

Who blames Brexit for their decision to leave the UK?

The departure of skilled Germans from Britain after the referendum

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Abstract

Brexit created uncertainty for migrants living in the UK and a potential reason to leave the country. Some of the consequences of the Brexit referendum, such as the loss of skilled workers, may have been unintended. This article investigates the relevance of Brexit for German migrants who decided to return to Germany from the UK in the two years following the 2016 referendum. 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 decision to return was strongly affected by Brexit. Furthermore, Brexit as a motive for returning positively correlates to dissatisfaction with the political situation, the lack of social security, and dissatisfaction with life in the country as other reasons for their return. 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.

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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 influx of EU labour migrants and that a decrease in net migration would affect the gross domestic product (GDP) of the UK negatively (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 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 2023; 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 (Turcatti and Vargas-Silva 2022; Vargas-Silva 2016). The ‘leave’-narrative focused on border control (Benson *et al.* 2022) and the spectre of welfare tourism (Currie 2016), thereby generally framing migration in negative terms and, whether intentionally or not, implicating migrants regardless of their ethnicity and employment status. This new atmosphere of latent exclusion has been 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 the socio-cultural profiles of German return migrants from the UK and which of them blame the Brexit for their decision to return to Germany from the UK in the two years after the referendum of June 2016. Almost three in four empirical studies examining the Brexit-migration nexus are based on qualitative interviews mostly with migrants living in the UK, according to a literature review (Benson *et al.* 2022). While the majority of studies is concerned with Eastern member countries (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 (Brahic and Lallement 2020; Mohr 2020; Mulholland and Ryan 2023) 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, on the basis of survey data, the profiles of migrants who have returned from the UK to their countries of origin on account of Brexit.²

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 to Germany from the UK. 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, the data yield information about 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 were 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

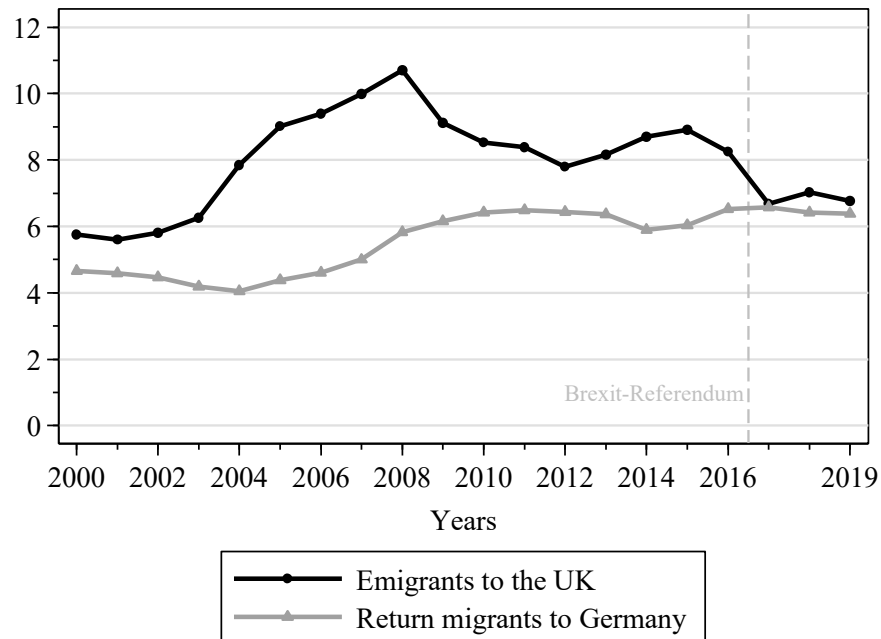
The international mobility of the German population is close to the OECD average, and today a stock of around 3.8 million German citizens live abroad (Ette and Erlinghagen 2021). In the years between 2010 and 2018, the United Kingdom was in the top five of German migrants' favoured destinations. The 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). Overall, 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 have 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. Compared with 2015 the return migration numbers were around 6% to 9% higher in the years 2016 to 2018. As a consequence, net migration of Germans with the UK is pushed towards zero in 2017, where it has remained ever since. 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). Ultimately, the UK's migration balance with the EU28 dwindled and the number of EU citizens in the UK decreased (see also Auer and Tetlow 2022).

