

# **Brexit as a Trigger and an Obstacle to Onwards and Return Migration**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this article, using in-depth interviews with EU27 citizens residing in the UK and Britons residing in Belgium, I analyse the role of the Brexit process as both a trigger of and an obstacle to onward and return migration. Brexit implicates a reduction in the freedom of movement and settlement for both groups, and has been linked to the increase of xenophobia and potential economic instability in the UK. In this context, both EU27 citizens in the UK and Britons in Belgium can consider onward or return migrations. However, the Brexit process introduces also obstacles to such migrations, including the loss of EU freedom of movement for UK citizens and complications for transnational and citizenship-divergent families. I argue that the realization of migration plans is mediated both by individual resources and by imaginations on the future of the UK and the EU.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this article I use in-depth interviews to explore the orientations of British citizens in Belgium and of the citizens of the other 27 member states of the European Union (“EU27”)<sup>1</sup> living in the UK towards onward and return migration in the context of the Brexit process, and underline the role of imagination in mediating the perception of Brexit and the potential plans of further mobility. Brexit has removed EU citizenship from UK citizens, risks to limit significantly the rights of both UK citizens and EU27 citizens in the UK, and has been linked to the rise of xenophobia and a potential worsening of the UK economy. Therefore, Brexit can encourage both groups to plan onward or return migrations. At the same time, Brexit may introduce significant limits to both return and

onward migration, mainly, but not only, by limiting intra-EU freedom of movement. In such a situation, the attitudes of citizens by birth of EU member states (“EU citizens by birth”) emerge as similar to those found in literature among onward mobile naturalised EU citizens.

The available statistical estimates (ONS 2020) suggest that, while EU27 citizens are leaving the UK in larger numbers than before the 2016 UK Referendum on EU membership, the kind of onward and return migrations explored here are still on a relatively limited scale. My analysis does not focus on those who have already completed an onward or return migration as a result of the Brexit process. I rather focus on EU27 citizens currently in the UK and British citizens currently in Belgium, and on their plans and orientations toward a potential further migration, taking also in consideration the fact that, depending on the developments of the Brexit process, much larger migrations of this kind might develop in the near future. I further do not aim to predict the scale or the profile of future migrations, as previsions of this kind are uncertain in general (Carling and Schewel 2018), and more so in the Brexit context. While Brexit has been finalised on January 31 2020, after more than three years of complex negotiations, the future relations between the UK and the EU are the object of further negotiations, in which the UK government has declared the intention of introducing work visas for EU27 citizens arriving after the transition period. Rather than aiming to estimate future migration flows, I explore the different reasons EU27 citizens in the UK and British citizens see to plan (or not) an onward or return migration, and the obstacles they encounter, arguing at the same time that such plans are mediated not only by individual migratory resources, but also by imaginations about the post-Brexit future of the UK and, to a less degree, of the EU27.

In the following pages I first give some theoretical and contextual background about onward and return migration and the role of imagination in migration, and about Brexit and Brexit-related migrations plans. I then present the methods and, in the two central paragraphs, the orientations toward onward and return migration and the obstacles encountered respectively by EU27 citizens in UK and British citizens in Belgium. In the final paragraph I offer a discussion of the results, a discussion of the role of naturalizations, and some policy implications.

## ONWARD AND RETURN MIGRATION AND IMAGINATION

One of the main challenges in conceptualizing onward and return migration is understanding the degree of agency existing in it, or, said otherwise, the relative weight of aspiration and crises that bring to the further migration.

Onward migration can be linked to either blocked mobility – when the migrant had the final destination in mind before the first movement but was not able to migrate there directly – or failed mobility, when the second migration was not planned since the start, but is made necessary by the lack of adequate conditions of life in the first destination (<Author> 2017). Such distinction is similar to that proposed by Ahrens and colleagues (2016: 85) between stepwise migration as a deliberate strategy (Paul 2011) and onward migration as an unplanned phenomenon (cf. also Morad and Sacchetto forthcoming). This latter distinction however might not capture adequately the cases in which the second migration is triggered by a negative event in the first destination, but transferring to the second destination was nevertheless a long-term desire of the migrant (<Author> 2017, Della Puppa and King 2019). Intra-EU onward migration has mostly been studied in reference to naturalised third-country nationals, identifying three main reasons for onward mobility: 1) dissatisfaction with the first country of destination (lack of work and educational opportunities, high level of racism, weak welfare policies – van Liempt 2011, Ahrens et al. 2016, <Author> 2017, Ramos 2018, Della Puppa and King 2019), 2) the diasporic search for larger and more institutionalised communities of co-nationals (van Liempt 2011, Ahrens et al. 2016, <Author> 2017, Della Puppa and King 2019) and 3) crises in the country of residence, in particular the global economic crisis started in 2008 (Mas Giralt 2017, <Author> 2017, Ramos 2018, Della Puppa and King 2019). Ahrens and colleagues distinguish such motivations among naturalised EU citizens from the “cosmopolitan” mobility in search for life experiences and a specific lifestyle, which, following previous work (Favell 2008a) is considered to be the norm for EU citizens “from birth” (Ahrens et al. 2016: 95). For my interviewees, among whom only one has become an EU citizen by naturalisation, diasporic motivations for further mobility were limited, but the Brexit process represented both a crisis, and a reason to be dissatisfied with the conditions in the current country of residence, and in the UK in particular. Moreover, if one includes the role of imagination in the analysis, the ‘cosmopolitan’ approach to mobility could be considered more an aspiration than a practice that is actually followed. This is not to say that naturalised EU citizens and EU citizens “from birth” have the same approach to mobility – EU citizens from birth are more likely to have taken for granted the EU freedom of movement (cf. also <Author> forthcoming) – but the attitudes of the two groups could be more similar than sometimes assumed in literature.

