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— SPECIAL ISSUE —

Brexit and Beyond: Transforming Mobility and Immobility

Majella Kilkey*, Aneta Piekut**, Louise Ryan***

This Guest Editorial introduces a special issue entitled *Brexit and Beyond: Transforming Mobility and Immobility*. The unfolding story of Brexit provided the backdrop to a series of events, organised in 2018 and 2019, which were the result of a collaboration between migration researchers in Warsaw and the UK, funded by the Noble Foundation's Programme on Modern Poland. The largest event – held in association with IMISCOE – was an international conference, arising from which we invited authors to contribute papers to this special issue on the implications of Brexit for the mobility and immobility of EU citizens, particularly – but not exclusively – from Central and Eastern Europe, living in the UK. As we outline in this Editorial, collectively, the papers comprising the special issue address three key themes: *everyday implications and 'living with Brexit'*; *renegotiating the 'intentional unpredictability'* status and settling down; and planning the future and the return to countries of origin. In addition, we include an interview with Professor Nira Yuval-Davis, based on the substance of her closing plenary at the conference – racialisation and bordering. Her insightful analysis remains salient to the current situation – in June 2020, as the UK enters the final months of the Brexit transition period – in the unexpected midst of a global pandemic and an imminent recession.

Keywords: Brexit, migration, mobility, bordering, EU

Introduction

Brexit is a notable political landmark in the UK's more generalised 'hostile environment', bringing far-reaching implications for the lives of over 3 million European Union (EU) citizens living there,¹ including for their experiences of mobility and immobility. Conceptualised variously as an 'unsettling event' (Kilkey and Ryan 2020) and as a 'wicked problem' (King 2020), it is unsurprising, then, that a vast amount of research has

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emerged focusing on Brexit's implications for the international economy and trade, political relations and societies at large. At the time of writing this Introduction (June 2020), according to a Google Scholar search for 'Brexit', 179 000 scholarly works (articles, books, working papers etc.) have been written – most of which were published in the last four years since the Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016.² One in every five of these outputs is related to the topic of migration (36 700 search results for: Brexit + 'migration OR immigration OR emigration').

This special issue addresses the question of the implications of Brexit for the UK's EU-citizen population, with a special focus, although not exclusively, on Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants. The process of making decisions about staying/leaving/returning is multi-layered and shaped by various personal circumstances, which are interwoven with local contexts and impacted on by the new migration-policy regime (Kilkey and Ryan 2020). As such, the collection of papers provides insights into the different aspects of Brexit's implications for the immobility/mobility axis – emotional responses, coping strategies in the context of uncertainty, everyday relations with neighbours and co-workers, everyday bordering, reflections on future life plans and possible return to the countries of origin.

Migration and transformations

International migration is inextricably linked to complex and varied processes of societal change (Castles 2010). Different, if not all, spheres of social life change in response to or as a result of people moving and living across national borders (Grabowska and Garapich 2016). Our initial interest in studying how migration transforms societies started with Poland. Although it was named as a 'country with no exit' until 1989 (Stola 2010), it could easily be named 'a country of emigrants' as, despite long periods when international mobility was restricted, Poland is among the 20 countries globally with the largest diaspora populations (approximately 4.4 million Polish citizens lived abroad in 2019, while 38 million resided in the country).³

This interest led us to developing a networking project entitled *Modern Poland: Migration and Transformations* (October 2017–September 2019),⁴ funded by the Noble Foundation under their Programme on Modern Poland scheme. Bringing together leading scholars from the University of Warsaw and the University of Sheffield, our project used the lens of migration to examine key dynamics in modern Polish society and the transnational field to explore the interconnections between Poland and Britain. The unfolding consequences of Brexit for Polish and other EU citizens formed an important backdrop to our programme of events.

Over the two-year life of the project, we undertook a range of activities, including a series of visiting lectures and master classes in both Sheffield and Warsaw, and a summer school on advanced research methods in migration – held in Warsaw in partnership with POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews and bringing together students from the UK and Poland over one week in September 2018. Additionally, in collaboration with IMISCOE, we organised a very successful conference in Sheffield in Spring 2019. Under the title *Transforming Mobility and Immobility: Brexit and Beyond*, the conference brought together leading scholars from Poland, the UK and elsewhere to present cutting-edge research on migration.⁵

The conference closing plenary was presented by **Professor Nira Yuval-Davis** and was based on her recent book, *Bordering* (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy 2019). The substance of the lecture is discussed in this special issue, in an interview with **Professor Louise Ryan** entitled *Talking about Bordering*, in which Yuval-Davis revisits her corpus of work over more than 40 years in order to explain the evolution of her thinking on racialisation and bordering. The interview helps to situate Brexit within the political and economic context which has been unfolding over several decades. Conducted in the summer of 2019, the interview captures the mood of that moment in British politics, as a minority Conservative government, led by the beleaguered Prime Minister, battled to get the Brexit deal through parliament. Of course, things have changed since then in several

significant ways but the insightful analysis of Nira Yuval-Davis remains salient to the current situation, in June 2020, as Britain battles a pandemic, an imminent economic recession and the transition period towards Brexit.

