

The Impact of Brexit on Young Poles and Lithuanians in the UK: Reinforced Temporariness of Migration Decisions

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The main aim of this paper is to assess the extent to which the 2016 Brexit referendum impacted on the decisions of young Polish and Lithuanian migrants to stay in the UK or return to the country of origin. We analyse information from 76 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Lithuanians and Poles living in the UK, as well as those who have returned to Lithuania and Poland since June 2016. We find that, for our interviewees, the referendum had little impact on the decision to stay in the UK or return to the country of origin, giving way, instead, to work, family and lifestyle considerations. Only for a select few did it act as a trigger, either adding to other reasons which eventually prompted the return to Lithuania or Poland, or motivating people to secure their rights in the UK and delay plans to leave the country. We conclude by discussing our results together with existing research on transnationalism and life-course migration theory: regardless of interviewees' decisions to stay or return, these were never final, stressing the fluid nature of migration and the desire of our interviewees to maintain ties across multiple places.

Keywords: return migration, transnationalism, Brexit, Lithuania, Poland

Introduction

On 23 June 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union (EU). In a referendum surrounded by heated debates on immigration, the message was clear: the UK has too many immigrants. While the vote had wide-ranging consequences for the British economy, politics and people, this article explores how the referendum impacted on the decisions of young Polish and Lithuanian migrants to stay in the UK or return to their country of origin.

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We focus on Poles and Lithuanians because the former quickly became the largest migrant group in the UK and the latter come from one of the countries the most affected by emigration in the EU (Eurostat 2019: 3).

Brexit has attracted a great deal of research on migrant experiences in the UK following the 2016 referendum. However, the majority of studies analyse how Brexit affected migrants' experiences of living in the UK or their future mobility intentions rather than their actual decisions. We take the existing literature on the effects of Brexit a step further by interviewing migrants who, since 2016, have returned to their country of origin and those who have since decided to stay in the UK. In total, we conducted 76 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Lithuanians (36) and Poles (40) living in the UK (66), as well as with those (10) who have returned to Lithuania and Poland since June 2016. We carried out the interviews in 2019, which would have given the interviewees enough time to act on their decisions. In this respect, we hope that our findings can be considered more robust since they are based on an actual rather than an intended return or stay. Specifically, this paper aims to answer four research questions.

1. How did the Brexit referendum results affect the migrants' decisions to stay in the UK?
2. How did the Brexit referendum results affect Poles' and Lithuanians' decisions to return to their country of origin?
3. What are other, non-Brexit factors that play a role in migrants' decision to stay in the UK?
4. What are other, non-Brexit, factors that play a role in migrants' decision to leave the UK?

We organise the paper as follows. We begin by engaging with some theoretical literature on intra-European transnationalism, the life course and youth transitions, return migration and Brexit, as relevant to our investigation presented here, after which we briefly outline our methods. Then, bearing in mind our research questions, we present our findings in four empirical sections, one for each question. We conclude by discussing our results in the light of the ongoing conceptual debates referred to above.

Theoretical framework

Given that our research questions present staying and returning as two dichotomous categories, we engage with the literature on transnationalism which nuances these terms. There now exists a large body of literature that deals with the post-2004 transnationalism of Central and East European migrants in Western Europe (Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich 2007; Engbersen, Leerkes, Grabowska-Lusinska, Snel and Burgers 2013; Moskal 2013; Pollard, Latorre and Sriskandarajah 2008). These studies have resulted in the widely accepted definition of Central and Eastern Europeans as transnational migrants in all known respects: actual cross-border mobility, transnational practices and increasingly transnational identities (Burrell 2009; Eade *et al.* 2007; Morokvašić 2004). Transnational migrants create and maintain simultaneous multi-stranded relationships between their countries of origin and immigration (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995). Since the 2004 EU accession, Central and Eastern European migrants' transnationalism has taken an even-more-intense form thanks to the privileges of becoming EU citizens and being able to move freely within Europe. Due to cheap airlines, short distances, modern technological advances and the variety of ways available to them to exchange goods, services, ideas and visits across fading intra-EU borders, CEE European migrants have quickly earned the names of 'easy transnationalists' (cf. Ryan, Klekowski von Koppenfels and Mulholland 2015: 199), 'middling transnationals' (Conradson and Latham 2005), and 'liquid' or 'fluid' migrants (Engbersen *et al.* 2013).

Return migration is one of the strands of transnationalism which, in the context of fluid post-accession mobility experiences, has given way to terms such as multiple returns, circular migration, temporary migration

or open-ended migration. Transnational theories argue that, in a globalised world, national borders no longer prevent migrants from maintaining cross-border relations (Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999: 219). On the contrary, whether migrants decide to return to their country of origin, stay in the country of immigration or move to yet another country, their transnational relations continue to flourish, which often leads to re-migration or double return migration (White 2014). Our paper advances these transnational theories by exploring whether migrants understand their post-Brexit referendum decisions to be permanent or temporary.

