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Liminal Lives: Navigating In-Betweenness in the Case of Bulgarian and Italian Migrants in Brexiting Britain

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The UK's decision to leave the EU illustrates some of the tensions embedded in European integration, enabling us to examine how nationalism and cosmopolitanism operate simultaneously, thus reinforcing each other. Furthermore, the prolonged Brexit negotiations have created a climate of protracted insecurity where the only certainty is uncertainty. This is particularly reflected in the migratory experiences of European citizens currently residing in the UK. Academic research has begun exploring the affective impact of Brexit; however, little is known about how processes of connection and disconnection operate simultaneously, nor which coping strategies European migrants have employed to navigate this state of in-betweenness. Using the anthropological notion of liminality as a lens, we draw on participant observation and semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of Brexit and the coping practices of a range of (new) Bulgarian and (old) Italian European migrants. We argue that Brexit results in a loss of frames of reference for European migrants in the UK – which can be both liberating and unsettling, depending on migrants' positioning as unequal EU subjects as well as their views on the nature of their future re-incorporation in post-Brexit Britain.

Keywords: Brexit, liminality, Bulgarians, Italians, coping practices

Introduction

Intra-European mobility and its driver, European citizenship, are the by-products of years of European integration and, as such, they arguably bear not only the hopes and strivings of that process but also its tensions and dysfunctions. As Stevenson argues, 'Europe is actually a site of ambivalence (...)', a place of '(...) both hope and nightmare' (2012: 114) and it has been the negotiation between these two that has woven the nuanced character of European integration. A clear illustration of these tensions could be discerned in the 2016 EU referendum in the UK, which culminated in the country's decision to leave the Union. Before and, especially,

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since then, public discourse in relation to intra-European mobility, has clearly highlighted how cosmopolitan and nationalist ideas not only operate simultaneously (King and Pratsinakis 2020) but, as we argue, also reinforce each other. Furthermore, the arguably controversial win for camp ‘Leave’ has led to a sharp polarisation of public opinion, supplemented by political volatility which (so far) has seen the change of three different Brexit Secretaries, three different Home Secretaries and three different Prime Ministers, as well as more than 50 ministerial resignations (Sandhu 2019). In such turbulent times, Brexit negotiations have created a climate of protracted insecurity where the only certainty is uncertainty. This has been palpable for the estimated three million European citizens who currently reside in the UK. Amidst the initial shock and incredulity (Lulle, Moroşanu and King 2017), followed by an upsurge of hate crime (Rzepnikowska 2019), Europeans in Britain have seen their citizenship status and rights being questioned and transformed – from ‘citizens’ into ‘migrants’ and ‘bargaining chips’. The latter have highlighted their precarious status in a UK negotiating its way out of the EU and aiming to ‘take back control’ over its borders.

With this context in mind, this article aims to understand not only how Europeans living in the UK make sense of their state of in-betweenness but also the kind of strategies they employ to navigate Brexiting Britain. To do so, we draw on the experiences of two groups of Europeans who belong to different phases of the process of European integration: Italians as foundational members and Bulgarians as relative ‘newcomers’. Based on their length of benefitting from EU mobility rights, we refer to them as ‘old’ Europeans (Italians) and ‘new’ Europeans (Bulgarians). Our choice has been motivated by our longstanding research interests and expertise as well as by the fact that Bulgarians are relatively less researched within the group of Central and Eastern European migrants. Furthermore, despite some similarities in patterns and cultural traits (further explained in the next section), Bulgarian migratory flows have not been considered in relation to those of Italians, particularly with regards to their shared South European context.

The article is methodologically informed by a set of ethnographic methods such as participant observation and 30 semi-structured interviews. Conceptually, we argue that the anthropological notion of ‘liminality’ first coined by van Gennep ([1909] 1960) then further developed by Turner (1967) and Thomassen (2014), is particularly useful in making sense of both protracted periods of in-betweenness and of the strategies that people employ to navigate such contexts. Bearing this in mind, we ask how European migrants experience this state of in-betweenness forced upon them – what are their coping strategies and plans for the future and how these experiences differ in terms of length of beneficence from EU mobility rights. The broader aims of this empirical article are thus two-fold. Firstly, we aim to advance the emerging field of Brexit studies by reinvigorating van Gennep’s ([1909] 1960) anthropological notion of liminality which, as Thomassen (2014) has argued, is particularly useful in understanding periods of crisis. Secondly, we aim to unravel the differentiated ways in which such a state is affecting EU migrants as well as their plans for the future.

The article is structured as follows: first, we review both the Bulgarian and Italian migratory flows, including the emerging Brexit migration literature. We then map liminality as a way of conceptualising protracted insecurity and Brexit more specifically, asserting its effectiveness in illuminating the experiences of European migrants in the UK. Next, we provide a methodological overview of our study. This is followed by two empirical sections – one that focuses on how migrants navigate Brexit and one that focuses on their plans for the future. The final section brings all the themes and arguments together to demonstrate how opportunity and insecurity operate simultaneously in an unsettling and uncertain context, signifying the shifting nature of the European migratory regime.

Theoretical overview

Arguably, the UK’s decision to leave the EU has highlighted the fragile, contested nature of EU mobility rights, creating a unique context that enables us to gain comparative insights into the experiences of various groups

of European migrants and the way in which they navigate what we argue is a liminal state (Thomassen 2014; van Gennep [1909] 1960). Thus, we firstly discuss various theorisations of the European migratory regime, noting how Bulgarian and Italian migratory flows feature within them. Next, we map the emerging Brexit migration literature before engaging with the notion of ‘liminality’ (Turner 1967; van Gennep [1909] 1960) which, we argue, offers a useful conceptual lens through which not only to understand Brexit as a state of ‘betwixt and between’ for European migrants but also to understand migratory decisions in the case of protracted uncertainty.

