

END TO DREAM? BRITISH RETIRED RESIDENTS IN SPAIN AND THEIR RETURN PATTERNS

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ABSTRACT

Academic production on residential tourism and retirement migration historically focus on movements of arrival in receiving countries. This assumes both the uni-directionality of migrations and the importance of analysing immigrations from the host society point of view. Other types of migratory flows or mobility such as re-emigrations, return movements or transnationalism are left aside from the academic agenda. One of the factors that difficult the analysis of issues such as re-emigration or return migration is the arduousness of capturing these movements in migration statistics. Even when we have access to such sources of information, their interpretation must be very prudent, since numbers do not always reflect real migrations. In this paper, we focus our analysis both on the British population living in Spain, their arrivals and, mainly, out-migrations. Moreover, the result of the referendum of 23th May 2016 could be key to understanding future exit movements. We will use the Residential Variation Statistics (RVS) developed by the National Statistics Institute (INE) to try to shed some light on this topic.

Keywords: International Migration, Return Migration, Mobility of Retired Migrants, Immigration Law.

JEL Classification: F22, F29, J69, K37

1. INTRODUCTION

Britons are one of the largest foreign population groups in Spain, just after Moroccans and Romanians. In fact, the Mediterranean coast of Spain is one of the territories with a higher concentration of British citizens apart from the Commonwealth countries (Finch, Andrew & Latorre, 2010; Chislett, 2017). Their presence, mainly on the Mediterranean coasts and islands, dates back to the first years of Francoist regime's opening, first as tourists, and later as residents. Nevertheless, British settlements in Spain date back to the 19th century and even before in some locations (Grayson, 2001). British citizens in Spain usually described as a privileged group in the eyes of the host society, in comparison with immigrants from other nationalities who have arrived with labour or economic motivation (Leonard, 2010; Lundström, 2014). In the end, the society applies privilege schemes in which it does not mean the same arriving as a tourist, an expat or a lifestyle migrant than arriving as a migrant worker. We must add the fact that they are perceived as a whole as coming from a developed country and, therefore, with a higher income level than Spaniards (Nash, 1970). Moreover, the relevance of the "tourist" label that most of the Spanish host society uses for almost every north European settler must be taken into account. The combination of these previous factors is key to understanding the arrival, settlement and social integration of those collectives in the first decade of the 21st century.

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Arrival processes are very well documented on the migration academic literature, but it is not possible to say the same with return processes or other types of migration (King, 1978). First, because these other sides of the migration process are less controlled, both by the Administration and the Academy. For example, while the Spanish administration actively control the numbers, characteristics (and legal situation) of those migrants who arrive, there is a lack of control in the register of out-migration. Second, because most of the migration routes in recent history are from South to North. This affects the analysis of migration processes from the point of view of the sending country, which only recently has started to study these movements. Third, because it is very common to perceive migration as a unidirectional and finalist movement, where subsequent moves are not expected after first settlement.

Return movements are one of the possible scenarios once a migration has been performed (Cerase, 1974; Gmelch, 1980; Cassarino, 2004). In the case of the British citizens in Spain, there has been an academic agreement on the minor importance of the phenomenon. This agreement seems to be based on the fact that most of the migrants are retired and emancipated, thus all their needs are covered and do not depend on a uncertain issue as having a job. Moreover, they usually verbalize their desire to stay in Spain until their last day and show behaviours that might lead to believe that they will (i.e. selling their properties in the home country and buying a new one in the receiving country or establishing solid social networks, as well as importing their pension, etcetera). Despite these facts, from 2012 the number of return movements of British citizens from Spain have increased as seen on the media (Govan, 2014; Robinson, 2017; Zafra, 2018). On the other hand, the result of the referendum of 23th May 2016 could unleash future exit movements. Depending on the type of agreement and to what extent it affects Briton's everyday life, the number of returns could be very significant.

2. METHODS

The first thing every migrant -labour or not- must do when they arrive to Spain is to register in the local *Padrón Municipal* (from now on, the Register), even when they are in an irregular situation. This procedure will give them a minimum bunch of rights, like the access to public health or education services. In fact, everyone who is living in Spain for more than six months need an inscription in the local Register by law. Nevertheless, not everyone who lives in Spain is registered at all. It is well known that under-registration is very common, especially among the European citizens, most notably in the case of Britons (Rodríguez, Lardies & Rodríguez, 2010; Ródenas & Martí, 2016). Amidst the reasons behind the under-registration it is possible to find the desire to retain economic or social advantages, as social benefits or pensions paid in pounds, maintain the legal link with the home country or remain invisible to the host country administration and its regulations. In the end, under-registration affects the host municipality as well as its finances and the public services coverage rate, which depend on the amount of people effectively registered.

The main difficulty is how to reach the real number of residents and returnees. For example, the British Embassy in Spain estimates that the total residents are much higher than the numbers on the *Padrón* (Sriskandarajah & Drew, 2006; Rodríguez, Lardiés & Rodríguez, 2010). Of course, the approximation to return movements is affected both by the under-registration and the lack of control on out-migration by the local administration, something that has been solved in the last years with the requirement to confirm residence for those UE citizens without a residence permit. While there is no way to track the movements of British citizens who live under the radar, it is possible to look at those who once were registered. In

the last case, they are monitored when performing an internal migration and if they inform the local authorities in Spain, when the movement is towards an international destination.