This transnational way of life is particularly widely adopted among young migrants. The variety and multiplicity of migration experiences among young people entering adulthood these days leads to the creation of the term ‘mobile transitions’ (Frändberg 2013; King 2017; Raffaetà, Baldassar and Harris 2015; Robertson, Harris and Baldassar 2018). The concept highlights the fact that, for young people, key life events – such as starting their education or employment, a partnership or children – take place ‘on the move’ (Blachnicka-Ciacek, Grabowska, Hekiert, Pustulka, Sarnowska, Trąbka, Werminska-Wisnicka, Barcevicus, Budginaite-Mackine, Jonaviciene, Klimaviciute, Vezikauskaite and Parutis 2019). Migration can be used as a kind of ‘rite of passage into adulthood’ or cutting of the umbilical cord (King, Lulle, Moroşanu and Williams 2016), or a way of leaving the parents’ shadow (Moroşanu, Bulat, Mazzilli and King 2018). As it has been shown with post-accession Central and East European young (especially highly educated) migrants, migration can offer an opportunity for personal self-development and individualisation as well as career progression (King, Lulle, Parutis and Saar 2017). Migration for this group can act not only as an escalator to career development and income but also as an ‘adventure’ and a way of accelerating the youth-to-adult transition (King *et al.* 2017: 5). To highlight these experiences, our sample focuses on the youth, on which we elaborate further in the Methodology.

Life-course theory also stresses the fluidity of migration and suggests that migration correlates with major life events (King, Thomson, Fielding and Warnes 2006). Migrants can move abroad for study and work to establish themselves financially and then return home when family considerations and the desire or need to spend more time with the parents takes priority (King 2017). Life courses are not always linear (Worth 2009) and can be ruptured by illness, redundancy, the failure to pass exams, breakups or divorce, each of which might cause migration or return (Hörschelmann 2011). The life-course approach suggests that migrants remain open and move to maximise opportunities in different places and at different times (du Bois-Reymond and López Blasco 2003). Such flexibility is associated with broader trends like the destandardisation of work and education (du Bois-Reymond and López Blasco 2003), individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) or a delay in marriage and parenthood, and can be enabled or limited by geopolitical and economic events like the EU enlargements, financial recessions or Brexit (Kilkey and Ryan 2020; King 2017). Our paper, therefore, considers various factors – related or not to Brexit – to see whether migrants make their decisions depending on the stage of their lives that they are in.

Methodology

The data used in this paper came from 66 semi-structured interviews conducted with migrants in the UK and 10 conducted with those Poles and Lithuanians who returned from the UK to their countries of origin after June 2016. All our interviewees were aged 19–36. We focus on young people to explore the implications of our research to transnationalism and life-course theories, which are particularly relevant for migration that occurs in youth. Our interviewees arrived in the UK after 2004 and lived there for at least three years. Participants were recruited through social media sites and a snowballing approach. Interviews were conducted via Skype, phone, Messenger or face-to-face. We gathered information on reasons for migration and return, social

anchors in the UK and in the country of origin, perceived risks and plans, participants' opinions and experiences regarding Brexit and key socio-demographic data. Fieldwork was conducted from February to May 2019 (for a detailed methodology, see Blachnicka-Ciacek *et al.* 2019). To ensure respondent confidentiality, names used in this paper have been changed and we do not present any identifying information.

A few points about our sample are important to note. We recruited fewer returnees than migrants in the UK because some migrants were delaying making their decision until the Brexit details were clear, and we wanted to capture the effect of this uncertainty on their decisions. Even with few returnees, however, we are able to showcase the diversity of factors that influenced their decisions, including the impact of the Brexit referendum. The skewness might nevertheless affect our results in that decisions for return might not be explored in as much depth as decisions to stay. Furthermore, the emphasis on youth allows us to explore how migrants navigate migration decisions in light of other important events such as career-building and family planning. However, such a focus also poses the danger of overstating the risks associated with Brexit given that we did not interview older migrants in the UK who might have been more established and hence less affected by the referendum. Our sample is also skewed more towards women (47) than men (29) and those with a Bachelor's degree or higher (59) compared to people with secondary education (13) or those studying for a BA (4). The distribution resulted from convenience sampling, as women and those with higher levels of education are more likely to agree to participate in research. Given that the views of men and those with less education might be under-represented in the study, we spend more time analysing their data in this paper. Less than half (32) of the respondents live in London, with the remaining 44 residing across the UK, with the exception of Wales.

Brexit and its impact on transnationalism and the return-migration decision

In this article we explore the extent to which Polish and Lithuanian migrants' decisions to return to their country of origin or stay in the immigration country have been affected by the Brexit referendum results and anticipated withdrawal of the UK from the EU. While there is now a rapidly expanding body of literature on the effects of Brexit on migrant populations in the UK, including Central and Eastern Europeans, previous studies tended to focus on other aspects of migrants' experiences and only mention in passing the effects on their decisions to leave or remain.

