Who blames Brexit for leaving the UK?

The departure of skilled Germans from Britain after the referendum

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Abstract

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union—better known by its portmanteau Brexit—had changed the situation of migrants living in the UK and could be a reason to leave the country. Some consequences, like the loss of skilled workers, are possibly unintended. This article investigates the relevance of Brexit for German migrants from the UK that decided to return to Germany in the two years after the referendum in 2016. Our analysis relies on a register-based probability sample of German migrants. We find that more than half of German migrants from the UK assert that their return decision has been strongly affected by Brexit. Furthermore, German migrants who were strongly affected by Brexit in their return decision are more likely to blame the political situation, the lack of social security, and their dissatisfaction with life in the country than Germans who have been less affected by Brexit. Our results indicate that skills and the Brexit return motive are positively related. Whereas attachment to the UK does not affect whether German migrants blame Brexit for their return, those with better English skills and longer durations of stay are more likely to mention Brexit as a return motive.

Keywords: Brexit, migration decisions, skilled migrants, return migration, EU mobility, freedom of movement

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1 Introduction: How the Brexit process unsettles migrants

Freedom of movement is a cornerstone of the European Union (EU) and allows European citizens to settle in any member state (Recchi 2015). In recent decades, the United Kingdom (UK) was a primary recipient of EU labour migrants (Fries-Tersch *et al.* 2020). The British labour market absorbed many migrants following the EU's eastern enlargement in 2004 and 2007 (Blanchflower and Lawton 2010). In the discussion about the labour market integration of EU migrants, the vast majority of studies conclude that the British economy benefits from the immigration of EU labour migrants and that a decrease of net migration would affect the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the UK negatively (e.g. Arnorsson and Zoega 2018; Kierzenkowski *et al.* 2016; Portes and Forte 2017; Wadsworth *et al.* 2016).

In spite of the positive economic impact of labour migrants, the ostensible threat of immigration to the economy and the health care system was a major argument of the Brexit supporters¹ (Guma and Jones 2019; Henderson *et al.* 2017; Virdee and McGeever 2018). While the vote in June 2016 seems to have “legitimated an extraordinary outburst of [...] attacks against migrants, especially those from Poland, and non-white British citizens, residents, and visitors” (Khalili 2017; see also Benedi Lahuerta and Iusmen 2021), all EU migrants living in the UK, including Western Europeans, lost their ‘invisibility’ and saw their privileged cross-border mobility threatened (Godin and Sigona 2022; Lulle *et al.* 2018; Mulholland and Ryan 2022; Rzepnikowska 2019; Zontini and Genova 2022). Moreover, the Brexit referendum in June 2016 and the vote to leave the EU have generated uncertainties regarding migrants’ residence status and living conditions in the UK (Vargas-Silva 2016). This new atmosphere of latent exclusion forced EU immigrants is a potential push factor for resident migrants to leave the country (Lulle *et al.* 2018; Mazzilli and King 2019; Ranta and Nancheva 2019).

This article provides an empirical assessment of Brexit’s consequences for the return of German migrants from the UK to Germany in the two years after the referendum in June 2016 and investigates why they migrated in response to Brexit. Most studies covering the Brexit-migration nexus that use

individual data are based on qualitative interviews with migrants living in the UK.² While the majority of studies is concerned with Eastern member countries (e.g. Duda-Mikulin 2020; Guma and Jones 2019; Lulle *et al.* 2018; Ranta and Nancheva 2019) the interest in the consequences for Western European migrants has been increasing (e.g. Brahic and Lallement 2020; Mohr 2020; Mulholland and Ryan 2022) including some studies comparing Eastern and Western European migrants (Godin and Sigona 2022; Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz 2021; Zontini and Genova 2022). Another strand of research examines the impact of the Brexit referendum on return migration intentions (Markova and King 2021; McGhee *et al.* 2017; Mohr 2020) and on legal integration (Godin and Sigona 2022; Moreh *et al.* 2020). However, none of these studies investigates based on survey data, whether migrants have actually turned their back on Britain on account of Brexit and returned to their countries of origin.³

We use the first wave of the German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS), a unique probability-sample of German return migrants (Ette *et al.* 2020), to assess migration motives and socio-structural characteristics of German migrants returning from the UK to Germany. These data enable the identification of Brexit migrants on the basis of a questionnaire item regarding the relevance of Brexit for their return migration to Germany. Furthermore, they yield return migrants' migration motives from other EU countries as an instructive reference. A major strength of this study and the GERPS data is the reliance on confirmed migration as opposed to intended migration, which is seldom predictive of actual migration behaviour (Lu 1999; Manski 1990).

The next section provides background information on migration of Germans between Germany and the UK. We then derive hypotheses about the likelihood that return migrants have been motivated by Brexit from both theory and research findings followed by a description of the data, variable operationalization and methods of analysis. Finally, we present our empirical results before we discuss our findings in light of the literature and our studies' limitations.