Arising from the conference we invited authors to contribute papers to this special issue on the implications of Brexit for the mobility and immobility of EU citizens living in the UK. We now introduce these papers and the themes which they raise.

Implications of Brexit on mobility and immobility

The migration-policy implications of Brexit and migrants' individual-level decisions to stay, leave, renegotiate their lives and plan for the future have increasingly been a focus of recent research (see, for example, Botterill, McCollum and Tyrell 2019; Duda-Mikulín 2019; Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira 2020; Guma and Jones 2019; Kilkey 2017; Lulle, King, Dvorakova and Szkudlarek 2019; McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017; Ranta and Nancheva 2019). While, at first, debates on the implications of Brexit were dominated by the feeling of 'shock' and disruption brought into the lives of EU citizens, the expectation of a 'Brexodus' has not materialised (Kilkey and Ryan 2020). Below we discuss the contributions to this special issue, which relate to three broad topics: (1) everyday implications and 'living with Brexit'; (2) renegotiating the 'intentional unpredictability' status and settling down; and (3) planning the future and the return to countries of origin.

Living with Brexit

There is, by now, a large volume of literature documenting the emotional and affective impact of the Brexit referendum result and its aftermath on EU citizen-migrants in the UK. The implications for these latter's sense of belonging has been a dominant theme and forms the point of departure for the paper by **Rosa Mas Giralt**. Drawing from analysis of a large volume of testimonies of EU27 citizens in the UK published in a book and blog and Twitter accounts by the not-for-profit and non-political initiative In Limbo Project, Mas Giralt proposes the concept of unbelonging to capture how dynamics of social bonding and membership are disrupted and unravelled over time. The data point to two processes driving unbelonging in the context of Brexit – the acquisition of 'migrantness' and the non-recognition of contributions and efforts made to belong – which occur across private, legal and communal spheres.

The contribution by **Elena Genova and Elisabetta Zontini** demonstrates how the prolonged Brexit negotiations have created a state of in-betweenness for migrants from Italy and Bulgaria – who are living in prolonged uncertainty – and how they cope with it. The authors apply Van Gennep's ([1909] 1960) original concept of liminality, with later modifications by Turner (1967) and Thomassen (2014), as a lens through which to examine the reactions of Italian and Bulgarian citizens in the UK to the Brexit referendum and Britain's protracted exit from the EU. In so doing, the authors show how these migrants are experiencing a liminal state, as they navigate the transition between the old certainty of freedom of movement and the potentially uncertain future associated with a restrictive post-Brexit migrant social status. Moreover, the authors note that, while liminality entails a complex blend of uncertainty and ambiguity, it can also be potentially liberating, offering the possibility of reinvention.

Genova and Zontini find that those migrants who have been resident in the UK the longest feel the most betrayed by Brexit and who also, at the same time, have the most entanglements in British society – such as children in school – which may make it more difficult for them to move on elsewhere. These observations are echoed by the results of another paper in this special issue – written by **Barbara Jancewicz, Weronika Kloc-Nowak and Dominika Pszczółkowska**. Drawing on a survey with 472 Polish residents in the UK, they investigated whether Brexit could be the key push factor shaping Polish migrants' decisions to leave. Despite the fact that

some Polish migrants felt that they were well settled and had long-term plans to remain in the UK, almost 60 per cent – according to the survey – could no longer tell how long they would now stay. As Jancewicz et al. explain, Brexit had a polarising effect on migrants in the UK: some developed settlement plans (e.g. through applying for citizenship) while, for others, Brexit added ‘another layer of uncertainty’ to their previously vulnerable situation.

While the above-mentioned papers examined the reactions to Brexit among adult migrants, **Daniela Sime**, **Marta Moskal** and **Naomi Tyrrell** focus on how young people aged 12 to 18, who were born in Central and Eastern European EU countries but now live in the United Kingdom, are imagining their future in a Britain outside of the EU. The Brexit debates and the associated anti-immigrant hostility had a particular impact on this cohort of young people as it occurred during their formative adolescent years and has the potential to significantly undermine their sense of belonging in the UK. Starting with a similar question on the implications of Brexit for inter-ethnic relations, the paper by **Alina Rzepnikowska** turns the reader’s attention to the impact of Brexit on everyday social lives and to whether conviviality – a mode of living and interacting together in a multicultural society – could offer the possibility of building up resilience to everyday racism and anti-migrant discourses in the context of Brexit. In her research, she returned to some participants from her previous study (2012/2013) and interviewed them again in the aftermath to the EU referendum. Narratives from Rzepnikowska’s participants – all Polish women – demonstrate how conviviality cannot be considered without taking into account class and socio-economic positioning in the local communities. For some Polish women living in more deprived areas, Brexit resulted in the construction of more imaginary boundaries between the local British population and migrants, disrupting their sense of belonging. Conversely, other women’s narratives provided testimonials of increasing embeddedness in their local communities, which provide safe spaces in the context of Brexit in the form of ‘habitual interactions of care between neighbours’.

