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# Going Back, Staying Put, Moving On: Brexit and the Future Imaginaries of Central and Eastern European Young People in Britain

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*This paper explores the ways in which young people aged 12 to 18 who were born in Central and Eastern European EU countries but now live in the United Kingdom construct their future imaginaries in the context of Brexit. It reports on findings from a large-scale survey, focus groups and family case studies to bring an original perspective on young migrants' plans for the future, including mobility and citizenship plans, and concerns over how Britain's decision to leave the European Union might impact them. While most of the young people planned to stay in Britain for the immediate future, it was clear that Brexit had triggered changes to their long-term plans. These concerns were linked to uncertainties over access to education and the labour market for EU nationals post-Brexit, the precarity of their legal status and their overall concerns over an increase in racism and xenophobia. While our young research participants expressed a strong sense of European identity, their imaginaries rarely featured 'going back' to their country of birth and instead included narratives of moving on to more attractive, often unfamiliar, destinations. The reasons and dynamics behind these plans are discussed by drawing on theories of transnational belonging.*

*Keywords: Eastern European migrants, future imaginaries, belonging, transnationalism, Brexit*

## Introduction

Research on transnational families has highlighted the efforts that migrants put into the maintenance of family networks at a geographical distance, giving insights into the mechanisms, processes and practices that sustain family relations and friendships across borders (Assmuth, Hakkarainen, Lulle and Siim 2018; Reynolds and Zontini 2014; Sime and Fox 2014). Once in a new country, migrants negotiate their sense of identity and

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relationships with those around them and aim for stability, security and a sense of belonging. At the same time, they continue to engage in various cross-border transactions and maintain socio-cultural identities that incorporate both country of origin and country of settlement (Haikkola 2011; Ryan 2011; White, Ní Laoire, Tyrrell and Carpena-Méndez 2011). However, adult migrants and their children often have different experiences post-migration. Their relationship with the country of birth and their new country of residence is transforming through time and their family relationships are also changing. The resources, values and practices that circulate within families have been described as a by-product of a ‘transnational family habitus’ (Zontini and Reynolds 2018), which young people access when they are ‘doing families’ transnationally. A transnational family habitus, the authors argue, is an asset that can be activated by young people whenever needed. Young people have trans-local, social and emotional connections which anchor them in two or more places. This translocal view disrupts conventional understandings of belonging and family practices tied to co-locality.

In this study, we draw on extensive research with young people aged 12 to 18 born in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), who had been living in the UK for at least three years. While still nationals of their countries of birth, they had spent at least three years and most of their lives in the United Kingdom and felt ‘at home’ in Britain, yet, as EU nationals, their plans for future had been altered by the so-called ‘Brexit’ referendum on Britain’s membership to the European Union. Zontini and Però (2020) argue for renewed scrutiny of the role of public discourses on migrants’ experiences, which illuminate the redrawing of the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion, especially at a time of increasingly neo-assimilationist pressures in Britain. As the data in our study were collected in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, we show how the looming possibility of Brexit and the ongoing debates on immigration had a practical and emotional impact on this generation of young people. As adolescents, at a crucial stage in their identity formation and thinking about their futures, they experienced the transition to Brexit both on a personal and on a group level, through the ongoing hostility towards migrants and the othering of EU nationals during the Brexit debates (Guma and Jones 2019; Rzepnikowska 2019).

Being from a migrant background impacts the ways in which young people think about their future and their im/mobility. In this study, we show how their sense of belonging and plans for future can be unsettled by a changing political landscape. We consider future imaginaries as wishes and plans for the future, which are shaped by young people’s aspirations, desires and life trajectories as well as by what they think is possible in the current socio-political context. The certainty over the future and future imaginaries ‘mould and shape who we are and the directions in which we wish, can and will go’ (Cantó-Milà and Seebach 2015: 198). Given the age of our participants, we thought it was important to examine how they experienced the life transition from childhood to youth, grappling with issues of who they are, who they want to be and where they belong (Tyrrell, Sime, Kelly and McMellon 2019) in the context of Brexit. We thus explore the dynamism and contingency of young migrants’ plans through changing as being not only relational and personal, but also as shaped by structural and political contexts. Brexit is a ‘rupture’ that appears to jeopardise their rights to education, work and citizenship, as available to them up to now through the freedom of movement in the EU (see also Lulle, Moroşanu and King 2018).

