

The impact of Brexit on the migrant strategies of Slovaks in the UK

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Abstract | Introduction: It is well-known that after the most significant enlargement of the EU in 2004, a great number of migrants from the Visegrad countries (V4), including Slovakia, decided to seek new opportunities in the UK. This has been reflected in numerous studies illustrating the consequences for British society and particularly the negative shift of Britons' attitudes towards migrants. The fatal mixture of political populism, media influence and social issues subsequently led to a referendum with the unexpected outcome of Britain leaving the EU, otherwise known as Brexit. Objectives: The main objective of the research presented in this paper was to examine the social, economic, legal and political consequences of Brexit and its impact on the migrant strategies of the Slovaks living in the UK. Methods: We used qualitative-research methods in the form of 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews online after the Covid-19 pandemic forced the original plan of interviewing the participants face-to-face to be abandoned. The approach used in the interviews was biographical, addressing the migrants' personal history (in respect to migration), present (in respect to Brexit) and future (in respect to both Brexit and migration). However, the final themes and questions included in the interviews was also affected by the pandemic which had largely replaced Brexit as the main cause of the migrants' concerns and had to be reflected. Results: A qualitative analysis of the collected data showing that Brexit did not alter the migration strategies of those 30 Slovak research participants, especially those from the post-EU-admission migration wave. They did not intend to go back to Slovakia and did not perceive any immediate negative impact of Brexit on their lives. Moreover, they believe that Britain would easily sustain and deal with any potential trouble resulting from Brexit. However, the focus of this paper is on those who emigrated before 2004 and can see the UK, their own lives and consequences of major political decisions in a broader perspective.

Keywords | Brexit, migration, migrant strategy, qualitative research, interview, pandemic

Introduction

When the result of the Brexit referendum was delivered in June 2016, it was regarded by the media as a black swan[1]. Since then, a few more unprecedented blows have shaken Europe with the global pandemic[2] being first and foremost. As a result of Covid-19, fundamental changes had to be made to the original design of this study, mainly in terms of the research methodology, implementation framework and scheduling. While Brexit remained the major focus of the study, the extent to which the pandemic had overshadowed it meant it had to be taken into consideration as well.

Brexit as a response to in-migration in the EU - a theoretical framework

In the 1990s, Europe became one of the most popular migrant destinations in the world (Wihtold de Wenden, 2020). Currently, the European Union provides refuge to 42 million migrants although about 10 million of them are citizens from member states. Migration is the main reason for demographic growth in the west as both immigrants and emigrants find Eastern Europe less attractive. Internal migration within the EU has caused 3% of EU citizens to live in a member state different from the one in which they hold citizenship (Wihtold de Wenden, 2020, 30). Most migrants move towards Germany, Northern Europe and prior to 2020, the UK as well. Many sectors in the EU economy currently depend on migrant labour as migrants are willing to accept less favourable working conditions, work in all types of weather and get paid below-average wages, etc. (Uherek, 2016), all of which would normally be refused by the locals.

While migration is not a new phenomenon (Cohen, 2020, p. 210), certain trends directly affecting it can be observed. According to Cohen (2020), current migration flows are dominated by three trends. The first one is selection resulting from migration flow management where rich and developed countries prefer medium and highly qualified migrants. The second one is migration of large groups in response to climatic, demographic and political changes. The third one is linked to concerns about the cultural and social differences of migrants and demonstrations of their cultural identity. The reception of migrants provokes different social responses from arousing fear and expectation of conflict (often by exaggerating the number of migrants in the country) to making the effort to integrate, co-live with them peacefully and have good relationships based on mutual respect. However, cultural differences are one of the main reasons why the integration of migrants has become the target of criticism. Its failure is typically caused by misunderstandings of the different culture and norms brought to the host culture by a migrant, or by a migrant's unwillingness to join the host society and accept the norms contradicting their cultural identity. In response, this can bring embarrassment, misunderstanding or even fear to the host society.