What it is not possible to analyse is all those external migrations, which were not informed –not only for British citizens, also for the Spaniards who left the country looking for a job. The database *Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales* (Residential Variations Statistics, from now on *RVS*) also look at the migration destinations, crossed by sociodemographic variables as age, sex or nationality. The *RVS* compile the data on the Register so it is highly reliable for internal migrations and arrivals, but not so trustworthy for out-migrations since it depends on how individuals inform the administration. In any case, the *RVS* is the best available tool now to monitor migrations towards and from Spain, and the one that collects the higher number of cases.

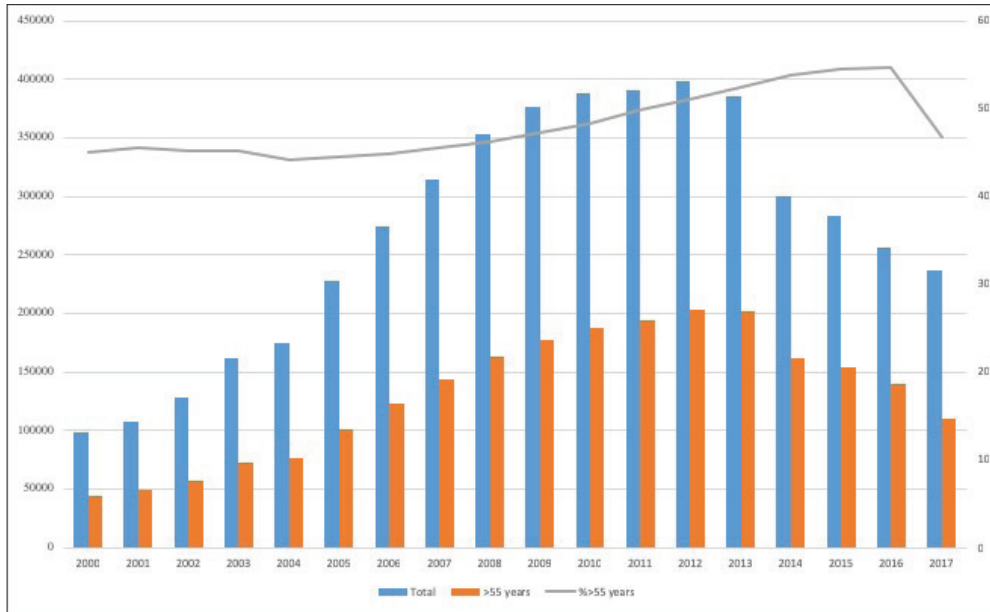
What we try to unveil is the amount of return migration performed by British citizens from Spain in the last years, paying particular attention to the latest available data and trying to establish the profile of the returnee. The update of *RVS* microdata have a year and a half gap, so that the 2017 microdata are not yet available. These data pretend to be the first to show whether the result of the Brexit referendum has influenced the number of returns from Spain.

3. RESULTS

The number of registered people from the United Kingdom in Spain has been growing from the 1950s. In 2012, it reached its peak number in the midst of the economic crisis: 397,892 British residents registered (Figure 1). From that moment on, however, the number of British residents began to decline, reversing a trend that had been positive historically. The reasons behind this demographic contraction are in the registration system itself, but also in the fact that migrations -mostly international retirement migrations- usually end with a return to the country of origin, as we will try to explain.

Migrations from the United Kingdom are couples over 55 years of age. High average age is a typical factor of these migrations, to the extent that around 50% of the British population in Spain is over 55 years old. They are usually located outside the labour market and settled in new dwellings far from urban centres, usually in newly built housing estates or *urbanizaciones* (Membrado, Huete & Mantecón, 2016). They are generally couples with a medium-high purchasing power, although from the first decade of the 21st century onwards, younger families with a lower purchasing power began to arrive looking for a job. In general is a population with difficulties to learn the language of the host society, in part because there are many facilities to insert themselves into what could be called a vicarious society, making intensive use of ethnocentred services such as bars, pubs, supermarkets, professional services, etcetera (Betty, 1997; O'Reilly, 2000; Simó, Herzog & Fleerackers, 2013; Huete, 2016).

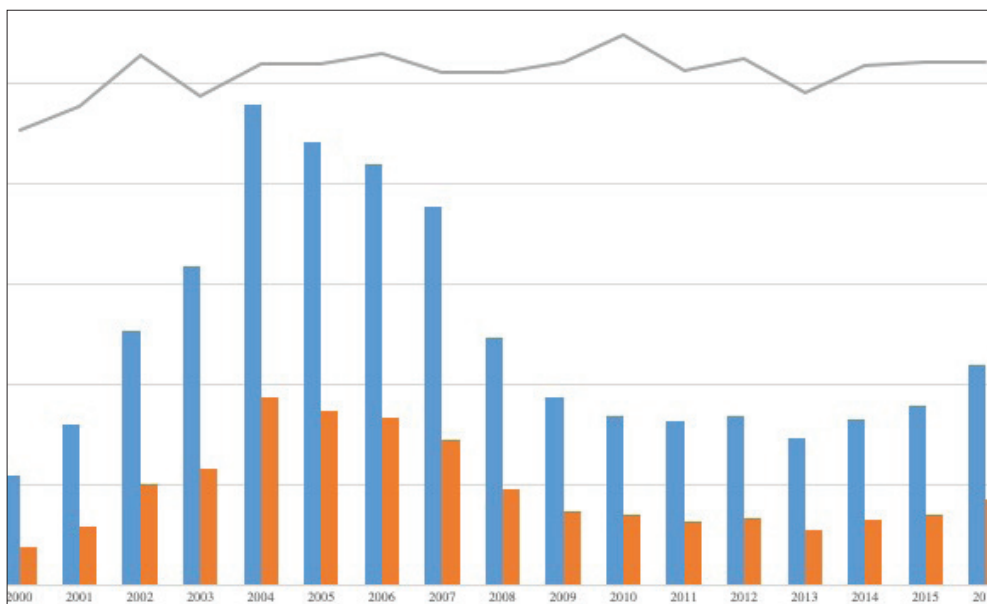
Figure 1. British citizens registered, 2000-2017



