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BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

Politics as a Factor in Primary and Onward Migration for British Citizens Living Long-Term in Poland

ABSTRACT: The experience of British citizens living in in France, Spain and Italy has been amply covered by researchers. However, very little attention has been given to British citizens living in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, although the impact of Brexit on Britons living in the EU has received some attention, the role of politics in general as a factor in unforced migration is relatively understudied. This paper draws on qualitative in-depth interviews conducted in the period 2019-2022 with 60 British citizens living long-term in Poland. It investigates the structural effects of politics in Poland and the UK and how its sliding doors have fostered or hindered UK citizens' ability to move between the two countries since the political transformation of 1989. On a micro level, it also looks at the individual agency of British citizens and their attempts to negotiate the changing political landscape. This paper finds that anomic feelings connected to the political conditions in the UK have often been a contributory factor in the decision to move abroad. Despite widespread concerns about political illiberalism in Poland, the state of British politics today and the structural impact of Brexit, which prevents many citizens returning to the UK with their partners, as well as the 'hostile environment' for Polish migrants, fuel continuing disillusionment with the UK and a reluctance to return.

Keywords: migration, politics, Brexit, anomie, hostile environment, linked lives

INTRODUCTION

Although it is as yet an understudied area, there is growing interest in intra-European migration from West to East. This paper adds to knowledge about this field and attempts to explain how political structures have been a major or contributory factor in the decision of some British citizens to leave the UK and settle in Poland. Since the 1990s, the sociopolitical landscapes of both Poland and the United Kingdom have been transformed. Uncertain times in the UK and new opportunities to work in Poland led a number of British citizens to seek new lives in Poland. This paper explores this decision through a number of inter-related themes, such as 'anomic exit', the 'hostile environment', Brexit, changing national identities, and the 'point of no return' to understand the motivation for leaving the UK and not returning.

The Office for National Statistics estimated that over half a million people left the UK as long-term emigrants in the year ending June 2022, 67% of whom were EU citizens and 16.5% who were UK citizens.[1] Unfortunately, there is a lack of accurate and reliable data on the reasons why people leave, as International Passenger Survey records only show the single most important reason for emigrating from the United Kingdom. Based on the findings of a Home Office report in 2012,[2] around 40% of British citizens were leaving to take up employment and a further 18% moving to actively look for work. 23% left with family or to (re-)join family, whereas an insignificant number (4%) were leaving to study abroad. Unexplained were the 'other' reasons why around one in six passengers were leaving the UK. The most recent ONS figures[3] shown in Table 1 (below), underscore the opaque nature of these statistics, showing that the overwhelming majority of UK emigrants are now classified as 'other' when giving their reason for leaving the country.

Table 1: Long-term emigration of British nationals in Years Ending 2022/2023 (author's elaboration based on ONS 2023 data)

	All reasons	Work	Study	Family	Other
Year Ending June 22	89,000	3,000	1,000	4,000	81,000
Year Ending June 23	93,000	2,000	1,000	1,000	89,000

1 "Long-Term International Migration, Provisional: Year Ending June 2022," *Office for National Statistics*, at https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingjune2022, 27 January 2025.

2 R. Murray et al., *Emigration from the UK: Research Report 68*, 2012.

3 "Long-Term International Migration, Provisional: Year Ending June 2023," *Office for National Statistics*, at https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingjune2023, 27 January 2025.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Many researchers comment on the difficulty of obtaining or ascertaining precise figures of British citizens living abroad. Some sources provided estimations that over 36,000 British citizens were living in Poland in 2019.[4] In fact, the number of British citizens holding valid residence permits in Poland in 2020 was approximately 6,500[5] and Brits were the tenth largest group of in-migrants by nationality. Since official registration of residence was required by the end of the Withdrawal Agreement period on January 1, 2022 (before UK citizens became third country nationals), it might be expected that this number is now slightly higher. In addition to dual nationality citizens who have chosen not to register as British citizens, there may still be a relatively small number of British citizens living 'under the radar'.

This paper is based primarily on empirical data from a study of 60 UK citizens living long-term in Poland, which took place between Summer 2019 and Spring 2022. The study involved two rounds of semi-structured interviews and the age of participants ranged from mid-20s to mid-70s, many of whom have been living in Poland for over 20 years. The study sample was split between the metropolitan area of Warsaw and smaller cities, towns, and rural locations around Poland. The main criteria for participation in the study were that the participant held a British passport, had lived in Poland for at least two years and had spent a significant part of their life in the UK. The main research questions of the study were explored during two rounds of interviews. The first round (Summer 2019 – Spring 2020) concerned why the participants moved to Poland and their reactions to Brexit and its potential impact of on their future lives in Poland.[6] The second round of interviews (Spring 2021 – Spring 2022) touched upon issues of identity and personal reflexivity, attempting to gain a more complex insight into the participant's life in Poland. The themes of the interview focused on emotions and feelings about the UK and Poland, personal relationships, plans and anticipations about the future. The interview transcripts were coded using MAXQDA software and a thematic analysis approach. Whilst economic opportunities and romantic interests were the predominant motivators for the majority of participants to move to Poland over the years, the frequency with which politics was explicitly mentioned by participants as a contributory or major factor in the migration process was significant.

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4 "No-Deal Brexit: 10 Ways It Could Affect You," *BBC*, 11 October 2019, at https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-47470864, 27 January 2025; "Estimated Number of British Citizens Living in the European Union in 2019, by Member State," *Statista*, at https://www.statista.com/statistics/1059795/uk-expats-in-europe/, 27 January 2025.

5 "Brits Living in Poland after Brexit – Residency Issues," *Finding Poland*, 24 December 2023, at https://findingpoland.com/brits-living-in-poland-after-brexit/, 27 January 2025.

6 See S. Davies, M. Kułakowska, "More Than a Storm in a Teacup? British Nationals in Poland in the Time of Brexit," *Politeja*, vol. 68, no. 5 (2020), pp. 257-277.

Fig. 1 Number of UK citizens arriving in Poland in the period 1989-2019 (based on project sample).