Information about the socio-economic characteristics of German migrants living in the UK is scarce. Generally, both German emigrants and migrants who return to Germany are positively selected in terms of education and occupational status (Ette and Witte 2021). Moreover, we assume that German migrants enjoyed a 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 2023; 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 online supplementary material.

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 back to the country of origin', or 'leave and move to a third country' (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). Non-action and return to Germany are only slightly less popular, while a minority intends to move to third countries. 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). That aligns with the observation that migrants from countries with relatively lower incomes tend to hold out during (economic) crises unless they retain options of return (Martin 2009; Ramos 2018). Legal uncertainty, however, is a particular feature of Brexit before the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) of 2018, whereas economic consequences were mostly looming in that period but already felt by the depreciation of the pound against the euro (Korus and Celebi 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, the decision to return is complex 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 currently 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 (Cassarino 2004; Curre 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 2021) to have a negative impact on migrants' assessment of their labour market prospects (Dustmann and Weiss 2007; Landesmann *et al.* 2015). We additionally expect the impact of a negative economic outlook to be greater for highly skilled migrants compared with less skilled migrants, because they are more likely to have migrated to improve their status relative to the origin country and, are therefore more prone to return if their socio-economic expectations are not met in the destination (Caron and Ichou 2020). Moreover, for skilled individuals 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' (Steinmann 2019; Verkuyten 2016). That fits with Zontini and Genova's (2022) observation that migrants ranking higher in the 'hierarchy of privilege' were 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 the specific consequences of Brexit to themselves 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 highly skilled German migrants who return to Germany from the UK are more likely to cite Brexit as a motivation for return than less skilled Germans (*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 (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 had 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. However, some socioculturally more assimilated migrants – especially those with strong reactions to Brexit – are more sensitive to challenges to their identity and sense of belonging (Verkuyten 2016; Zontini and Genova 2022) and Brexit nudges them to finalize their potentially existing plans of return (McGhee *et al.* 2017; Ryan 2015). Generally, more assimilated migrants tend to have higher expectations to be treated equally and feel more entitled to certain rights and privileges (Diehl *et al.* 2021; Genoni 2022). Brexit threatens the materialization of such expectations. We thus expect that more socioculturally integrated German migrants returning from the UK are more likely to cite Brexit as a reason for their return than those who were less 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). This study contains rich individual socio-economic information and retrospective questions about migration motives (Erlinghagen *et al.* 2021).³ 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). Note that the EUSS had not been introduced by the end of the sampling period. In Germany register-based samples are a good solution for identifying mobile populations (Ette *et al.* 2021), even if they lead to some under-coverage of groups who do not de-register at emigration, like exchange students and employees with short-term stays. 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 restrict the sample to persons at working age (18 to 65 years) and exclude groups that potentially face distinctive conditions of return migration and would require separate analysis, i.e., students, voluntary service participants, and pensioners. Other groups that could potentially be in employment like self-employed and unemployed are included. This makes our sample overall more homogenous, since the decision-making process is substantially different before, during, and after labour market entry. Thus we obtain a gross sample of 507 German return migrants from the United Kingdom and 1,342 German return migrants from other EU15⁴ countries ($N = 1,849$). After listwise deletion of all cases with missing values, the net sample consists of $n = 442$ return migrants from the UK and $n = 1,262$ from other EU15 countries.⁵ 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. occupational, familial 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.⁶ Only UK returnees were asked in addition about the importance of Brexit in their

decision to return. For the correlation analysis with other migration motives, we dichotomized answers to the Brexit motive to identify those for whom Brexit represented a relevant return motive.