Migration flows have been examined from many different perspectives in academic papers, publications and are still an ongoing global process (Bahna, 2011; Collier, 2017; Letavajová, 2021; Uherek, 2016; Pondelíková, 2020). The current paper refers to the concept of liquid migration that is based on Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity (2000). The connection of both theories helps to understand the notion of "liquidity" better. It is based on the idea of stable social institutions that are transformed into more flexible ones. The expected stability and/or flexibility of institutions and systems can play a crucial role in how migrants make decisions before moving. In the liquid migration theory, the sub-category of labour migration with the vision of better living conditions (that could be guaranteed by institutions) and wider job opportunities being two important push factors in the global liquid society.

Over the 20th century, the UK was transformed from an emigrant to immigrant country. The influx of migrants from all over the world has increased to more than 250,000 a year with most of them being labour migrants (Letavajová2021). However, in the British political and social discourse at the beginning of the 21st century, the negative effects of immigration were accentuated by Nigel Farage, the UK Independence Party leader. The subsequent Leave campaign focused on the politics of reasserting Britishness as an identity which must be preserved and reasserted in the face of increasing immigration (Tyrell et al, 2018). A direct consequence of their politics was the referendum to leave or stay in the EU. The result was very tight with 51.9% voting to leave and 48.1% voting to remain in the EU[3]. This has caused the British society to stay divided between “the Remainers” and “the Leavers” to this day.

It is assumed that the migration wave which brought millions of people from the Middle East to Europe in 2015 was one of the major factors that influenced the result. The EU’s contradictory response to the crisis and poor coordination between the member states revealed the Union’s supposed weakness in the eyes of the British voters. This, along with the Eurozone debt crisis concerns, presumably helped tilt the scales towards the British decision to leave.

However, there were some other circumstances that played an important role in Brexit. After the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries had become the EU member states, the UK cancelled the previous visa requirement to enter the country. This was in contrast to Germany and other EU countries which temporarily blocked the new EU citizens from their job markets. Consequently, the UK became the top destination for migrants in Slovakia. These migrants were extremely young with 82 % of them aged 18–34, single (93%) and mostly male (57 %) (Jenčová, 2007). Similar developments could be observed in all the Visegrad countries where the standards of living were much lower than in Britain and migrants were prepared to work for extremely low wages. As such, the massive influx exceeded expected numbers so much that they were perceived as “invaders” by the local population. As Marshall (2018) has put it, many economists argue that the UK really needs immigration. The problem is that it has been happening very quickly. When the government estimated the number of migrants, they did not consider the consequences of ten East European countries joining the EU. As it turned out, government estimations had nothing to do with reality.

Project objectives and methodology

This study follows on from previous research studying the impact of Brexit on EU citizens living in the UK (Lulle et al, 2017; Becker&Fetzer, 2018; Sandu, 2018). In order to make this qualitative research unique and problem-focused, it was decided to only focus on migrants from the V4[4] countries, i.e., Poland, Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia. Each academic institution (the University of Warsaw, Poland; Charles University, the Czech Republic; Matej Bel University, Slovakia; and the Academy of Science, Hungary) focused on their own – current or former – nationals.

The objective was to study the social, economic, legal and political impact of Brexit on the lives of V4 migrants in the UK and to analyse migrant strategies vis-a-vis this change, i.e., to find out whether and how it had influenced their migrant strategies. This was done through 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted by each team (i.e., 120 in total) with the results being analysed at two levels. First, each national team looked at its findings in the context of their own government’s migration policy and the situation in their respective countries. Second, a comparative analysis using the data representing all V4 countries made up the final outcome. The recordings and transcripts were made and saved in compliance with the GDPR and ethical standards set by the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) and University of Warsaw, with the interviewees’ full consent.