2 Background: Migration between Germany and the UK

The international mobility of the German population is close to the OECD average, and today a stock of around 3.8 million German citizens live abroad (Ette and Erlinghagen 2021). In the years between 2010 and 2018, the United Kingdom was in the top five of German migrants' favoured destinations. The estimated stock of German citizens living in the UK increased continuously from 133,000 in 2012 to 154,000 in 2017, followed by a decrease since 2018 to 140,000 (Office for National Statistics UK 2020). Therefore, Germans have been one of the largest groups of EU nationals in the UK since the 1980s (Godin and Sigona 2022: 1140f.).

The flows of German citizens migrating from Germany to the UK decreased since 2016, the year of the referendum (Figure 1). Subsequently, these flows settled at their all-time low since 2003. Return migration of German citizens from the UK to Germany had reached a plateau in 2008, slightly decreased in 2014 and 2015, followed by a slight increase in 2016 the year of the referendum and in 2017. For reference, the volume of migration from EU member states to the UK also decreased after the Brexit referendum, except for Romania and Italy (Fries-Tersch *et al.* 2019; Fries-Tersch *et al.* 2020). As a result, the UK's migration balance with the EU28 dwindled and the number of EU citizens in the UK decreased (see also Auer and Tetlow 2020).

Information about the socio-economic characteristics of German migrants living in the UK is scarce. Generally, both German emigrants and migrants that return to Germany are positively selected in terms of education and occupational status (e.g. Ette and Witte 2021). Moreover, we assume that German migrants enjoyed rather privileged social status in the UK before the referendum compared with Eastern European migrants, who encountered discrimination and prejudice (Mazzilli and King 2019; Moore 2013; Mulholland and Ryan 2022; Zontini and Genova 2022).

Figure 1. Migration of German citizens to and from the UK

Source: Federal Statistical Office of Germany, own calculations.

Note: See Table A1 of the appendix.

3 Theorising return migration under Brexit conditions

Several studies describe the emotional reactions (e.g. shock, anger, and betrayal) that the Brexit referendum and its result triggered among EU migrants in the UK (Guma and Jones 2019; Lulle *et al.* 2018; Mazzilli and King 2019; Zontini and Genova 2022). These reactions and the unclear migration policy in the subsequent period (Vargas-Silva 2016) forced migrants to reconsider their legal situation, their social integration, and their national identity (Lulle *et al.* 2018; Mazzilli and King 2019; Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz 2021). In terms of theory, the changed social and political situation in the UK throughout the Brexit debate made frames of ‘foreignness’ more salient and provoked greater levels of conscious reflexivity among migrants (King 1978). The literature has identified four potential strategies adopted by migrants facing Brexit: ‘wait and see’, ‘change residence status’, ‘leave the UK and move to the country of origin’, or ‘leave and move to a third country’ (e.g. Lulle *et al.* 2018). If we

take non-representative findings as suggestive, the consolidation of their status either through naturalisation or through permanent residence certificates is German migrants' preferred strategy (McGhee *et al.* 2017; Moreh *et al.* 2020).⁴ Non-action and return to Germany are only slightly less popular, while a minority intends to move to a third country. Interestingly, return migration is considerably less popular among all other sampled nationalities (Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, and Portuguese) (Moreh *et al.* 2020). Less favourable labour market conditions in these countries compared with Germany are a potential reason for these differences (Duda-Mikulin 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, the decision to return is complex and time-consuming and its consequences are far-reaching (Haug 2008). Where families are present, these consequences affect several persons (e.g. Tabor *et al.* 2015). The decision to return is often driven by the motive to improve the current dissatisfying situation and to increase the quality of life (Engler *et al.* 2015; van Dalen and Henkens 2007). Moreover, it is usually assumed that migrants assess the subjectively perceived monetary (e.g. income) and non-monetary (e.g. quality of life, health care, or social contacts) costs and benefits which go along with migration. They decide in favour of migration if the benefits outweigh the costs (e.g. Hoppe and Fujishiro 2015; Sjaastad 1962). In the remainder of this section, we theorize the influence of Brexit on return decisions of German migrants living in the UK based on two crucial dimensions derived from the literature (e.g. Cassarino 2004; Currle 2006; Salaff 2013): (1) skills as evidenced by formal education and (2) sociocultural integration.