We operationalized skills through a collapsed CASMIN scale, which originally combines educational and vocational certificates (Brauns and Steinmann 1999), and differentiated between lower secondary or lower qualifications (0, 1, 2a/b), higher secondary qualifications (2c), and tertiary qualifications (3). The sociocultural integration of migrants was measured in several ways. First, we used the number of friends in both the home and the host country. Second, we used self-assessed language skills that were rated on a six-tiered Likert scale from one ('very poor') to six ('mother tongue'). Third, we used feelings of belonging to the UK which were 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 accounted for the sex of the respondent and age at the time of migration. In terms of labour market integration, we differentiated employees and self-employed since labour market integration affects return migration (Ette and Witte 2021; Jensen and Pedersen 2008). Other activity states such as unemployed, not employed, work and travel, further training, etc. had few observations and were therefore collapsed into one category. Furthermore, we accounted for the number of stays abroad before migration to the UK, since migration decision-making is probably different for multiple migrants and they could be less committed to their host countries (Constant *et al.* 2013). Therefore, we expect them to be less affected by Brexit. We used retrospective information about the marital and family status, since both can reduce the likelihood of return migration (Constant and Massey 2002). Family status was derived from information about the household composition before migration (abroad) and after migration (in Germany) respectively. Children living in the same house-

hold as respondents both before and after migration were assumed to be their own children. Furthermore, research findings suggest that the decision to return was shaped by original emigration motives (Ghosh 2000; King 1978). While these motives are not covered by the questionnaire, we included expatriate status (“Had you been posted by your employer?”) 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 online supplementary material gives an overview of the variables we use, their categories, and their summary statistics.

Analytical strategy

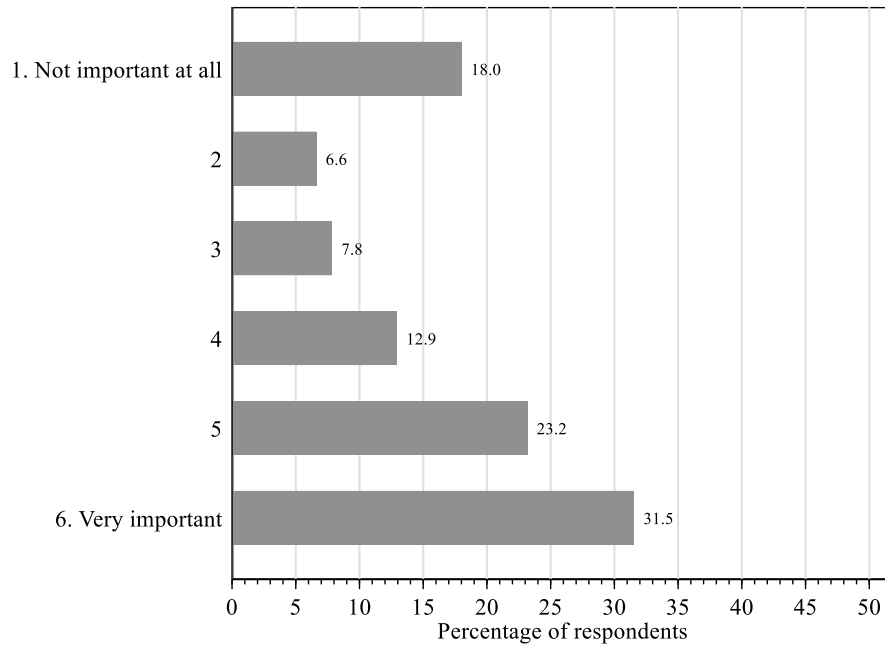
Our analytical strategy is twofold. First, we compared the motives for migration between three groups: (1) German return migrants from the UK who state that Brexit was of lesser relevance for their decision to migrate, (2) German return migrants from the UK who state that Brexit was of greater relevance 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 used linear regressions (OLS) of the Brexit motive on our model to investigate the multivariate relationship between the Brexit motive and German return migrants’ characteristics. Since the ordinal scaling of our dependent variable calls for ordered logit regression models, we provide appropriate sensitivity checks in addition (see ‘Robustness checks’ below and Table A3 in the online supplementary material). We used combined design and adjustment weights throughout, 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 2 shows the relevance of Brexit for German migrants who returned from Germany to the UK. More than half of them (55%) state that Brexit was a very important motive (5, 6) for their return to Germany, while it was not important for 25% (1, 2), and of medium importance for 21% (3, 4) of German return migrants.