The changing European migratory regime

While both Italians and Bulgarians were mobile long before the establishment of the EU, recent flows cannot be understood in isolation of the process of European integration itself. One of the most influential earlier conceptualisations of unconstrained intra-European mobility belongs to Favell (2008) whose ‘Eurostars’ were the pioneers of EU mobility in the early 1990s – middle-class professionals from often humble backgrounds who were residing in major European hubs such as Brussels, Amsterdam and London. For his cosmopolitan participants, simply scanning passports and IDs without the requirement of a visa was a mundane, everyday practice. Thus, Favell (2008) has powerfully argued that, rather than ‘migrants’, the pioneers of EU mobility rights should be described as ‘free movers’, whose individualised paths were based on the flexibility associated with being the first to reap the benefits of freedom of movement. Yet, even then Favell notes that ‘(...) as soon as intra-EU mobility passes some threshold (...) the value of being a pioneer drops sharply’ (2008: 229), predicting rightly the rise of hostility towards EU migrants that came with subsequent waves of enlargement. Italian migratory flows featured quite prominently in this first phase of unconstrained and largely less problematic intra-EU mobility characterised by the introduction of European citizenship and the demise of EU internal borders as a result of the Schengen Agreement. These migrants were moving for educational, career and lifestyle reasons and saw migration in emancipatory terms (King and Pratsinakis 2020). In comparison, Bulgarian migratory flows in the early 1990s were still visa-regulated, mostly prompted by political disillusionment with the process of transition to democracy (Krasteva 2014).

This soon changed with the first and second waves of Eastern enlargement; ‘liquid migration’ emerged as a prominent theoretical framework for the analysis of, in particular, East-West post-accession migratory flows associated with legality and driven by economic motivations as well as temporariness and individuality (Engbersen and Snel 2013; Engbersen, Snel and de Boom 2010). ‘Liquid migration’ has been quite popular in studies of, for example, youth mobility to the UK (Lulle *et al.* 2017; Lulle, King, Dvorakova and Szkudlarek 2018) and Central and Eastern European (CEE) labour migration to the Netherlands (Engbersen *et al.* 2010). Yet, its applicability can be questioned with regards to Bulgarians and Romanians, who had labour restrictions in many EU countries, the UK included, until 2014. The concept of ‘liquid migration’ also does not account for mobility patterns where educational motivations precede career aspirations and other subjectivities. For instance, Manolova’s (2019) study with prospective Bulgarian migrants illustrates how the imaginaries of life in the ‘West’ often associated with ‘normality’ work as a strong pull factor that also counterbalances post-socialist realities. Furthermore, Ryan’s (2018) research on Polish migrants negotiating belonging in London over a decade further questions the circularity and temporality of post-accession migratory flows. In exploring processes of differentiated embedding, Ryan rightly notes that mobility rights ‘(...) also confer opportunities to adjust migration plans and extend the stay’ (2018: 235).

Additionally, the conceptual suitability of ‘liquid migration’ can also be questioned in the context of what King and Pratsinakis have termed ‘the third phase of EU mobility’, which started with the 2008 European financial crisis and led to new South-to-North migrations (2020: 9). Pratsinakis *et al.* (2020: 12) argue that the

slow and patchy post-2008 recovery has ‘(...) “re-peripheralized” Southern Europe as a broad region of economic fragility’, which had prompted growing numbers of young adults to migrate. These new flows are comprised mainly of young, unemployed and career-blocked graduates, motivated by a desire for socio-economic stability. Contrary to their Eurostar predecessors, their migration occurs at a time of increased hostility towards migrants and multiculturalism as well as raising Euroscepticism. Italians take a prominent place in this ‘crisis migration’.

The brief overview above thus reveals that Italian and Bulgarian migratory flows feature differently at various moments of the theorisation of intra-EU mobility. Focusing specifically on the UK as a destination, significant Italian migratory flows consisting of agricultural workers from the northern regions were already established in the pre-war period, followed by their Southern Italian counterparts, who began arriving in larger numbers in the 1950s and 1960s to take up factory jobs in industrial towns such as Bedford, Peterborough and Nottingham (Zontini 2015). Subsequent waves have included Italian ‘Eurostars’ in the 1990s and, later, ‘crisis migrants’, largely attracted to the cosmopolitan, super-diverse and economically thriving London (Pratsinakis *et al.* 2020). In comparison, Bulgarian British-bound migratory flows prior the country’s EU accession in 2007 have been minimal and quite sporadic (Maeva 2017). Since then, however, numbers have grown and, in parallel, so has the hostility directed towards CEE migrants, not specifically aimed at but inclusive of Bulgarians (among many studies, see Genova 2017; Moroşanu and Fox 2013). As Manolova (2019) rightly observes, this has produced a rather paradoxical trend that combines an intensification of host society ‘othering’ discourses with a rising popularity of the UK as a destination. We have chosen Italians and Bulgarians to typify ‘old’ and ‘new’ European migrants in the UK. Such categorisations, however, should be used more cautiously as Italians themselves could be divided into ‘old’ (Eurostars) and ‘new’ (crisis migrants) free movers with the latter being more similar to Bulgarians, as we demonstrate later. Finally, the above overview also highlights King and Okólski’s (2019) argument that intra-European mobility cannot be considered in isolation from the larger economic and socio-political events and processes that ‘disrupt’ and largely shape it. The first and second waves of Eastern enlargement, the Eurozone crisis and the ‘migration’ crisis have all left their mark. Brexit is yet another one of these events that will reconfigure intra-European mobility flows as well as the experiences of Europeans themselves – this is what we consider next.

Overview of the emergent Brexit literature

In the last few years, academic scholarship that aims to understand the EU referendum vote in the UK and future migration policies has grown exponentially. A primary concern has been how Brexit is likely to differently affect individuals and their families, revealing cross-European and within-EU group divisions and nuances (D’Angelo and Kofman 2018; Kilkey 2017; Lulle *et al.* 2018; Zontini and Però 2019). The burgeoning literature includes explorations into the (mostly) initial reactions to the referendum, migrants’ future plans and how this event has affected their identities, sense of belonging and perceptions about rights. This has begun to unravel the complex impact of the EU referendum result with considerable research conducted shortly before and after the vote and focusing mainly (but not exclusively) on London (Botterill, McCollum and Tyrrell 2019).