Taking in consideration the role of imagination in migration plans and desires can further help understand the blurring between chosen and unwanted onward migration. Imagination has been proposed as a more complex and more accurate alternative to the push-pull model to understand the intention to migrate. Rather than positing linear decisions based on the lack of resources and opportunities in the place of residence and on the availability of the same in the potential place of

destination – decisions that in any case would be based on incomplete information – imagination captures the more elaborate and socially shared ideas about the potential results of migration. Such desired results include economic opportunities (Salazar 2011), social recognition (Bolognani 2007), lifestyle (Benson 2010, Bolognani 2014), a “normal life” (Manolova 2019), or life as it ought to be, but is not, in the place of residence (Vigh 2009, Koikkalainen et al. forthcoming). In this sense, “imagination” does not have connotations of unreality or frivolity, but rather recognizes that anticipating the result of a migration is both difficult with incomplete information, and mediated by collective cultural constructions. Imagination can bring to actual migration only when there are resources available and when the collective imagination can be appropriated individually on the basis of one’s biography (Benson 2010 – see also Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016 on cognitive migration as precondition of the geographical one). It has been further argued that imagination can also inhibit migration, by substituting fantasy to the act (Salazar 2011). It should be understood that some onward migration can follow a pre-existing imagination without having been planned since the first migration, and that some migration plans, although detailed, can remain at the stage of imagination.

One aspect that characterizes existing literature on imagination and migration is that imagination is rarely conceived in negative terms – it is almost always the positive image of the destination place, or, at most, an idea of how life should be and is not in the place of residence, that is taken in consideration (for an exception considering the lack of hope as a reason for refugees to move see Koikkalainen et al. forthcoming). In the present analysis I focus on the other hand on the negative imaginations regarding the future of the UK and, to a lesser degree, of the EU27. The anticipation of negative developments linked to Brexit can be also analysed through the concept of risk (<Author> 2018), but in this article I focus on imagination in order to highlight the complex images of future UK and EU27 presented and shared by my interviewees. Post-Brexit UK is a relatively uncharted territory, given the difficulty of foreseeing the result of the current negotiation between the UK government and the EU. Brexiters and Remainers have both depicted the provisions of the opposite camp as fantasies (“project fear” or “sunlit uplands”) since the Referendum campaign (cf. Sykes 2018).

More generally, understanding the role of negative imagination can also help a more extensive conceptualisation of return migration. While most research on return migration has focused on unsuccessful migratory projects, crises, or stages of life (e.g. White 2014, Apsite-Berina et al. 2020), with a few works analysing it as partly a lifestyle choice (e.g. Bolognani 2014), incorporating negative imagination can allow to understand the more complex and partial understandings of one’s future in the country of residence that can bring to a return migration.

## BREXIT AND ITS IMPACT ON ONWARD AND RETURN MIGRATION

Brexit has been recognized as impacting several groups, including UK citizens who have been deprived of EU citizenship, EU27 citizens in the UK who are bound to lose the protection deriving from EU norms, as well as third-country nationals who might lose the opportunity for onward migration and mobility between the UK and EU27 based on the acquisition of an EU member state citizenship (Ahrens et al. 2016, <Author> 2017, <Author> forthcoming). The main rights linked to EU citizenship include the right to move and reside in all the EU member states (with some limitations), to be treated as equals of national citizens in most cases when accessing social rights, as well as to vote both in EU elections and in the local elections of the member state of residence.

Brexit is hardly the only process limiting and endangering freedom of movement within the EU. Since the beginning of the global economic crisis in 2007-2008, key judgements of the European Court of Justice have limited the access to welfare of mobile EU citizens (Barbulescu 2016), some member states – including Belgium and the UK – have made large use of expulsion orders for EU citizens considered undue burdens to welfare (Lafleur and Mescoli 2018), and governments of other member states than the UK have expressed support to the idea of limiting freedom of movement (Ruhs 2018).