First, skilled Germans are more internationally mobile than those possessing lower skills (Ette and Sauer 2010). The expected returns on migration as investment in their human capital are one theoretical explanation for the educational gradient in international mobility (Becker 1975; Sjaastad 1962). A negative labour market outlook has been shown to affect migration decisions more strongly than a positive outlook (Czaika 2014). We therefore would expect economists' pessimistic prophecies regarding the economic consequences of Brexit (Dhingra *et al.* 2016; Kierzenkowski *et al.* 2016; Sredanovic 2020) to have a negative impact on migrants' assessment of their labour market prospects

(Dustmann and Weiss 2007; Landesmann *et al.* 2015). We expect the negative impact on the return decision to be greater among skilled migrants compared with less skill migrants, because skilled migrants can expect greater returns to return migration especially during a recession. Moreover, for skilled Germans the German labour market may be an attractive alternative. From an emotional perspective, skilled migrants are usually more sensitive to discrimination and ethnic inequality known as the ‘integration paradox’ (Verkuyten 2016). That fits with Zontini and Genova’s (2022) observation that migrants ranking higher in the ‘hierarchy of privilege’ where more likely to perceive their loss of rights through Brexit as unjust. In this context, Mohr (2020) shows that Brexit increased the return intentions of the typically highly skilled Germans. Moreover, the results of Lulle *et al.* (2019) show that skilled migrants living in the UK are less concerned about their individual consequences of Brexit and more open to leaving compared with low skilled migrants, who have more negative expectations of the future and see their choices as restricted (see also Moreh *et al.* 2020). We therefore expect that high skilled German migrants that return from the UK to Germany are more likely to cite Brexit as a motivation for return than low skilled ones (*Hypothesis 1*).

Second, research shows that the sociocultural integration of individuals (e.g. identification with the host country, social contact with natives, speaking the host country’s language), which is a correlate of duration of stay, is an important aspect of return migration (e.g. Constant and Massey 2002; de Haas and Fokkema 2011; Ette and Sauer 2010; Snel *et al.* 2015). The general assumption is that stronger sociocultural integration goes along with lower inclinations to return to the country of origin, because the costs of return increase with sociocultural integration. Along these lines, return migration was usually not an option after Brexit for migrants who stayed for extended periods in the UK (see also Brahic and Lallement 2020; Guma and Jones 2019; Markova and King 2021). Therefore, strategies of legal integration in the UK (e.g. naturalisation) should be prevalent among migrants who are more integrated in sociocultural terms. Owing to selectivity, we thus expect that German migrants returning from the UK to Germany who were less socioculturally integrated in the UK are more likely

to name Brexit as a reason of return to Germany than those who were more assimilated in sociocultural terms (*Hypothesis 2*).

4 Data, variables, and analytical strategy

Data

We use the first wave of the German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS). GERPS contains rich individual socio-economic information and retrospective questions about migration motives (Erlinghagen *et al.* 2021).⁵ The panel relies on register-based probability samples of German citizens who emigrated or returned from abroad between July 2017 and June 2018 and were between 20 and 70 years of age at the time of sampling (Ette *et al.* 2020). The sampling period thus starts one year after the Brexit referendum (June 2016). During the sampling period, notable events included elections for the lower house (June 2017) and the opening of the second round of negotiations between the EU and the UK (December 2017). In the German case register-based samples are a good solution to identify mobile populations (Ette *et al.* 2021), even if they lead to some under-coverage of exchange students and short-term stays of employees. Comparisons with official statistics revealed only minor deviations (e.g. regarding age and region), which seem to be mainly explained by contact problems (Ette *et al.* 2021).

We exclude students, pensioners, and persons older than 65 years from our sample. Thus, we obtain a gross sample of 507 German return migrants from the United Kingdom and 1,342 German return migrants from other EU15⁶ countries (N = 1,849). After the list wise deletion of all cases with missing values the net sample consist of n = 442 return migrants from the UK and n = 1,262 from other EU15 countries. We argue that the EU15 member states can be reasonably compared, because migration between them was covered by EU regulations of free movement before Brexit. Moreover, the EU15 have similar geographical proximity, and their economies have been similarly developed in global comparison.

Variables

Migration motives (e.g. occupation, family or financial reasons) are measured on a six-tiered Likert scale from one (not important at all) to six (very important), where the questions are asked retrospectively.⁷ Only UK returnees were asked in addition about the importance of Brexit for their decision to return. For the correlation analysis with other migration motives, we dichotomize answers to the Brexit motive to identify those for whom Brexit represented a relevant return motive.

We operationalize skills through a collapsed CASMIN scale, which originally combines educational and vocational certificates (Brauns and Steinmann 1999), and differentiate between lower secondary or lower qualifications (0, 1, 2a/b), higher secondary qualifications (2c), and tertiary qualifications (3). The sociocultural integration of migrants is measured in several ways. First, we consider the number of friends in both the home and the host country. Second, we use self-assessed language skills that were rated on a six-tiered Likert scale from one ('very poor') to six ('mother tongue'). Third, feelings of belonging to the UK are measured on a four-tiered Likert scale (1 = not attached at all; 4 = strongly attached) based on the question: 'How strong are your feelings of attachment to the country where you lived (United Kingdom) and its citizens?' Fourth, the duration of stay abroad has four answer categories: 'less than one year'; 'one to under two years'; 'two to under 5 years'; and 'five years or more'.