The methodology is based on the liquid migration research methods (Bauman, 2000; Lulle, Morosanu & King, 2017). The research plan was agreed within the project consortium and the Centre of Migration Research at Warsaw University was the main coordinator. The research questions were set as follows: 1. What have been the social, economic, legal political impacts of Brexit? 2. What strategies did they applied? 3. How has Brexit influenced the position of V4 migrants? This article focuses on the results from Slovakia and the attitudes of Slovak migrants.

As a result of the Covid-19 global pandemic shortly after the project started, the original intention of in-person interviews conducted in the UK had to be replaced by online ones. As such, the whole process of searching for participants, arranging online meetings, the interviews themselves and recordings took place online. This had a big impact on the choice of participants as chances for spontaneous meetings with migrants at events organized by the Slovak expat organizations were lost. Therefore, only the researchers’ personal contacts and migrants within reach of social networks were involved. In the end, the research sample comprised 21 women and 9 men between the ages of 23 and 67. As for their place of residence, 11 participants were from London and 19 from outside of London (see Table 1).

Table 1 Respondent statistics overview

| Gender | | Age | | Residence in the UK | | Migration wave | |
|--------|------|-------------|-------------|---------------------|---------------|----------------|------------|
| Female | Male | 20-40 years | 41-70 years | London | out of London | before 2004 | after 2004 |
| 21 | 9 | 19 | 11 | 11 | 19 | 13 | 17 |

Source: own processing (2022)

Another setback was that the interviews had to be conducted online at a time when people were getting tired of virtual meetings and thus their willingness to cooperate was reduced. As a result, the original requirement of participants having migrated after 2004 when Slovakia joined the EU, was eliminated. However, this brought an unexpected positive result of more “profound” data from the participants whose migrant experience covered a longer stretch of time. This put them in a position to compare the situation before and after Brexit, as well as before and after the EU membership of Slovakia.

The approach used in the interviews was biographical. In other words, it addressed the migrants’ personal history (in respect to migration), present (in respect to Brexit) and future (in respect to both Brexit and migration). However, the final themes and questions included in the interviews was also affected by the pandemic which largely replaced Brexit as the cause of migrants’ concerns. However, the main focus was on the social, economic, legal and political aspects of the migrants’ “life before and after Brexit” in the UK. The recordings and transcripts were made and saved in compliance with GDPR and ethical standards, i.e., with the interviewees’ full consent.

The last step was analysing the collected data. As it was of a qualitative nature, the materials were arranged according to the thematic areas set out in the interview questions. Each thematic area was identified with the general results/most frequently given answers provided and relevant citations added to indicate typical or notable results. It should be noted that the most frequently cited participants are the migrants from the pre-EU era who had lived longer in the UK, giving them the advantage of a deeper first-hand experience with the British society. In addition to the qualitative analysis, a measurable/calculable part of data was also processed in order to give a quantitative dimension to the research and provide yet another perspective.

Research outcomes

The first theme identified the expectations migrants had had prior to arriving in the UK and whether they had been met. Most of the participants claimed that their main expectation had been a better job for higher pay than in Slovakia. This expectation was confirmed by practically all the participants, even those who had not seen it as a priority before coming to the UK. Many of them highlighted their appreciation of the opportunity to climb up the career ladder without an academic degree but merely from hard work. One of the respondents put it very plainly:

The main reason for my leaving Slovakia was money and getting to know another culture... There is certainly a better life in the UK. Look, I was able to get an amazing job even without a university degree. (Female, 32, Andover)

Others went to the UK primarily to learn or improve their English skills (the pre-EU wave ones often did so through au-pair programmes), to study or for a variety of specific individual motivations. In most cases, the original intention was to stay for a limited period of time (1-3 years) which was repeatedly prolonged and eventually led to long-term/supposedly permanent residence. This is also evident in this interviewee's life-story:

It was a classic. A close friend of mine came here before, and she found an au-pair family for me... It was a chance to travel, learn the language, see the world and go back - that was the original plan. In Slovakia, I wanted to study acting. I was not admitted at first, but they said I should try again the following year. But I did not, I stayed in England. (Female, 40, London)

At this point, it is important to mention that although the vast majority of (not only) Slovak au-pairs were females (cf. Bahna, 2011; Búriková, 2006; Búriková a Miller, 2014; Williams & Baláž, 2004), there were also some males who endeavoured to find such an "unconventional" job prior to Slovakia's accession to the EU. Indeed, temporary migration (allowed by the au pair visa) helped them to overcome the negatives of the economic transformation (Hess, 2003). For many reasons, such experience was highly appreciated and regarded as an important investment in the future (Williams & Baláž, 2004).