For example, Lulle *et al.*’s (2017) study captured well the immediate aftermath of the EU referendum result. Comparing the experiences of young Irish, Italians and Romanians in London, their work illustrates very clearly not only the raw emotional reaction to the referendum result as a political rupture but also how some of their participants are employing various ‘tactics of belonging’. This is furthered subsequently by scrutinising ‘new’ Europeans’ (Slovaks, Latvians and Poles) perceptions, revealing the key role of migrants’ unequal positioning in shaping power geometries (Lulle *et al.* 2018). Thus, Brexit deeply questions EU citizens’ sense of

belonging, which is also illustrated by both Ranta and Nancheva's (2019) and McCarthy's (2019) studies. Indeed, in the context of political vacuum, legal uncertainty and democratic deficit, Ranta and Nancheva (2019) emphasise the emergent processes of reconstitution of belonging, which could potentially undermine integration. Finally, in looking at how Brexit amounts to an ongoing process of unsettling and othering for EU migrants in Wales, Guma and Daffyd Jones (2018) argue for the need to scrutinise how Brexit manifests itself in various geographical localities to account for possible differences and nuances.

Even though these studies have described Brexit as a shocking event and as a political rupture that has deeply unsettled European migrants, two very different studies – that of Rzepnikowska (2019) and that of Benson and Lewis (2019) – remind us to be cautious about framing this event as a complete qualitative change of attitudes, perceptions and experiences. In studying Polish migrant women before and after the referendum, Rzepnikowska (2019) argues that racism and xenophobia manifested themselves not only *after* the vote but also *before* it, as also testified by earlier studies conducted by Moroşanu and Fox (2013) and Genova (2017) with other CEE migrant groups. Similarly, in looking at British citizens of colour residing in the 27 EU countries, Benson and Lewis (2019) contend that, while Brexit may have amplified the process of racialisation, the latter both precedes and supersedes the referendum, reminding us that this is not a British-only problem. Thus, these studies highlight the importance of grounded analysis, which is spatially and temporally sensitive and reliant on a strong historical contextualisation.

While the early Brexit literature has enriched our understanding of the initial insecurities that structural changes to migratory regimes instigate amongst European and British nationals alike, some studies have begun exploring the significance of time in responses to Brexit. Looking at Poles and Finns in Scotland, Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira (2019) demonstrate how reactions to socio-political changes are not only fixed *in* but also fixed *on* time. It is precisely this aspect of protracted insecurity that we aim to better understand through the lens of liminality.

On liminality

We argue that the notion of liminality first conceptualised by van Gennep ([1909] 1960) and later developed by Turner (1967) and Thomassen (2014), is particularly useful in understanding the contextual uncertainty of Brexit as a phenomenon, as well as European migrants' practices of coping with it. We maintain that liminality serves as a useful lens that illuminates the state of in-betweenness that European citizens in the UK have been subjected to since the vote to Leave.

Rooted in anthropology, liminality as a conceptual idea was first introduced by Arnold van Gennep in 1909 in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*, in which he argues that '[t]he life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another' ([1909] 1960: 2–3). Van Gennep further elaborates that each of these 'transitions' is not only marked by a ceremony or a ritual but also that, within them, three separate but interlinked stages can be discerned: pre-liminal (separation rites), liminal (rites of transition) and post-liminal (rites of incorporation) ([1909] 1960: 11). He clearly identifies the middle, liminal stage as the most important one in rites of passage ([1909] 1960: 15) as it follows the real or symbolic separation from the 'normal' *status quo* and precedes the re-entry into a new social order. The value of this conceptualisation of rites of passage lies in the strong emphasis on the dynamics of experience. Liminality, then, is about experiencing change and dealing with its consequences; it is a state of in-betweenness, of crossing a threshold (physical, cognitive or emotive), which redefines and reformulates a person's existence. Liminality as an idea, then, emerges as a useful conceptual way of evaluating experience, accounting for all the factors and subjectivities that underpin it.

In describing ‘the peculiar unity of the liminal’, Victor Turner summarises it as: ‘(...) that which is neither this nor that, yet it is both’ (1967: 99). Here an important nuance must be highlighted. While van Gennep’s ([1909] 1960) main concern is with the *uncertainty* associated with liminal periods, Turner’s approach to the condition of ‘betwixt and between’ centres upon the *positives* by highlighting that ‘[u]ndoing, dissolution, decomposition are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns’ (1967: 99). Undergoing a period of liminality goes straight to the core of an experience, uncovering its various nuances and opportunities. Essentially it is not only about the loss of frames of reference but also about the process of discovering new ones, which can be both distressing and liberating – even exciting. Liminality entails a complex amalgamation of uncertainty and ambiguity but offers the possibility for reinvention. Finally, as Thomassen (2014) argues, the conceptual value of liminality lies in its malleability: that is, in its anthropological sense, it can not only refer to either temporary and more permanent, longitudinal transitions but can also be applied to individuals, social groups or whole societies – even civilisations – in relation to a variety of social phenomena that trigger or are associated with transitory periods. Yet he reminds us of the limitations of the concept: ‘Liminality explains nothing’ (Thomassen 2014: 7). The notion itself cannot serve as an explanatory framework or a tool for prediction; rather it enables us to comparatively consider the impact of contextual social changes upon individuals, societies and different time periods.