In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, researchers explored the potential negative impact of Brexit on migrants' rights and welfare entitlement (Currie 2016; Kilkey 2017) and migrants' initial emotional reactions to the results of the referendum and the anxieties associated with it (Lulle, Moroşanu and King 2017). The uncertainties stemming from the referendum results were claimed to affect both their everyday lives and their future plans (Kilkey 2017; Rzepnikowska 2019). Numerous studies have examined the disruptive impact of Brexit on EU migrants' sense of belonging to the local area, the UK and Europe (Botterill and Hancock 2018; Lulle *et al.* 2017; McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017; Ranta and Nancheva 2018; Sime, Kakela, Corson, Tyrrell, McMellon, Kelly and Moskal 2017). Speculations about how CEE migrants have shifted their belonging practices has given rise recently to theories of anchoring (Grzymala-Kazłowska 2018) and differentiated embedding (Ryan 2018). A few studies have included migrants' discourses on future plans in relation to further migration or return to the home countries (Sime *et al.* 2017). Other recent studies have warned against generalising about the impact of Brexit for all EU migrants since the category hides diverse groups of individuals of variable vulnerability to post-Brexit changes (Lulle, King, Dvorakova and Szkudlarek 2018). For example, highly skilled migrants are believed to be more open to leaving the UK, while low-skilled ones face more-restricted future choices (Lulle *et al.* 2018).

Our study takes the discussion on migrants' intentions regarding settlement vs re-migration a step further by examining their actual decisions to return to Poland or Lithuania within three years of the Brexit referendum. Although studies on post-referendum migration are few, McGhee *et al.* (2017) argue that migration from the UK since 2016 has been impacted on by an awareness of one's rights and anxieties about the ability to maintain them. Others (Kilkey and Ryan 2020; Trąbka and Pustulka 2020) stress the importance of embeddedness in the places where migrants live and the life stages they are at when making the decision to stay in the UK. To add to these studies, we asked our interviewees to assess the extent to which their decision to stay in the UK or return to Poland and Lithuania had been affected by the referendum results. We hope that this approach allows us to produce more reliable findings than those obtained about migrants' intentions to return, as Drinkwater and Garapich (2015) have shown that intentions rarely align with actions. In examining this question, we also contribute to the literature, reviewed above, on intra-European transnationalism, the life course or youth transitions and return migration.

Results

Brexit as a trigger to establish the right to stay

None of the migrants interviewed for this project claimed that Brexit had a major impact on their decision to stay in the UK. However, the referendum did motivate many to secure their legal status in the UK as a direct result of possible post-Brexit difficulties for non-British citizens. At the time of interview, many of our participants in the UK had already applied for permanent residence or settled status in order to ensure that Brexit would not interfere with their lives after the UK leaves the EU. For example, Elena (Lithuanian – LT, 33, single, F, PhD), who works at a UK university and applied for the settled status early, concludes: 'There was no choice about it, everyone will need to have this, I had this opportunity to do it early, so I simply wished to take care of all this as soon as possible'.

A Polish interviewee (31, engaged, F, MA) who came to the UK because she could not find a job as a teacher in Poland and who was expecting a baby with her Polish partner, admitted that she needed to apply for permanent residence in order not to disrupt her family's life in the UK: 'I feel much more secure now, knowing that I am in their system'. Edita (LT, 32, partner, F, MA), who applied for settled status twice, having been rejected the first time a year earlier, also stresses the emotional security that permanent residence brings:

I have it [permanent residence] because Brexit really scared me. I never needed it before (...) but perhaps I will need some sort of proof that I was here before the end of March 2019. (...) In the coming two years, it [permanent residence] doesn't give anything, no privileges. (...) It helps me more emotionally that no, no one will tell me in a few months to 'pack your things and go because you have no proof that you were here before'.

Some of the Polish migrants already had a British passport, which is an ultimate guarantee for them that they will not be facing any undesirable treatment after Brexit. This is explained by Konstancja (Polish – PL, 33, partner, F, PhD) who currently holds a permanent residence card but is planning to apply for British citizenship: 'Why citizenship? Because I really do not trust the British people. (...) The Brits may not honour it [settled status]; citizenship is the safest option'.

Importantly, to acquire British citizenship remains a bigger problem for the Lithuanian migrants because Lithuania, unlike Poland, does not allow dual citizenship. For them, obtaining British citizenship means renouncing their Lithuanian nationality, which the majority of interviewees perceived as quite unacceptable; thus their only legal option at present is to obtain permanent residence in the UK while still holding a Lithuanian passport. Moreover, both Polish and Lithuanian passports were highly valued for enabling work and travel within the EU. Nevertheless, one Lithuanian couple was considering a strategy in which the husband would keep his Lithuanian citizenship, while his wife acquired British nationality; this would – at least in theory – simplify the settlement process in either of the countries if they had to choose.

The referendum also had a rather surprising effect on some of our highly skilled interviewees' return plans and migration decisions. A number of the highly skilled migrants in our sample, who either planned to return or to move to another country, are staying temporarily in the UK because of the referendum. Pursuing their international careers, they still wanted to keep their options open and if necessary, to be able to come back to the UK. They plan to move away as soon as they can formally secure their potential return to the UK, which safeguards their professional and personal transnationalism. For example, Modesta (LT, 24, single, F, BA) is worried about the restrictions that come with closed borders and the fact that she may find it difficult to visit Lithuania as often as she would like. She expects the UK labour market to be hit by an economic crisis after Brexit and so is exploring opportunities in other European countries. However, she admits that she has postponed all plans to leave the UK until after Brexit, when the situation is clearer.