However, Brexit is probably the single major challenge to freedom of movement, both because it involves one of the most populous and rich member states, and because it shows an extreme case in which EU citizenship cannot protect its holders. The long negotiation between the Referendum in 2016 and Brexit day in 2020 has brought significant uncertainty about the content of Brexit and the impact on EU27 and UK citizens. While a Withdrawal Agreement emerged in 2018, pledging both the UK government and the EU to the safeguard of the rights of EU27 and UK citizens already present respectively in the UK and in the EU27 (with some crucial exceptions, such as the right of UK citizens to move to another EU member state), the two parts came several times close to a no-deal Brexit with no guarantees of safeguarding the rights. Even with Brexit officially agreed up in January 2020, there is uncertainty about the situation after the end of the transition period at the end of 2020. Such uncertainty has emerged both in the differences between interviews I have collected in different moments and in the experiences of the most recent interviewees, who have seen both the Withdrawal Agreement and the subsequent UK Parliament votes.

Among the rights mentioned above, political rights have not been included in the negotiations, while the right to stay and equal access to social rights for EU27 citizens already in the UK, and UK

citizens already in the EU27, could be maintained, conditional to the reaching of an agreement between the UK and the EU. The rights of UK citizens to move to another EU member state, as well as the future freedom of movement between the UK and the EU27 are also not part of the negotiations. The number of EU27 citizens in the UK and, especially, of UK citizens in the EU27, is uncertain and, to a degree, contentious, because of discrepancies between sources and issues of under-registration. The most recent ONS estimate (ONS 2019) is of 3.6 million people born in EU27 member states residing in the UK in 2019, a number still slowly growing since the 2016 Referendum. UK citizens in the EU27 have been estimated to be between 1 and 2.2 million. In Belgium, UK citizens without Belgian nationality are about 20 thousand (Statbel data), a number that is decreasing, also as a consequence of an increase of acquisitions of Belgian nationality since the Referendum.

In addition to the loss of formal rights, there are two main phenomena emerging from my interviews that encourage EU27 citizens in the UK to consider onward or return migration. One is the feeling of being unwelcome and the increase in episodes of xenophobia directed specifically against EU27 citizens since the Referendum campaign (see also Guma and Jones 2019; Rzepnikowska 2019). The other phenomenon, which has attracted less attention in the existing literature, is the expectations of a number of EU27 interviewees that the UK will undergo an economic crisis linked to Brexit.

If such situation brings many to consider an onward or return migration, Brexit also menaces to limit the capacity to conduct such migration (see also <Author> forthcoming). The most obvious limit is that to the onward migration of British citizens, as their freedom of movement to other EU member states has not been included in the negotiation between the UK and the EU. There are however other limits, including the potential loss of rights to return to the UK or to an EU member state in case of onward or return migration, or the limits experienced by families with different citizenships.

The already mentioned difficulty of conceptualising onward and return mobility becomes even more complicated in the case of intra-EU mobility, as the guarantees linked to freedom of movement have allowed open-ended mobility that some have argued is not adequately captured by the concept of “migration” (Favell 2008b). Some of the Brexit-related research (McGhee et al. 2017, Lulle et al. 2018, Lulle et al. 2019) have suggested how this type of mobility is being limited by the Brexit process. I further argue (see below) that freedom of movement, in addition to be an effective bundle of rights, is also an imagination about potential future mobility that mediates the plans of the groups impacted by Brexit.

While the emigration of EU27 citizens in particular has captured the attention of UK journalism and has been defined a “Brexodus”, the most recent ONS data (ONS 2020) show that, while EU27 emigration has increased, there are still more EU27 citizens moving to the UK than leaving it. The only exception is for the EU8 (the group of Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004 – Romania and Bulgaria still have a positive migratory balance), that do have a negative migratory balance, and even in this case the main cause is mainly a strong drop in the arrivals. Kilkey and Ryan (forthcoming) have recently suggested that the idea of a Brexodus is linked to an overestimation of the mobility propensity of EU8 citizens in particular, both on the part of the researchers and of the migrant respondents themselves, and an underestimation of the settling processes (Ryan 2019).

The survey conducted by McGhee and colleagues (McGhee et al. 2017, Moreh et al. 2020). shows how Brexit makes open-ended mobility plans harder and forces many to choose between settlement or further migration (McGhee et al. 2017). Further, their data could be read to indicate that those that are losing more from Brexit – the respondents with more migratory seniority and the Western Europeans (among the nationalities included in the survey), who had a longer experience of freedom of movement – were those expressing more frequently the choice to leave the UK (Moreh et al. 2020). One limit to their data is that the survey was conducted until the day before the Referendum; my interviews as well as other post-Referendum research (e.g. Guma and Jones 2019, Lulle et al. 2019, Brahic and Lallement 2020) has shown how the Referendum has changed significantly the attitudes of EU27 citizens, both because most did not expect Brexit to go through and because of the feeling of defeat and being unwelcome (see also <Author> forthcoming). The post-Referendum survey conducted by McCarthy (2019) further shows a greater intention of settling in the UK among naturalized Spanish citizens from Latin America who have completed an onward migration to the UK, compared to migrants born in Spain. Qualitative studies show the role of children (Zontini and Però 2020), British partners, and non-transferable professional skills (Brahic and Lallement 2020) in limiting the plans of onward or return migrations among EU27 citizens in the UK. The research with young EU27 citizens of Lulle and colleagues (Lulle et al. 2018, Lulle et al. 2019) also shows how Brexit is at odds with the open-ended migratory plans, and how the opportunities to both move and settle in the UK are stratified according to economic and skill resources, with those with less resources both more interested in settling and having less opportunities to settle *and* to move.