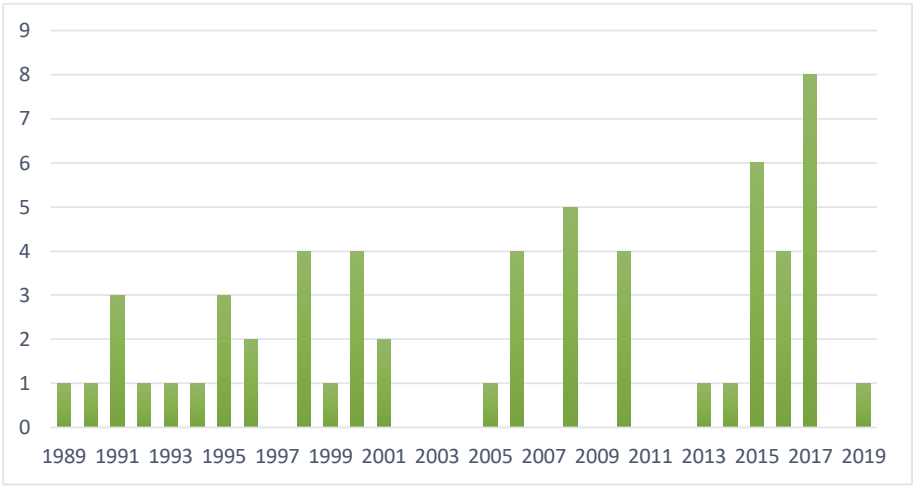

Figure 1 (above) shows the year of arrival of UK citizens in Poland. It is possible to see patterns in the numbers and frequency of these arrivals. The number of arrivals was low, but steady, throughout the 1990s, increasingly slightly towards the end of the decade. Numbers fell off but rose relatively rapidly again during the period 2006-2010, which might be partially attributed to the global economic crisis during that period. However, the accession of Poland to the European Union in 2004 is likely to be a more important reason for the rising number of migrants in this period. The spike in 2015-2017 seems to occur during a period of economic recovery and falling unemployment in the UK. However, it is hard to ignore the impact of the 2016 Brexit referendum and the decision to leave the European Union.

EMIGRATING FOR POLITICAL REASONS

There is no obvious tradition in recent history of people leaving the UK for political reasons. Nevertheless, the contention of this paper is that politics is often a contributory factor and, at times, a key factor in the processes of deciding to move abroad or to return to the 'home' country. Politics here is taken to mean those decisions of government that have a direct impact on the lives of citizens, in the form of legislation or promotion and reinforcement of political views and values, often through mass media, that lead groups or individuals to become disenfranchised (imagined or real) and feel disconnected from the society they live in. To the best of my knowledge, there is no major study that investigates the incidence of British citizens leaving the country of their birth or not returning for political reasons.

Due to a shared language and the transatlantic overlap of popular culture and news feeds, US culture has a significant impact on British popular imaginations. By contrast, there is no apparent strong affinity for the European project with the majority of the British population. It is interesting, therefore, to observe that more than one important study has investigated the political motivations of American emigrants. Wennersten[7] found that citizens leaving the USA for political reasons were often graduates from non-technical backgrounds who expressed dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the political system and also complained about a lack of suitable employment opportunities. Due to structural factors that restricted internal migration, these graduates increasingly sought a life outside of the United States. More recently, Klekowski von Koppenfels[8] studied the lives of US emigrants living in the UK, France and Germany. In her sample, 4.5% revealed that politics was the primary reason for leaving the USA.

The last decade has seen a growing number of articles devoted to migration flows in the European Union caused to a large degree by political disillusionment.[9] To take one example, Bygnes[10] documented how many citizens left Spain not because of the economic crisis but because they disliked the kind of society they saw developing there. This phenomenon also includes newer members of the European Union, such as Romania,[11] where political dissatisfaction is an important factor in recent intra-European migration. Romanians leave for Western European countries to escape a post-communist era that has offered little economic betterment for ordinary citizens. A recent study of Polish trainee doctors[12] also indicates that, ahead of low wages, long hours and work organisation, the socio-political situation is the strongest push factor in explaining the likelihood of leaving Poland after completing their studies.

The possibility of moving to another country in the European Union can be traced to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which boosted the idea of a pan-European citizenship.[13] This vision was realised when the 1993 Maastricht Treaty created European

7 J.R. Wennersten, *Leaving America: The New Expatriate Generation*, Westport 2008.

8 A. Klekowski Koppenfels, *Migrants or Expatriates? Americans in Europe*, Basingstoke 2014.

9 C.G. Enríquez, "Country Focus: Migration of Spanish Nationals during the Crisis," *Elcano Royal Institute*, 17 June 2014, at https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/work-document/country-focus-migration-of-spanish-nationals-during-the-crisis/, 27 January 2025; A. Triandafyllidou, R. Gropas, "'Voting with Their Feet': Highly Skilled Emigrants from Southern Europe," *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 58, no. 12 (2014), pp. 1614-1633; D. Valisena, "From Migrations to New Mobilities in the European Union: Italians in Berlin between Anomie and Multi-Situated Identity," *AEMI Journal*, vol. 1, no. 13-14 (2016), pp. 174-181; S. Bygnes, "Migrants of Disillusion: European South-North Mobility in the Wake of the Crisis," *Sosiologisk Tidsskrift*, no. 3 (2015), pp. 171-192; S. Bygnes, "Are They Leaving Because of the Crisis? The Sociological Significance of *Anomie* as a Motivation for Migration," *Sociology,* vol. 51, no. 2 (2017), pp. 258-273.

10 S. Bygnes, "Migrants of Disillusion...".

11 S. Bygnes, A. Flipo, "Political Motivations for Intra-European Migration," *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 60, no. 3 (2016), pp. 199-212.

12 M. Duszczyk et al., "Will We Lose Our Doctors? Migration Plans of Polish Medical Students," *Migration Policy Practice*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2023), pp. 26-31.

13 E. Recchi, *Mobile Europe: The Theory and Practice of Free Movement in the EU*, Basingstoke 2015, p. 26.

citizenship as an identity, bestowing a conditional right to freely move and reside in any member state of the Union. Janoschka[14] refers to a Europe as a 'community of values' which include democratic institutions, human rights and tolerance as substantial elements of the European identity. Barton[15] claimed that an increasing number of British citizens were moving to countries that better aligned with their politics, suggesting that working online has made physical relocation easier than in the past.

ANOMIC EXIT AND PERSONAL POLITICS

Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*[16] outlined three options when faced with the decline of a business or political system. 'Voice' concerns a public and active expression of dissatisfaction, and the collective agentic intervention of individuals to shape the futureactions of the company or polity. In a sense, voting in a general election is an example of the chance to give voice to one's individual and collective political concerns. By contrast, 'exit' may be seen as a 'passive' reaction of an individual who feels, or is, disenfranchised.Hoffmann suggested that Hirschman's concept might be employed in understanding transnational migration in *the overlapping and simultaneity of these categories.*[17]

Traditionally, the concept of anomie focused on the consequences of social, economic, or political crises that ushered in rapid change, particularly in agreed social norms. Through studying the social roots of suicide, Durkheim[18] presented anomie as a concept based on a macro-level collective perception of the breakdown of social integration. The concept was adapted by Merton[19] and revised by Messner and Rosenfeld[20] to address the more social context of individual values and belief systems to focus on personal achievement in the USA, a country characterised by stark discrepancies in income equality, and with low levels of general trust. The use of the concept of anomie to focus on the issue of crime and deviance led to the popularity of a number of scales for measuring anomie and alienation. However, these were gradually replaced increasingly by an emphasis on

[14] M. Janoschka, "Between Mobility and Mobilization – Lifestyle Migration and the Practice of European Identity in Political Struggles," *The Sociological Review*, vol. 58, no. 2 (2010), pp. 270-290.