In migration studies, liminality has been widely used to conceptualise migratory experiences as a state of in-betweenness from a cultural, legal or life-course perspective (Collyer 2007; Kirk, Bal and Janssen 2017). Specifically, there has been a strong emphasis on using liminality as a lens for understanding marginalisation and vulnerability. For example, studies such as Menjívar’s (2006) on Salvadorans and Guatemalans in the US as well as Collyer’s (2007) research on trans-Saharan migrants use liminality to capture precarity and uncertainty. Equally illuminating has been the application of a liminal lens to understand both *temporality* or how ‘waiting’ may be a notable part of in-between states at refugee reception centres (Sutton, Vigneswaran and Wels 2011), and *spatiality* or how migrant activities are segregated and othered spatially by dominant groups (Noussia and Lyons 2009). While, in his research with Roma refugees in Italy, Però (1999) engages more thoroughly with in-betweenness by positioning it as central but inseparable from pre-liminal (separation) and post-liminal (reincorporation) rites of passage, the main emphasis is still on illuminating oppression. Thus, overwhelmingly, liminality has been used in relation to low-skilled and legally precarious migrants, often emphasising in-betweenness as destructive and marginalising. Such accounts of liminality tend to emphasise vulnerability and question migrants’ agency. One of the few exceptions is Kirk *et al.* (2017), who have studied the experiences of highly skilled Indian bachelors in Amsterdam. Their use of liminality is useful because it understands the ritual of migration as a performance and not a set of rules (Kirk *et al.* 2017). Importantly, the study also captures both the debilitating and the liberating qualities of the state of ‘betwixt and between’ (Kirk *et al.* 2017). Albeit very different contextually, we contend that European migrants’ complex and contradictory experiences of the ambivalence of living in Brexiting Britain and the insecurity associated with their rights and social positioning can be usefully framed within and understood through liminality.

Drawing on the work of van Gennep ([1909] 1960), Turner (1967) and Thomassen (2014), we argue that liminality serves as a useful lens through which to understand both protracted periods of uncertainty and how individuals themselves experience them. We aim to also advance the way in which the state of ‘betwixt and between’ is used in migration studies by combining the understanding of liminality as a context (structural changes to migratory contexts) and as an individual (migrant) experience. We therefore argue that an analysis of the migratory experiences of Italian and Bulgarian migrants residing in the UK which uses a liminal conceptual lens is uniquely positioned to capture and better understand not only the state of in-betweenness itself but also how migrants navigate it. Thus, we regard liminality as a state in which EU migrants find themselves as a result of Brexit – a state of in-betweenness which was symbolically unlocked with the referendum itself,

lasting through the years of negotiations that followed and eventually ending with the UK's formal exit. While, formally, EU migrants' legal status has not changed during this period, symbolically their social positioning as free movers enjoying the privilege of mobility has been questioned. Thus, this liminal state has emerged as a 'middle' stage resulting in the symbolic stripping off of EU migrants' previous identity (and potentially their rights), leaving them oscillating between their previously privileged social positioning of free movers and a new, unclear and, very likely, more-restrictive post-Brexit migrant social status. While a lot of the emergent Brexit literature has focused on capturing the *beginning* of this liminal stage, there is still a need for a more in-depth investigation of this most important 'middle' stage and how it informs the eventual re-incorporation of Europeans as either migrants (with lower status and rights than before, and equal to non-EU migrants) or as UK citizens (if they have the requisites and choose to apply). *Experiencing* Brexit then, we maintain, is essentially undergoing a period of liminality in itself, which can entail a complex amalgamation of often oppositional feelings and, as such, can be both liberating and entrapping, constructive and deconstructive. Our empirical sections document not only how EU migrants experience this process but also how they cope with it by searching for new frames of reference.

The study: a methodological insight

In comparison to other hard-to-reach migrant groups, studying European migrants in Britain is relatively easy. However, their European citizenship status, which gives them the right to reside, work and study without the need to apply for a visa or a work permit, certainly poses its challenges to researchers.¹ This means that migratory flows fluctuate greatly; they are incredibly diverse in terms of socio-economic and ethnic profile and their geographical location in the UK is difficult to determine. Therefore, Europeans in the UK remain relatively invisible (Genova 2017; Ryan and Mulholland 2014), thus rendering any statistical data unreliable. Nonetheless, rough estimates are useful in terms of getting a sense of the scale of the phenomenon.

Although the number of EU migrants in the UK has increased more rapidly than that of migrants of non-European origin in the past decade, Europeans accounted for only 39 per cent of foreign-born citizens in the country in 2017 (ONS 2017). Comparing Bulgarians and Italians reveals that, even though the former have received more media attention than the latter in the last decade (Genova 2016, 2017; Manolova 2019), it is the latter who are more numerous: Italians are an estimated 600 000 (Marchese 2016), whereas Bulgarians were only 71 700 by the end of 2016 (ONS 2017). This article is based on a dataset from an ongoing comparative project that aims to explore EU migrant workers' settlement practices and experiences of Brexit. We thus recruited participants based on their occupational status and those with 'specialist knowledge' or key informants who were knowledgeable about these two migrant groups' practices and experiences. We used a wide range of recruitment strategies – from relying on previous contacts and acquaintances through identifying gatekeepers to snowballing, confirming that finding participants is never a 'straightforward procedure' (Burgess 1984: 45). Interestingly, the recruitment of participants was not confined to or mainly driven by shared ethnicity. For example, there was an instance when Elena got in touch with a Romanian gatekeeper who assisted her in recruiting two Italians for Elisabetta to interview. Similarly, Elisabetta was able to help in recruiting one Bulgarian participant whose partner she had met at a workshop. These instances further remind us of the complexity of social ties post-migration (Ryan 2011).

In this article, we mainly draw on 30 semi-structured interviews which explore participants' migratory projects and journeys, their feelings regarding the UK's decision to leave, homing practices and future plans. The interviews are supplemented by both on- and offline participant observation. In the first instance, we monitored some prominent Facebook groups for Bulgarians and Italians in the Midlands whereas, in the case of offline participant observation, we visited cafés and organised workshops and events for both groups of

migrants as well as informal gatherings, celebrations, protests and demonstrations. On a few occasions, we did so together to foster a stronger reflexive account (Davies 2008; Okely 2012).