For adult EU migrants, work opportunities and better living conditions legitimise decisions to move abroad and often take their children with them (Assmuth *et al.* 2018; Vathi, 2015). At the same time, while for many adults the prospect of ‘a better future’ for their children plays an important role in the migration process, children’s agency will vary when it comes to migration decisions (Moskal and Tyrrell 2016; Sime and Fox 2014). At times resentful of their parents’ decisions and their lack of say in them, children do not always buy into their parents’ imaginaries of a ‘better future’. Our research involved adolescent migrants finding themselves at a critical point in their life trajectories, one at which they could envisage a future which they could influence, as their agency in the family decision-making process was increasing with age. In this context, we asked the following questions: *How do young people experience and interpret their current options and plans*

for the future, especially in relation to their mobility/immobility rights post-Brexit? How much certainty do they have over these plans? Finally, how do future imaginaries shape and are shaped by young people's sense of belonging?

The article focuses on young people's ideas about their future and describes the three types of futures that they imagined for themselves. These three imaginaries centre on their views of mobility and their rights, including uncertain rights to immobility and staying in the UK. We provide evidence of how young people explained these imaginaries and what motivated them to think of themselves as willingly or unwillingly mobile, keen or reluctant to stay or trapped in immobility. We also show the strategies adopted by these young migrants to cope with the three scenarios, which can be summed up as follows: 1) 'Going back' – imagining a move back to country of birth; 2) 'Staying put' – imagining a future in the UK; 3) 'Moving on' – imagining a future elsewhere.

### Young migrants, belonging and future imaginaries

Research on young CEE migrants' imaginings of the future is limited, while adults' imaginings are better documented (Benson 2013; Guma and Jones 2019; Lulle *et al.* 2018; McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017). Tyrrell (2013) explored the future plans of young CEE migrants who had moved to Ireland with their families. The study focused on the young people's plans for the future in the wider context of the collapse of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy; they were weighing up the perceived advantages and disadvantages of staying or leaving Ireland during the economic recession. Similarly, our young respondents can be considered to be weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of staying or leaving Britain in the context of Brexit. More recently, other authors (see Assmuth *et al.* 2018; Zontini and Però 2020) have also asked EU children to share their future imaginaries and showed the significant role played by the translocal capital which young people acquire through migration and which enables their imaginaries of what is possible in the future.

A focus on intra-EU mobility flows has meant that surprisingly little academic attention was paid initially to how European migrants negotiated attachments, belonging and processes of settling in destination countries (Ryan 2018b). While many remained firmly focused on eventually returning, they continued to postpone this or decided to settle indefinitely in the UK and bring family over. Moving with children can have an anchoring effect (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2016) for migrant adults, as they experience family life in the new country differently to migrants who are single or in couples with no children. Children attend preschool, school and social and leisure activities and forge links between their families, neighbours and local communities. However, an extended family stay cannot be simply understood as evidence of gradual 'integration' in the host society (Ryan 2018b). Such a static view of integration as permanent adjustment overlooks the ongoing spatio-temporal dynamism of migrants' complex and contingent relationships in the home and host countries (Erel and Ryan 2019).

The literature on young people and migration has often focused on children's integration within the 'host societies' and their prospective futures as adults, rather than on their immediate, direct experiences. Research with young CEE migrants in Ireland has suggested the importance of national identity as a point of fixity for young people when they migrate. Young people living transnational lives and having multiple homes across national borders helped contest ideas of declining, nationally oriented senses of belonging and attachment (Ní Laoire, Carpena-Mendez, Tyrrell and White, 2011). Transnationalism thus provides an important framework in which to understand the everyday realities of CEE migrant youth and their future imaginaries. Children and young people take part in transnational practices and have a range of transnational perspectives and emotions (Assmuth *et al.* 2018; Gardner 2012). They may, however, experience these processes in different ways to adults and this emphasises the need to explore their ideas and understandings separately and in their own right.

Transnationalism and integration are not mutually exclusive, as connections with the host society and sending nation occur concurrently (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Within the transnationalism–integration dynamic, place continues to hold an important position; residing in the place of settlement may lead to integration, although connections with the place of birth remain active (Erdal and Oeppen 2013; Ptashnick and Zuberi 2018). In the case of young people, their future imaginaries are shaped not just by their daily encounters, but also by their memories of a past in another country, or stories of a past handed down to them by adults who migrated with them or stayed behind. Migrant children’s lives are characterised by the simultaneous development of strong local connections and emplacement practices and the retention of an ongoing engagement with their areas of origin through transnational family connections. Telegdi-Csetri and Ducu (2019) argue further that the ‘otherness’ or ‘strangeness’ acquired through migration becomes a permanent trait, one to be coped with, irreducible to the emigration–immigration–repatriation axis. Translocal children are not rootless cosmopolitans but rooted individuals, whose relocation becomes a constituent factor of their lives.