## METHOD

The present analyses is based on in-depth interviews with EU27 citizens in the UK and British citizens in Belgium (at least 18 years old and born respectively outside the UK and outside Belgium). The interviews are part of an ongoing research on Brexit and the values and uses of citizenship started in 2018; the research also includes interviews with UK-born citizens in the UK who have explored applying for another citizenship and Indian citizens in Belgium and the UK, however these interviews are not included in the present analysis. I focus here on 25 interviews with EU27 citizens in the UK and 16 interviews with UK citizens in Belgium conducted between June 2018 and June 2019. In both cases the interviewees were contacted mainly through social media (Facebook groups dedicated to specific national groups or more largely to migrants, and open calls for interviewees on Twitter), with further contacts through a snowball procedure. As most potential interviewees contacted me answering to a social media post, there was a degree of self-selection, in what in any case is not a probabilistic sample. In both cases the interviews were conducted across the national territory and in most cases (28) in person, but in some cases (12) by Skype or phone when this was the preference of the interviewees. A single interview was conducted by Skype with an EU27 citizen who had already left the UK for Norway. The research received ethics authorisation from the <Author's institution> and all the interviewees received full information about the research and gave written consent. All the names used in the article are pseudonyms.

The research is comparative in design and the interviews with different groups followed a highly similar interview guide; the narratives emerging from each interview have been analysed comparatively, both within the group and across groups. In this analysis I focus on the answer of the interviewees' to questions about their potential plans to migrate again in the near or far future or, on the contrary, on the plans to remain indefinitely. The interviews also explored their memories of the Referendum, their migratory experience pre-Referendum, the impact and expected future impact of Brexit, their experience and plans, if any, to naturalize, the possibility of relatives reaching them in the country of residence, and their visions of the UK-EU negotiations.

The EU27 interviewees as a group, perhaps also due to self-selection, were slightly skewed towards the middle class, and included more women than men (16-9) and more Western than Eastern Europeans (7 interviewees from Italy, 5 from Spain, 3 each from France and Germany, 2 from Poland, and 1 each from Austria, Belgium Croatia, Greece and Hungary). The interviewees were between their late 20s and early 50s, and for most of them the migratory experience in the UK was their first one, although a few had previous experiences in other EU member states (Spain, France and Hungary) or in the US.

The British interviewees were also skewed toward the middle class (although the British population in Belgium as a whole sees an important concentration of middle-class professionals in Brussels), were balanced by gender and were between their late 20s and their 70s. For most of them, the Belgian one was their first migratory experience, although some had previous, in some cases extensive, migratory experiences.

## EU27 CITIZENS IN THE UK: WORRIES ABOUT BREXIT AND PLANS OF FURTHER MIGRATION

As mentioned, there are three main reasons that make Brexit a trigger for onward or return migration for EU27 citizens in the UK. While a few interviewees were not worried at all about Brexit and its consequences, most interviewees expressed at least some serious concerns about the process. Firstly, the loss of rights linked to the dis-application of EU law had a number of worrying implications: some interviewees were outright uncertain about the right to stay in the UK (although several were confident they would have not been “kicked out” of the country). Some of the interviewees were aware of the Hostile Environment policy (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018) and that without the protection of EU law they could be subjected to right-to-work or right-to-rent controls (or simply turned away because the potential employer or landlord prefers to avoid the hassle) post-Brexit. Further, a number of interviewees resented the introduction of the settled status procedures, in which EU27 citizens apply through a mobile app to have their rights recognized and safeguarded post-Brexit, and considered them risky and stigmatising. Secondly, many felt that there was a general rise in xenophobia linked to the Brexit process and felt unwelcome in the country, as other research (Guma and Jones 2019, Rzepnikowska 2019) has also shown. Thirdly, several interviewees were strongly convinced that an economic crisis would have hit the post-Brexit UK; while this has been rarely discussed in the existing literature, for some of the EU27 citizens this was a much stronger worry than the loss of formal rights or xenophobia.