Thirteen of our participants are Bulgarian and 17 are Italian, with the youngest being a 20-year-old male Italian waiter and the oldest two being both 55 years old and female – a Bulgarian entrepreneur and an Italian cook. However, our wider project included further interviews with children as well as informal conversations with a larger number of participants. Our informants' work profile (types of job and industry) and employment status (type of contract) was diverse: participants worked in catering, management, services or academia on zero-hour, temporary or permanent contracts. One Bulgarian participant (Lily) had her own cleaning business and described herself as an entrepreneur. Furthermore, only one of our participants was also a Master's student but we decided to include her in the sample as she was also working part-time and thus able to reflect on her experiences. While the Italians' educational profile was quite varied, with four having only secondary education, all the Bulgarians were educated to university level. The gender make-up of the sample is slightly imbalanced, with 19 females and 11 males, possibly influenced by the gender of the researchers. Most of our participants are from the Midlands area but the varied channels of recruitment also meant that we had a few participants from other locations (three in London, three in southern towns and one in Northern England). Finally, as Figure 1 below illustrates, our participants had spent varying amounts of time living in the UK, with four of the Bulgarians arriving after and, in some cases, because of, Brexit. While we initially set out to do a comparative analysis on the basis of nationality, it quickly became evident that our informants' experiences were also shaped by factors such as age, gender and occupation as well as the time of arrival as linked to larger socio-economic processes (King and Pratsinakis 2020). This is indicated by the three periods we identified on our migration arrival timeline.

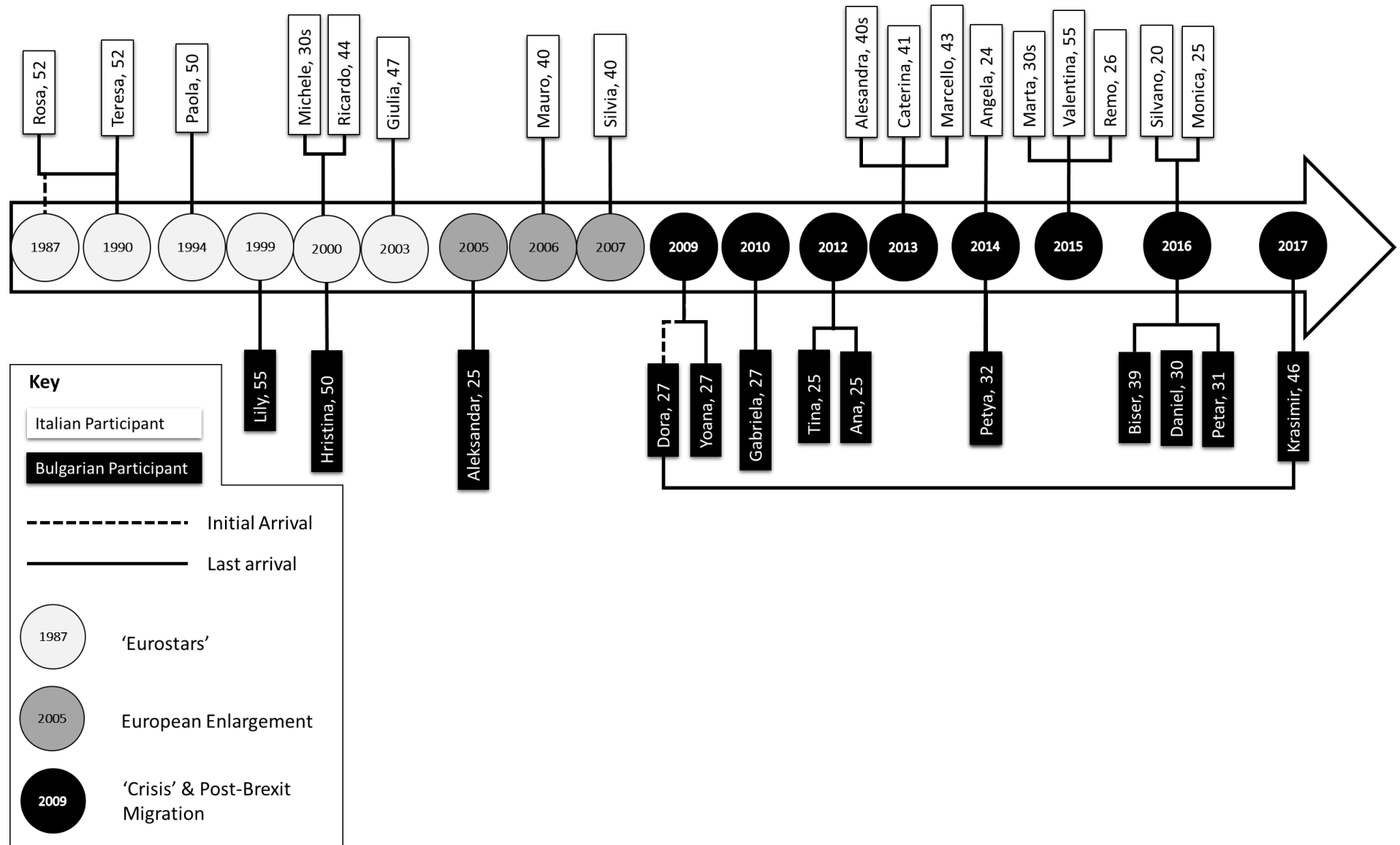
The project followed ethical guidance as it is outlined by the University of Nottingham and this project was approved by the School of Sociology and Social Policy Research Ethics committee. All participants were thoroughly informed of the aims and objectives of the study as well as their rights to withdraw. We obtained consent from our participants but throughout our fieldwork we continuously ensured they wanted to be involved in the study. Furthermore, the participants clearly indicated they were happy for their personal details such as age and location to be disclosed. However, we have used pseudonyms throughout this paper. While most participants chose to conduct their interviews in their native language, two of the Bulgarians, Hristina and Yoana, chose to speak in English, arguing it was much easier to tell their 'story'. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by external but trusted Italian and Bulgarian transcribers who signed confidentiality statements to maintain participants' anonymity and privacy. The data were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006) by the researchers, whereby Brexit clearly emerged as a state of in-betweenness producing conflicting reactions and various coping strategies, which we explore below.

Brexit: living in liminality

This section considers how Brexit has produced a sense of liminality in EU migrants. As Thomassen has argued, liminality is a 'paradoxical state, both at the individual and at the societal level. At the level of the individual, it is the destruction of identity while, at the level of society, it involves the suspension of the structure of social order' (2014: 92). Our data demonstrate that in-betweenness can be experienced negatively (as the loss of frames of reference) or positively (as a wide range of opportunities) or could even be deemed as ordinary, as we illustrate below.