As control variables, we account for the sex of the respondent and age at the time of migration. In terms of labour market integration, we differentiate employees and self-employed since labour market integration affects return migration (e.g. Ette and Witte 2021; Jensen and Pedersen 2008). Other activity states like unemployed, not employed, work and travel, further training, etc. had few observations and were therefore collapsed into one category. Furthermore, we account for the number of stays abroad before migration to the UK given research findings about circular migration (e.g. Constant *et al.* 2013). We use retrospective information about the marital and family status, because empirical findings show that both can influence return migration (e.g. Constant and Massey 2002).

Family status is derived from information about the household composition before migration (abroad) and after migration (in Germany) respectively. Children living in the same household as respondents both before and after migration are assumed to be their own children. Furthermore, research findings suggest that the decision to return is shaped by original emigration motives (Ghosh 2000; King 1978). While these motives are not covered by the questionnaire, we include expatriate status (“Had you been posted by your employer?”) as proximate information and fixed return migration plans (“Was your stay abroad planned from the beginning for a limited time only?”) as controls in our models. Table A2 of the appendix gives an overview of all variables, their categories, and their summary statistics.

Analytical strategy

Our analytical strategy is twofold. First, we compare the motives of migration between three groups: (1) German return migrants from the UK who state that Brexit was of lesser relevance for their decision to migrate, (2) German return migrants from the UK who state that Brexit was of higher relevance for their decision to migrate, and (3) German return migrants from other EU15 countries. This is to check for general differences between German return migrants from the UK and from other EU15 countries, and to identify whether alternative migration motives correlate with the Brexit motive. Second, we use linear regressions (OLS) of the Brexit motive on our model to investigate the multivariate relationship between the Brexit motive and German return migrants’ characteristics. We use combined design and adjustment weights throughout as provided, which correct for sample selection as well as for unit nonresponse (Ette *et al.* 2020).

5 Results

This section reports descriptive statistics and multivariate analyses of return migration motives. Figure 3 shows the relevance of Brexit for German migrants who returned from the UK to Germany. More than half of them (55 per cent) state that Brexit was an important or very important motive (5,

6) for their return to Germany, while it was not important or not important at all for 25 per cent (1, 2), and of medium importance for 21 per cent (3, 4) of German return migrants.

For further analysis, we use the assessment of the Brexit motive to define two distinct groups: German UK returnees who state that Brexit was not or only moderately important (response categories 1–4), and German UK returnees who state that Brexit was an important or very important reason for returning (response categories 5, 6).⁸ Germans that return from other EU15 states to Germany figure as an additional reference. Hereinafter we refer to the three groups as ‘other EU15 returnees’, ‘non-Brexit returnees’, and ‘Brexit returnees’ respectively. Table A3 in the appendix shows the descriptive sample statistics separately for each of the three groups.

Figure 3. Importance of Brexit for German migrants that returned from the UK to Germany

Source: GERPS wave 1, $n = 442$, weighted

Table 1 shows how the importance of other migration motives varies over the three groups. German EU15 returnees figure as counterfactual ‘average’ German migrants that returned to Germany for the

assessment of differences between non-Brexit returnees and Brexit UK returnees. Moreover, this analytical step uncovers whether ‘conventional’ migration motives correlate with the Brexit motive. We test the differences between German non-Brexit returnees and Brexit returnees using t-tests and report Cohen’s d as a measure of effect strength (see Table 1, right columns). Overall, the comparison shows that German non-Brexit returnees are more similar to German EU15 returnees in their migration reasons compared with Brexit returnees. The similarity of German non-Brexit returnees and German EU15 returnees indicates that it is sensible to treat Brexit returnees as a distinct group. Moreover, German Brexit returnees migrate more often owed to discontent with life in their host country and because of the political situation and social security than EU15 returnees do. Our analysis reveals that the same differences apply in contrast with German non-Brexit returnees. In a nutshell, concerns about political developments in the host country and about social security as well as dissatisfaction with life in the former residence country reveal a particular unease among the group of Brexit returnees.