A sense of the future and future imaginaries is important in the personal identity development of young people. Little, Paul, Jordens and Sayers (2002), drawing on Locke’s (1992 [1689]) influential analysis of personal identity and continuity of memory, called for an examination of psychological dis/continuities in order to understand identity development. Similarly, Demblon and D’Argembeau (2017) argued that personal identity is nurtured by memories of significant past experiences and by the imagination of meaningful events that one anticipates may happen in the future. The development of identity could be then explained as the finding of ways to preserve continuities between past memory, present experience and constructions of the future. Little *et al.* (2002) posit events of the past and present contribute thus to the continuity of memory and what we consider ourselves to be here and now; this continuity extends to the future. The future, in this sense, does not only refer to ‘plans’ or ‘expectations’ of what will happen. It involves an act of imagination, whereby we envisage, in the future, looking back at identity-defining events which have yet to occur. When individuals build plans and think of future expectations, they form the basis for the continuity into the future of a person’s lived life. In relation to our data, we show in this paper how the Brexit process can be considered as disruptive to the future imaginaries of young migrants in the UK, with consequences for their identity development as it leaves them uncertain about the direction and location of their lives. Brexit has brought wider structural shifts which can reframe and reverse migrants’ rights and attachments and influence their sense of identity and agency, as well as the sense of what they would like and can realistically chose for their future (Cantó-Milá and Seebach 2015).

## Methodology

In order to provide an empirically informed perspective on research on future imaginaries and their importance to individuals, we draw here on quantitative and qualitative research with young people who had moved to the UK as children from Central and Eastern Europe. The original project (‘Here to Stay? Identity, Belonging and Citizenship among Eastern European Settled Migrant Children in the UK’) used multiple methods to explore the lives of young migrants, aged 12–18, who had lived in the UK for at least three years. An online survey took place between October 2016 and April 2017, a few months after the June 2016 Brexit referendum. In total, 1 120 young people participated in the survey, with 806 full completions.<sup>1</sup> Advertised through schools and social media, the survey mainly attracted young people aged 16–18 (68 per cent), more female than male respondents (60 per cent) and 97 per cent – the vast majority – who identified as White. Over half of the

respondents were Polish (56 per cent), followed by Romanian (10 per cent) and Lithuanian (9 per cent) nationals. Data from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics. The nature of the sample limits the possibilities for generalisation.

In addition to the survey, 20 focus groups were carried out with young people who met the inclusion criteria (born in a CEE country, living in the UK for at least three years), followed by 20 family case studies. The focus groups explored in detail some of the emergent issues from the survey, focusing on feelings of identity and belonging, relationships, access and use of local services and the implications of Brexit. In total, 108 young people, including 50 females and 58 male participants, all aged 12–18, were involved in focus groups between June and November 2017 across the UK. We used a toolkit for creative engagement ([www.ketso.com](http://www.ketso.com)) to allow all young people to fully participate in the group discussions. Family case studies involved 20 young individuals and their consenting family members. At first, a researcher visited the family to discuss participation, meet family members and give the young person a box with creative materials which they could use independently. Later, two family meetings were completed, which included a meeting with the young person to discuss the materials produced by them independently with the use of the ‘creativity box’ and a meeting to carry out a Ketso-mediated focus group with willing family members, including the young person. Most focus groups and case-study meetings took place in English (some case studies were carried out in other languages with an interpreter, if necessary) and were recorded and transcribed in full, in order to allow an in-depth thematic analysis.

To develop the analytical framework, several transcripts were first coded independently by the research team, who then agreed jointly on a framework for analysis to be applied to the remaining data. In order to identify young people’s future imaginaries, we scrutinised all transcripts, looking for all instances when young people talked about their future dreams, plans and aspirations. This analysis indicated that place was an important dimension of these plans, where young people connected their imaginaries of the future with the UK or elsewhere – place of birth, place of current residence and other places. Three themes are thus presented in the paper.

All appropriate ethics and local governance approvals were obtained before the project started, with approval from the University of Strathclyde’s Ethics Committee. The research followed the ethical guidelines of working with young people specified in the University’s Code of Practice on Investigations Involving Human Beings. Our participants all provided their consent before they started the online survey and at the beginning of every meeting, after having received detailed information about the project and what their involvement would require. They were also encouraged to discuss their participation with their parents/carers and parents of children under 16 involved in the case studies and focus groups also provided written consent. Consent was seen as an ongoing process, whereby we re-established participants’ willingness to continue with the meetings and their consent for us to use the data for research purposes. Participants’ names were anonymised throughout the datasets. In two cases, a disclosure of harm (bullying) made during the focus groups was brought to the attention of senior teachers.