The loss of identity and other frames of reference clearly emerge in the narratives of our Italian participants, especially those who had been in the UK for several years. They considered themselves as European citizens who chose to settle in the UK for both personal and professional reasons (career or study prospects, proximity

Figure 1. Timeline of Bulgarian and Italian participants' arrival in the UK Source: Researchers' database



to country of origin, multicultural environment), often after a period of work or study abroad there. For example, Marta (IT)² describes Brexit ‘like a betrayal’, signifying the strength of attachments that EU citizens form with the host society, despite the fluidity embedded in the idea of intra-EU mobility. Marta thus experienced the referendum as a personal rejection of her Europeaness and, together with her husband, they began questioning whether the UK was the country for them, especially in light of the protracted uncertainty and what they perceived as the rejection of the cosmopolitan and multicultural values which they had hoped to find there. Paola (IT) refers to a game that has gone wrong. Specifically, she feels that the UK changed the rules after she had started playing, finding this extremely unfair. She explains that she chose not to accept a job in the US, preferring the UK because it was in the European Union, with the rights and protections that this ensured her. The stripping away of her European citizenship was deeply unsettling for Paola, as it was for other of our long-standing Italian migrants. Teresa, too, a teacher in her 50s (IT), feels tricked and thus full of ‘anger, disappointment, fear of having done the wrong thing, because I always thought that life was like a poker game and that I was a good player, having played the right cards, but actually I played the wrong game, that’s what I think now’. While, up until this moment, she has been relatively privileged in being able to freely exercise her agency, she now finds her ability to act curtailed and somehow limited. With her husband, she previously had had the opportunity to move back to Italy but had chosen to stay on for the sake of her children. She now feels cheated and regrets the choices made. Thus, for many of our participants, entering a state of liminality provoked by Brexit resulted in them losing their frames of reference as EU citizens with a specific set of rights.

Mauro (IT), too, felt shaken and unsettled by Brexit, describing feeling like: ‘someone who got an enormous vase on the head but eventually is going to be all right’. It is interesting to note that Mauro, like other Italian participants, still felt a certain sense of security (I’m eventually going to be all right). This is because some of our participants, both Italian and Bulgarian, believed that they are part of a ‘class that, in the end, will somehow survive’ (Michele, IT). This hints at the heterogenous nature of liminal experiences, with class and skills playing a key role. In Rosa’s (IT) words: ‘I’m getting increasingly worried, even if in reality I’m safe, because I am highly skilled, I have been here many years, so I don’t think they are going to kick me out’. This highlights the importance of social class and inequality in determining migrant–local relations (Pratsinakis 2018). This is confirmed by Marcello (IT), who states that ‘I’ve never thought they are going to kick me out, not even for a second, because I know that unfortunately the Brexit campaign was aimed at poorer people’. A slightly different nuance to this class dimension is revealed by Daniel (BG), who is educated to Master’s level but works in packaging factories. He uses educational status and his willingness to work not only as a source of division but also as a sense of privilege and security:

The British society is completely uninformed. So, whatever you tell them, i.e. ‘Brexit is good, Eastern Europeans – Bulgarian and Romanians – steal your jobs’, they believe it. Okay, but the English are just used to living on benefits. I see them all the time, the women having 3–5 children and not working and the men not going to work.

However, this sense of security determined by the participants’ perceived privileged status is fragile. Episodes of racism and othering were encountered by our informants, further exacerbating their sense of liminality. This was particularly the case for younger Italians who lived in the city centre and had busier social lives. Angela (IT) recalls: ‘It has happened to me more than once – when people start to realise that I’m Italian – that they say “Ah, you are Italian, you are here and don’t pay taxes. You are using our own resources”’. It also affects older migrants who live in the suburbs, like Teresa, who commented that she often feels uncomfortable when out: ‘I look around and I wonder if that person had voted Brexit’. Michele feels OK at his workplace which he considers ‘international’ but feels that, in other contexts such as the pub or in the countryside, he stands out as

different, creating uneasiness – a point shared by several other Italian male participants. Such sentiments had a broader geographical dimension too: they were more prominent among participants who reside in regions that voted ‘Leave’ than among those where the population voted to remain.

However, even though some of our Bulgarian participants shared the same negative associations with their state of in-betweenness, their reactions and conceptualisations of Brexit were often more pragmatic and, at times, even positive in comparison to those of the Italians, thus revealing the complexity of a state of ‘betwixt and between’. Specifically, many of them saw their newfound liminal state as an opportunity that they tried to use in creative ways to enhance their position, status and skills. For example, Tina, a 25-year-old Bulgarian with a finance job in London, was initially ‘shocked’ by Brexit as it disrupted her carefully arranged plans. However, after consulting with her family, she decided to be pro-active and moved on to do a Master’s degree sooner than she had anticipated, in order not to ‘waste’ the investment that her family had made to support her migration to the UK. She thinks she could live anywhere in the world but, for now, she is in the UK because she has ‘an interest in being [here]’ (our emphasis). This clearly illustrates the paradoxical nature of liminality: an amalgamation of positive and negative features, of the disruption and reconstruction of migratory plans. Similar liminal complexity is revealed by 27-year-old Dora (BG). She was initially surprised and had negative feelings about the referendum result, even though she was not in the UK at the time: ‘I felt horrible. I was disgusted and felt cast out. I just could not believe that people think like that about me’. Nonetheless, such negativity was short-lived and temporary: she has now consciously decided to discard her feelings and look at her situation positively, even taking up a job opportunity in the UK post-referendum. In fact, some Bulgarian participants such as Petar, Biser and Daniel saw Brexit as the last opportunity to relocate to the UK and improve their quality of life.

Liminality can also be experienced as liberating, as illustrated by 46-year-old Krasimir (BG). Despite realising the implications of Brexit economically and politically, he sees Brexit as an opportunity to not be seen as one of ‘them’ – i.e. one of those ‘lazy bums on benefits and those others [Bulgarians] who come here to claim benefits and steal’. He further confirms that the only reason why he has not been discriminated against outside work is because strangers tell him “‘You look like an Italian” and my sister looks like a Pole, so we do not get discriminated against outside work’. This quote hints that there is a certain hierarchy among different groups of European migrants. This is not only confirmed but also succinctly summarised by a few informal comments made by some of the highly skilled, highly paid Bulgarians who, upon the announcement of the settlement scheme, have remarked that, at least now, all Europeans, not just Bulgarians and Romanians, have to go through the same steps to secure their status. This suggests a possible new levelling of previously established intra-EU mobility hierarchies.