I came to England in 1999. The biggest reason was to learn English... yes, there were financial reasons too... I went to England with some 20 pounds. I applied for an au pair job, there were no other options at that time. Guys were not wanted but I managed to find a family... And that was my plan - 2 years, certainly not more. (Male, 44, London)

The one and only representative of the pre-1989 migrants offered a life story based on the anti-regime dissidence of her parents, typical for that generation. Still, her own life behind the iron curtain took a "conventional" course of a young woman seeking "standard" values of love and education, unrestricted by politics or ideology.

I left Czechoslovakia along with my parents in 1978, first for Germany. Emigration was allowed, or even forced upon such "problem elements" as we were - people who got into conflict with the regime... But I wanted to try what it would be like to live in England or the US, so I applied for a scholarship and went to London for a year... In London, I met my future husband so after returning to Germany, I finished my studies hastily and came back here in 1983. We got married and since then I have lived here. (Female, 67, London)

The second theme dealt with the changes that occurred in the UK after Brexit and the migrants' assumed uncertainty about its further developments. Nearly half of the participants said they had

not observed any (noticeable) changes at all. Those who had perceived something said it was mostly concerns about legislative/administrative securing of their residence in Britain after Brexit. As for the uncertainty that the participants might feel about the course of social developments in Britain, there was a prevalence of denials, i.e. uncertainty was not acknowledged in this respect. Only a few participants were critical about the British government and had some fears of social polarization. Nonetheless, most of them shared the belief that these factors were just temporary and that the British society was stable enough not to be shaken by Brexit.

I believe the loss of chances to study and work in Europe is a big negative for the British youth. It seems Britain will go back to its old isolationism. From my point of view as a translator, before Brexit a more open approach to translation literature had finally appeared. Now, when they close (themselves) off again, it is likely they will be less open to the cultures from the outside... and this is not clear yet, whether the authors who would like to come and present their books in the UK, will need visa... (Female, 67, London)

It is true that the situation has already become more complicated for those such as musicians, where studying and performing in Europe now means much higher fees, visas, etc., strictly limiting exchange. Another respondent said:

Some of the older generation still believe that what they had been promised by the pro-Brexit politicians – clearing the UK of ALL the immigrants – will actually happen and they will earn all the money the foreigners had deprived them of. They would not admit they had been misled. (Female, 30, St Helens)

The third theme focused on the interviewees' private and work lives, and how they had been influenced by Brexit. Most answers showed no worries about unemployment or other significant changes in their living standards or lifestyles.

No such thing that I am from Slovakia and now we have Brexit and something is going on. I have been here for so many years that I have a right to remain – I have actually applied for one. As my son is British, they just cannot send me home (laughs) – but if they did, I would be happy to go... Our bosses are just fine, they told me if there was anyone sending me back home, they would say the office could not exist without me (laughs). (Female, 38, North London)

Some replies were somewhat contradictory in that they first explicitly denied and then later implicitly admitted the impact of Brexit on their lives. On the other hand, some job losses were assigned to the pandemic rather than Brexit.