### **‘Going back’ – imaginaries of return**

Our participants had moved to Britain in the mid-to-late 2000s and many were now reaching adulthood and deciding on their future plans. For some, these future imaginaries were destabilised by Britain’s decision to leave the EU, while others said that their plans had not changed and they hoped for a smooth transition post-Brexit. Many said that conversations with their parents about ‘moving back’ to their birth country or staying were part of family life since the Brexit referendum. While research on return migration has shown that adults return for a variety of reasons– including improving work opportunities in their country of birth, ageing parents, changing



labour markets and much more (Kilkey and Merla, 2014; Lulle *et al.*, 2018)– we know less about the return plans of young people who migrated as children. In this sense, our data add new knowledge to existing work on return migration.

The majority of the young people displayed a sense of transnational belonging, sustained by frequent visits to their country of birth – in the survey, 78 per cent said they had visited their country of birth at least once in the previous year, while one in three said they had visited ‘a few times’ in the same period. Like in Ní Laoire *et al.*’s (2011) study of CEE young people living in Ireland, many of the young people in our study felt a sense of belonging to different places and at multiple scales. While we acknowledge that the meaning of being ‘transnational’ is contested (Ryan 2018a, b), we see our participants as having a sense of transnational belonging and engaging in ‘doing family’ transnationally (Carsten 2004). Their ability to move freely between European countries influenced their feelings of being European, whilst also having a sense of belonging to both their country of birth and Britain, as shown in this group discussion with Dagnija, 14, from Latvia and Marek, 15, from Poland:

**Researcher:** *Do you feel like you have another home in Latvia, or you just feel like ‘This is my home, in the UK’?*

**Dagnija:** *This is more of a home, Latvia’s more of a... I really don’t know. Like, I feel Latvia’s my home, too. Then here, this is where I live and stay, so...*

**Marek:** *I feel like I, I am, kind of belong in Poland, but I feel better here [in the UK].*

A sense of belonging often resulted from feeling connected to people and places that were familiar and welcoming (Moskal and Tyrrell 2016). In this way, our young respondents indicated that their sense of ‘home’ had changed in the past and might change again in the future. They expressed a sense of unfamiliarity with the country of birth, not only because they were losing their language skills in their parents’ home country, but also because the places they were born in were changing, too. Belonging by birth to a country was not enough to make young people think of a long-term plan to return, as these young interviewees reported in focus groups:

*It feels like I should be there, but I haven’t been there for eight years and it’s just not the same. The place has changed so much because now there’s pretty much buildings everywhere. (Marek, 15, Polish, Focus Group)*

*I don’t have anything there. Like, I have no friends. The only thing I have is a house, and that’s it. I would be going back to nothing because I don’t know, I know hardly anything about Poland. About Polish history, the Polish language. (Antoni, 14, Polish, Focus Group)*

Young people commented on how they were often asked if they were planning to ‘go back’ to their country of origin. The assumption that one’s place of birth is also where one feels that one belongs was implicit in these everyday encounters. However, being told to ‘go back’ was also used as a form of xenophobic slur in the schools and communities the young people attended, especially since the referendum on Brexit:

*Sometimes, like, I remember in primary I got in a fight with, well, it’s more of a bully. She said I should go back to my own country because I don’t belong here. (...) Well, I do kind of feel the odd one ... because I’m from a different country. Yeah. (Dagnija, 14, Latvian, Focus Group)*

*At school sometimes people would say something about Hitler and aim it at me because of Auschwitz. Also, they would say something like 'Go back to your country'.* (Dorota, 16, Polish, Survey)

Casual, everyday encounters with discrimination and xenophobia were becoming more common, the young people said, which made them feel that they would not be allowed to belong in Britain. Many talked about changes in the perceived levels of discrimination since the Brexit referendum:

*I have encountered a lot discrimination. Of course, racism is the main one; many people have been mean just because my name looks different. I speak Polish in a public place, and they just don't like the look of me. After Brexit, this has definitely increased and people are now quicker to assume...* (Emilia, 18, Polish, Survey)