Source: Own elaboration from INE, *Continuous Register Statistics* (2018)

These data give us an idea of the importance of the British immigration flow at this time. We find the reasons for this increase in the progressive liberalisation of movements in the European Union; the income differential with the Spanish population; the position of power of the pound sterling at that time; the sunny climate and the existence of a large holiday housing stock resulting from the housing bubble (Membrado, Huete & Mantecón, 2016). It has to be underlined that the real estate sector has obtained huge benefits with the sales associated with these movements, mainly based on the purchase of newly build houses and properties. We should not forget that in some areas, such as Valencia or Murcia, there have been violations of the town planning laws with the aim of building as many houses as possible, even at the risk of being illegal.

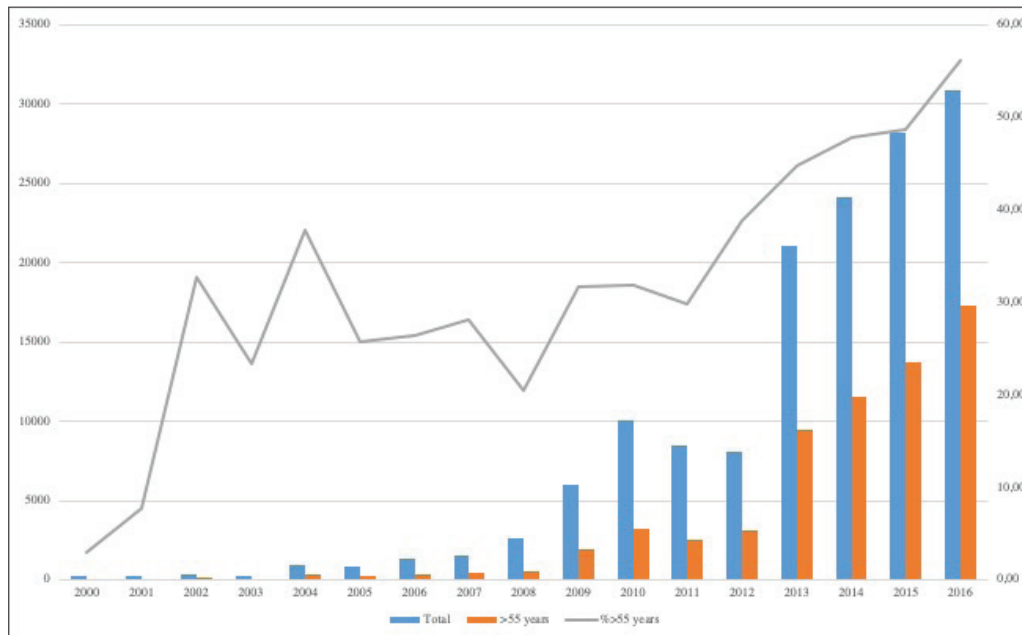
Figure 2. Arrivals of British registered citizens, 2000-2016



Source: Own elaboration from INE *Residential Variations Statistics* (2017)

Thus, before the crisis, immigration flows were predominant. However, as noted before, it is also necessary to analyse emigration movements, both labelled as return and those that fit into other categories (i.e. re-emigrations). We left from our analysis the other types of mobility, such as transnationalism, not covered by official statistics. In the present case, we will first attend to the out-migration movements taken as a whole, that is, without differentiating the destination of the population that declares to leave the country -or in other words, that leaves the Register. Between 2000 and 2016, 145,327 British nationals left the Register, 64,987 of whom were 55 years of age or older (that is, 45%). The out-migration movements are irregular on time, as can be seen in figure 3: on the first period, from year 2000 to 2008, out-migration practically does not exist. From 2009 to 2012, there is a period of moderate out-migrations, around 5,000 to 10,000 each year. Finally, from 2013 to 2016 there is a period characterised by a very high number of registered exits from Spain. 2013, is the first year in which the number of out-migrations are higher than the number of arrivals, a trend that continues in subsequent years despite the increase in arrivals in recent years. It should be noted that the percentage of the population over 55 years in the total number of departures is rising, which far exceeds its relative weight at the time of arrival. This figure peaks in 2016, with 56% of the population aged 55 and over emigrating from Spain, explained by the fact that people who leave the register do so after a few years of residence. Taking into account that their age of arrival is around 42 to 44 years in the period from 2000 to 2016 that means that their average age of leaving the country will necessarily be higher. More specifically, the average age at the time of departure from Spain, independently of the destination, is between a minimum of 38 in 2008 and a maximum of 54 years in 2016.