At first, it had no impact on us, the employer said, no matter I'm from Slovakia, I don't have to worry, employment is safe, everything's fine. But later, as the Brexit process was going on, people were getting colder. Even if someone had known you for years, suddenly – you are from the EU, a strange approach. But later on, they got used to it and now that England has finally left the EU, we do not feel any substantial consequences. (Male, 42, London)

There were also some answers revealing some unplanned, but eventually beneficial turning points in individual careers:

As for my present job of a nanny, Brexit had no influence on me, and as for my future job, it is just likely to be beneficial (smile) as more people will need a psychotherapist... But many people have lost their jobs, many cannot find one... My husband says some 700 thousand people have left London, but again, we don't know if it was because of Brexit or corona... (Female, 40, London)

The fourth theme focused on the participants' view of Brexit. Most of them thought it was the wrong decision although some showed understanding and sympathy with the motivation to leave the EU. They even criticised the EU for drawing on the UK budget and redistributing it to less developed countries, Slovakia included. They also believed this extra money would now stay in Britain and help create more jobs. It is clear that these were the views of the post-2004 migrants while those who came to the UK earlier tended to classify such opinions as the impact of the leave campaign or brainwashing and propaganda.

Before the referendum, I lived in a bubble where all of my friends and colleagues wanted to vote for Britain to remain in the EU. According to a survey before the campaign, only 1% of Brits considered the EU a problem! So, I was under the illusion that such a disgusting pro-Brexit campaign packed with lies couldn't be successful. For me, the result was the shock of a lifetime. (Male, 42, Manchester)

Other participants noted that the polarization in society was horrible with a division line running across its core. Until the very last moment, the majority of Brits favoured the EU so the result was a real shock to them. Again, the most interesting observations came from the oldest participants who made some disturbing conclusions about the consequences of the pro-Brexit campaign.

What spilled out then - hideous xenophobia, even racism, which I had not noticed in England before robbed me off many illusions. What I had valued about England before - great tolerance, blend of so many cultures... but obviously, racism and xenophobia have been there all the time only they were suppressed and people did not dare to show them. And suddenly, the floodgates opened up and a wave of hatred against the migrants from South Asia and the Caribbean cumulated in the local people over the years, spilled out to the migrants from Central and Eastern Europe. (Female, 67, London)

Another respondent commented on the UK's older generation suffering from what he even called a "culture shock", supposedly the result of the new EU citizens from Eastern Europe flooding the UK. In this context, there was an important remark made about migrants allegedly refusing acculturation which was perceived as a threat by the locals.

As for me - I was surprised, I thought the English would not vote to leave the EU. But it was politicized, they made the EU an enemy and a scapegoat - what is bad are the foreigners and the EU... People who had lived almost since the time of the British Empire, the 70- 80-year-olds, voted to leave. They did not like the Polish shops, a lot of foreigners in the towns ... they have had foreigners for a long time but with the EU, the borders were open and in 5 years there were many new ones and this was a culture shock for the English. (Male, 44, London)

One participant recalled the referendum night, providing an insight into a more subtle psychological process of "becoming aware" of Brexit and its importance. By comparing her own, originally very superficial and ignorant view of the events to the one of her interested and well-informed husband, she gives a very strong and touching picture.

Yes, I was aware of both the referendum and propaganda, but I am not interested in politics. My husband is, however, interested very much, he talks about it a lot and wants to discuss it- and he took it very hard. On the referendum night, he did not go to sleep, he was waiting and I was like - why don't you sleep? Why do you care so much? I just wasn't aware how serious the situation was. Finally, he went to sleep in the morning and when we saw the result, he started to cry - which was a shock for me. That's why I remember it so clearly - his crying, his reaction was a bigger shock to me than the referendum itself. I considered it terribly exaggerated. I wanted to support

him in his grief but I only managed to say - are you really crying because of that? Only some 2 years later, I was like - I got it... (Female, 40, London)

The fifth theme was about the interviewees' current migration strategy and particularly the prospective of remaining in the UK. It was found that 82% of participants wished to stay while 14% were reconsidering their options. However, none of them voiced the intention of going back and living in Slovakia. They only considered a temporary stay as an option if there was a need to take care of their ageing parents/relatives, or a longer stay in retirement. In the case of a deteriorating situation in Britain - possibly as a result of Brexit - and its potential consequences, they would prefer to move to another country in West Europe (or the "western world").