Table 1. Reasons for return migration

Reason	other EU15 Migrants		UK Migrants						
	Mean	N	Importance of Brexit				t	p	d ^a
			1–4		5, 6				
Occupational	4.28	1218	4.00	208	3.83	224	-0.58	0.564	-0.10
Occupational (partner)	2.90	871	2.96	151	2.79	155	-0.45	0.656	-0.09
Other (partnership)	3.02	823	2.93	155	3.29	148	0.89	0.373	0.18
Family	3.95	1099	4.25	205	4.28	219	0.13	0.894	0.02
Financial	2.88	1107	2.73	204	2.84	217	0.42	0.677	0.07
Discontent with life in host country	2.45	1112	2.14	207	3.55	229	5.35	< 0.001	0.89
Educational	2.02	800	2.33	144	2.61	145	0.57	0.568	0.14
Lifestyle	2.76	1094	2.86	202	3.19	215	0.95	0.344	0.19
Political situation	1.73	1033	2.38	216	5.28	233	15.89	< 0.001	2.78
Social security	2.61	1083	2.63	206	4.09	219	6.45	< 0.001	0.90

Source: GERPS wave 1, weighted

Note: ^a Cohen’s d, small effect d = 0.2, medium effect d = 0.5, large effect d = 0.8

The remaining analysis is restricted to German UK returnees aims to investigate variations in the subjective importance of Brexit. For this we use bivariate correlations and multivariate regression models (Table 2), where we treat the dependent variable as metric. The bivariate analysis demonstrates that individuals with higher secondary and tertiary degrees rate Brexit as more important for their return to Germany than those with lower secondary qualifications. Both effects are substantial, while only the latter is statistically significant in the multivariate model. Sociocultural integration of migrants has ambiguous effects. While the number of friends in the UK is positively related to the Brexit return motive, the number of friends in Germany is negatively related. The negative effect for the number of friends is upheld in multivariate models ($p < .10$). In both the bivariate and multivariate model, English skills are positively related to cite Brexit as reason for return, whereas the effect for the emotional attachment to the UK is not significantly related and much smaller. Findings for the duration of stay, our compound measure of host country integration, show that those who stayed for shorter periods in the UK state less often to be affected by Brexit in their decision to return than those who stayed for five or more years in the UK. While the bivariate correlation is strongest for those who stayed more than one and less than two years, the correlations become weaker and statistically insignificant in the full model. Additional analyses, which exclude language skills and planned return migration from the model, suggest that these variables partially mediate the association of the duration of stay with the Brexit motive ($B_{<1\text{year}} = -0.65, SE = 0.490, p = 0.183$; $B_{1-2\text{years}} = -1.01, SE = 0.374, p = 0.007$; $B_{2-5\text{years}} = -0.47, SE = 0.300, p = 0.116$). Findings for the age at migration suggest that middle-aged migrants (aged 25–49) are more affected than younger and older ones, although only the difference with the older group is statistically significant. Among the other control variables, three findings stand out and are significant at least in both bivariate (except the effect for children) and multivariate models. Expatriates as well as returnees with fixed ex ante return plans or children state that the Brexit was less important for their return to Germany.

Table 2. Linear regression of the importance of Brexit for the decision to return to Germany, b-coefficients and SEs

<i>Variable</i>	<i>bivariate</i>			<i>multivariate</i>		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Educational level						
Lower Secondary or lower	-	-	-	-	-	-
Upper Secondary (Abitur)	1.29	(0.692)	0.063	0.91	(0.563)	0.106
Tertiary	1.53	(0.617)	0.014	1.31	(0.530)	0.014
Number of friends in UK	0.08	(0.035)	0.016	-0.00	(0.028)	0.916
Number of friends in Germany	-0.08	(0.027)	0.003	-0.05	(0.025)	0.052
English skills	1.01	(0.188)	<0.001	0.60	(0.245)	0.015
Emotional attachment to UK	-0.04	(0.210)	0.851	-0.13	(0.163)	0.442
Duration of stay						
< 1 year	-0.78	(0.500)	0.121	-0.37	(0.462)	0.417
1 to < 2 years	-1.42	(0.407)	0.001	-0.61	(0.398)	0.127
2 to < 5 years	-0.55	(0.403)	0.170	-0.19	(0.291)	0.525
> 5 years (ref.)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age						
22–29	-0.49	(0.343)	0.152	-0.29	(0.331)	0.381
30–49	-	-	-	-	-	-
50–65 (ref.)	-1.19	(0.613)	0.052	-0.80	(0.387)	0.038
Women (ref. men)	0.61	(0.299)	0.041	0.20	(0.261)	0.454
Main activity						
Employed (ref.)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Self-employed	-0.41	(0.816)	0.616	-0.36	(0.453)	0.433
Other	0.24	(0.363)	0.514	0.36	(0.297)	0.228
Partner (ref. no)	-0.30	(0.296)	0.319	0.06	(0.260)	0.803
Children (ref. no)	-0.54	(0.352)	0.125	-0.74	(0.259)	0.005
Number of earlier stays abroad	0.06	(0.150)	0.706	-0.08	(0.121)	0.534
Expatriate (ref. no)	-1.42	(0.475)	0.003	-0.93	(0.409)	0.023
Fixed return to Germany (ref. no)	-0.89	(0.325)	0.006	-0.74	(0.241)	0.002
Constant	-	-	-	1.40	(1.305)	0.285
Adjusted-R ²		-			0.22	
<i>N</i>		442			442	

Source: GERPS wave 1, weighted

Robustness checks

We tested the robustness of our findings in two ways. First, we estimated both, ordered logit regression models as well as logistic regression models using the same dichotomization as in the first part of the analysis to test the robustness of our findings (see Table 1). Both kinds of models support our main findings (see Table A4 of the appendix). Second, we restricted our sample to employed and self-employed to test whether our findings are affected by the heterogeneity of our sample. The linear regression based on this more homogenous sample leads to the same conclusions (see Table A5 of the appendix).