Finally, there was also a group of both Italian (mainly crisis) and newly arrived Bulgarian migrants for whom liminality was banal and ordinary. For them, Brexit and the uncertainty that ensued were not new experiences and, as such, were deemed insignificant and unimportant. An example is Petya (BG), who has two part-time jobs (both to do with customer services) and describes herself as a ‘domoshar’ (a person who likes to stay at home) who has finally found ‘peace’ in Brexit Britain, which makes her and Doncho, her husband of eight years, feel ‘at home’. Partially this could be explained by the fact that, for both of them, this is the first time that they have stopped moving and have lived without housemates; however, they also find the UK ‘full of opportunities’ – referring to the kind of minimum-wage jobs still abundant in the service economy. Unsurprisingly, then, when asked about how she is experiencing Brexit, she remarks quickly ‘I don’t think our family will be affected. As I said, we have some specific dreams and goals and I hope that whatever we have decided to do we will not be stopped’. She then candidly admits that they do not have a TV at home, so she does not know much about it. Her conviction that Brexit ‘does not exist anymore’ is further reiterated by the fact that, while at work, no one appears to be talking about it: ‘My job is such that you have to listen to your customers

but you end up also listening into their conversations [pause] and no one mentions Brexit'. While she is not entirely sure whether or not people are afraid or that it is a taboo topic or there is a sense of tiredness, it is evident that the contextual liminality is completely ignored on this occasion. Similarly, 55-year-old cook Valentina does not question her liminal state but, instead, feels grateful for the opportunities that Brexit Britain has given her and sees it as a necessary step towards a future stability.

Overall, it becomes evident that the liminal state that has been forced upon EU migrants in the context of Brexit manifests itself differently depending on the various personal characteristics and skills the migrants have and on their length of stay and context of arrival. Liminality emerges as a complex, paradoxical state that is experienced both positively and negatively – as both a disruption and an opportunity.

Imagining reincorporation: coping with liminality

While the previous section demonstrated the range of experiences resulting from a newfound liminality – prompted by the UK's decision to leave the EU – and attitudes towards the protracted Brexit negotiations, this section discusses old and new European migrants' coping strategies. Drawing again on van Genep ([1909] 1960), these strategies could be conceptualised as ways not only of navigating in-betweenness but also of imagining the reincorporation that would follow the period of liminality. Specifically, here, we want to expand on how our participants imagine their future reincorporation post-Brexit.

Interestingly, for participants such as Lily (BG), who has lived in the UK for 19 years and has been granted an indefinite leave to remain, as she arrived long before Bulgaria was a member of the EU, Brexit Britain brings up memories of the migratory regulations before freedom of movement. Respectively, her post-Brexit prediction resonates with the same pre-EU restrictiveness and differentiation:

It will be very difficult to get a visa, just as it was once upon a time. They just crucify you [at the visa interview] and they say 'No' to you. But they are saying that your children and grandchildren will have the same settlement rights as you do... So those Bulgarians who want to work, they will be able to find a job and work but they [the government] will cut down on benefits.

Lily hints at possible changes in the new migratory regime post-Brexit. This quote highlights not only that a differentiation in migratory statuses is possible but also that settlement rights and thus, by extension, the length of residence in the country, will remain a key marker of difference in the new UK migration policy. Also and quite importantly, the current Brexit status is hinted at as a period of liminality, of a transitory state that precedes the new *status quo*.

In anticipation of this new *status quo*, all the long-standing Italian migrants had expressed a desire to leave the UK. However, age, skills and particularly stage in the life-course affect their possibilities of realising such a desire. Teacher Teresa, who arrived in the 1990s, admits that relocation, instead of providing a solution, may lead to further complication of reintegration: 'I'm an adult now and starting all over, I don't know if I feel like doing that'. Paola has no intention to go back to Italy but looks forward to being able to 'start travelling again', something she sees as possible when her son goes to university. She remarks: 'If it wasn't for Fabrizio I would have already left'. Clearly, further mobility or return are seen as ways of dealing with participants' newfound liminality, yet the presence of school-aged children complicates this coping strategy. Respectively, Rosa shares:

We don't have many plans for the future, except for looking for work elsewhere – if not necessarily through me, through Peter – and see if we can start a life; clearly, we have a daughter who is still young so we can't

leave her behind. Also, at her age is difficult if we take her away – it could have emotional repercussions, so at the moment we don't know what to do.

Evidently the life-course reluctantly grounds some of our participants in the UK (Ryan *et al.* 2009; Zontini and Però 2019). Even if these 'Eurostars' are currently unable to move, they struggle to come to terms with the idea that Brexit will remove the option of fluidity associated with EU mobility rights. Paola candidly admits: 'I struggle – and I have always struggled like many of us, I think – to put down roots just in one place'. Thus, for this group of old Europeans, any form of grounding and giving up some of the freedom associated with mobility rights as a way of reincorporation post-Brexit is something they find very difficult.

For those who were younger and had children not yet in school, Brexit acted as a catalyst to clarify their plans. This was the case for two of our Italian participants and their partners, who moved away from the UK after our first interview. These were highly skilled people in their 30s who chose, in one case, to take a job opportunity elsewhere and, in the other to 'return'. They felt that having pre-school children and still being employed on temporary contracts allowed them to continue to be mobile, pushing them to try out their preferred plans before they became 'less fluid' – in terms of getting permanent jobs or having their children start school in post-Brexit Britain. This was also the case for some of Dora's friends for whom Brexit again was seen as a catalyst that helped them to make a decision – which in her case was to return to Bulgaria. In all these cases there is a confluence between life-course and external events (Brexit) to instigate return/further migration.