[15] E. Barton, "The People Moving to Countries That Fit Their Politics," *BBC*, 16 February 2017, at https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20170216-the-people-moving-to-countries-that-fit-their-politics, 27 January 2025.

[16] A.O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, Cambridge 1970.

[17] B. Hoffmann, "Bringing Hirschman Back in: 'Exit', 'Voice', and 'Loyalty' in the Politics of Transnational Migration," *The Latin Americanist*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2010), pp. 57-73.

[18] E. Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, transl. by J.A. Spaulding, G. Simpson, London–New York 2005.

[19] R.K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 3, no. 5 (1938), pp. 672-682.

[20] S.F. Messner, R. Rosenfeld, *Crime and the American Dream*, Belmont 2007.

the individual cognitive interpretation of the social environment. Konty[21], for example, highlights the frustration, anger and fear that can arise when individuals are unable to realise their interests, underlining the possibility of finding legitimate solutions to such obstacles and satisfying personal goals. Meštrović and Brown[22] extended the understanding of this phenomenon beyond the macro-level of society, claiming this condition could also be experienced on a micro-level by individuals. Blanco & Diaz[23] also focused on the perceptions and experience of individuals in the social world and its impact on social well-being and integration. Noting the various interpretations of anomie, Bjarnason[24] referred to it as *a complex, dynamic concept* that can be applied to both the social context and an individual's state of mind. However, to be properly understood, anomie should be studied in both macro- and micro-level contexts

This paper maintains that, over time, significant legal and political decisions in the UK have created a context (macro-level) in which a number of individuals (micro-level) have experienced personal disorientation, alienation and disillusionment, thus contributing in a significant way to their decision to leave the country.

ANOMIE IN THE UK

"Let me tell you how it will be. There's one for you, nineteen for me"
('Taxman' – The Beatles)

According to George Harrison of the Beatles, in 1966, *Anybody who ever made any money moved to America or somewhere else*.[25] The Beatles were just one example of how rich and successful Brits opted to reside outside of the country for some time to avoid paying high taxes on their earnings. Although the practice of offshoring fortunes by the very rich is a subject of great interest, it is not the focus of this paper. What this example highlights, however, is the potential role of political decisions in the lives of individuals and communities, and the feelings and actions they provoke.

In 1980, Margaret Thatcher referred to the issue mentioned above, saying *Britain must stop being the kind of country that drives success into exile*.[26] Setting out her political

[21] M. Konty, "Microanomie: The Cognitive Foundations of the Relationship between Anomie and Deviance," *Criminology*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2005), pp. 107-132.

[22] S.G. Meštrović, H.M. Brown, "Durkheim's Concept of Anomie as Dérèglement," *Social Problems*, vol. 33, no. 2 (1985), pp. 81-99.

[23] A. Blanco, D. Díaz, "Social Order and Mental Health: A Social Wellbeing Approach," *Psychology in Spain*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2007), pp. 61-71.

[24] T. Bjarnason, "Anomie among European Adolescents: Conceptual and Empirical Clarification of a Multilevel Sociological Concept," *Sociological Forum*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2009), pp. 135-161.

[25] Quoted in J. Whatley, "The One George Harrison Song That Changed The Beatles Forever," *Far Out*, 10 May 2023, at https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-george-harrison-song-changed-the-beatles-forever/, 27 January 2025.

[26] M. Thatcher, "Speech to Conservative Women's Conference," *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, p. 6, at https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104368, 27 January 2025.

creed of cutting taxes and following the American model of small government, she confided, *I believe people accept that there's no real alternative*.[27] The TINA[28] justification for an era of globalised capital and neo-liberal market-led economics ushered in a raft of political measures to deregulate and privatise industry, particularly financial services. An economic boom lasting 16 years saw the UK restructured as the first globalised service economy in a Europe that was rapidly becoming post-industrial. With property prices growing almost threefold over a decade, personal wealth grew significantly for a certain portion of society. For many, however, the successes of the financial sector and wealth of London and its surrounding counties did not 'trickle down' and spread evenly across the whole country.

Boltanski and Chiapello[29] suggested that levels of anomie increased in this period of 'late modernity', caused not only by the reality of mass employment, but also by feelings of powerlessness and pessimism about the future, which constituted a threat to 'ontological Security',[30] thus eroding a sense of well-being and quality of life. Burgi[31] concluded that this rapid transformation to neo-liberal politics engendered *individual and collective anomie by depriving social actors of agency and* voice *while caging them in the disciplinary constraints of an ideal competition society* (my emphasis).

Referring back to Hirschman, within the newly emerging European regime of spatial politics, those who could find their voice or their place might choose to exit the UK and cross the English Channel to seek out new opportunities. Burgi also suggested that feelings of anomie would have been exacerbated after the extreme austerity programmes implemented in the UK as a response to the global economic crisis of 2008-9. In fact, Ryan and Yuval Davis[32] point out the 'double crisis of global neoliberalism' after 2008 whereby austerity measures prioritised the interests of the market over those of citizens.

The collapse of purpose and ideals was especially prominent among highly educated and skilled EU migrants, whose political dissatisfaction and poor career prospects in their home countries grew after the 2008 world economic crisis. Bygnes & Erdal[33] studied the migration of highly educated and skilled Spanish citizens to Norway during the crisis. They found a general rejection of economic motivations, and, instead, a dissatisfaction with thehome country as 'a place with no future'.

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27 Ibid., p. 8.

28 An acronym for There Is No Alternative.

29 L. Boltanski, E. Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London 2005, p. 421.

30 See A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge 1991.

31 N. Burgi, "Societies without Citizens: The Anomic Impacts of Labor Market Restructuring and the Erosion of Social Rights in Europe," *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2014), p. 290.

32 N. Yuval-Davis, L. Ryan, "Talking about Bordering: Prof. Nira Yuval-Davis Interviewed by Prof. Louise Ryan," *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2020), pp. 13-27.

33 S. Bygnes, M.B. Erdal, "Liquid Migration, Grounded Lives: Considerations about Future Mobility and Settlement among Polish and Spanish Migrants in Norway," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2017), pp. 102-118.