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This article investigates to what extent the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, known as Brexit, affects the decision of German migrants returning from the UK to Germany. We use individual survey data from the German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS). Our study contributes to the literature on Brexit-related migration that usually relies on qualitative interviews with migrants living in the UK and intended migration by exploring the migration motives of actual return migrants based on a probability-sample of German return migrants.

Our analysis reveals that Brexit was an important or very important migration motive for around 55 per cent of German migrants that returned from the UK to Germany between July 2017 and June 2018. Furthermore, our analysis highlights that German 'Brexit-returnees' differ in their migration reasons from German 'non-Brexit returnees', whose motives are more similar to those of German return migrants from other European states (EU15). In particular, we find that social security, the political situation, and dissatisfaction with their life in the host country are important return motives for Brexit returnees, whereas they play a minor role for non-Brexit returnees and return migrants from other EU15 countries. These results indicate that Brexit has worsened the situation of migrants living in the UK and has spurred the return migration of some of them (Guma and Jones 2019; Lulle *et al.* 2018), while we acknowledge that the alternative coping strategy of naturalisation has been popular among German and other UK residents (McGhee *et al.* 2017; Moreh *et al.* 2020). Moreover, relatively stable numbers of Germans in the UK indicate that other strategies, like 'wait and see', are widespread (Godin and Sigona 2022; Lulle *et al.* 2018).

The analysis of the characteristics of return migrants show that Brexit returnees are more often skilled than non-Brexit returnees, a finding that is in line with our theoretical arguments that skilled migrants have higher opportunity costs from looming recession and that they are more sensitive for discrimination (*Hypothesis 1*) and that resonates with the literature (Lulle *et al.* 2019; Mohr 2020;

Moreh *et al.* 2020). In contrast, findings based on a convenience sample of Bulgarian migrants indicate that skilled migrants less often intend to return home than migrants with lower skills (Markova & King, 2021). Both, a comparably more attractive labour market in the origin country of Germans and lower sensitivity of those lower in the ‘hierarchy of privilege’ (Zontini and Genova 2022) could account for this difference. The expected negative relationship between sociocultural adaptation and the significance of Brexit for returnees is not confirmed (*Hypothesis 2*). Our results show that emotional attachment to the UK, which is a measure of sociocultural adaptation, is unrelated to the probability of citing Brexit as reason to return. On the contrary, those with better English skills and longer durations of stay, two strong indicators of sociocultural adaptation, more often declare to be affected by Brexit in their return from the UK to Germany than those with lower English skills and shorter durations. An explanation for this may be that sociocultural more assimilated persons are more sensitive to challenges of their identity and belonging through the Brexit process (Verkuyten 2016; Zontini and Genova 2022) and Brexit nudges them to finalize their potentially existing plans of return (McGhee *et al.* 2017; Ryan 2015). The fact that German UK returnees who were strongly motivated by Brexit are less likely to have planned a fixed return to Germany supports this interpretation. Moreover, our results reveal that German migrants returning from the UK to Germany aged 30 to 49 tend to be more affected by the Brexit process than older ones. Therefore, it seems that Brexit is a decisive issue for individuals who are looking to settle down, to raise a family, and to establish themselves in the labour market (e.g. Mulder 1993). Expectably, those posted by employers (expatriates) were less affected by Brexit compared with self-initiated movers.

The study has a few limitations. First, since migration motives were measured post hoc, the evaluation of migration motives could be skewed by individuals’ reinterpretations. Second, German migrants staying in the UK or moving to third countries would be appropriate reference groups for German UK return migrants. Because GERPS relies on German registries, it was not feasible to account for these groups. Third, we use cross-sectional data methods of analysis and are aware that the

results are correlational. Given the scarcity of individual migrant data that can be related to Brexit, our data and empirical analysis still contribute by promoting our understanding of Brexit-induced EU migration.

Our results echo with the notion that the Brexit referendum unsettled the lives of EU citizens in the UK and curtailed their freedom of movement (e.g. Lulle *et al.* 2018; Mazzilli and King 2019). Although several years have passed since the Brexit referendum was held in June 2016, its implementation and institutional consequences have remained the subject of political and public debates in subsequent years. Our results suggest that uncertainties ensuing from the Brexit referendum has triggered emigration of migrants from the UK and resulted in losses of human capital. Skilled middle-aged German migrants who had been well adapted and had lived in the UK for extended periods were more likely to mention Brexit as reason for return—persons who are important for the societal and economic development.