These worries are part of a public discourse on Brexit and the post-Brexit UK, and each interviewee combined some or several of them (cf. Benson 2012) in imagining how the UK would become after Brexit. Combined with their social position (e.g. class, family situation, migratory experience), such efforts to imagine their future in the UK brought different interviewees to think of more or less defined onward or return migration plans. A few of the interviewees were adamant about not wanting to leave the UK, such as Valérie and Fabien, a recently arrived French couple who were

investing a lot emotionally and socially in the UK, and deliberately limited their contacts with France, or Marina, who spent most of her life in the UK, hardly ever left the country even for a holiday, and had limited contacts with her relatives in Greece.

Only one interviewee had completed an onward migration: Ralf, originally from Germany, had left the UK for Norway after his Indian wife was racially harassed on a bus the day after the Brexit Referendum.

It really felt as floodgates had opened and racists could say whatever they wanted.

[...]

[We started thinking of] moving in general, not specifically to Norway, pretty much around that time. There were some other issues, so I was only on a limited contract anyway, my wife had a permanent contract. So we were kind of thinking that's worth looking to some other place. I am originally German, so Germany was one of the options we were thinking about. [...] And then Norway was just what happened to come out first.

[Ralf]

While Ralf is the only interviewee to have reported open harassment, other interviewees were similar worries (the “opening of floodgates”) about the changing political situation in the post-Referendum UK. Ralf was also one of the few ready and able to take the first migratory opportunity. None of the remaining interviewees had clear-cut short-term migration plans, although in the days before 29 March 2019, one of the potential days in which the UK might have left the EU, Marika (a Belgian interviewee) and Guacimara and Fernando (a Spanish couple) had planned a holiday around March 29 and were potentially ready to make it the start of a return migration had the UK left without a deal with the EU. In most cases onward or return migration were reserve plans in case Brexit confirmed some of the more negative provisions – in the case of Matteo, a potential deterioration of the economic situation.

If it was for me I would remain here, because I like it, especially from on the work level, especially thinking of my experiences in Italy and Spain. [...] Then, obviously, even if in the background, I am thinking about possible alternatives. The thing that scares me the most is if my girlfriend cannot find a job, if the price of everything goes up, in short, not that much that they throw me out, as that it is not that much appealing for me any more staying here.

[Matteo]

For other interviewees the decision to leave the UK seemed more clearly formulated, but postponed at the time of the interview, either because the partner was not willing to move, or because the family situation (e.g. dependant family-in-law) was not allowing to plan a migration.

Many interviewees were open both to a return or an onward migration (mostly within the EU or within European Economic Area countries such as Norway or Switzerland). The idea of return migration was however unacceptable for the two Polish and for the Hungarian interviewee, because of the political situation in the two countries, and was also excluded by some Spanish and Italian interviewees, who saw too little economic opportunities in case of return.

Véronica: We in Spain we don't have anything. I mean, we have our families, people we love. But we don't have a house, and we don't have a place to be.

Sebastian: And if she goes back to her parents and I go back to my parents, I will be in the south and she will be in the center of Spain. [...] I already give it a wee thought, and I was thinking of Ireland, I mean, it's just over there [...] we don't have to learn another language.

[...]

Véronica: [In Spain] the economy is far from being good. So the salaries are very low and they are not paying extra hours of work.

It is worth noting that, while Véronica and Sebastian, who had always held less qualified jobs (despite both having university degrees) felt they had limited opportunities in Spain, other Spanish and non-Spanish interviewees with qualified jobs saw Spain as an attractive destination, suggesting asymmetries in opportunities.

I have always kinda had a plan of probably moving to Spain, not going back to Poland, for various reasons, but I've been thinking with my husband about moving to Spain. But I don't think that that directly has to do with the EU Referendum. We did kind of joke around about "OK, so now we can go to Spain, we have the clearance, they kind of don't want us here".

[Wioletta]

Brexit introduces also a number of limits to onward and return migration of EU27 citizens. While EU27 citizens obviously maintain the right to travel in the other 27 EU member states post-Brexit, one interviewee, Marta was strongly aware that, apart from UK citizenship, no status guarantees a permanent right of return to the UK after emigration:

There was a will to go away, to speak sincerely. The only certainty of being able to go away, stay outside the United Kingdom, for any length of time I want, one, two, ten years, only the citizenship could give it. [...] [Citizenship] is a freedom, freedom of being able to move freely as much as I want, without the five years of the settled status or the two years of the permanent residence.

[Marta]

Double return migrations (White 2014) based on the failure of the return migration, as well as onward or return migrations that are planned as limited in time, are both endangered by the risk of losing the residence rights in the UK and not being able to rely on EU citizenship to re-enter the country. Apart from Marta, few of the interviewees had such an issue in mind, although many of them expressed worry when I mentioned it. A second issue is the freedom of movement of UK/EU27 families; while the status of relatives of EU citizens does offer some protection to the UK relatives of my interviewees (see also the case of Arthur in the next paragraph), there are no further guarantees of freedom of movement for UK citizens post-Brexit. A number of interviewees were aware of the issue and were exploring the possibility of obtaining an EU27 citizenship for their children and especially their partner. In the latter case the configuration of citizenship laws, and in particular the possibility of naturalisation by marriage without residence requirement, could change a lot in terms of access to mobility. Finally, Brexit could entail limits to short-term mobility between the UK and the rest of the EU, from longer waits at the borders to the potential introduction of visas, and some of the interviewees recognized this as a limit to the continuation of family life that could make a further migration project more challenging.