I am not planning to return to Slovakia in the near future. One reason is the agenda of the new Slovak parliament which is hostile towards the LGBTI+ community. On the other hand, if my mother or sister and her family need help, I am ready to come. I keep in touch with them and we visit each other frequently... My pension is my biggest worry as I don't know what it will be like when Brexit really happens... Moving to France or Spain could be my retirement plan... I don't want to lose Slovakia and I feel European. That's why I want to keep my Slovak, i.e. European passport. (Male, 42, Manchester)

In the case of the oldest participant, Brexit would have an impact more on the migration strategies of her daughter than on her herself. In general, Brexit has caused a significant increase of Slovak citizenship (and passport) value in the eyes of all its holders. The reason is its European "quality", legal validity and sudden importance of having evidence of being an EU citizen.

When the results of the referendum were released... [my daughter] phoned me and asked, mum, can we get Slovak citizenship? We did not have it before, I never tried to renew it[5], but for her the chance to live and work anywhere in Europe was a thing that goes without saying and she could not imagine not having it. So, that was the main motif why I renewed my Slovak citizenship, which automatically made my daughter eligible, too... (Female, 67, London)

Tyrell et al., (2018) have claimed that a person's age at the time of a key life transition - such as migration - is crucial for understanding the ways in which they become involved in new regimes and societies. For the young people who were born in CEE countries but lived most of their formative years in the UK, what it means to belong in Britain was being deconstructed during the crucial time of transitioning from youth and adulthood.

We have discussed it several times as to whether we should apply for a British passport, but I have always come to the conclusion I would keep the Slovak passport because it is the European one. Even now, I will not apply for citizenship because the English passport has lost that fabulous colour ... currently, it is a valueless piece of paper... But for the first time after those many years, I ask the question whether I want to stay here for good. So far, we've been here because of our daughter, she goes to school... But if things keep going in this direction, perhaps we will have to take it seriously and consider leaving the UK. Not for Slovakia though... we were considering Switzerland, we have acquaintances who have invited us there... (Male, 44, London)

It is more likely we could live in Vienna, despite none of us speaking German... I don't know at the moment, and it is definitely due to Brexit that my husband and I started to discuss it, because we both love London, we are really happy here, but we started to feel a bit - they don't want us to be here. And this has changed our view of where we'll live in the future. On the other hand, we have the pandemic now so we can do nothing about it... (Female, 40, London)

The sixth theme looked at whether individual migration strategies were affected by the change of the locals' attitudes to migrants. Again, most of the younger participants had not noticed such a change and some were even worried about the potential influx of new immigrants. In contrast, people with a longer history of being in the UK admitted having had experiences of being verbally attacked/offended by the (intoxicated) locals immediately after the referendum.

At work, we are a multinational team, a huge open plan office with just a few Brits, but after the release of the referendum results, it was like at a funeral, people were crying and everyone was saying sorry. On the same day, it happened to me for the first time in my life that a drunk Brit in the bar was "sending me home". Since then, I have experienced similar verbal abuse 3 more times. (Male, 42, Manchester)

The following participant confirms what has been said about the anti-immigration rhetoric and message of re-gaining power and control from the EU over national affairs. These were clearly determining aspects of the Brexit vote whilst public attitudes to immigration and the EU were shown to turn increasingly negative as the referendum campaign progressed (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017). The statistics shows that a sharp increase in the number of hate crimes and online "xeno-racism" incidents recorded by the police in the month after the referendum. In particular, many white migrants, especially Polish, were reported as victims (Burnett, 2016). As a result, self-regulation or even self-censorship may have emerged such as not using a native language in public for example.

