from Eastern Europe to the United Kingdom after 2004. *Social Identities* 16(3): 285–296.

Ranta R., Nancheva N. (2019). Unsettled: Brexit and European Union Nationals' Sense of Belonging. *Population, Space and Place* 25(1): 2199–2209.

Ryan L., Sales R., Tilki M., Siara B. (2009). Family Strategies and Transnational Migration: Recent Polish Migrants in London. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35(1): 61–77.

Rzepnikowska A. (2019). Racism and Xenophobia Experienced by Polish Migrants in the UK Before and After the Brexit Vote. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45(1): 61–77.

Scheper-Hughes N. (2004). Parts Unknown: Undercover Ethnography of the Organs-Trafficking Underworld. *Ethnography* 5(1): 29–73.

Sime D., Kakela E., Corson S., Tyrell N., McMellon C., Kelly C., Moskal M. (2017). *Eastern European Young People in Brexit Britain: Racism, Anxiety and a Precarious Future*. Research and Policy Briefing No. 1. Durham: Durham University.

Travis A. (2013). Immigration Bill: Theresa May Defends Plans to Create 'Hostile Environment'. *The Guardian*, 10 October. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/oct/10/immigration-bill-theresa-may-hostile-environment (accessed 9 May 2022).

Trąbka A., Pustułka P. (2020). Bees and Butterflies: Polish Migrants' Social Anchoring, Mobility and Risks Post-Brexit. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46(13): 2664–2681.

Trevena P. (2013). Why do Highly Educated Migrants Go for Low-Skilled Jobs? A Case Study of Polish Graduates Working in London, in: B. Glorius, I. Grabowska-Lusińska, A. Kuvik (eds), *Mobility in Transition: Migration Patterns after EU Enlargement, pp. 169–190*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.