Apart from the obstacles deriving directly from Brexit, a number of other issues were recognized by the interviewees. Language skills limited the onward migration destinations they considered feasible, and non-transferable professional skills (cf. Brahic and Lallement 2020) and one's age further limited potential plans (cf. also Ramos 2018). Susanne recognized in these terms the difficulties of moving back to Austria in middle age and risking to interrupt careers:

... just because I am a citizen [of Austria] it doesn't mean that they are gonna throw jobs at me. We will both be approaching 50, it's not the age where you find jobs very easily. What job will he [her husband] find, having been self-employed for the last 20 odd years? It's not obvious what type of work he would go into. I work in academia, getting jobs in academia is incredibly difficult in the best of times [...] so we both basically have to start from scratch.

[Susanne]

The presence of children has already been recognized as an anchoring factor, both in general (Ryan 2019), and in relation to Brexit specifically (Zontini and Però 2020). Some of my interviewees confirmed this, but the result was not categorical as in some of the existing literature: apparently for some of the interviewees the imagined post-Brexit UK was a place dangerous enough to consider moving with young children a good choice. On the other hand, as already mentioned, one's partner emerged rather often as an anchoring factor, especially for some of the women: a partner with a better and less transferable working condition, and/or with a more optimistic imagination about the post-Brexit UK was described in some cases as a limit to further migratory projects. In some cases, as the one of Bruno, plans about potential onward migration were focused on nearby countries that could allow to continue to have regular contacts with the partner's family:

When we [he and his wife] speak, when I say “if things go bad I would try some other experience”, I think more about Dublin, or Belgium, or the Netherlands, something closer [...] easily reachable from London, from Gatwick, and close to her family

[Bruno]

The case of Renate shows some of the family-related obstacles, as well as about the indeterminacy of migration orientations. German by origin, and with children from a previous marriage with a Briton, Renate had decided to naturalize and settle in the UK despite Brexit. She gave three different answers about her plans to move back to Germany. First, that she would have already gone back if it had not been for her children's father, then that she might have not done so, as the children had already settled in school in the UK, and finally that she would not have done so in any case, as her specialisation within nursing gave her less job opportunities in Germany. Rather than indecision on Renate's part, such answers should be interpreted as the complexity of migration attitudes before they consolidate in an actual migration (or settlement).

## BRITONS IN BELGIUM: KEEPING THE FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

Among the British interviewees in Belgium, Brexit was feared mainly in terms of loss of formal rights, including the right to reside and work, but also the access to healthcare and pensions. While among these interviewees some also downplayed the impact of Brexit, some were afraid (or had been afraid in the first months following the Referendum) that they would have been forced out of

the country after losing their EU citizenship, while others were more worried about finding themselves in untenable positions in the long run.

For me personally I, I was concerned that at some point I might have to leave Belgium. And that I would, I would no longer to live and to work in Belgium as I do now, so that was, yeah, that was a fear that I had. That I have to go back to the UK.

[Kelly]

If Kelly focused more on the fear after the Referendum to lose the right to reside and work in Belgium, Judy was one interviewee that felt more strongly that her and her husband's self-employed profile opened them to economical fragility after retirement. She feared that a development of this kind could force them to move back to the UK.

I am very scared that Brexit and the changes will mean that we will be impacted on, financially, somehow. [...] when I asked questions at the meetings I've been to with the Embassy or various people, they've said all that the fiscal and tax thing is separate from Brexit, and that's a well-oiled machine, and it shouldn't be affected, but I am scared that they will grade our pension, or they will make it difficult for us to access our pensions, or that something will happen financially.

[Judy]

Judy is one of the interviewees who had little desire to go back to the UK, but she feared that Brexit could impact her and her husband's access to pensions, and, not feeling to have sufficient economic resources to manage such a situation, feared being forced to move back. While a few interviewees feared or had feared that Brexit would mean they would need to move back to the UK, the only actual migration caused by Brexit among the interviewees had happened in the opposite direction. Brian and his Belgian wife had planned to retire to Belgium some time before the start of the Brexit campaign, and the result of the Referendum accelerated the decision, although with significant delays given the difficulty of selling their London house.