Young people often were more likely to say that they were becoming the targets of xenophobic bullying since the Brexit referendum. These incidents, even if isolated, were sufficient to make some participants consider their position in Britain and future plans and question their sense of belonging. In this context, many also realised that a return might become a forced and unwanted option, which would not be straightforward. The difficulties which some young people experienced with their first language were often a barrier for them when imagining their futures in their country of origin, as mentioned by these participants:

*Because since they [the parents] dragged us out here at such a young age, we're used to living here and we don't want to move back because we'd have to learn the language over again, since we're starting to forget it. And then we would have to go back to school for another year.* (Dymitr, 16, Polish, Focus Group)

*It's a lot harder, yeah. (...) I mean I'd go on holiday, obviously, but not to stay there.* (Grzegorz, 15, Slovakian, Focus Group)

*In Glasgow I can speak English. If I go to Slovakia, I won't understand a lot of Slovak. (...) I know a bit, but it's like, different skills you need in Slovakia.* (Dominik, 13, Slovakian, Focus Group)

*If I have to leave the UK, I'm f\*\*\*ed, man. Can't speak Polish that well, nor write.* (Andrzej, 16, Polish, Survey)

With the loosening of family and cultural ties over time, young people were worried not only that they did not know the language in the country of birth well enough to continue their education or pass exams, but also that their qualifications would not be recognised and they would find it difficult to secure work. For those older and closer to transitioning to work, they worried that their unfamiliarity with the job market in the country of origin would be a barrier, as skilled work is often built on place-specific accreditations, contacts and experience. Erel and Ryan (2019) pointed to the difficulty not only of migrants transferring their cultural capital from the country of birth to the destination country, but also of transporting this newly acquired cultural capital back to the country of origin or elsewhere.

However, for those whose families and friendships had endured the distance and time, out-migration from Britain, back to their country of birth, was becoming a possibility, because they felt that they did not belong in Britain and were marginalised. In considering the possibility of return, young people who left their country of birth as teenagers and had more vivid memories of living there were more likely to imagine themselves returning:

*Well, my memories are there and everything is simpler because I live in a small town, I know a lot of people there. And even now, if I go back people recognise me, they say 'Hi, how have you been?' ... I know my neighbours there; I don't really know my neighbours where I live round here. (Monika, 17, Polish, Focus Group)*

Having a sense of belonging and being recognised as part of the community gave young people an image of a future where they would 'count' and would be connected to others and the places where they would live. Any consideration of social memory inevitably comes around to questions of power and the uneven access to a society's political and economic resources (Kilkey 2017). In the UK, this increasingly includes access to citizenship, mentioned by many of our participants:

*I am worried about the legal safety of people like me; my parents are currently sorting out legal documents to ensure that we are completely safe from any changes to laws that may happen after leaving the EU. It is an uncertain time and, despite promises that EU citizens living here already will be safe and will not be deported, it leaves us in a vulnerable and uncomfortable position. (Nora, 17, Hungarian, Survey)*

Brexit was thus creating not only anxieties and concerns over residence rights but also familial tensions, with a divergence of plans starting to emerge in some cases. Young people were now envisaging the possibility of their parents returning and them being left to continue their education or work in Britain. In Dymitr's case, the family had two younger children and conversations about a family return were ongoing for a while:

*My parents have wanted to go back since Brexit started, like the rumour around it. They were thinking about going back as soon as I finish Year 11, but then they changed it until I finish college. (...) But at college, the course I want to do is for four years, so when I finish college I'll be 21. So, I could potentially live here by myself and, if they go back, I can go and visit them. So what I was thinking was to get maybe two or three friends and share an apartment. (Dymitr, 16, Polish, Focus Group)*

Despite increasing levels of xenophobia and insecurity over their residence rights, most young people in our study were not seeing themselves 'going back' to their countries of birth. While some mentioned an emotional connection to the places where they were born, especially due to family and friends left behind, many had difficulties envisaging a permanent return. Return was thus an extreme-case scenario, often linked to the threat of losing their rights to stay in the UK, or to parental plans, rather than to their own future imaginaries.