Figure 3. Exits of British registered citizens, 2000-2016



Source: Own elaboration from INE *Residential Variations Statistics* (2017)

Part of the registered out-migrations relates to return movements, but another very important part is not linked to them. As we mentioned before, most of the out-migrations have been caused by the purging of the Register established in 2012 via the confirmation of residence. Until that year, no one record the emigration movements if there was not an effective communication from the migrants themselves. The Register database was not

updated at that time, since most of the older Britons that have already moved from Spain without noticing the town hall were still inscribed. The arrival movements reflected in the Register since there is an interest in accessing the rights associated with registration. However, no one record the exit from the country for such a long time, so there was a stock of residents who at some point had left Spanish territory but never left the Register. This lack of control was more evident for the EU population. To the contrary, non-EU citizens had more documentary obligations (renewal of permits, confirmation of residence, etcetera), which increased control over their stay in Spain as well as over their movements. But since 2012, every Briton -in fact, every UE citizen- registered in Spain without the permit of residence received a letter urging to confirm the residence at the correspondent town hall's Register. The local registers had three years to update the UE citizens inscription, and that is why exits peak from 2013, most notably those performed by Britons older than 55 years. In the end, the purge has caused a large population loss in some municipalities, mainly in Alicante and Málaga, and a huge decrease on the local finances.

Our hypothesis, at this point, is that out-migration increase due to returns recorded since the years prior to the application of the confirmation of residence, interpreted as losses produced in previous years. In some cases, we are probably dealing with a gap of 10 to 20 years, reflected in an average age of the group that would be considerably older than it should be, as we will see later. The opposite option, i.e., to assume that the modification of the registration rule has left out a large number of people who are now outside the Register, does not seem very reasonable. First, because part of the population is old and uses public health services, to which they have access thanks to the health card derived from registration. The families use public education centres and other public resources. It is true that access to public health services is possible through the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC). Even though, some autonomous communities, such as Valencia, have placed limits on the irregular use of EHIC (without registration for more than six months), which makes it more difficult to live under the radar. Furthermore, it should be considered the legal uncertainty that residence without registration can generate for older persons in an unfamiliar environment with a limited linguistic integration level, as some authors have pointed (Betty, 1997; Gustafson & Laksfoss Cardozo, 2017).

116,065 out of the 137,776 people who left the Register between 2000 and 2016 are not associated with a known destination in the RVS. This does not mean that they are not returnees, but based on what has been argued above, it is evident that a large part of them will be. Only 22,535 people have left the Register towards the United Kingdom in this period, as shown in table 1, 10,169 if we select those with 55 years and more. The main destination throughout these years is the United Kingdom, which accounts 94.5% of known destinations. For Britons above 55 years the percentage of return migrations is 96.3%. In both cases implies a pattern of residential variation more centred on return than other forms of migration. The second most important destination in both cases is towards other European countries, mainly France, Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, Netherlands and Portugal). The third main destination is America, followed by Asia. By countries, United States is the first non-European destination, especially for the younger adults and the second destination is Australia followed by China.

Table 1. Residential variations (out-migrations) by destination, 2000-2016

DESTINATION	TOTAL	> 55 YEARS
Total	137,776	63,396
Unknown destination	116,065	52,832
United Kingdom	20,535	10,169
Other European destinations	714	276
America	197	60
Asia	141	33
Africa	41	13
Oceania	83	13
<i>Main countries</i>		
<i>France</i>	127	65
<i>United States</i>	109	34
<i>Germany</i>	109	54
<i>Switzerland</i>	59	17
<i>Ireland</i>	89	20
<i>Netherlands</i>	66	22
<i>Australia</i>	75	10
<i>Portugal</i>	44	24

Source: Own elaboration from INE Residential Variations Statistics (2017)

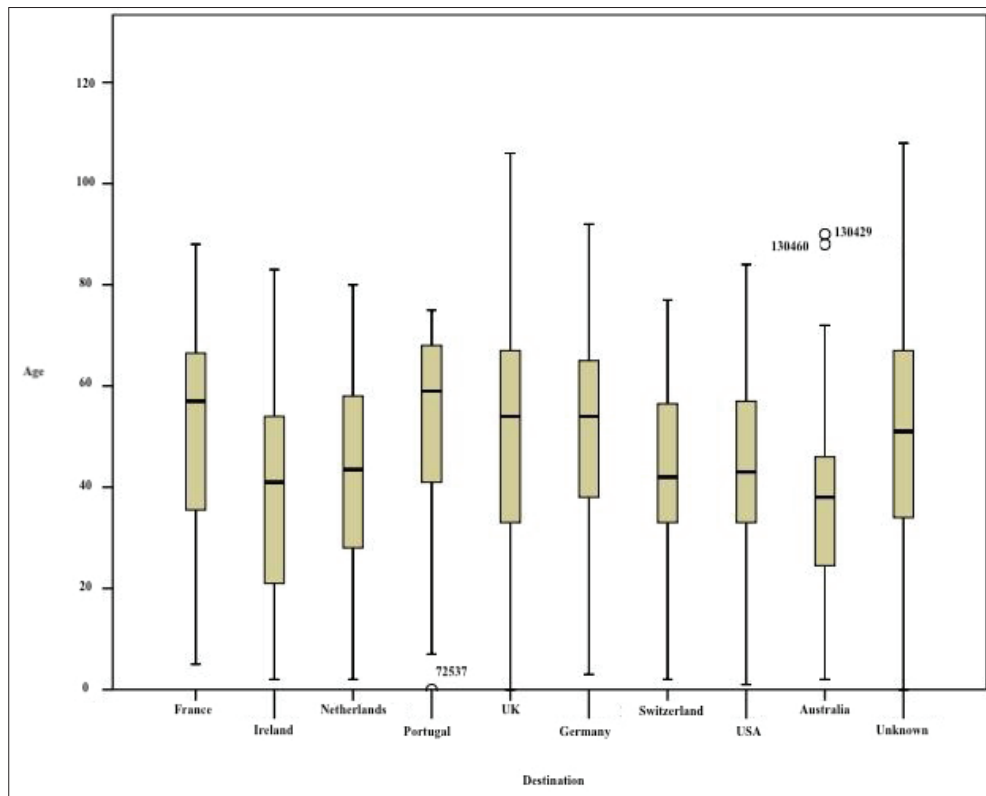
These patterns show clearly two types of out-migrations:

1. the departures of the young adults, living in Spanish big cities, not necessarily on the coast, maybe working for multinational companies with facilities for mobility towards other countries;
2. the exits of retired people, mainly towards the UK as return migrations, even though some of them choose other European or American countries probably to follow with their retirement plan or to be close to their families.

Figure 4, present the variation of age distribution in each destination. The highest age medians correspond to exits towards the United Kingdom, with less dispersion in the case of out-migrations to unknown destinations. The upper range in both cases makes us suspect that some of these exits were not recorded correctly. For example, there are too many individuals over 100 years performing return migrations. These are an example of migrations not recorded on time that emerged from the purge. On the other hand, the distribution of departures to other destinations is around much younger medians, about 15 years younger and with less noticeable amplitudes (i.e. Australia or Belgium). Exits towards an unknown

destination present an age structure so similar to that of out-migrations towards the United Kingdom that it is highly probable that most of them are returns as well. These data point in the direction of a return-oriented behaviour among the older British population, even though in different surveys they do not declare clearly their intentions to return (Warnes et al., 1999; King, Warnes & Williams, 2000; Giner-Monfort, Hall & Betty, 2016). Furthermore, the structure of exits towards France, Germany and, especially, Portugal reveal a possible retirement re-emigration. In any case, the numbers are not very high.

Figure 4. Age at the moment of residential variation (exits) by destination, 2000-2016



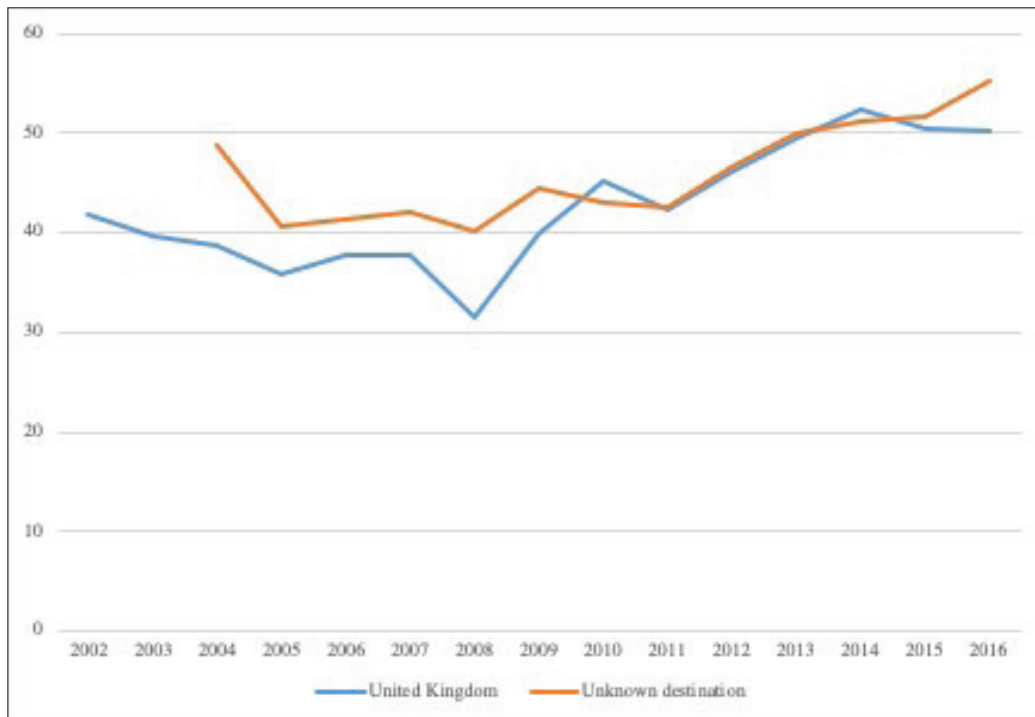
Source: Own elaboration from INE *Residential Variations Statistics* (2017)

The evolution of the average age of out-migrations has been upward. In the case of return movements, a maximum of 52.3 years reached in 2014, while in the case of those of unknown destination the maximum reached in 2016 with 55.3 years. While waiting to know the data for 2017, it is worth noting the upturn in 2016 related with migrations without a known destination. As we mentioned earlier, this would be the first year not fully affected by the Registry's purging, and despite this, the increase in the average age is the second most important since 2012. This could be pointing precisely to an effective increase in the return of retirees.