Notes

- 1 We refer to the campaign organisations ‘Vote Leave’ and ‘Leave.EU’ (Virdee and McGeever 2018).
- 2 Except for the study of Auer and Tetlow (2020) that focusses on British citizens living in Germany.
- 3 Some do identify migrants who realised their return, but these studies use qualitative data (Godin and Sigona 2022; Zontini and Genova 2022).
- 4 We neglect the implications of the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) because it was published at the very end of our observation period.
- 5 <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13750>
- 6 These include all EU15 countries minus Germany and the United Kingdom; that is Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Denmark, Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Finland, Austria, and Sweden.
- 7 The items were part of an item-battery introduced as follows: “There are many potential reasons for moving back to Germany. The following list mentions several motives for moving to Germany. Please indicate to what extent these reasons were important for your decision to move to Germany.”
- 8 It is common practice to split only the extreme categories (1–4 vs 5, 6), thus obtaining similar group sizes.

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Appendix

Table A1. Number of Germans migrating between Germany and UK

<i>Year</i>	<i>Migration of German citizens</i>	
	<i>to UK</i> <i>(Emigration)</i>	<i>from UK</i> <i>(Return migration)</i>
2000	5760	4657
2001	5596	4594
2002	5806	4464
2003	6264	4186
2004	7842	4049
2005	9012	4388
2006	9395	4600
2007	9996	5000
2008	10706	5824
2009	9112	6153
2010	8530	6426
2011	8385	6487
2012	7802	6432
2013	8155	6362
2014	8707	5903
2015	8917	6043
2016	8243	6526
2017	6677	6583
2018	7032	6418
2019	6766	6385

Source: Federal Statistical Office of Germany

Table A2. Descriptive statistics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean / %</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Remigration reasons					
Occupational	1	6	4.17	1.88	1687
Occupational (partner)	1	6	2.92	2.00	1196
Other (partnership)	1	6	3.03	2.05	1142
Family	1	6	4.06	1.76	1553
Financial	1	6	2.87	1.77	1554
Discontent with life in host country	1	6	2.56	1.67	1570
Educational	1	6	2.16	1.8	1108
Lifestyle	1	6	2.82	1.83	1535
Political situation	1	6	2.34	1.75	1502
Social security	1	6	2.83	1.81	1532
Brexit	1	6	4.12	1.85	455
Educational level					
Lower Secondary or lower	0	1	0.13		503
Upper Secondary (Abitur)	0	1	0.14		503
Tertiary	0	1	0.73		503
Number of friends in UK	0	30	1.69	2.87	497
Number of friends in Germany	0	48	4.24	3.50	497
English skills	2	6	5.03	0.52	499
Emotional attachment to UK	1	4	2.35	0.79	502
Duration of last stay abroad					
< 1 year	0	1	0.12		504
1 to < 2 years	0	1	0.14		504
2 to < 5 years	0	1	0.33		504
> 5 years	0	1	0.41		504
Age					
22–29	0	1	0.23		504
30–49	0	1	0.64		504
50–65	0	1	0.12		504
Women (ref. men)	0	1	0.52		503
Main activity					
Employed	0	1	0.73		504
Self-employed	0	1	0.10		504
Other	0	1	0.18		504
Partner (ref. no)	0	1	0.69		502
Children in household (ref. no)	0	1	0.34		504
Number of earlier stays abroad	1	4	1.85	0.98	504
Expatriate (ref. no)	0	1	0.06		504
Fixed return to Germany (ref. no)	0	1	0.50		499

Source: GERPS wave 1, weighted

Tab A3. Descriptive sample statistics

<i>Variable</i>	other EU15 Migrants		UK Migrants Importance of Brexit			
	<i>Mean / %</i>	<i>SD</i>	1–4		5, 6	
			<i>Mean / %</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean / %</i>	<i>SD</i>
Educational level						
Lower Secondary or lower	0.17		0.11		0.03	
Upper Secondary (Abitur)	0.18		0.14		0.19	
Tertiary	0.64		0.75		0.78	
Number of friends in UK	1.67	2.50	1.47	2.72	2.09	3.21
Number of friends in Germany	4.80	4.62	4.82	3.72	3.92	2.82
Language skills	4.33	1.46	5.00	0.41	5.17	0.41
Emotional attachment to destination	2.4	0.82	2.31	0.85	2.31	0.78
Duration of stay						
< 1 year	0.10		0.12		0.07	
1 to < 2 years	0.16		0.17		0.06	
2 to < 5 years	0.28		0.38		0.29	
> 5 years	0.46		0.33		0.57	
Age						
22–29	0.26		0.19		0.16	
30–49	0.54		0.63		0.75	
50–65	0.20		0.17		0.09	
Women (ref. men)	0.50		0.40		0.59	
Main activity						
Employed	0.73		0.75		0.72	
Self-employed	0.09		0.12		0.09	
Other	0.18		0.13		0.19	
Partner (ref. no)	0.65		0.68		0.69	
Children in household (ref. no)	0.24		0.41		0.36	
Number of earlier stays abroad	2.01	1.05	1.88	0.96	1.87	1.02
Expatriate (ref. no)	0.10		0.11		0.03	
Fixed return to Germany (ref. no)	0.40		0.63		0.35	
N	1262		213		229	