Although safeguarding against any Brexit impacts in this way was important for all our interviewees, including young single migrants, it was especially important for families with children who felt a need to secure stability for their lives in the UK. This is the case for Witold (PL, 35, married, children, M, PhD), whose children had a hard time adapting to the new education system and new linguistic environment after they moved from Poland to London. Witold is an academic who, echoing other interviewees, feels safer in the UK, in contrast to Poland. He admits that his family has just started to enjoy their lives in the UK so, in order to not disrupt this process, he obtained permanent residence:

So far, we don't have plans for the future, I mean the plan is to stay here. It's more difficult to plan the future when there are four people compared to when there was one person. (...) the whole family found their place in the UK and achieved a good quality of life. (...) there are no reasons for this [any changes] right now.

A similar explanation about safeguarding their life in the UK through acquiring permanent legal status is given by another migrant with family and children (PL, 35, engaged, children, M, secondary school). Coming from a blue-collar background and having spent 14 years in the UK, he would not consider living elsewhere, possibly because his job opportunities elsewhere would be limited. He explains that the only impact of Brexit on him was that he became more politically involved. Interestingly, he was not the only interviewee who intensified his social engagement after the results of the Brexit referendum. While some joined the political parties clearly opposing Brexit, others participated in marches and regularly signed petitions against leaving the EU. It shows that CEE migrants are not only passive subjects of the ongoing political changes but also active agents, who attempt to co-shape the circumstances they live in. Such an approach is also reflected in the reappearing disappointment in our interviewees' discourses that migrants were not eligible to vote in the referendum.

For many migrants the legal precautions do not translate into their taking a decision to stay in the UK permanently. None of the migrants to whom we spoke admitted that they would live the rest of their lives in the UK. They all stressed the temporary nature of their stay in the UK, leaving themselves a multitude of other places to which they would like to move in the future, usually in Europe. For example, Ksenia (PL, 32, partner,

F, MA) had previously lived and worked in the US and still holds a valid US visa which, for her, is a back-up plan in case she decides to leave the UK. Another interviewee (PL, 32, partner, F, MA) has a Canadian partner and so is contemplating a possible move to Canada in the future. Aurelia (PL, 27, single, F, MA) works for an international company and would like to move to another country in the future. Her phrase sums up these plans and intentions well: 'It is very fluid for now'. This fluidity is made possible by our interviewees' young age, higher education and single (childless) family situation.

There are also several interviewees who adopt the 'wait and see' approach when it comes to applying for permanent residence or citizenship and who will not take any action on that front until they know exactly what will be required as a result of Brexit. They justify this lack of action because of the Brexit-related chaos and uncertainty about legal procedures which, in some cases, was confirmed by special consultations with legal advisors.

Nevertheless, in some cases the referendum caused a paradoxical effect with regard to the migrants' integration. Although many of them had formalised their stay or planned to do so, anchoring themselves institutionally, their emotional attachment to the UK weakened. For example, Edita (LT, 32, partner, F, MA), who holds permanent resident status, asserts that, after the shock of Brexit, she feels 'less British' and more cosmopolitan. There are, however, numerous accounts of migrants who received strong words of support from Britons and sincere apologies for their plight. It helped them cope with the challenging situation and mounting uncertainty, enabling them, with time, to return to 'normal life', as if Brexit were never going to happen.

Brexit as a trigger to return: a reality check?

Our interviews with Polish and Lithuanian returnees made it very clear that Brexit was not the main motivation for their return: only a few admitted that the 2016 vote had had any impact on their decision to return. Thus, it seems appropriate to talk, instead, of Brexit only contributing to and, in some cases, accelerating the return decision.

On the one hand, the unexpected results of the referendum made some migrants rethink their life strategies, which could have resulted in a decision to leave the UK – as was the case for Aurora (LT, 36, single, F, BA), for whom the referendum was a factor that made her stop and take a look at the bigger picture of her life:

Actually it [the referendum] did change the situation because I started thinking what I wanted to do. And I don't want to do jobs like this all my life. So it was like a reality check because time passes quickly and one does not notice how many years one spends there. From rent to rent, from one trip to another (...) there are many stimulating experiences to be had there. (...) And after some years you realise that you do not just want to stimulate yourself, and you start thinking how I would like to live my life and where I would like to live it.

Having taken stock of her life, Aurora decided that she did not want to continue living in London. In her precarious situation the additional uncertainty brought about by Brexit was the last straw which motivated her to end the liquidity of her migration and begin a settled adult life in Lithuania. She has her own flat in Vilnius which she feels attached to, has a job that she likes and friends that share her worldview. According to her, things are much simpler in Vilnius because it is a small city and because she can afford to be more flexible than before. Although she misses the rich cultural life in the UK and friendly conversations with strangers, she feels good in Vilnius for now. It is important to add that Aurora's migration to the UK always had a temporal nature, as she left Lithuania in order to escape the emotional aftermath of a personal tragedy and needed some

space and time to deal with her personal problems. So, for her, Brexit simply defined the end of that temporary stay abroad.