It has been argued that the emerging neo-liberal philosophy of late modernity helped to shape 'lifestyle migration' by making people responsible for their own well-being and success in both the present and the future. British citizens with accumulated savings or pensions could exercise agency by investing their capital more advantageously in countries with a lower cost of living – a phenomenon that Hayes[34] calls 'transnational geo-arbitrage'. Until recently, however, there was little empirical evidence of lifestyle migration in Poland. More pertinent is a 1999 survey in ten European countries[35], which found low and broadly comparable unemployment rates among university graduates four years after graduation. More than in any other country, however, British graduates felt underemployed in their work, which did not utilise or require their university knowledge (25%). The proportion assessing their work situation as disappointing and dissatisfying was also the highest (18%). Discussing Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Rutledge[36] argued that none of those needs could be met without human connection.

A lack of social connection felt by some young British adults was and still could be a key factor in their decision to migrate. Young adults, usually university-educated and at the beginning of their working lives, or disillusioned by lack of professional success and looking for a better life, made up a large proportion of the teachers coming to Poland between the 1989 transition and EU accession. The 'entrepreneurial self-fashioning'[37] required of individuals in the face of poor employment prospects and reduced resources available from the state led a number of young people to exit the UK in the early to mid-1990s. The rate of unemployment peaked at just over 10% in 1993 and opportunities to teach English abroad attracted many young people to the post-socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe, as the following examples from my research illustrate:

- University-educated and unable to find suitable work, David watched the Berlin Wall come down on the television in 1989 and announced to his flatmates; *If the Tories win the next election, I'm leaving this country.* At the age of 25 in 1993, having earned a TEFL[38] certificate at a local community college, he secured employment at a teacher training college in a small city in Poland.
- Kevin dreamed of being his own boss and running his own business in Greater London; inspired by the entrepreneurial spirit promoted by government, he tried a number of small business projects and opened two different shops, but his business was hit by economic recession and he was bankrupt by the mid-1980s: *I lost*

[34] M. Hayes, "'We Gained a Lot over What We Would Have Had': The Geographic Arbitrage of North American Lifestyle Migrants to Cuenca, Ecuador," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 40, no. 12 (2014), pp. 1953-1971.

[35] U. Teichler, "Graduate Employment and Work in Europe: Diverse Situations and Common Perceptions," *Tertiary Education and Management*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2002), p. 213.

[36] P.B. Rutledge, "Social Networks: What Maslow Misses," *Psychology Today*, 8 November 2011, at https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/positively-media/201111/social-networks-what-maslow-misses-0, 27 January 2025.

[37] J. Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*, London 2018.

[38] Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

my flat, I lost my car, I was down to virtually zero money, I was on the dole…I wanted to be my own boss and all my little projects failed. Aged 30 in 1991, he had a chance encounter with a group of young seasonal workers from Poland in a pub in Kent, who suggested that he should come to Poland at the end of summer to teach English teachers. Feeling he had nothing to lose, he thought to himself *OK. Let's go. Let's see what's on the other side of the world.*

- Aged 31 in 1994, Lee had eventually completed a university degree but felt his life was going nowhere. Having had a number of uninspiring jobs, he often thought about his hometown in the Midlands, *You can't get far enough away!* After a couple of years working in Poland, all three had secure positions at Polish universities, which gave their lives greater freedom and occupational rewards.
- Aged 25 in 1995, Jill was living in a northern post-industrial city. She admits, *I always knew that I was going to leave there as soon as I could. I never liked living there.* After studying at university, she decided that she would like to see a bit of the world, signed up for a CELTA course and moved to Warsaw to teach English.
- It would be a mistake to think that anomic migration is only the preserve of disaffected left-leaning young adults. In 1997, aged 33, Paul moved to Poland to escape what he considered increasing political correctness in the UK. Starting his first teaching job in the south-east of Poland, he proclaims: *I felt the shackles fall off…there was no self-censorship*.

The examples above highlight the bleak outlook some young adults felt in early-1990s Britain. Rapid deindustrialisation had left many urban centres as unemployment blackspots and the small businesses of young entrepreneurs often failed. In addition, university education did not necessarily lead to rewarding or meaningful work. The end of the Cold War and the opening up of post-socialist economies such as Poland's to those with business or language-teaching skills seemed like a risk worth taking for young people hungry for money and success and not seeing that as a realistic possibility in their home country.

The accession of Poland to the European Union in 2004 was another opportunity to respond to a feeling of disaffection in the UK, often partially motivated by changes in society that were directly or indirectly attributed to domestic politics.

- Carl, an ex-serviceman in his late-20s, moved to Poland in 2006 as a security worker. He believed the Labour prime minister Tony Blair and his left-wing policies had ruined the country: *it was a tipping point…I had nothing to lose.*
- Pam and Jim are now retired and are quite frank about their reasons for leaving London: *we lived in London our whole lives and we felt like second class citizens, so we moved out…the reason we left was because there's nothing for people our age*. Underpinning their flight from the city, followed by relocation to Poland in 2006, was a feeling of their world and opportunities for peaceful retirement being slowly eroded.

All of the voices represented above are representative of a state of mind in which, at a fairly early stage in their lives – but also in later life – people can feel that they do not belong in a community or that they are constrained by their environment, and

eventually decide to leave in order to find a better or at least a different life. Here, we can draw on Berlant's[39] concept of 'cruel optimism' - our attachment to the quest for a good life and a 'cluster of promises' promoted in Western capitalism. The often-unrealistic expectations that hard work leads to a good life can be destroyed when our sacrifices go unrewarded and our dreams unfulfilled. According to Berlant, this precarious experience of 'non-sovereignty' can be overwhelming and the normalisation and acceptance of multiple crises ensures that life feels *more like desperate doggy paddling than like a magnificent swim out to the horizon.*[40] Building on the concept of 'impasse' – a feeling of being unmoored and adrift in the vortex of events in a seemingly accelerating world – Marotta[41] claims that despite being conscious of the existential threats, people are worn down by their sheer number. Aware that we are limited by forces often beyond our control, the ability to move and to affect our destiny even in a small way means that we can 'feel at home in the world'.[42]

LINKED LIVES AND THE 'HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT'

The idea of creating a hostile environment for migrants dates back to the late 1990s, with its origins in a range of 'processes and perceptions', including globalisation, party politics, UK and EU legal frameworks, public attitudes towards migration, and the mainstream media.[43]

In 2010, Home Secretary Theresa May planned to step up measures for tackling undocumented migrants *to create...a really hostile environment for illegal migration*.[44] She aimed to restrict access to social benefits, housing, health care, work and education for these migrants and their families in the UK, with the intention of forcing them to leave.[45]

[39] L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham–London 2011, p. 23.

[40] Ibid., p. 117.

[41] B. Anderson et al., "Encountering Berlant Part One: Concepts Otherwise," *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 189, no. 1 (2023), pp. 117-142.

[42] J. Coates, "The Cruel Optimism of Mobility: Aspiration, Belonging, and the 'Good Life' among Transnational Chinese Migrants in Tokyo," *Positions Asia Critique*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2019), p. 471.