Differently from the interviewees in the UK, there were no mentions of Brexit-linked reasons beyond the loss of formal rights to plan an onward or return migration. Benson and Lewis (2019) have found experiences of racism, partially exacerbated by Brexit, among non-white Britons in the EU27. On the other hand the white Britons interviewed by Benson (forthcoming) in France saw Brexit as a first experience of othering in the country. The participants to my research, some of whom had backgrounds different from the British one, but none of whom were part of visible minorities, made no mention of specific hostility encountered in Belgium. On the other hand, Brexit

as an obstacle to further migration, which was mentioned sparsely in the interviews with EU27 citizens, had a very strong role in the narratives of UK citizens.

I want to remain an EU citizen, I live in the EU, my wife is French, my children are also French, as well as British, so I just didn't want complications at borders or if one day we retire to France, which is possible.

[Trevor]

The onward mobility of UK citizens within the EU27, which interviewees like Trevor treasure, has not been indeed included in the negotiations between the UK and the EU. A number of interviewees were both aware of that and felt that this was one of the main attacks deriving from Brexit to their EU citizenship rights. One interviewee in particular, Arthur, was however aware of the resources that could safeguard such freedom of movement even without obtaining an EU27 citizenship. Arthur was considering accelerating a marriage with his Polish girlfriend, aware that as a relative of an EU citizen he would have extensive family-based freedom of movement. He was further aware that as a qualified worker there was manoeuvring space for employers to present him as the only qualified candidate for a job and hire him, even should UK citizens lose the rights to work when national or EU citizens are available for the same job.

The onward migration to the rest of the EU was however often an open-ended possibility, with Trevor's retirement migration to France being one of the most concrete plans. For most of the interviewees onward migration was part of an ambition they were not ready to act upon, but at the same time were not willing to give up:

You never know what's gonna happen. For the time being I'm in a permanent role, which I really enjoy, I'd like to stay here [in Belgium]. If a job came up in the Netherlands, for example, I would like to be able to think about that and apply for it without stressing about visas and being last in the queue, after all the Europeans.

[William]

Sometimes I do think about going to Spain... my other language [studied at university in addition to French] is Spanish, so if were to go anywhere it would probably be Spain. And, well, now that I have Belgian nationality I feel that that would be a lot easier for me.

[Kelly]

Neither William nor Kelly had actual plans to move respectively to the Netherlands or to Spain, and indeed, if some of the interviewees were making plans to move back to the UK if needed, none (including EU27 citizens in the UK) were taking actual measures to move elsewhere in the EU27. In the case of Sarah the description of a possible future onward migration was particularly open-ended.

... once she [her daughter] is settled in life, then I can do what I like. And I could always go back to the UK, now I can go to Ireland, and thanks to the Irish passport I am still welcome, and I use that word because I will still have the right to go and move to wherever I want, be it a Greek island, be it, you know, Scandinavia somewhere, you know, be it former Eastern Europe.

[Sarah]

The access to Irish citizenship and passport thanks to her father's background was something that Sarah appreciated not only as an immediate safeguard, but also as something that kept open several possible lifestyles later in life once her daughter reached the adult age. Seen in this perspective, Brexit and its limits to onward migration can be also considered as attacks to the imagination about the EU freedom of movement.

From a family perspective, obstacles to both return and to onward migration converge in undermining family life. Beverley, married to a Spanish national, and with limited access to both Belgian citizenship (she did not qualify at the moment of the interview) and the Spanish one (she would have had to move to Spain and could not with children in school in Belgium), recognized that she had limited guarantees about her future capacity to move within the EU27, and feared about her husband's future opportunities to move to the UK, should the current norms for family reunification of third-country nationals be applied to EU27 citizens. Annabelle, who had a daughter in the UK and two children in Belgium, was afraid about her daughter's chances to return to Belgium in case of problems with her British experience. Moreover, with her husband and son wanting to move to the UK and her other daughter wanting to remain in Belgium, she was aware that transnational family life could become much more complicated without guarantees about the freedom of movement. Rhys was another interviewee who identified freedom of movement, or rather "being location-neutral" as a family need:

I think, with slightly ageing parents... that might have a decision impact. We are both quite happy here, with the advantages of bringing up our kids with such a multilingual country [...]. What we would like to have is being location-neutral.

[Rhys]

Some of the interviewees in Belgium identified also obstacles to return migration. In some cases these were linked to rights, including worries about the transferability of pensions, access to healthcare and future freedom of movement outside the UK. In many cases however they mirrored the worries of EU27 citizens in the UK. All my interviewees in Belgium were against Brexit, and some identified strongly as remainers, and therefore saw post-Referendum Britain as a country they could not identify with politically and, in some cases, as a place in which they would not feel safe economically.

I found that I had no desire to go back to the UK as it is at present. [...] I feel that I am going to pop my head in the lion's mouth, and it never turns out like that. Nevertheless, I know that I would find it difficult to find a community of kindred spirits, with my kind of experience, but that has to do with having had a very particular lifestyle.