For the next analysis, we used the assessment of the Brexit motive to define two distinct groups: German UK returnees who state that Brexit was rather not important (response categories 1–4), and German UK returnees who state that Brexit was a very important reason for returning (response categories 5, 6).⁷ Germans who returned to Germany from other EU15 states figure as an additional reference. Hereinafter we refer to the three groups as ‘non-Brexit returnees’, ‘Brexit returnees’, and ‘other EU15 returnees’. Table A2 of the online supplementary material displays the descriptive sample statistics separately for each of the three groups. It reveals that, compared with Brexit-returnees, other EU15 and non-Brexit returnees have higher proportions of individuals with low educational skills as well as lower shares of upper secondary degrees and tertiary education. Moreover, other EU15 and non-Brexit returnees display similar average numbers of friends in Germany and in the host country, while Brexit returnees report higher numbers of friends in the host country and lower numbers in Germany. Host country language skills are generally higher among UK return migrants compared with the other groups of returnees and emotional attachment to the host country is very similar across all three groups. Finally, Brexit returnees tend to have longer durations of stay than the two other groups.

Figure 2. Importance of Brexit for German migrants who returned from Germany to the UK



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

Table 1 shows how the importance of other migration motives varies across the three groups. For the assessment of differences between non-Brexit returnees and Brexit UK returnees, German EU15 returnees figure as counterfactual ‘average’ German migrants who returned to Germany. 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 makes sense to treat Brexit returnees as a distinct group. Moreover, German Brexit returnees migrate more often owing 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 when contrasted 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
Familial	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	0.15
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 and aims to investigate variations in the subjective importance of Brexit. For this we use multivariate regression models (Table 2), where we treat the dependent variable as metric. The 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 (*Hypothesis 1*). Both coefficients are substantial, while only the latter is statistically significant. Sociocultural integration of migrants has ambiguous effects (*Hypothesis 2*). The number of friends in Germany is negatively related to the Brexit motive, while friends in the UK have no effect at all. English skills are positively related to citing Brexit as reason for return, whereas emotional attachment to the UK is not significantly related. 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 having been affected by Brexit in their decision to return than those who stayed for five or more years in the UK. The coefficient is statistically insignificant. Additional analyses that 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 30–49) are more strongly affected than those younger and older, although only the difference with the older group is statistically significant. Among the other control variables, three findings stand out and are significant. Expatriates (vs. self-initiated movers), returnees with fixed ex ante return plans (vs. those without intention of return), and returnees with children (vs. returnees without children) are less likely to state that Brexit was 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>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Educational level			
Lower secondary or lower	-	-	-
Upper secondary (Abitur)	0.91	(0.563)	0.106
Tertiary	1.31	(0.530)	0.014
Number of friends in UK	-0.00	(0.028)	0.916
Number of friends in Germany	-0.05	(0.025)	0.052
English skills	0.60	(0.245)	0.015
Emotional attachment to UK	-0.13	(0.163)	0.442
Duration of stay			
< 1 year	-0.37	(0.462)	0.417
1 to < 2 years	-0.61	(0.398)	0.127
2 to < 5 years	-0.19	(0.291)	0.525
> 5 years (ref.)	-	-	-
Age			
22–29	-0.29	(0.331)	0.381
30–49 (ref.)	-	-	-
50–65	-0.80	(0.387)	0.038
Women (ref. men)	0.20	(0.261)	0.454
Main activity			
Employed (ref.)	-	-	-
Self-employed	-0.36	(0.453)	0.433
Other	0.36	(0.297)	0.228
Partner (ref. no)	0.06	(0.260)	0.803
Children in household (ref. no)	-0.74	(0.259)	0.005
Number of previous stays abroad	-0.08	(0.121)	0.534
Expatriate (ref. no)	-0.93	(0.409)	0.023
Fixed return to Germany (ref. no)	-0.74	(0.241)	0.002
Constant	1.40	(1.305)	0.285
Adjusted-R ²		0.22	
<i>N</i>		442	

Source: GERPS wave 1, weighted

Robustness checks

We implemented three robustness checks of our findings. First, we estimated both ordered logit regression models and logistic regression models using the same dichotomization as in the first part of the analysis. Both types of models support our main findings (see Table A3 of the online supplementary material). Second, we restricted our sample to employed and self-employed individuals 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 A4 of the online supplementary material). Third, instead of educational level we used the International Socio-Economic Index