[43] W. Somerville, *Immigration under New Labour*, Bristol 2017, p. 147.

[44] Quoted in J. Kirkup, R. Winnett, "Theresa May Interview: 'We're Going to Give Illegal Migrants a Really Hostile Reception,'" *The Telegraph*, 25 May 2012, at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/theresa-may-interview-going-give-illegal-migrants-really-hostile/, 27 January 2025.

[45] D. Webber, "Trends in European Political (Dis)Integration: An Analysis of Postfunctionalist and Other Explanations," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 26, no. 8 (2019), pp. 1134-1152.

Fig 2. Government advertisement used to 'scare' migrants in the hostile environment.[46]

Among commentators who investigated the role of the media in promoting an anti-migrant discourse, Threadgold[47] believed that press activity did affect policy, indicating that the mainstream media tended to focus on the issue of controlling migration. Buchanan & Grillo[48] found that six national newspapers failed to differentiate between asylum seekers and economic migrants, repeatedly chose images that depicted young foreign men as a threat to the general population, and regularly relied on unsourced migration statistics or failed to explain or challenge official government statistics. There is, therefore, strong evidence that sections of the UK press not only reflect political policy on immigration but also influence policy change through its reporting of the issue. Subsequently, newspapers also shape and exemplify public opinion on immigration.[49]

The hostile environment of May and her Conservative successors transformed landlords, bank clerks and health workers into proxy enforcers of border security. The lowest point in this politicised migration landscape was the 'Windrush scandal' of 2017-2018, during which British subjects who had lawfully settled in the UK before 1973

[46] G. Philo, "Our Hysterical Media Helped Create the Immigrant 'Go Home' Van," *The Guardian*, 8 August 2013, at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/08/media-immigrant-go-home-van, 27 January 2025.

[47] T. Threadgold, *The Media and Migration in the United Kingdom, 1999 to 2009*, Washington, D.C. 2009, p. 14.

[48] S. Buchanan, B. Grillo, "What's the Story? Reporting on Asylum in the British Media," *Forced Migration Review*, January 2004, at https://www.fmreview.org/reproductive-health/buchanan-grillo, 27 January 2025.

[49] See Cohen's classic work on how the media create 'folk devils and moral panics' – S. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, London–New York 1972.

were denied rights to health care, work and benefits. A number were detained or deported despite having lived almost their whole lives in the UK until the scandal was brought to light. A recent psychiatric study of Black Caribbean citizens found that they have worse mental health relative to the white population, particularly as a result of media coverage of the Windrush scandal.[50] Analysing the language of the hostile environment, Goodfellow[51] stated that it can create borders between people that racialise and exclude. A 2018 parliamentary inquiry into the scandal[52] also voiced concerns that other groups subject to immigration control, such as the approximately three million EU citizens resident in the UK, might experience problems with the immigration system in the future.

Several participants in my research project shared their personal insights on how the hostile environment affected friends and family while living in the UK and how these events were a major reason for their leaving the country. Mel (m, 40s) recounts how his daughter was abused at a school in London in 2003. Although she had a 'native' English accent and name, one parent discovered that her mother was Polish and told other parents. Subsequently, the children began to tell her that their mothers had told them not to play with 'foreigners' Another example is Scott (m, 50s), who relocated from Poland with his wife and son after his mother passed away. In 2006-7, he was aware of the growing resentment toward migrants, and his wife began to feel very uncomfortable in England, so they decided to return to Poland. Owen (m, 20s) also noticed the shift in attitudes and worried whether his family would be abused if they were speaking Polish in public. Derek (m, 60s), who admits to previously being a 'Little Englander', now has no interest in returning to the UK and visits as little as possible after several Polish friends in the UK were verbally abused and told to go 'back home'.

It has become clear, particularly in recent decades, that couples often consider moving even when only one partner is unhappy.[53] Therefore, it is important to see households as collections of 'linked lives'.[54] Whilst the majority of British citizens coming to Poland before EU accession tended to be single, post-accession migration showed a marked rise in the number of British-Polish couples coming to Poland after several

[50] A. Jeffery et al., "The Effect of Immigration Policy Reform on Mental Health in People from Minoritised Ethnic Groups in England: An Interrupted Time Series Analysis of Longitudinal Data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study Cohort," *The Lancet Psychiatry*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2024), pp. 183-192.

[51] M. Goodfellow, *Hostile Environment*: *How Immigrants Became Scapegoats*, London 2019.

[52] "The Windrush Generation," *parliament.uk*, 3 July 2018, at https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhaff/990/99003.htm# idTextAnchor000, 27 January 2025.

[53] R. Coulter, M. van Ham, P. Feijten, "Partner (Dis)Agreement on Moving Desires and the Subsequent Moving Behaviour of Couples," *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2012), pp. 16-30.

[54] G.H. Elder Jr., M.K. Johnson, R. Crosnoe, "The Emergence and Development of Life Course Theory," in J.T. Mortimer, M.J. Shanahan (eds), *Handbook of the Life Course*, Boston 2003, pp. 3-19; A.J. Bailey, M.K. Blake, T.J. Cooke, "Migration, Care, and the Linked Lives of Dual-Earner Households," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, vol. 36, no. 9 (2004), pp. 1617-1632.

years spent together in the UK. Bratman[55] suggested that the fundamental structures of agency associated with the individual can be shared when the plans for agency are interconnected. In this way, an individual may share agency and make compromises with a life partner in order to coordinate plans and actions as a unit. There is strong evidence of such shared agency in my research among couples arriving in Poland after EU accession.

BREXIT AS A REASON TO EMIGRATE

Related to the previous point is the sharp rise in British emigration to the European Union in the period 2016-18 (up by 30% on figures for 2008-15)[56], which most probably reflected reactions to the result of the UK referendum on leaving the European Union. There is a number of possible reasons for this spike, including fears of the hostile environment in the UK, the changing legal status of family members, and worries concerning loss of rights such as freedom of movement and the right to work within the EU.

The vilification of EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe in the UK press, has been documented by Azarova[57], and Radziwinowiczówna and Galasińska[58], among others. Hostility towards EU migrants during and after the Brexit referendum disrupted their feelings of belonging and sense of identity in the UK.[59] Although the view is contested, many EU citizens living in the UK perceived the vote for Brexit as an anti-immigration statement by the nation, particularly within the context of the Conservative government's ongoing policy of creating a 'hostile environment' for immigrants. As the son of Irish immigrants, Jay (m, 30s) remembers feeling insulted by the rhetoric of much of the English press. Whilst he knew it was not directed at him, he was also aware of the anti-immigrant feelings towards the Irish in the past and felt that the UK was becoming increasingly intolerant towards all migrants.

Virtually overnight, Brexit changed the legal status of individuals within many families. The processes involved in leaving the European Union deepened or introduced

[55] M.E. Bratman, "Shared Cooperative Activity," *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 101, no. 2 (1992), pp. 327-341.