As shown in figure 6, 37% of the out-migration movements towards the United Kingdom are recorded between 2013 and 2014, 43% if we take those over 55 as a reference. Assuming this information as the most reliable, and that the person responsible for the Register in each municipality has recorded a return as what in fact is a return, the figure is very small in general (only 5 people would return for every 100 arrivals in the same period), and very concentrated in a few years. On the other hand, we can see that the outcome of Brexit referendum affects data for 2016. However, the short time between the vote and the end of the year suggests that the effect on return movements will be minor. A return migration should be considered as something that requires a minimum planning, sometimes

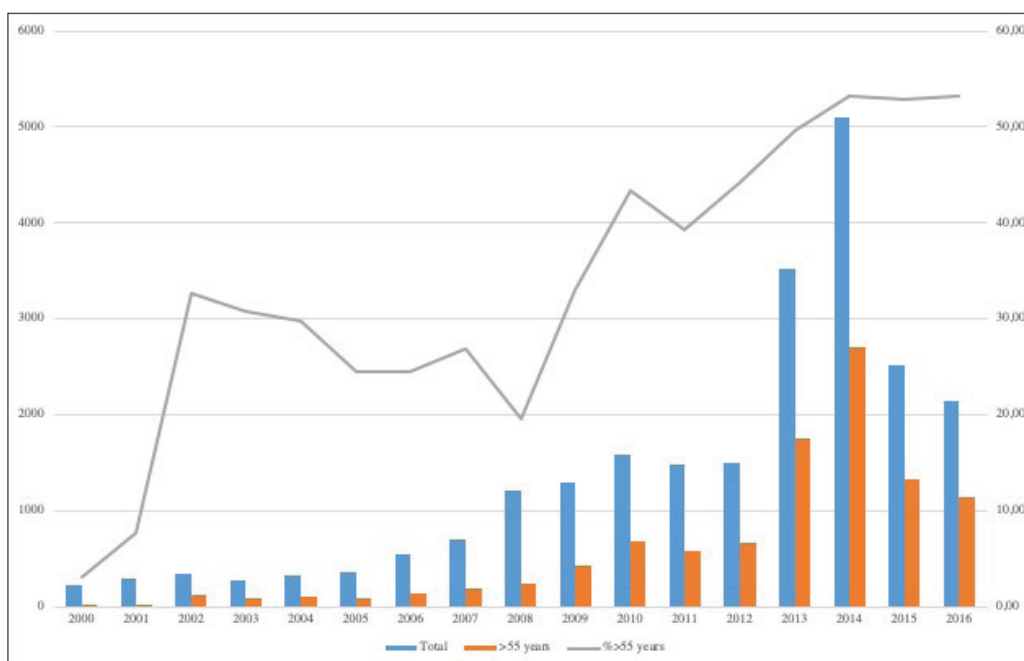
involves selling the property and, even in the case of performing a return, it is not always properly updated in the Register.

Figure 5. Average age evolution (return and unknown destination), 2002-2016



Source: Own elaboration from INE *Residential Variations Statistics* (2017)