[Pauline]

Pauline and Nilay were the two only interviewees that specifically discussed the ability to live in a milieu characterised by different nationalities as a lifestyle dimensions they wished to safeguard by guaranteeing their capacity to live in Belgium.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

I have shown how the Brexit process introduces both reasons to consider an onward or return migration and obstacles to such plans. At the moment of writing the future content of Brexit is still uncertain and subject to further negotiations, and any type of plans or attitudes towards further migration have to be mediated by collective imaginations about the future of the UK and of UK/EU relations, as well as by individual appropriations of such imaginations (cf. Benson 2012). Both in the UK and in Belgium, Brexit entails a loss of rights, which risks to be extensive, potentially including the right to reside, to work, access pensions and welfare, and the freedom from immigration controls. In addition to this, EU27 citizens in the UK are worried by an increase in xenophobia and fear a significant economic crisis. On the other hand, the potential plans for onward or return migration encounter several obstacles deriving from the Brexit process. These include access to residence and movement rights, including the loss of freedom of movement to third EU member states for UK citizens, the loss of residence rights in the UK for EU27 citizens who leave

the country for long periods, and the greater difficulties for families who hold different citizenships and/or transnational families. Further, there are lack of guarantees about the access to pension and healthcare, and the reticence of some UK citizens to re-enter a UK they see as politically and economically problematic.

Freedom of movement emerges as a complex institution, appropriated in different ways. When discussing “Eurostars”, Favell (2008a) explicitly focused on a specific group of intra-EU migrants, young, highly-skilled and successful migrants who took advantage of holding skills that were scarce or unusual in the country of residence. The author further anticipated that such advantage was bound to disappear with further arrivals holding similar skills. For my interviewees, even those who matched the profile of the “Eurostar”, EU freedom of movement was rarely lived as the actual capacity of moving anywhere in the EU, as for some of Favell’s interviewees. On a first level, for my interviewees freedom of movement was a mostly taken-for-granted right that facilitated intra-EU transnational family relations in particular. For some EU27 citizens, freedom of movement was further an insurance policy that they were relying on in case post-Brexit Britain reveals not to be a place they can or want to continue to live in. For several interviews, however, freedom of movement further emerges as what could be considered an imagination (again, without connotations of unreality): most interviewees had no concrete plans of onward migration within the EU27, but saw it as an attractive potential future, and one they resented losing even if they might have never acted upon it. The Brexit process and the pro-EU counter-movement have respectively brought an attack against such imagination and helped develop it further. Neither taking freedom of movement for granted, nor having strong imaginations about freedom of movement, is something that has emerged in previous research with naturalised onward mobile EU citizens, including <Author> 2017. However, the fact that for most interviewees freedom of movement was part of an imagination rather than of concrete plans invites to somehow reduce the assumption about the different attitudes to intra-EU mobility between naturalised EU citizens and EU citizens “at birth”.

A common tactic mobilized by the interviewees was to apply for citizenship and either ensure to have full citizenship rights in the UK (for the EU27 citizens – see also <Author> forthcoming) or safeguard their EU citizenship (for the UK citizens). While I cannot discuss in detail such tactics for reasons of space, I should underline how UK citizens in Belgium did not only apply for Belgian citizenship, but also for the citizenships of other EU member states on the basis of marriage, or ancestry. In addition to needing to qualify for the requirements, the interviewees in both countries encountered difficulties with the particularly high fee and discretion linked to the UK naturalisation process, and with the local variability in the implementation of the Belgian law on nationality (<Author> 2020).

There are a number of policy implications deriving from this research. The impact of Brexit on citizenship rights of both UK citizens and EU27 citizens in the UK has been largely discussed, but some aspects of such impact have received less attention. The possibility of UK citizens in the EU27 to safeguard their freedom of movement to other EU27 member states has not been negotiated and has received limited attention. The situation of families with divergent citizenships, and the importance of freedom of movement for transnational family relations have also received limited attention. In terms of onward and return mobility, the existing statistical data suggest the absence of a “Brexodus” of EU27 citizens in the UK in particular. However, having shown the complexity of the orientation towards onward and return migration, and the way in which these are mediated by imaginations, my data suggest a further complexity of the effort to estimate future Brexit-related migration. Survey research will probably struggle to predict such movements, which will probably depend on substantial guarantees of access to rights, beyond those of the continued right to stay currently negotiated between the UK and the EU, on the level of xenophobia in the UK and the solidity of the British economy, and on the way in which public discourse on Brexit will develop in the future.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The United Kingdom left the European Union (EU) on January 31, 2020 (the “Brexit” day), with UK citizens without citizenships of other EU member states losing EU citizenship. EU law is still valid in the UK during the transition period agreed upon to conduct negotiations between the UK and the EU, but the citizens of other EU member states will not be protected by EU law in the UK after the end of such transition period. This research is based on interviews conducted before Brexit day, when UK citizens were also EU citizens, while citizens of the other 27 EU member states were called EU27 citizens.

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