[56] M. Benson, "Emigration in Brexit Times: Why Are British Citizens Moving to the EU?," *UK in a Changing Europe*, 7 August 2020, at https://ukandeu.ac.uk/emigration-in-brexit-times-why-are-british-citizens-moving-to-the-eu/, 27 January 2025.

[57] A. Azarova, "Eastern Europe According to British Media: More Likely to Go to Italy for Cappuccinos Than Join the Ethnic Fighting in Kosovo," *Political Critique*, 17 August 2017, at http://politicalcritique.org/cee/2017/azarova-uk-media-eastern-europe-western-representation, 27 January 2025.

[58] A. Radziwinowiczówna, A. Galasińska, "The Vile Eastern European: Ideology of Deportability in the Brexit Media Discourse," *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2021), pp. 75-93.

[59] T. Guma, R.D. Jones, "'Where Are We Going to Go Now?' European Union Migrants' Experiences of Hostility, Anxiety, and (Non-)Belonging during Brexit," *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-10.

new borders into the lives of families and often played a decisive role in decisions to move orstay.[60] Among those affected were the Polish life partners and children of British citizens. Increasing equality in relationships and the fact that family units are not always constituted around marriage have led to more women taking a leading role in the decision-making process, particularly in self-initiated migration.

One example is Gary's partner, Ewa, who, despite having a Master's in English, could not teach due to changes in UK regulations. When the café she worked in closed down, the couple reassessed their situation and decided there were few advantages in staying in England long-term. As Gary explains: *when she was feeling that England wasn't going to be her place, we decided, yeah, let's do it...because she has opportunities [in Poland] and I would have a job to come to.* Duda-Mikulin[61] has found that highly educated women, in particular, are dissatisfied with the lack of opportunities to realise their cultural capital on the British labour market. Brexit has also brought significant disruption to their lives, leaving female workers who may have spent their entire employed lives in the UK feeling betrayed and unwanted.

In examining the linked lives of married couples in migration, Bailey et al.[62] also suggested that the impact on children of all ages, including those not yet born, can have a significant influence on the decision to migrate. Added to this would be the costs of childcare and the potential for extended family support, especially with young children. Net childcare costs in 2008, based on the average earnings of a married couple, were more than three times higher in the UK than in Poland. In 2019 the OECD estimated that the UK had the second most expensive childcare in the world – at 35.7% of a couple's average earnings, whilst the figure for Poland was just under 15%.[63] One of the hidden factors in these statistics is the amount of help with childcare that is received from close family, in particular grandparents. It is not unusual in Poland to hear of people who have lived with a grandparent in one household or who were brought up by one.

BREXIT IN POLAND

After the result of the Brexit referendum in 2016, leading to the UK withdrawing from the European Union in January 2020, many participants reported feelings of shock and disorientation. More importantly for this paper, the referendum was a political decision that significantly affected the lives of British citizens and their families living in the

[60] E. Zambelli, M. Benson, N. Sigona, "Brexit Rebordering, Sticky Relationships and the Production of Mixed-Status Families," *Sociology*, vol. 58, no. 3 (2023), pp. 605-622.

[61] E.A. Duda-Mikulin, "*Should I Stay or Should I Go Now?* Exploring Polish Women's Returns 'Home,'" *International Migration*, vol. 56, no. 4 (2018), pp. 140-153.

[62] A.J. Bailey, M.K. Blake, T.J. Cooke, "Migration...".

[63] S. Fleming, "These Countries Have the Most Expensive Childcare," *World Economic Forum*, 23 April 2019, at https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/these-countries-have-the-most-expensive-childcare/, 27 January 2025.

EU. Many had been astonished to find they were not eligible to vote in the referendum due to having lived abroad for over 15 years. Therefore, the decision to leave the EU had been made on their behalf and without their involvement.

Table 2: Referendum data for UK citizens in Poland

Brexit Referendum data for UK citizens in Poland (n=60)
Opinion on Brexit
Remain 52
Leave 8
Voted in referendum
Remain 10
Leave 3
Eligible but did not vote
21
Ineligible to vote (15-year rule)
26

As Table 2 (above) clearly shows, an overwhelming majority of the sample (n=60) of British citizens living long-term in Poland opposed Brexit and wanted the UK to remain part of the European Union. Despite being eligible to vote, one third of the sample decided not to, often citing difficulties with the voting procedures. However, almost half of the respondents were surprised to discover that they were ineligible to vote in the referendum due to their having lived outside of the UK for more than 15 years. Realising that the resounding Conservative victory in the general election of December 2020 election had taken the Brexit process beyond the point of return, a few were still very angry, many were sad and frustrated, but most had moved on, describing themselves as 'ambivalent', 'generally indifferent' and 'rather detached'. No one was optimistic about the future of their birthplace and some felt a particular bitterness about what they perceived to be happening in their country. Eve felt that Europhobia and racism had been used *to execute a take-over of the UK* and complained *I see fewer and fewer heroes as role-models, whilst scoundrels and charlatans abound.* Others echoed the idea of having been betrayed by politicians but also felt that the political mood had changed in a country they no longer recognised as their own.

Harry (m, 60s): *by distancing [yourself] from the UK for long enough, you almost cut off your natural path home, and I think I've done that.*
Jamie (m, 40s): *the UK doesn't really make any attempt to connect people abroad... so I've no connection back.*

In the years since the Brexit referendum, with the damage they feel has been inflicted upon their homeland, many British citizens living long-term in Poland feel a sense of disconnection from the UK and most do not envisage a future return to the UK as an option.Some long-term residents in Poland who attempted to return to the UK failed to reintegrate, finding the work available uninspiring or poorly paid compared to their previous employment in Poland, when taking the costs of living into consideration. This phenomenon, found by White[64] in the experiences of Polish migrants, can be called 'double return'. It is a realisation that 'home' is now in a foreign country. After this failure to 'return', migrants often create more permanent structures for life abroad, often by committing themselves more fully to local social networks.

The vast majority of UK citizens living long-term in Poland before the Brexit referendum have secured the rights to live and work in their country of residence under the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement. However, they have no right to free onward movement for the purpose of residence or employment in other EU member states. Many blame the UK government for removal of these rights and the lack of predictability concerning future rules and rights. They are bitter towards the UK government for their disenfranchisement in the referendum vote and almost complete political disenfranchisement in both their home and host countries, as well as poor feedback from governmental authorities concerning these issues.