Figure 6. Return migration of British registered citizens, 2000-2016

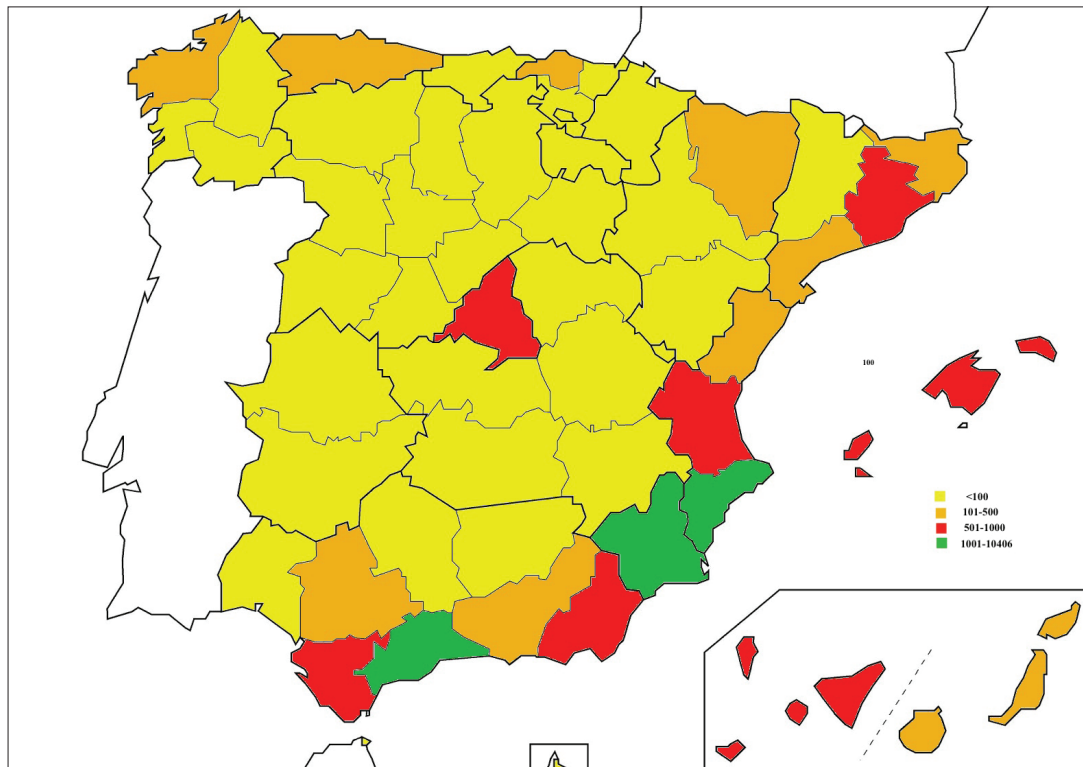


Source: Own elaboration from INE *Residential Variations Statistics* (2017)

Figure 7 present the resulting territorial distribution, taking into account only the movements labelled as returns in the RVS, that is, the withdrawals from the Register with destination United Kingdom. Most of the returns of the British population are concentrated

in the Mediterranean strip, the major capitals and islands and, to a lesser extent, on the northern coast. Alicante is, in fact, the territory from which more British population has left towards the United Kingdom in the period (10,265 people, compared to 3,016 in Málaga and 973 in Murcia). Alicante is also the territory where we find more British population, followed by Málaga and Murcia, so it is normal to find more return migrations where there are more residents registered. Barcelona and Madrid register more returns as these cities concentrate the majority of young workers, with different mobility patterns from those of retirees.

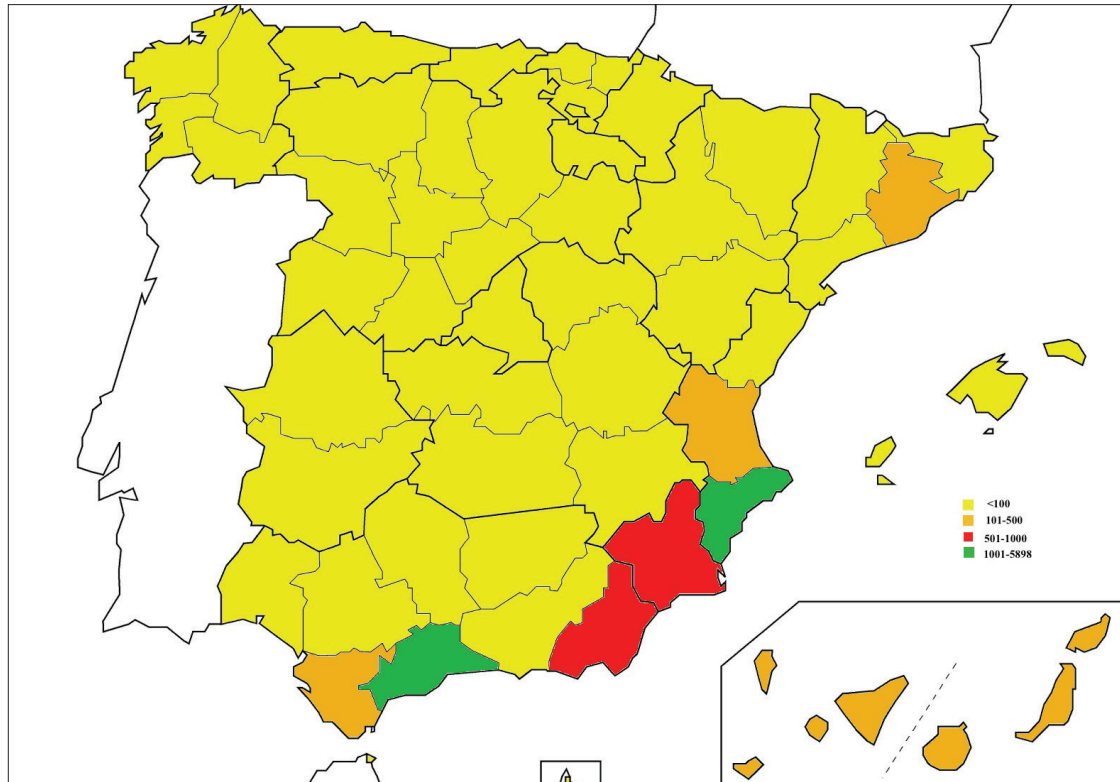
Figure 7. Registered return migration of British citizens by provinces, 2000-2016



Source: Own elaboration from INE *Residential Variations Statistics* data (2017)

The same map for the population over 55, however, offers a different reality. Figure 8 shows that the capitals are disappearing as sending territories, which can be explained by their power to attract labour migration, that is, lower average ages. The northern coast also disappears as sending territory, but not the islands. Return is concentrated again in the Mediterranean strip, which is where lives most of the retired population, following the model of lifestyle migrants. Once again, Alicante is the province from which most British population has left in the period, in this case with 5,871 people, that is, 57.7% of total returns in Spain. However, between 28% and 35% of the British Spanish population lived in Alicante from 2000 to 2017. This means a higher rate of return than would be expected if all Spanish territories contributed equally. On the other hand, the highest percentage of aged population returned is that of Murcia, with 69.5%, followed by Almeria, with 60.2% and Alicante, with 57.2%. The percentage for Málaga is 45.4%, much lower than the rest of the territories, which implies that their British registered returnees are much younger.