### **'Staying put' – imaginaries of a future in Britain**

A majority of young people in the study (83 per cent) had reported feelings of belonging to Britain and their local communities and wanted to continue to live here, at least in the medium term. Often, this was based on a desire to complete their education at college or university in Britain or wanting to gain work experience. In the survey, 85 per cent of the respondents said that they thought they would still be living in the UK three years later and only 10 per cent said they might leave. The intention to stay was justified not simply in terms of practical decisions, but also in relation to a sense of belonging. Feelings of national belonging to the UK were expressed concurrently with a strong sense of a European identity (92 per cent of survey respondents stated that they felt European). Many said that a European identity would always be part of who they are and how they see their place in the world. However, given that many had also expressed a sense of belonging in Britain (33 per cent 'most of the time', 29 per cent 'definitely' and 20 per cent 'a little'), they were concerned that



their right to immobility was under threat – they could not just simply stay on without securing their status. Their plans to secure residence included plans to apply for ‘settled status’ or British citizenship for some, while others were waiting to see how things developed before making a decision:

*It's changed plans for me, I want to do a citizenship test, just to have that security, but my Mum, yes, she feels afraid of what's going to happen. She doesn't want to move back, neither do I. I don't want them to move back, I don't want to be here on my own. We might have to change plans after Brexit, it depends what the negotiations are. For now, we're just sticking to what we've been doing so far. (Melania, 17, Latvia, Family Interview)*

Brexit deprives EU citizens of their European citizenship on the UK territory, which not only puts them in a situation of structural marginality, but also makes them experience exclusion on an emotional level. The potential loss of residence rights made many take actual steps to ensure that they could continue with their plans to stay in Britain. Some were therefore saving money to cover the high fees of British citizenship (over £1,300):

*When I get a job, I'll start earning and saving money so I can get British citizenship, which I can legally obtain as I have lived in the UK for nine years but, due to the expensive prices, my single mum cannot afford it for us. I feel as if it [citizenship] is more a legal thing. (Dimitar, 17, Bulgarian, Survey)*

Most young people were very focused on their need for education if they were to provide a better life for themselves, conscious that their parents had made compromises and were sometimes de-skilled when they moved to Britain. Financial gains and giving children a better chance in life often were stated as a motivation for parents' migration to Britain and young people often considered finishing their education in Britain as an important part of the family project in which they had all invested. While 70 per cent of our survey respondents said that they wanted to continue their education, they were concerned that Brexit may impact on their right to access college and university. For those who wanted to remain in Britain long term, the risk to their educational prospects was of great concern, as they felt that their employment prospects would be directly affected and they would end up in low-paid work.

*Although I live in the UK, I don't feel that I belong here and I think that I'm a lot more comfortable in Poland. I wish to go to university in England, because I have been educated here, but afterwards I hope to return to Poland or live in a different country. I definitely don't plan to stay in the UK any longer. Because of this, I don't have very strong feelings about Brexit, but because this is such a history-changing move, I'm excited to see how the issue progresses. (Nadia, 17, Polish, Survey)*

Finally, while some young people felt that they had a choice over staying or moving on, others felt that they were not in a position to choose their path or start imagining a future elsewhere. While they did not feel a strong sense of belonging to the UK, they felt ‘stuck’ in Britain, mainly due to their lack of economic power, with not enough resources to move elsewhere or live independently. In their case, resentment over their parents' decision to move to Britain was more openly expressed – but so was their anger at their economic situation and their lack of networks and capital which would make a move possible.

### **‘Moving on’: imaginaries of futures elsewhere**

A majority of young people (81 per cent in the survey sample) did not feel hopeful about Britain’s decision to leave the EU and expressed uncertainty over their status and rights as migrants. For some, the prospect of Brexit had increased their desire to leave Britain, while for others, it had prompted them for the first time to consider whether they had a future in Britain:

*I was once talking about Brexit with my college lecturer. He said I was lucky because you can’t tell I’m Polish by the way I speak. I don’t want to stay in a country in which I need to hide my nationality to be treated equally. (Ada, 18, Polish, Survey)*

When considering their futures, many young people were fearful about whether they would feel welcome in Britain in future as the Brexit vote meant that Britain rejected Europe and its values and this had shaken their sense of belonging to Britain. As a ‘return’ to the country of birth was not seen as a viable option, many said their plans were up in the air:

*Brexit obviously, you know, I’m not going to lie, it had a huge impact on how things went and at first I was like, ‘Oh my God, they’re going to send me back’, you know, I need to return, but now it’s just like, ‘I’ll see how things go, and then I’ll start making my mind up’, because that’s when, with time, I hope things will become more apparent. I hope, but no guarantee. (Jana, 17, Polish, Family Interview)*

Young people commented that the result of the Brexit referendum had altered their feeling of belonging to their neighbourhood because of the hostility towards migrants being expressed openly by people they knew. In this sense, their future imaginaries were shaped not just by a changing political climate and rising anti-immigration attitudes, but also by their everyday encounters with prejudice and the subsequent pressure to hide their nationality:

*I moved here when I was six years old and, even though I speak English with a British accent as a result of using it for over 11 years, when people find out that I am Polish, I often face racism and discrimination. I find that I belong as long as no one finds out my nationality. (Artur, 17, Polish, Survey)*

For some young people, out-migration to countries such as the USA or Australia or to European countries they had visited or knew of was starting to feature in their future imaginaries, with a view to securing better employment and quality of life. Overcoming the challenges of migration and settlement in the UK had given them the confidence to consider options for education and work that they felt they might not have considered if they had remained in their birth country. Some felt that their parents should be credited with opening up their worldview and making them see migration to another place not only as possible, but also as desirable as a life experience and character-building:

*I genuinely don’t think I’d be the person that I am if I hadn’t moved here because, right now even, I don’t see myself being here constantly. I want to go to America and I don’t think I would have been like that, like globally, such a person before. I would have just been stuck in that, that’s where we live. (Barbara, 18, Hungarian, Family Interview)*

The ways in which these changes will play out in their young adult lives are only just beginning to be realised. Some young people felt that their initial migration had enabled and encouraged them to feel footloose and able to move anywhere, a useful skill given the Brexit-induced uncertainty they were experiencing:

*I think I might spend some time in the US, potentially. However, looking into the next three, five years, I am looking to be in London but, of course, as my work hopefully progresses, my ideal place to end up would be Japan. (...) If I can't get to Japan, I'll go to France. France will do. (...) I think my mother moving us here has definitely shown me that anything is possible. I know my mum went through a whole lot of poo to get us where we are, but she's shown me that we can. (Daria, 17, Polish, Family Interview)*

When deciding on potential future locations, young people were weighing up not only the economic conditions and what they heard or knew about countries to which they were aspiring to move, but also the existing networks – such as family and friends – which they might use to help them with the move, thinking thus about activating their family cultural habitus:

*I would like to move somewhere where I have family, that's why I want to move to Australia. I don't want to go back to Poland, which is quite surprising to some people, 'cos I know my friend Martha she wants to go back to Poland. (Kinga, 17, Polish, Family Interview)*

In many respects, some of our participants were displaying a 'footloose' attitude to migration, where the idea of moving to new countries was exciting and possible – although they were unsure about what it would be like to live in their imagined destinations. To keep their options open, some young people held multiple countries in their imagined futures simultaneously.

**Emese:** *I want to stay here [the UK] but, at the same time, I want to go for a year or two to France or Germany.*

**Vanda (Emese's mother):** *Japan?*

**Emese:** *Japan as well.*

**Researcher:** *Do you want her to go to Japan?*

**Vanda:** *No, I don't want her to go anywhere, but she wants to, she said.*

**Emese:** *I don't know, maybe I would live there for a bit. (Emese, 17, Hungarian, Family Interview)*

Imagining their futures beyond Britain created unwanted uncertainty for many. The EU referendum and its aftermath had forced them to question their identity and right to belong in a country which a majority of them considered as their home. Some young people were envisaging opportunities in new countries, drawing on their feelings of Europeanism, their transnational social fields and/or their research for future employment prospects. Some of them said that they were considering out-migration in order to not be discriminated against in the future.

*I feel very connected to Europe and European culture. There has been some concern regarding whether I want to stay in this country in the future due to the political changes happening in the UK. I am considering moving to the EU after finishing university, despite the fact that I enjoy living in this country. (Andris, 18, Latvian, Survey)*

For the young people who wanted to move to another country, their future imaginaries often involved family separation. They were aware that their plans to move elsewhere did not engage their parents, who might want to remain in Britain or return to their country of birth to look after elderly parents or retire.

*I've been going to Poland quite often now and, like, I just feel a lot more at home there and the fact that my brother's there, there's family to go to and, yeah, 'cos if I go to the USA for university, my parents are probably going to move back 'cos there's nothing holding them here, they don't own a house and my grandma's getting quite old, so my mum wants to look after her mum. (Katia, 18, Polish, Family Interview)*