CHANGING IDENTITIES

At the turn of the century, Garton Ash[65] suggested that British people tend not to identify themselves as Europeans due to the competing identities that make up the four nations of the United Kingdom. In addition, he posited an imagined transatlantic identity shared with the USA and other English-speaking countries of the Old Commonwealth, which leaves very little chance for a European identity to take root. A Eurobarometer survey on European identities conducted the year before the Brexit Referendum found that around two-thirds of British citizens identified exclusively with their given national identity and around one-third saw themselves as British and European, in that order.[66] However, a recent surveyof British citizens actually living in the European Union after Brexit[67] found that 23% of them have dual or multiple nationalities. Of those who had left the UK to live in an EU country since the referendum, just over 40% claimed that Brexit had affected their migration plans a lot or a great deal,

[64] A. White, "Double Return Migration: Failed Returns to Poland Leading to Settlement Abroad and New Transnational Strategies," *International Migration*, vol. 52, no. 6 (2014), pp. 72-84.

[65] T. Garton Ash, "Is Britain European?," *International Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 1 (2001), pp. 1-13.

[66] A. Kiersh, E. Holodny, "This Chart Shows which Europeans Are the Least Likely to Consider Themselves European," *Business Insider*, 21 April 2016, at https://www.businessinsider.com/british-dont-think-they-are-european-2016-4?IR=T, 27 January 2025.

[67] M. Benson et al., "British Citizens in the EU after Brexit," *MIGZEN Research Brief*, no. 1 (2022), pp. 1-16.

and 80% reported that Brexit had changed their feelings towards the UK a lot or a great deal. Like the opinions mentioned in the previous section, many felt a sense of shame and disconnection from their country due to its political actions.

As European citizens who exercised their right to freedom of movement for over 15 years, most British citizens had not felt the need or the desire to acquire Polish citizenship. Their transnational practices, included semi-regular visits to the UK, interaction with family and friends via social media, and accessing English-language media content, meant that they could adopt the lifestyle of 'flexible citizens'.[68] Erica (f, 50s) states, *I don't feel I belong to Poland or have any duty towards the state beyond paying taxes... I don't want to take Polish citizenship, at all. I have no sentimental need for it*. Similarly, Kevin (m, 50s) claims, *I can live anywhere... I lived in about 20 places... I don't get attached.* Many came to live in Europe well before Brexit. They are quite often university graduates who speak a foreign language and who are aligned more clearly with an imagined European identity. As a result, despite their years of residence in Poland, many respondents in my research still feel like 'outsiders looking in'.

Life in migration challenged the self-perception of participants and the shifts in identity they have made to accommodate the perceived threats of Brexit and the context of living abroad long-term. After Brexit, Jill (f, 50s) stated *I've been an EU citizen all my life and I feel like I am losing part of myself.* While few felt they had developed a specifically Polish identity, those with access to other European identities felt conflicted by the situation. Those with a possibility of applying for Irish citizenship had mixed feelings about applying for it. Aron (m, 30s) described it as *an accident of birth*. Jess (f, 40s) believed it would make her feel like a fraud – the same reason she gave for not acquiring Polish citizenship. However, Jay (m, 30s), who obtained an Irish passport, claims he feels European and has a growing affinity with Poland.

Interestingly, a large number of participants state a feeling of belonging to Europe. Jeff (m, 50s) claims to have felt European during his whole working life. Carol (f, 40s), who is relaxed about her hyphenated 'British-European' identity, intends to leave Poland when her daughter finishes school. She imagines working in many European countries, but not the UK. Scott does not feel English when visiting UK now and claims, *I've always known I was more European*. Kevin feels that he has achieved the freedom he desired by moving to Europe, but his attitudes reflect a juggling of identities over the long term: *I embrace Europe. I've tried to embrace Poland, but I still feel very English*. Throughout his career, Billy (m, 60s) has worked with colleagues and friends from all around Europe and it does generate a kind of a self-identity of being 'a European' – proximity of borders and Vienna *my self-identity is now more European*. Philip (m, 40s), having lived abroad for 17 years, now classifies himself as European. Since the Brexit referendum, these people tend to perceive the UK as backward-looking and narrow-minded. Now, having left what some call 'Little England', the majority have evolved new identities and show scant interest in returning to the UK.

[68] See A. Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Durham–London 1999.

These findings bear out and lend further support to the question of the emotional connection Brits in the EU feel towards national and international spaces of belonging. While only 31% felt very or extremely attached emotionally to the UK, 59% felt this way about their country of residence, and 75% felt this attachment to the European Union.[69] Barwick[70] also noted how Brits in Berlin brought meaning to the idea of being 'European' utilising it as a symbolical identifier synonymous with openness, tolerance and diversity. With reference to the transatlantic identity Garton Ash hinted at earlier, it may be that a European identity has superseded it to give British citizens a supranational identity on the European continent which is easier for them to identify with than a single European national identity.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN?

A key impact of Brexit on EU citizens is the long-running uncertainty connected with its processes.[71] One in 25 married or cohabiting couples in Britain have one UK-born and one EU-born partner[72] and members of these UK-EU families are now affected by the rules of the UK immigration system. EU citizens in the UK often live with the feeling that they are not wanted, despite many years of working hard, paying taxes and building their lives in the country.

Aside from feelings of dislocation and anger, another simple reason why many British citizens cannot return to the UK is a legal one. According to Home Office rules, anyone who sponsors a spouse, partner or child to live in the UK must be able to support them financially. In 2012, the rules on immigration changed to prevent migrants from outside the EU earning less than £18,600 from bringing their spouse or partner join them in the UK; the costs are higher if children are involved. Since January 2021, this rule now applies to British citizens who wish to return to the UK with their partners and other dependents. Several interviewees stated they were deeply resentful that their partners should be treated in this way and were adamant that the UK is not a country they would seek to move to in the future. Andrew (m, 40s) wondered where 'home' was now that he was settled with a family in Poland: *before children I felt more connected with the UK...with children Poland feels a lot more like home.* Other difficulties

[69] M. Benson et al., "British Citizens...".

[70] C. Barwick, "Legal Integration and the Reconfiguration of Identifications: Material and Symbolic Effects of Brexit on British Nationals in Berlin," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* (2021), pp. 1-17.

[71] M. Kilkey, L. Ryan, "Unsettling Events: Understanding Migrants' Responses to Geopolitical Transformative Episodes through a Life-Course Lens," *International Migration Review*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2021), pp. 227-253.

[72] K. Charsley, H. Wray, "'Just the Rich Can Do It': Our Research Shows How Immigration Income Requirements Devastate Families," *The Conversation*, 5 December 2023, at https://theconversation.com/just-the-rich-can-do-it-our-research-shows-how-immigration-income-requirements-devastate-families-219246?s=09, 27 January 2025.

are bound to arise as a result of this new structural barrier for Brits who might consider some sort of return. Erica, for example, anticipates having to look after her elderly parents, potentially living in England without her husband.