On the other hand, the consequences of the Brexit decision did not always lead to the redefinition of migrants' life goals but changed the structural conditions under which the migrants had to act. This, in turn, prompted their decision about return, as was the case for Amelia (PL, 29, single, F, MA). Amelia worked for a multinational company in London but, due to the risks of Brexit, her position in the company was no longer secure and she expected to be moved to another city in the UK – which she did not like. In the midst of this uncertainty and possible changes, Amelia considered returning to Poland, where she believed she would have a better quality of life than in the UK and would still be able to use her skills and competencies gained in the UK. Again, as with Aurora, she originally migrated with the intention of staying in the UK temporarily, as her goal was to gain access to specific health services that she needed at that moment in her life. By the time the referendum took place, her health problems were already resolved and she felt ready to return.

These two cases presented above do not, however, mean that the returnees are determined to stay in their home countries for good but that their return suits their current situation of single educated young women.

Brexit and business as usual: what really keeps migrants in the UK?

While, for some of our interviewees, the referendum encouraged their plans to return or establish residency, most of them felt that Brexit had no impact at all on their decisions. Although many interviewees felt shock, sadness, fear or anger right after the referendum, as time passed they adapted to the new situation and no longer took Brexit seriously. Edita (LT, 32, partner, F, MA), for example, felt a strong negative emotional response to the vote but now 'just lives like [she] lived before: work, friends, relationship'. The sentiment that nothing had changed was echoed particularly by interviewees who live in locations where Britons voted Remain, like London:

At the time when the referendum happened, in June, I was in Lithuania... from a distance and so on, you really get this fear that maybe everything is really bad, something changed. Then I returned to London... and realised that, no... if you want to live here, no one will bother you and you don't bother anyone (LT, Gediminas, 27, engaged, M, MA).

Moreover, some interviewees felt relatively safe and were almost sure that Brexit would not impact on them at all because of their long residence in the UK (echoing findings by Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira 2019), their contribution to the local labour market, tax payments and lack of a criminal record – in other words, because they are 'good migrants' (Anderson 2015). In their opinion, these aspects give them the right to live in the UK, regardless of what additional requirements Brexit will introduce, as discussed by Kornelia (PL, 34, partner, child, F, BA): 'We have been living here for several years. We have work here, we have a settled life, we perceive this place as our home and I think that Brexit more or less won't do us any harm'.

By contrast, migrants like Jolanta (LT, 35, divorced, now engaged, children, F, secondary school), living in areas where most of the people voted Leave, did encounter some episodes of hate speech – Jolanta's own daughter felt it. Interviewees also noted the rising cost of living, plummeting pound exchange rate, less-generous social benefits and uncertainty regarding business and employment. However, they decided to stay for one or a combination of the reasons discussed below.

The availability of jobs within interviewees' fields of specialty keeps many migrants in the UK. As Aneta (PL, 35, single, F, MA) argues, 'In the UK [I] can do anything [I] would like to do because possibilities in this area are limitless'. Aneta had previously considered moving to Poland but her boss offered her the opportunity

to work remotely. She can now spend a lot of time in Poland and feels that if she applied for a job there, she would have to limit her expectations. Vaiva (LT, 27, single, F, MA), too, likes her current job in the UK because it involves both helping others and developing herself. She does not exclude the possibility of return to Lithuania but is worried about finding a similar job to her current one. Finally, Klaudija (LT, 24, single, F, student) came to the UK to become an artist and thinks that London offers her more opportunities to realise her goal than cities in Lithuania.

Reasons to stay include not only migrants' career aspirations but their financial security more generally. Despite liking his town and colleagues, feeling like 'a member of the community', owning a house and gaining more respect from his employer than in Lithuania, Eiminas (LT, 34, married, M, secondary school) claims that 'only financial possibilities keep me attached... if there was the slightest chance of being able to live like that in Lithuania, near family, friends, I would go home'. A strong emphasis on financial opportunities might be a way to reduce cognitive dissonance. Eiminas has spent 14 years in the UK and is fully settled, so it is unlikely that he will return; however, he does not want to let go of the idea, as evidenced by the expressed desire to return in the future, arguing that he has 'always cared about Lithuania' and maintains transnational ties by voting in Lithuanian elections and visiting Lithuania twice a year. Financial opportunities are not something that Lithuania can fix easily – so they serve as an internal justification for staying while still giving space to assert one's Lithuanian patriotism.