Figure 8. Registered return migration of British citizens aged 55 and more by provinces, 2000-2016



Source: Own elaboration from INE *Residential Variations Statistics* data (2017)

With this information, we might ask what effects may have UK's exit from the EU. A few months before Brexit becomes effective, the uncertainty is very high. There are contradictory reports in the media every day about health coverage, freedom of movement or residence permits. The effects of this uncertainty on a population with an high average age, an underdeveloped level of social integration, dependent in large part on their nationals for their daily lives and in some cases with outstanding payments for the purchase of properties, can be devastating depending on which is the final deal between United Kingdom and European Union. Furthermore, the social service system in Spain is underdeveloped in terms of assistance, compared to the British one, in part due to the importance of family care. In short, it is quite common to find cases of some help, which end in the local social services, and sometimes require a special return procedure involving different administrations (Hall, 2011; Hall & Hardill, 2014, Hall, Betty & Giner, 2017). Such situations could worsen in the future, depending the reached type of agreement on coordination between administrations and the right of access to public services.

The publication of 2017 RVS will give us a first glance of the immediate effect of the outcome of the UK's exit referendum from the EU, but its consequences prolonged in time, depending on the agreement reached between the EU and the UK. If we compare the raw data of the Register on 1 January 2016 with the same date for 2017, there is a difference of 15,716 people, i.e. a population decline of 6%, 5% for the population aged 55 and over. Therefore, in view of the data, and pending the availability of the latest edition of the RVS, it does not appear that the outcome of the UK's exit referendum from the EU has altered an already existing negative trend.

We need to interpret the data with caution. Firstly, because the intention to return does not materialise in a short time, especially when we are dealing with the elderly population. The majority of British residents in Spain own the homes in which they live. Some people

took a mortgage but others sold their properties in the UK in order to pay the new property in Spain. Trying to sell the Spanish properties to return to the UK is still difficult today without making a loss, even when economic crisis is supposed to be out. Furthermore, returning to the United Kingdom, to a physical environment with which probably there has not been relation for years, with a family scattered throughout the world and without sufficient funds to establish by themselves may not be easy or quick (Hall, 2011; Hall & Hardill, 2014; Ahmed & Hall, 2016; Giner, Hall & Betty, 2016; Walsh, 2018). It is also true that in spite of all the modifications introduced in the management of the Register, most of the returns are not registered and may appear years after their materialization when their registration expires. Thirdly, we expect that the return will vary depending on the agreement on crucial issues such as freedom of movement, health care, the fluctuation of the pound or the import of pensions, which may be of great importance for British retirees. On the other hand, it must be considered that some of the Britons living in Spain, even with those socioeconomic conditions, could steel feeling Spain as their home and resist to return to United Kingdom (Miller, 2018).

4. CONCLUSION

Although the numbers can be very scandalous on the media, we must analyse the return data carefully. The RVS is not the perfect tool to analyse return migration, but it is still the best and the one that gathers the most cases. What is clear is that there exists a trend of return of former British migrants from Spain, and that this trend is as old as migrations are. It is important to stress this statement because the possibility of return among lifestyle migrants has always been undervalued both academics and administrations.

Despite the movements to purge the registry, return is the main destination of British emigrants from Spain. These movements have been of greater importance since 2013, but against forecast, also after the end of the registration control phase. Thus, in 2016 there are still more departures of British residents from the country (more than 30,000) than arrivals (more than 20,000). In this way, 2017 data will be key to better interpreting population movement after the Brexit referendum

Even though it is difficult to establish an official number of returnees, it would be useful to monitor the return intentions of British residents in Spain. Previous estimations put the intention of return between 10 and 30% of the population. What we can know from the statistics is that the percentage of returnees must be even higher. Otherwise, the mortality figures, which as mentioned above, do not affect under-recording, would be much higher. About 3,000 British people die in Spain each year, about twice as many as in 2000, despite the fact that the number of residents is more than twice as high, we assume that many of them will have aged in this period.

The application of Brexit, soft or not, could unleash different situations, both in Spain and United Kingdom. In Spain, it could trigger a depopulation, mainly in areas as Marina Alta and Baix Segura, both in Alicante, especially in towns like Líber or San Fulgencio, where British are the majority. Moreover, those who remain in Spanish territory would face a status loss and a decrease in quality of life depending on which rights conserved after the Brexit deal. Even in the case of returning to the United Kingdom, reintegration into the British society could be hard, especially for those who have been residing in Spain for a long period and, therefore, have lost some of their citizenship rights. Having to demonstrate that they are residents in the United Kingdom, through a proof of address and the Habitual Residence Test, can be such a hard process, even for British people. In the end, Brexit could transform previous migrant flows within the EU space into tourist flows, less engaged

in terms of residence, property and time of staying but also with less rights, which could diminish the number of British arrivals, as it has been happening since 2017.

Finally, there is a need to amend the statistics system in order to increase internal control in the European Union. It is not only a question of quantifying or facilitating research, but also of controlling administrative registrations and cancellations. Without this control, it is easy to commit a fraudulent use of services and social benefits, with a subsequent overloading of public services, especially in overburdened tourist areas such as the coastline. All of the above can facilitate a kind of social and economic dumping from northern Europe to southern Europe.

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