(ISEI) of occupational status as a measure of skill levels. The additional model reveals that ISEI is positively correlated with the importance of the Brexit for the return migration decision ($B = 0.02$, $SE = 0.009$, $p = 0.030$). This corroborates our main finding of a positive association between skill and the Brexit-motive for return.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

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

Our analysis reveals that Brexit was a very important migration motive for around 55% of German migrants who returned to Germany from the UK 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 other return motives such as social security, the political situation, and dissatisfaction with life in the host country highly correlate with the tendency to blame Brexit for their return. These results suggest that Brexit may have worsened the situation of migrants living in the UK and that it has spurred the return migration of some of them (Guma and Jones 2019; Lulle *et al.* 2018). Naturalisation, however, seems to be an attractive alternative coping strategy 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, such as 'wait and see', are widespread (Godin and Sigona 2022; Lulle *et al.* 2018).

The analysis of the characteristics of return migrants shows 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 to 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). An attractive labour market in the origin country of Germans may account for this difference. The expected positive relationship between sociocultural adaptation and the significance of Brexit for returnees is partially 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 leave the UK. On the contrary, those with better English skills and longer durations of stay, also two strong indicators of sociocultural adaptation, more often declare themselves to be affected by Brexit in their return to Germany from the UK than those with lower English skills and shorter durations. Moreover, having friends in Germany reduces the likelihood of citing Brexit as a return reason. 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, individuals in the medium age group of 30 to 49 years 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). Predictably, those posted by employers (expatriates) were less affected by Brexit compared with self-initiated movers.

We acknowledge that this study has limitations. First, since migration motives were measured post hoc, the evaluation of migration motives could be skewed by individuals' reinterpretations. However, Brexit as a reason to return strongly correlates with other comprehensible return motives, which should not be the case if this is a purely post hoc interpretation. Second, German migrants staying in the UK or moving to third countries would be appropriate reference groups for German UK return migrants. But because GERPS relies on German registries, it was not feasible to account for either

group. Third, we used cross-sectional data 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. Fourth, both educational level and English skills can be proxies for political interest in general and for interest in the discussions surrounding Brexit in particular.

Our results resonate with the notion that the Brexit referendum unsettled the lives of EU citizens in the UK and curtailed their freedom of movement (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 a reason for return—persons who are important for societal and economic development. This holds significant implications for other participants in the global ‘race for talent’ (Shachar 2006). Populist narratives and regulatory moves—like recurrent debates about asylum shopping and welfare migration—potentially scare off not only the vulnerable but also the sought-after migrants.

Notes

- 1 We refer to the campaign organisations ‘Vote Leave’ and ‘Leave.EU’ (Virdee and McGeever 2018).
- 2 Some do identify migrants who realised their return, but these studies use qualitative data (Godin and Sigona 2022; Zontini and Genova 2022).
- 3 Survey data are available here: <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13750>
- 4 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.
- 5 We used multiple imputations to deal with missing values. For our analytical sample of UK return migrants we imputed all missing values based on the information of the regression analysis (Table 2) and with other migration

motives as auxiliary variables. The estimates based on the imputed data were very similar to those displayed in Table 2 and lead to the same conclusions.

- 6 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.”
- 7 It is common practice to split only the extreme categories (1–4 vs 5, 6), thus obtaining similar group sizes. We also used correlations to analyse how the Brexit motive is related to other migration motives. Moreover, we contrasted persons who have rated the importance of the Brexit was not important (response categories 1, 2) with those that stated the Brexit was very important (response categories 5, 6). Both additional analysis lead to the same conclusion as drawn from those presented in the paper.

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Online supplementary material

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

Tab A2. 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 destination	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	2.40	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 previous 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

Note: 1 = values of categorical variables must be multiplied by 100 to obtain percentages.

Some percentages do not total 100 per cent due to rounding.

Table A3. 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 in household (ref. no)	-0.98	(0.329)	0.003	-0.75	(0.345)	0.029
Number of previous 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 A4. 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 in household (ref. no)	-0.85	(0.270)	0.002
Number of previous 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