In addition to higher wages, the UK's social benefits provide another source of financial security for migrants, as is the case for Kinga (PL, MA), a 30-year-old single mother. She is staying in the UK only because of her two-year-old child. According to Kinga, the benefits she receives enables her to have a decent life and in Poland her situation as a single mother would be much worse. Otherwise, Kinga is not attached to the UK: 'I have no choice – I have to stay here. Once my life here becomes unaffordable, I will go back'. The quote emphasises that staying is not always a free choice: Kinga feels forced to stay due to structural conditions – e.g. the worse financial support to single mothers in Poland – and not because she likes the UK. Her vulnerable economic situation also makes her susceptible to shocks like that incurred by the referendum. It is not that she stayed because the vote had no impact on her (in fact, she blames the referendum for making it harder to access social benefits) but because she had no choice, despite feeling unwelcome.

The decision to stay despite Brexit might also be influenced by family reasons, in particular with regard to children's education. Jolanta (LT, 35, divorced, now engaged, F, secondary school) finds the education system in the UK better than in Lithuania. Maja (PL, 30, engaged, F, secondary school) admits that her family would like to stay in the UK until her child finishes school. She and her partner both feel that providing children with a British education might be seen as an advantage in the future. Education aside, returning to the country of origin is seen as a potential negative shock for children who were born in the UK and spent their whole lives there. As Klementyna (PL, 34, divorced, now partner, F, secondary school) explains, her 'children would not be able to go back. They do not go to Poland; they would not be able to go and live there'. Remaining in the UK might be also perceived as an investment in children's future. Zosia (PL, 30, partner, F, MA) wants to have children in the UK in order for them to acquire two passports (Polish and British). She thinks that dual citizenship would give them many opportunities regardless of whether Brexit takes place or not.

The quality of life in the UK is frequently noted by migrants (both blue- and white-collar workers) as a strong argument for staying in the UK. Nonetheless, what quality of life means varies. While some stress the ability to earn a decent salary, others note a particular lifestyle. For example, when asked what makes her attached to London, Milda (LT, 31, partner, F, MA) responded that 'it is fun to live in London when you have a lot of money... we just started attending various private members' clubs... that kind of London is very cool, it is an absolutely cosmopolitan city where you meet all kinds of people'. Other interviewees also mentioned

a higher level of development in the UK, the broader choice of work and life opportunities, diversity and free-time activities.

It is interesting that some migrants want to stay in the UK because they feel attached to it whereas others stay because they do not feel attached to any other place. The former have their friends, jobs and favourite places in the UK – the potential move would entail starting everything from scratch. The latter stay in the UK because it is almost like a default option. As Stefania (PL, 25, partner, F, secondary school) argues, she ‘no longer [has] a home in Poland, so (...) as a consequence, it means it [the home] is here [in the UK]’.

For yet others, negative personal experiences in the countries of origin discourage thoughts about returning, as explained by Patrycja (PL, 35, partner, F, MA): ‘My home is here in England. I did not have good experiences in Poland. Many unpleasant things happened to me. Here I was given a second chance. In England, I could be myself’. This sentiment is also echoed by Klaudija (LT, 24, single, F, BA student):

Last summer I spent five weeks in Lithuania and I couldn't create [art]... it's just that my family is a bit negative and with problems and I just really missed London because I have a studio where I can create art, and I have friends, and work.

While we categorise the different reasons for staying – including those related to career opportunities, financial security, family, lifestyle and certain push factors away from the countries of origin – it is important to note that they often overlap, as evidenced by this last quote, in which Klaudija mentions multiple reasons for staying in London. Similarly, although we frame this section in terms of staying and leaving, many of our interviewees maintain a level of transnationalism. For example, although they reside in the UK, they hold strong ties with the country of origin – having a flat there, family, or visiting frequently. In the next section, we further explore whether or not migrants maintain ties with the UK after returning to their countries of origin, after first showing that Brexit had no impact on their decisions to return and discussing the factors that did.

Brexit as separate from return: why they really returned to Poland or Lithuania

Most interviewees who returned to their home countries after the Brexit referendum said that the process of Brexit had a close to zero impact on their decision. Rather, their return coincided with a particular life stage. This was the case for Irma (LT, 32, married, children, F, BA) who, with her husband, decided to return to Lithuania before their children started school; they therefore made the move as their eldest son approached school age. Saulius (LT, 31, married, M, secondary school) and his wife returned to Lithuania after they had earned enough money in the UK to start a new phase in their life by getting some education (postponed because of emigration) and starting a career in a new field. Gabriel (PL, 31, partner, M, BA) also returned after he had accumulated enough capital to develop his own businesses in Poland, through which he expected to earn more than in the UK.

For some returnees, their home countries became ‘safe havens’ during stormy periods in their life course, even though they had had no prior plans to return. Adomas (LT, 32, partner, M, BA) decided to go back to Lithuania as a result of a ‘personal crisis’ caused by a mix of reasons – including a burnout at work, a breakup with a girlfriend and the end of his accommodation contract. He simply did not have the energy to start everything all over again in the UK and chose instead to return to Lithuania. Meanwhile, Konrad (PL, 36, partner, M, MA) who, a few years ago, had no plans to leave and had even considered buying a house in the UK, returned to Poland after realising that he faced a ‘glass ceiling’ in his company because he was not British.