Source: GERPS wave 1, weighted

Table A4. Ordered logit and binomial logistic regression on the importance of Brexit for the decision to return to Germany, b-coefficients and SEs

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Ordered logit</i>			<i>Binomial logistic</i>		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Educational level						
Lower Secondary or lower	-	-	-	-	-	-
Upper Secondary (Abitur)	1.12	(0.764)	0.142	1.34	(0.691)	0.052
Tertiary	1.59	(0.746)	0.033	1.20	(0.597)	0.044
Number of friends in UK	-0.00	(0.040)	0.992	-0.04	(0.041)	0.327
Number of friends in Germany	-0.05	(0.030)	0.105	-0.06	(0.037)	0.118
English skills	0.92	(0.350)	0.008	0.99	(0.388)	0.011
Emotional attachment to UK	-0.03	(0.201)	0.876	-0.16	(0.218)	0.455
Duration of last stay abroad						
< 1 year	-0.03	(0.511)	0.956	-0.95	(0.642)	0.139
1 to < 2 years	-0.55	(0.461)	0.234	-1.01	(0.513)	0.049
2 to < 5 years	-0.15	(0.320)	0.643	-0.43	(0.388)	0.269
> 5 years (ref.)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age						
22–29	-0.54	(0.395)	0.168	-0.07	(0.477)	0.877
30–49	-	-	-	-	-	-
50–65 (ref.)	-0.90	(0.517)	0.081	-0.67	(0.435)	0.126
Women (ref. men)	0.43	(0.352)	0.227	0.35	(0.362)	0.327
Main activity						
Employed	-	-	-	-	-	-
Self-employed	-0.21	(0.603)	0.722	-0.36	(0.479)	0.451
Other	0.35	(0.330)	0.295	0.53	(0.511)	0.300
Partner (ref. no)	0.21	(0.333)	0.522	0.63	(0.443)	0.154
Children (ref. no)	-0.98	(0.329)	0.003	-0.75	(0.345)	0.029
Number of earlier stays abroad	-0.08	(0.142)	0.591	-0.21	(0.157)	0.187
Expatriate (ref. no)	-1.09	(0.447)	0.014	-0.86	(0.513)	0.092
Fixed return to Germany (ref. no)	-0.93	(0.306)	0.002	-1.09	(0.322)	0.001
Constant	-	-	-	-4.23	(2.033)	0.038
Log pseudolikelihood		1842.57			-699.06	
Pseudo-R ² (McFadden)		0.09			0.17	
<i>N</i>		442			442	

Source: GERPS wave 1, weighted.

Table A5. Linear regression of the importance of Brexit for the decision to return to Germany, employed and self-employed only, b-coefficients and SEs

<i>Variable</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Educational level			
Lower Secondary or lower	-	-	-
Upper Secondary (Abitur)	1.04	(0.610)	0.089
Tertiary	1.28	(0.545)	0.019
Number of friends in UK	-0.00	(0.031)	0.915
Number of friends in Germany	-0.04	(0.027)	0.171
English skills	0.67	(0.290)	0.022
Emotional attachment to UK	-0.22	(0.171)	0.193
Duration of stay			
< 1 year	-0.04	(0.422)	0.927
1 to < 2 years	-0.57	(0.425)	0.182
2 to < 5 years	-0.16	(0.309)	0.597
> 5 years (ref.)	-	-	-
Age			
22–29	-0.36	(0.343)	0.297
30–49	-	-	-
50–65 (ref.)	-0.82	(0.404)	0.043
Women (ref. men)	0.21	(0.273)	0.433
Self-employed (ref. employed)	-0.27	(0.440)	0.545
Partner (ref. no)	0.09	(0.274)	0.748
Children (ref. no)	-0.85	(0.270)	0.002
Number of earlier stays abroad	-0.07	(0.129)	0.598
Expatriate (ref. no)	-0.93	(0.421)	0.027
Fixed return to Germany (ref. no)	-0.79	(0.254)	0.002
Constant	1.25	(1.511)	0.408
Adjusted-R ²		0.24	
<i>N</i>		390	

Source: GERPS wave 1, weighted