Young people's plans for the future were thus shaped by different considerations – such as their disenfranchisement with their potential loss of rights in Britain and their everyday experiences of being othered, as well as their ideas about what desirable careers or inclusive places to live might be available to them. While, for their parents, a return to the country of origin was both possible and likely, the young people preferred to keep their options open and envisaged themselves as exploring other locations and destinations, often unfamiliar to them. Similar to other research with young migrants, a particular concern expressed by several participants was the uncertainty over a future location (Jørgensen 2016). While this was exciting for some, it did make others feel worried and insecure. The situation of the young people and their families could not be seen in separation from the legal and socio-political climate of Brexit and their transnational links with families in other countries. Everyday bordering affects not only adults (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy 2018), but also, as we have shown, their children. As Erel and Ryan (2019) rightly point out, Brexit reaffirms the importance of national boundaries, which had faded in the context of intra-European mobility.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to discuss young EU migrants' imaginaries of their futures, in light of Brexit-driven uncertainties and risks as well as contradictory processes of assimilation and exclusion (Guma and Jones 2019; Kilkey 2017; Zontini and Però 2020). Our findings showed that, despite the fact that the vast majority of young people had a strong sense of belonging to the UK, the increasing uncertainty which they were facing since the Brexit vote and their everyday encounters with xenophobia and racism had impacted on their future imaginings in different ways. While, for a minority, their outlook remained unchanged for now, for most of them, Brexit and the increase in their everyday experiences of being othered had acted as triggers for the re-evaluation of their plans for the future. While most said that they had no immediate plans to leave the UK, their imaginings for the future were more complex. Some wanted to remain in Britain to finish their education and perhaps gain some work experience – even to settle and secure citizenship rights. For many others, though, imaginings of the future included places of which these young people had no direct experience of, but where they thought that they would have a better chance of feeling fulfilled and secure (Sime 2018). For most, their future did not include a return to the country of birth other than to visit family, as some were conscious that their future plans to out-migrate might mean leaving their parents behind. These findings add to the evidence on translocal childhoods and family mobility (Assmuth *et al.* 2018) by identifying the role that the sense of security and belonging plays in young people's future imaginings. The agency of young people is exemplified in their claims to

a future that can be shaped by them, although some are aware of the structural barriers which they may encounter on the way and of their multiple attachments to places to which they want to belong, like their schools, communities and nations. Yet, their belonging is unsettled by the ongoing political events which mark them out as unwelcome citizens, despite their proven loyalty to the places in which they live.

This paper has also addressed the issue of the implications of Britain's exit from the European Union for the security, mobility and immobility rights ('right to stay') of CEE migrant youth. At the time of writing, their right to remain in Britain is subject to individuals applying for 'settled' or 'pre-settled status' or British citizenship for those who qualify through long-term residence. We have shown that young people were discussing their rights and their plans to secure their status in the UK, including through applying for British citizenship. However, while many said that they felt 'settled' and 'at home' *before* the Brexit vote, three years after the Referendum, young people were already envisaging the possibility of having to leave. In mapping out their plans to move on, some of which were not yet concrete plans, but rather imaginaries of the possible, we have taken into consideration young people's emotional responses to the Brexit situation, their coping strategies with being othered and the uncertainty which Brexit has created. Many were confident that they could uproot again and move on if they had to, while others felt more insecure, stuck and uncertain about possibilities. Similar findings were reported in Lulle *et al.*'s study (2018) with European students and workers in the UK; although the migration trajectories of young Europeans were often open-ended, given their age and early-adult life stage, Brexit had sharpened the potential choices of returning to their home countries or moving elsewhere within Europe to countries where the rights to free movement, work and residence seemed more secure.

To conclude, we have argued that Brexit, as an unexpected socio-political change, has created conditions of significant uncertainty for young people with a European migrant background and their families. While many expressed disappointment and anger at Britain's decision to leave the EU, their imaginaries were shifting in response to the new situation and the novel circumstances of uncertainty created by Brexit. Many envisaged a future where they might decide to leave the UK if circumstances became unfavourable to their plans for education, training, employment or a secure family life. While some expressed sadness at seeing the country they now lived in removed from the EU, their main concerns were over their rights to mobility – including opportunities to work and study in other countries – and concerns over family life. In this sense, their imaginaries of a future elsewhere were still evolving – just like the Brexit situation – and most seemed to be remaining open to readjusting their plans and ideas about what the future would involve depending on the outcome of the Brexit transition. This underscores the importance of analysing the wider socio-political discourses that shape young people's sense of security and control over their future imaginaries, as these can undermine their identity projects and relational subjectivities. Future research will need to examine the increasingly complex and unpredictable nature of young migrants' plans within an intergenerational and translocal framework and to consider the multiple social, political and economic factors which may impact on individuals' future imaginaries. Longitudinal studies might also examine the extent to which young people's imaginaries materialise, given previous research showing that migrants' plans change over time (Ryan 2018b), as migration requires negotiation over time and decisions are often taken by considering the implications not only for the individual, but also for other family members.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> This was a convenience sample and the data could not be weighted due to the absence of existing reliable data on EU nationals in the UK.



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## Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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