For most British citizens living abroad, choosing to return to the country of their birth with their partner and children at some point always seemed to be an unquestionable right. However, leaving the European Union meant that the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) now applies to their foreign-born dependents. Since income earned abroad does not count towards the MIR, it means, in effect, that the partner holding British citizenship must re-enter the UK tax system, usually returning ahead of dependents to register as fully resident in the country. Aside from the MIR of £18,600, an additional £3,800 must be earned to support a first child and £2,400 for each subsequent child. After applying for the right to live and work in UK for 2.5 years, the partner must repeat the process without access to most benefits or other government assistance. Thus, even eligible applicants can expect considerable expense and a lengthy separation from their partner and children. According to a House of Lords Report,[73] this system *does not promote social cohesion*.

In December 2023, changes were proposed to increase the Minimum Income Requirement for British citizens sponsoring a spouse or partner in the UK from £18,600 to £38,700.[74] The government trumpeted this as the 'biggest clampdown on legal migration Ever'. However, it has caused a great deal of confusion and distress among mixed-status families living in the UK.[75] According to Wray et al.,[76] imposing such a financial burden on bi-national couples and families, or the threat of such action, represents a performative act to deflect from the government's failure to effectively deal with irregular migration. Precipitating financial crisis in such families can be understood as another element in the attempt to create a 'hostile environment', creating other categories of unwanted migrants. Those who might have contemplated returning to the UK faced costs which were already prohibitive. Now the fees are all but unobtainable except for the wealthy few.

Returning to ideas of feeling 'at home' in the world and the 'cruel optimism' of much of life in 'late modernity', Jackson[77] maintained that *we feel at home in the world when what we do has some effect and what we say carries some weight…[it] is a balance between knowing that we are shaped by a world which seems largely outside our grasp, and knowing*

[73] House of Lords, *All Families Matter: An Inquiry into Family Migration*, London 2023, p. 28, at https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/34107/documents/188323/default/#:~:text=Current%20migration%20policies%20are%20at%20odds, 27 January 2025.

[74] Although the increase of the MIR level was to be introduced in Spring 2024, the government later claimed it would be introduced in two stages – £29,000 in spring 2024, then £38,700 in 2025.

[75] K. Stacey, H. Stewart, "Families Face Being Split Up by UK Plan to Cut Legal Migration, Lawyers Say," *The Guardian*, 5 December 2023, at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/05/families-face-being-split-up-by-uk-plan-to-cut-legal-migration-lawyers-say, 27 January 2025.

[76] H. Wray et al., "Introduction to Special Issue: Family Migration in Times of Crisis," *Migration Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2023), pp. 363-379.

[77] M. Jackson, *At Home in the World*, Durham–London 1995, p. 213.

that we, nevertheless, in some small measure, shape it. It seems clear that British citizens who have moved voluntarily to Poland with a considerable degree of social, cultural and symbolic capital and the self-awareness that comes with self-initiated mobility may feel they have more reasons to be optimistic than those who remain in the UK. Living long-term in Poland, they have usually developed long-term relationships and feel connection to the place and people. Many consider themselves to have quite a good life and feel that a return to the UK would be a retrograde step.

Again, these findings seem to support the results of the recent survey of British residents in the EU,[78] 59% of whom have lived continuously in their country of residence for over five years. For the most part, they are settled and plan to stay. Indeed, 78% declared they were unlikely to move to another country in the next five years. Although work and retirement were stated as key reasons for changing country of residence after 2016, a large number also mentioned the importance of family or a partner in moving to an EU country. Bearing in mind these findings and the spike in emigration after the Brexit referendum, it would seem reasonable to draw some kind of causal inference between political events and the decision of some families to emigrate to Poland.

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

Phil 'I feel trapped...I wouldn't step back in Britain for any length of time right now because I do not agree with various choices that have been and are being made'
Jenny 'I've never felt more personally touched by politics in my life.....I don't have a concrete plan [but] I can kind of imagine living in many other European countries'
Mary 'I feel doubly stateless...this is not the country I came to!'
Scott 'Nowhere is particularly fantastic to live at the moment.'

Whilst the vast majority of participants have clearly voiced their intention not to return to the UK, it would be a mistake to assume that all British citizens will remain in Poland for the rest of their lives. Loss of employment, divorce, ill health or the various needs of ageing family members or children may be among the reasons that many could reconsider previously made decisions. Recent interest in 'onward migration'[79] underlines the potential fluidity of migratory movement and the growing tendency to make multiple moves across the lifespan. Whilst acknowledging the critique that most mobile people seek stable and secure lives, Engbersen[80] points out the suitability of 'liquidity' for analysing intra-EU movement, enumerating factors of change, such as the sig-

78 M. Benson et al., "British Citizens...".

79 See J. Ahrens, R. King, *Onward Migration and Multi-Sited Transnationalism: Complex Trajectories, Practices and Ties*, Cham 2023.

80 G. Engbersen, "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*, Cham 2018, p. 65.

nificant expansion of the European Union, the flexibility but uncertainty of the labour market, technological advances, and the 'individualisation of family relations'. Moving to another EU country is still an option for many British citizens if they are married to a Polish partner or if they have acquired citizenship from Poland, Ireland of another EU member state.

This paper illustrates that while political events can influence migration decisions, the life experiences of individuals are shaped by a number of factors inherent in the uncertainty and complexity of modern migration movement. Events such as Poland's transition to democracy after 1989, the creation of EU citizenship, the accession of Poland to the EU in 2004 and the exit of the UK from the Union in 2016 have been the sliding doors that facilitated or hindered movement and migration between the two counties. The research participants highlight diverse experiences: some left the UK decades ago and never looked back, others saw their identification with their home country diminish over time due to political events, and relationships formed across borders further complicate decisions about migration, especially in the face of hostile environments and shifting political landscapes.

For some experts and teachers coming to Poland in the 1990s, disaffection with life in the UK often was often laced with feelings of political grievance, but usually intermixed with a quest for adventure and economic rewards. For the majority of participants arriving after 2004, employment was still a key motivator. However, romantic involvement was often key in the decision to return to Poland with a partner, taking advantage of the freedom of movement conferred on them as EU citizens. The Brexit referendum of 2016 and the change of government in Poland brought politics to the fore once again. The sense of feeling trapped was an unexpected theme which arose during my research interviews. Most British residents in Poland felt their country of residence had changed for the worse. For many, the way in which the Law and Justice (PiS) government in Poland had propelled the country towards an illiberal democracy – undermining the rule of law, tightening control over women's reproductive rights and promoting homophobia - was a reason to consider leaving the country. However, those with children in school do not usually wish to disrupt their education, those with Polish partners have more or less ruled out returning to the UK, and those who are not married to a Polish citizen or an EU citizen have only secured EU rights in their country of residence and would be treated as a third-country national in any other EU country, altogether reinforcing the feeling of being between the devil and the deep blue sea.

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