Finally, some other migrants returned to their home countries almost by accident, drawn by good employment opportunities. Longin (PL, 33, partner, M, PhD) applied for jobs in various countries while still living in the UK. He applied to only one company in Poland and was offered the job. He is now happy to have returned

to Poland, with a new job in a global organisation in Warsaw. Linas (LT, 25, single, M), after gaining his BA and MA in the UK, returned to Lithuania primarily for work. He had not planned to return so soon, originally intending to stay in the UK until he was 27 or 28 in order to earn some money before going back but, while looking for a job in the UK, also applied for a position in Lithuania and was offered it. He does, however, emphasise the fact that a ‘good job’ is not enough to root him in Lithuania. For that to happen, he would have to find a partner and start a family. In Artur’s case (PL, 23, partner, M, BA), it was an interplay between personal and work-related reasons that made him return. He went to the UK to study and wanted to remain in London after graduation but, meanwhile, met a girlfriend who lives in Poland. After some time in a long-distance relationship, he accepted a very interesting job offer from a global company in Warsaw.

Despite a general satisfaction with their decision to return, many returnees are keeping their options open – including that of returning to the UK. Irma’s husband has remained in the UK to support the family until the youngest child starts kindergarten in Lithuania and Irma can begin working again. They also own a house in the UK and want to rent it out instead of selling it. Irma is ‘95 per cent sure she will stay in Lithuania’ though a little uncertainty remains. She still maintains a UK bank account – mostly for sentimental reasons but also as a ‘plan B’, in case she needs to move to the UK again. Similarly, Linas explained that he does not feel attached to Vilnius despite having recently bought an apartment there. He would not mind moving elsewhere, preferably to a German-speaking country. He, too, has retained his UK bank account. Although he does not plan to return to the UK, he kept the account open when he left in case he needed to return. Krzysztof (PL, 34, single, M, MA) believes that coming back to Poland is perhaps just a ‘stepping stone’ between successive stages of his life, as he enjoys living in both Poland and England; however, he also likes living in Madrid and Georgia, where he has previously lived. ‘Home’, he says, ‘may still be somewhere else’.

Many returnees emphasised how important free movement between the UK and the rest of the EU, including their home countries, is to them. As Saulius (LT, 31, married, M, secondary school) explained, ‘It would be nice to know that I can visit the UK anytime I want, to stay there. If I have to pay for a visa, I will most likely choose to visit another country’. He also wants to continue running his business (he buys motorcycles in the UK, fixes them and sells them in other countries, including Lithuania) and is worried that, because of Brexit, the borders might be closed and new taxes introduced, impeding his ability to trade. Meanwhile, Irma (LT, 32, married, children, F, BA) also fears that it might be more difficult for them to visit friends in the UK or go there to shop. Therefore, whether in terms of future plans or actual lifestyles, returnees maintain connections to the UK in the same way that many migrants maintain connections to their home countries.

Discussion and conclusions

The Brexit referendum is perceived by researchers as a crucial moment in the migration process of Central and Eastern Europeans (Blachnicka-Ciacek *et al.* 2019). The potential impact of the Leave vote on the latter’s mobility patterns in the UK was being investigated even before the announcement of the results (McGhee *et al.* 2017). Earlier research has shown that the vote was a critical, frustrating and negative event in the life course of many migrants (Kilkey and Ryan 2020; Lulle *et al.* 2018). However, it has not necessarily resulted in migrants changing their mobility plans (Guma and Dafydd Jones 2019; Kilkey and Ryan 2020; Tyrrell, Sime, Kelly and McMellon 2018). Through the theoretical lens of intra-European transnationalism, the life course and return migration, our paper investigated retrospectively the impact that the Brexit vote had on migrants’ decisions to stay in the UK or return to Poland or Lithuania.

Our research suggests that the referendum had some – but not a major – influence on their decisions. A similarly ambiguous effect is observed in other research (Guma and Dafydd Jones 2019; Tyrrell *et al.* 2018). In answer to the first research question on the impact of Brexit on the decision to stay in the UK, migrants

report that, by not leaving the UK, they intend to preserve stability in their professional and family lives. One strand of interviewees included highly qualified professionals who had worked hard to build their international careers and were therefore not willing to risk them by leaving the UK at this crucial time when immigration and employment policies are changing. They do, nevertheless, keep their hands on the pulse of the European labour market so that they can monitor employment prospects elsewhere in case the situation in the UK worsens. These findings echo those reported by Gmelch (1980), who argues that well-off migrants, like the highly skilled international professionals in our study, do not wish to give up their secure positions. However, it is not only the highly skilled who prefer to stay. Those who have spent more time in the UK more generally and are thus more embedded also seek to establish residence (Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira 2019). The referendum indeed motivated many to secure their residence status or avoid moving to another country at least until after the migration rules are clarified. This effect has already been observed in the literature but mostly regarding low-skilled workers (Engbersen 2012; Massey, Durand and Pren 2016), whereas our interviewees, from both high- and low-skilled backgrounds, were determined to not move outside the UK before being certain of their ability to return.