When I was in the shops or in the street, I phoned my mother and felt uncomfortable to speak Slovak, so I stopped phoning in public for some time because there were incidents of people attacked physically or verbally when speaking a foreign language. It was as if the xenophobia against other people that used to be suppressed by the Brits, was suddenly released after Brexit. Whatever people thought of the migrants before, they had to keep it to themselves... Now it was like - away with you!... I was reading a Slovak book on the subway and I realized I felt awkward, I didn't want those people to see I was reading a Slovak book... as if I was suddenly sticking out of the crowd. (Female, 40, London)

The seventh theme was about the potential financial uncertainty resulting from Brexit and its impact on migration strategies. However, this turned out to be of little relevance and only one respondent acknowledged the deterioration of his financial situation. It seems that this was not even directly linked to Brexit however, but more to Covid.

Recently I was told that because of Covid, we would be dismissed at the end of March, so I have started looking for a new job after 15 years in finance... It's because Covid has caused profits to go down terribly... For the first time after some hundred years there was a loss in my bank, and downsizing is the easiest way because shareholders want to see a share price at a certain level... That's why I have lost my job, it is a saving, it has nothing to do with nationality, the bank would not risk such a scandal these days. (Male, 42, London)

Some participants were worried about food and house price increases or unavailability of certain foodstuffs because of the renewed international trade barriers, including postal services.

With my family both in Slovakia and Italy[6], we used to send each other parcels which is now getting much more complicated... all is being checked, duty is payable, it will no longer be worth doing such a thing in the future... The prices are also rising in the shops, certain things were not available right after Brexit - but actually, that happened during the corona crisis so I don't know what has had a bigger impact on the situation. We are not starving, that's for certain, but it is

obvious some foodstuffs were out of stock... (Female, 40, London)

The next theme looked at how the media addressed Brexit and whether they specifically covered migrants from the V4 countries. Although participants confirmed that Brexit had been strongly represented in the British media, it had shown no interest in its impact on immigrants from small countries like Slovakia. On the other hand, the responses of the older migrants included reports of perceived propaganda or manipulated rhetoric and media discourse which started long before Brexit and did have an impact on their lives in the UK. In particular, it questioned their trust in the open nature of British society. The oldest interviewee talked about the Conservative party and its leave campaign in the media long before the referendum as well as a certain part of society which has always been against the European integration of Great Britain. Along with most of the respondents, she thought they were a minority, just the isolated voices, “*nobody would mean it seriously, after all*”.

It started around here in the 1990s when my husband was teaching at the School of Slavonic Studies... When there were talks about all those countries joining the EU, it was decided – incomprehensibly for us – that these languages would be reduced at universities... We were also personally affected as my husband was forced to retire early as a professor and then they offered him a job again, but only the one of a language teacher, lecturer. That was very unwelcome and humiliating... At the time when those countries were supposed to become EU members and when we expected greater interest in getting to know them, their history, literature, culture – for me this was the first signal that what I have always admired about England –being open towards the cultures of other nations – that it was rather shallow, in fact. (Female, 67, London)

At the end of each interview, participants were asked to evaluate the situation in Britain and its future prospects. In this case, most answers were positive and optimistic although several respondents saw the darker side. The decisive factors in this was age, the time of migration and length of their residence in the UK with the ones scoring highly failing to see the positives.

Although I am not... how to put it – vengeful... and I do not – I mean the Brits who were in favour of Brexit – I wish them no harm, just so that they go through what they have voted for. So that what they want for the others, may they have it for themselves, because it seems they do not look into the future, what it’s going to mean for them as well. (Male, 44, London)

The most sceptical conclusion was presented by the oldest participant at the end of the interview when she used a sad joke to illustrate and explain her lack of optimism. It should be noted that this was said before the war in Ukraine started.