The end of liquid migration?

In the context of the economic crisis, rising anti-immigrant hostility and Brexit, papers by **Genova and Zontini** and by **Jancewicz et al.** challenge the applicability of earlier, perhaps more optimistic, concepts such as ‘Eurostars’ and ‘liquid migration’ to explain the current, complex and diverse experiences of EU migrants in the UK. While the notion of ‘intentional unpredictability’ dominated in migration studies on so-called migrants from A8 countries (EU Accession of 2004) in Britain, the results of the study by Jancewicz and her colleagues suggest that these frameworks may no longer be fully applicable. Migrants from CEE or any other EU country are no longer ‘new’ migrants from accession member-states – 16 years after Poland joined the EU, Poles who migrated to the UK have grown older, started families and developed careers and many ‘anchorage points’ (Grzymala-Kazłowska 2018). In other words, the passage of time means that this is by now a very different population, with changed perspectives on their lives in the UK (Kilkey and Ryan 2020). Specifically, the narratives of participants in the study by **Rzepnikowska** illustrate the transition from more-fluid and originally often planned as temporary migrations to more-settled and locally rooted lives across the lifecourse of migrants in the UK.

The dominant construction of intra-EU migrants, particularly those from the new member-states, as ‘transmigrants’ or ‘liquid migrants’ has provoked much interest in how Brexit would impact on EU citizen-migrants’ migratory behaviour. Despite Brexit having been seen as an ‘unsettling event’ (Kilkey and Ryan 2020) or ‘rupture’ (Owen 2018), pushing many migrants to reconsider their mobility/immobility plans, studies in this special issue indicate that Brexit has not resulted in the mass re-migration of EU nationals. Integration, settling down and concurrent decision-making about staying or leaving are complex, interrelated processes which depend on a multiplicity of factors. As shown by **Jancewicz et al.’s** study, Brexit was not mentioned as a main

factor dissuading Polish migrants from remaining in the UK; instead, respondents' labour market situation was key. Brexit was less a push factor for those with stable jobs and medium-level qualifications which were acquired and recognised in the UK. While most past research has focused on migrants' intentions in the wake of Brexit, the paper by **Luka Klimavičiūtė, Violetta Parutis, Dovilė Jonavičienė, Mateusz Karolak** and **Iga Wermińska-Wiśnicka** takes the discussion a step further by examining their actual decisions within the three years following the Brexit referendum. Focusing on young migrants (19–36 years) as the archetypal 'transmigrants', the authors undertook 76 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Lithuanians and Poles who decided to continue living in the UK, as well as those who, since June 2016, had decided to return to their countries of origin. The findings suggest that Brexit was not a major influence on decisions to return or remain. Among those who had decided to stay following the referendum, a mix of professional, family and emotional investment in the UK deterred them from leaving, particularly when uncertainty prevailed around what their future rights would be if they were to return again to the UK. Interestingly, this finding applied to both high- and low-skilled participants. Moreover, the transmigrants' dual frame of reference prevailed and, despite Brexit, life and opportunities in the UK – particularly for their own economic and professional security and success, as well as for that of their children – were evaluated as more positive than those available back home.

Challenging 'rational economic man' approaches to understanding migrants' decision-making, **Mas Giralt** highlights how the experience of unbelonging influences views on remaining, returning or re-migrating. Echoing the findings of other studies – including that of **Rzepnikowska** in this issue – she points to the need to acknowledge the heterogeneity of EU citizen-migrants, including when it comes to understanding responses to Brexit, with factors such as socio-economic positioning, age and lifecycle stage being important mediators of migrants' plans and their capacity to realise them. Indeed, Brexit responses are not uniform; the settlement/temporarily axis is further complicated by later waves of migration to the UK from Southern Europe which took place following the 2008 economic crisis. **Genova and Zontini's** paper, based on rich qualitative interviews with Bulgarians as 'new' and Italians as 'old' European migrants, points to the inadequacy of these rather simple categories to explain the range of migratory experiences. For example, while several of their Italian participants were long-term residents in Britain, others were recently arrived so-called 'crisis migrants'. As the authors show, these diverse migratory experiences were associated with quite different reactions to Brexit, highlighting the salience of temporality in migration research.