In answer to the second research question on the decision of returnees to return to the home country, the impact of Brexit was never described as a decisive factor but, rather, as a stimulus that reminded migrants of their originally temporary migration intentions. We did not encounter a single person who returned because of the 2016 vote. Rather, the referendum both encouraged migrants to reflect on their life goals and/or affected their possible employment prospects, both of which added to their reasons for return. One important factor that transpired in some interviews with returnees is that Brexit was the trigger encouraging them to take stock of their original migration goals – such as accumulating planned financial capital or resolving very specific physical and mental health-related problems. Earlier literature on return migration supports the link between original temporary emigration intentions and return decisions but only for those migrants who succeed in fulfilling their migration intentions (Bovenkerk 1974). Similarly, other studies show that the main reason for the return of short-term migrants is related to the accomplishment of the migration aim (Anacka and Fihel 2013). Some of our returnees certainly fell into this category of successful temporary migrants who, at the time of the Brexit referendum vote, felt that they had fulfilled their migration objectives and were ready to go back.

The third research question – on the non-Brexit-related reasons for remaining in the UK – resulted in many interviewees reporting that they chose to ignore Brexit and continue their lives in exactly the same manner as before. Their personal and professional life in the UK is treated by them as the default life option with which they are satisfied and which they currently see no reason to change. Highly skilled migrants, especially those working for multinational corporations, niche or art-related sectors, report staying for the better career prospects in the UK compared to Poland or Lithuania, while low-skilled migrants or those who struggled with job security in the past in their home countries tend to emphasise their current financial security in the UK which they do not wish to jeopardise. Financial motivation to stay is often related to the ability to afford a better quality of life in the UK – which includes access to numerous leisure activities which are often not available or accessible in their home countries. Some list specific anchors that keep them in the UK such as their favourite local places, routine activities and social circle. Those who have families, including the highly skilled, emphasise that their decision to live in the UK is grounded in the quality of education and better career prospects for the children, with some admitting that their children would struggle to adapt in Poland or Lithuania.

Finally, in answer to the fourth question about non-Brexit-related reasons for return, our returnees cited family or career considerations and, to some extent, disappointment with their lives in the UK. These motivations were starkly similar to reasons cited before 2016 and support the conclusions of some existing studies on the pre-2016 return migration to Poland and Lithuania. Although the main motivation for this migration was economic, the non-economic factors stood backed up the decision on return (Barcevičius and Žvalionytė 2012; GUS 2013), with family reasons cited the most often for the return of Polish long term-term migrants (GUS

2013). Family considerations in our interviews echo those quoted in previous studies (White 2009), which often refer to migrants wishing to bring up their children in the home country and cultural environment. This makes the timeframe for the return crucial in order not to disrupt the children's education.

A theme of temporariness emerged as a common factor for both stayers and returnees. Those who remained in the UK often cited the possibility of returning to the home country or maintaining transnational ties in other ways. Returnees, too, rarely considered their returns to be permanent, keeping open the possibility of moving back to the UK or elsewhere. Such a phenomenon is referred to in the literature as post-return transnationalism (Carling and Bivand Erdal 2014) – which, by not determining the direction of further movement, enables a minimisation of the risk of reverse exploration. Brexit threatens migrants' post-return transnationalism and therefore some choose not to leave the UK until they can do so safely – i.e. can retain the option of returning there freely. Whatever decision they have taken 'for now', they emphasise the controlled fluidity of their current situation, whereby they monitor the current conditions both where they are and also in other countries and keep their options open.

This flexible approach to migration seems to echo the main arguments of the life-course theories of migration and return (King *et al.* 2006). Our sample of interviewees included young Poles and Lithuanians who often migrated to start their adult life away from their parents' safety nets, to pursue better career and financial opportunities or to further their education. Some of them returned, often also making a career move or prioritising their family and lifestyle considerations. In this way, following the life-course approach, migrants move and continue to move in order to maximise the opportunities – both economic and non-economic – available to them in different places and at different times. At the heart of all these migration and return debates remains the attempt by young Central and Eastern Europeans to exercise their right to travel, work and live anywhere in Europe as long as this transnational experience helps them to develop as individuals and professionals and benefits them and their families.

To check whether initial migration, return and further movements are as fluid as we observed in this paper and to assess whether they are indeed associated with major life events, a larger sample is needed. To this end, the authors plan to launch a survey in 2020 with returnees to both Poland and Lithuania.

Our paper suggests that transnationalism is a crucial factor in the development of the young generation of Europeans, for whom it provides unprecedented opportunities for self-development, career-building, exploration, the exchange of various forms of capital and the building of their own sense of identity and home in the context of the rest of Europe. Poles and Lithuanians have only been privileged by this opportunity since 2004 and it is only recently that migrants from these post-accession countries have really embraced, in particular, the non-economic opportunities that come with being able to freely move between countries. It remains to be seen, however, whether post-return transnationalism, double return and circular migration remain possible without the unique opportunity structure and freedom of movement secured by the EU, which events like Brexit continue to threaten. Our interviews show that this rupture in 'easy transnationalism' is the main negative consequence of Brexit feared by Central and East European migrants in the UK (Vertovec 2004).

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