But wherever you look, terrible things are happening. We can see a sharp fall in political culture in general, this growth of populism... around here, everything used to be based on a gentleman’s agreement, but the number of gentlemen has been plunging so now the prime minister can be a notorious liar... I remember the classic joke, when Kohn wants to find a better place for living during WW2. So he goes to the travel agency and after spinning the globe for a while, he looks at the travel agent and asks, excuse me, don’t you have another globe? So this is where we got. (Female, 67, London)

Conclusion

The migration wave from the V4 countries, following the EU enlargement in 2004, allowed unprecedented numbers of “new Europeans“, including Slovaks, to enter the UK. As with most migrants, they were ready to work hard for the better life they had envisioned in their home

countries. From all the interviews in the study, it was found that those intended temporary stays were prolonged and eventually turned into long-term ones, often with a life-long potential. The reasons were mainly better job opportunities, better remuneration, better chances to climb the career ladder due to performance (rather than connections) and to develop oneself in an open, multicultural environment.

On the other hand, there is the 2016 referendum, when the UK voted for the UK to leave the EU. Although the majority of Slovak research participants agree that the decision to leave the EU was wrong, there is a difference depending on when the migrants arrived in the UK. This highlights a significant difference in the views and attitudes regarding the perceived causes and effects of Brexit between those who arrived after 2004 and those who emigrated in the late 1990s, or even earlier.

The study refers to Marshall (2018), Cohen (2020), Wihtold de Wenden (2020) and others to highlight that compared to local standards, “the invaders from the East” (Marek, 2019) were ready to work for lower pay and accept poorer working conditions, both of which had caused fears of job losses on the part of the locals.

As the research took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, its greatest limitation was not being able to access the Slovak residents in the UK directly and do research in the wider community. The original plan had included scientific observations of the Slovak expats’ life-strategies, i.e., full-range field research and keeping in touch with the communities that can serve as platforms for social science research, while connecting both global and glocal perceptions. However, in the circumstance of Covid, this was not possible to do. Furthermore, in an effort to provide a broader focus with statistics about the number of Slovaks living in the UK, it was found that different sources feature different numbers ranging from 65,000 to 95,000. This discrepancy, as well as other unclear data, led to the decision of sticking to qualitative research outcomes only, and using extrapolation in order to draw conclusions. Future research using qualitative research combined with a more quantitative focus may offer a deeper comprehension of the subject matter.

According to the majority of respondents, particularly those who had come after 2004, the social, economic, legal and political consequences of Brexit were negligible. As a result, this group of Slovak migrants did not need to change their life/migrant strategies apart from changing their originally intended short-term stay into a long-term one. Nonetheless, there was no causal relationship between this and Brexit and staying seemed rather to be a general trend. Regarding the position of Slovak migrants in British society, there was no significant change perceived by the (younger) migrants which supports the previous question. The answers given by the few pre-EU migrants represent a certain counterpoint, which appears to reflect quite a deep generation gap accentuated by their different motivations and preferences - both migration and life ones.

All in all, the current research shows that Brexit has not altered the migration strategies for the majority of 30 Slovak research participants, especially those from the post-EU-admission migration wave. They do not intend to come back to Slovakia and do not perceive any immediate negative impact of Brexit, while believing a “traditional country” like Britain will survive and deal with any potential trouble resulting from Brexit. The minority of those who hold different opinions have been cited in order to illustrate their manifold views and experience based on their long-term residence in the UK. These include disillusion regarding the once-believed openness of the British society towards different cultures, as well as an increased perceived value of Slovak citizenship, even in the eyes of long-term migrants. Although they do not intend to change their legal status not place of residence, they suddenly view their legal/administrative connection to the home country as an

important thread on which the European aspect of their personal identities has been hanging.

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[1] A surprising event with a major effect rationalized in hindsight (cf. Taleb, 2008)

[2] Taleb (2008) himself considers this “swan” to be a white one as a global pandemic was predicted and expected with great certainty in the years prior to the outbreak of Covid-19.

[3] See: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results

[4] Visegrad group is a cultural and political alliance of four Central European countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Established in 1993.

[5] As dissidents, her parents and herself had lost their citizenship upon eviction from (former) Czechoslovakia.

[6] Her husband is Italian.

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