Brexit and beyond – the return?

The final event in our Noble Programme-funded project was a panel which we organised at the Polish Sociological Association Conference in Wrocław in September 2019 entitled: Migration within, to and from Central and Eastern Europe in the Shadow of Brexit. Invited scholars and stakeholders⁶ considered what future lies 'in the shadow' of Brexit for migrants in various European countries. Some research included in this special issue also explores the future plans of EU migrants and the possibility of return migration to their countries of origin. Based on data derived from an online survey with over 1 000 respondents as well as from focus groups and family case studies, **Sime et al.** aimed to understand how Brexit impacts on the future imaginaries of young migrants. They argue that the Brexit process can be regarded as disruptive to their future imaginaries and can thus impact on their identity development and leave them uncertain about the direction and location of their lives in the years ahead.

The question of return is especially difficult for migrants who were brought up in the UK. Although many of the young people in **Sime et al.'s** study felt settled in the UK, anti-immigrant sentiment and experiences of xenophobic bullying could also undermine their sense of being accepted or welcomed. Moreover, the young participants had quite complex relationships to their parents' countries of origin. Despite frequent visits, many

felt it would be difficult to settle (or settle back) into life in their country of origin. However, as with **Genova and Zontini**, temporality was also a factor. Those who had migrated more recently or at an older age were the most likely to imagine returning to live in the country of origin. Overall, across the sample, the authors found the participants' imagined futures rarely involved return to the country of birth but often featured ideas of moving on to other destinations.

Likewise, in the study by **Klimavičiūtė et al.**, for those who had decided to return following the referendum, Brexit was more of a trigger rather than the over-riding factor. The authors conceive the returnees as mainly temporary migrants who had fulfilled their migration projects and were ready to return home. Brexit simply provided the stimulus to enact a long-standing plan to return, which was often framed around a desire to raise children in the home country. As with those who had remained, however, return was rarely seen as definitive and most returnees kept open the possibility of further migration in the future. This approach of 'keeping options open' is highlighted by **Klimavičiūtė and her colleagues** as a defining feature of the 'transmigration' or 'liquid migration' which they conceive as characterising post-2004 intra-EU migrants' attitudes. As the authors acknowledge, however, this may be more specifically a characteristic of young post-2004 intra-EU migrants.

Conclusion

While, collectively, the papers in this special issue focus on the implications of Brexit for migrants' mobility and immobility, **Mas Giralt's** research also considers the broader social consequences. In her paper, she develops an understanding of the consequences of unbelonging, beyond the migrants' themselves, by drawing on Askin's (2016) notion of 'emotional citizenry' – the 'intersubjective relationships of security, solidarity and reciprocity' which extend beyond the formal rights associated with EU citizenship. A highly cautionary note offered by **Mas Giralt** – and one with which it seems fitting to conclude – is that the erosion of 'emotional citizenry' caused by the processes driving unbelonging will have fundamental implications for wider community relations between 'majority' and 'minority' members, relations which cannot be ameliorated by formal citizenship rights alone. As King (2020: 12) observes 'true to the essence of Brexit as a wicked problem (...) [M]any pressing problems are on the table to be resolved and lasting legacies will endure for decades, if not longer'.

Notes

¹ Brexit also has implications for an estimated 1.22 million UK citizens who live in another EU country (Sturge 2016).

² Not all work is indexed with a publication year. Of those which are, 90 per cent were published in 2016 and later.

³ See: <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimatesgraphs.asp?3g3> (accessed: 6 July 2020).

⁴ The PI was Professor Louise Ryan, then at the University of Sheffield; other members of the Sheffield team were Professor Majella Kilkey, Dr Aneta Piekut, Dr Laura Foley and PhD student Indra Mangule. The Polish team included Professor Paweł Kaczmarczyk, Dr Michal Garapich, Dr Weronika Kloc-Nowak and Dr Anita Brzozowska, Centre for Migration Research, University of Warsaw, and Professor Izabela Grabowska, SWPS University, Warsaw.


⁵ Ten Polish colleagues were able to attend this event due to the generous financial support of the Noble Foundation. Thanks to funding from IMISCOE, we expanded the programme to a two-day international conference.


⁶ The session was chaired by Professor Paweł Kaczmarczyk, Director of the Centre for Migration Research, University of Warsaw. The panel speakers were: Olga Chrebor, Mayor of Wrocław's plenipotentiary for Residents of Ukrainian Descent; Professor Krzysztof Jaskułowski, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities; Maciej Mandelt, an activist at the NOMADA Association; Professor Majella Kilkey, University of Sheffield; and Professor Louise Ryan, then at the University of Sheffield.


Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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