Those who have arrived more recently have fewer concrete plans to return. However, they are not foreseeing or even aspiring to achieve a future stable re-incorporation in the UK. Michele is clear about the downgrading that Italian migrants like him are experiencing because of Brexit, which he describes as a 'mental shift': 'Before there was a clear distinction: British and European were part of the same intellectual category and then there was the rest, divided in many groups. Now Europeans are part of the rest'. Marcello and Caterina, having recently moved from Italy as adults, know that they do not want to go back but, being sceptical about their future in the UK, are open to the possibility of further migration. Caterina, for example, shares with us that: 'Well, I can't deny that, in the last 5 or 6 months, I started to look at the States as well...'. A similar open-endedness is maintained by Michele, who plans to go back to Italy after five years abroad. At present he is investing a lot of time and energy into trying to keep his options open, both in Italy and in the UK. He is continuously applying for permanent jobs in British academia but is also considering taking the public exam to gain access to the Italian system. For the young highly skilled Bulgarians – Ana, Tina and Dora – the future is still undetermined, though they envisage life and work in other countries, including outside of the UK.

Only one of our Bulgarian participants – Daniel – expressed a clear desire to leave at the time of his interview. His reason was not Brexit – in fact, he had come *because* of Brexit. However, he feels very bitter and frustrated by his UK work experience and is determined to go back as soon as possible. Return is a huge part of his narrative: 'I do not know a Bulgarian who does not want to go back. I personally want to return and I intend to do so by the end of the year. (...) There is no point wasting your health and feeling like a slave here'. Interestingly though, not only did he not keep his promise but he also found an alternative way to manage his frustrations – by enrolling on a distance-learning postgraduate degree, which was seen as a way of opening the door to better job opportunities in the UK. This approach is consistent with that employed by other participants for whom liminality was the 'normal' *status quo*. They envisaged their post-Brexit futures in terms of personal and professional satisfaction but firmly based in the UK. Petya and her husband, Doncho, who migrated recently because of their dissatisfaction with the socio-political and economic situation in Bulgaria, are determined to make it work in the UK and settle down there, if not permanently at least until retirement. This is also the case for our Italian participants who have arrived more recently, because they have experienced the

Italian job market and feel that their prospects, regardless of Brexit, are still better in the UK. Valentina is the most enthusiastic in this group: ‘My plans for the future are, if I can, to open my own coffee shop. I hope not to have problems with Brexit; if there are problems we’ll go to Ireland or Scotland but the best for me would be to stay here’.

Most of our Bulgarian participants fit in this group of would-be settlers. Like Valentina (IT), Hristina (BG), too, is in love with the UK and is determined to stay; however, she also thinks that Scotland could potentially be a valid plan B ‘where they like migrants’. Krasimir is convinced that people treat better those migrants who have decided to settle in the UK:

English people always ask me whether I like England and why I am here. So, the first thing I tell them is that England is my favourite country, which is really true, no hypocrisy involved. Secondly, I tell them that I have come here to settle down because I do not want to live in Bulgaria. My sister is here and my brother-in-law is here. So the attitude towards me is always different.

He contrasts himself to those who come for short-term economic goals, a move that is sometimes portrayed in the British press as coming to ‘leech off the system’.

Thus, the way in which post-Brexit reintegration is imagined differently is impacted by migrants’ length of stay as well other personal characteristics and experiences. Those who are the most precarious and have a long history of experiencing liminality (including in their countries of origin) appear to be more favourable towards settlement, whereas those who are more privileged appear concerned about the degrading of their status as a result of their future re-incorporation post-Brexit and the ways in which their mobility rights can be curtailed.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the post-Brexit period, which spanned from the referendum until the transition period when the UK has formally left the EU but no substantive change has yet actually happened, can be interpreted as a period of liminality when the previous order where EU migrants were EU citizens with guaranteed rights has been suspended but the new post-Brexit stage has not yet been delineated. The ways in which EU migrants will be re-incorporated and ‘integrated’ into British society after Brexit are still unclear. In the meantime, EU migrants have to come to terms with their loss of terms of reference and previous identities and learn to navigate this period of uncertainty and fluidity which, for some, is impacting on their life trajectories and migratory plans.

By comparing the experiences of Italians as an old EU group with those of Bulgarians as a new EU group, we have demonstrated that experiences of liminality do diverge between these two groups. However, ethnicity and length of membership in the EU did not appear as the only important factor in accounting for such differences. Length of stay or, rather, period and reason for arrival, have a profound impact on the ways in which our participants experience the Brexit liminal period. Those who arrived in the heyday of multiculturalism, also attracted by the promise of a diverse and cosmopolitan environment, experience with profound unease the rejection of such values and the spread of nationalist sentiments. Those who are able to, plan further mobility or even return migration. Those who arrived recently, often also pushed by economic and political crises in their own countries, are less surprised and therefore feel less affected by the Brexit context. The latter group are thus the ones more willing to stay on post-Brexit and to accept whatever type of re-incorporation is offered to them.

Using liminality as a lens has been instrumental in illuminating the diversity in EU migrants’ experiences. In addition to the negative aspects just highlighted, this period of uncertainty and transition has, nevertheless,

also emerged as positive and creative for some, as it was for those who used this unexpected event to re-think their plans and take some important life decisions, thus pushing further their individualised plans. It was also seen as an opportunity by those, especially Bulgarians, for whom it afforded the possibility to level the hierarchy that previously existed between ‘first-class’ and ‘second-class’ European migrants. This hierarchy of migrants was established through different waves of enlargement and European integration but is losing salience in the post-Brexit context, when everybody needs to negotiate a new status. This shows the fragility and temporariness of different migrant categories and the continuous re-shifting of such categories and mobility rights.

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated that the way in which intra-EU mobility is going to change as a result of Brexit is difficult to predict. It may favour settlement (with migrants rooting in place), increased mobility elsewhere (to destinations perceived to be more attractive) or return. Migrants’ life-course and relationships are likely to shape these patterns. What seems clear is that the fluidity and mobility that characterised the 1990s and the early 2000s, that our ‘older’ migrants find hard to relinquish, are the exception rather than the rule and are difficult to maintain. Processes of bordering and re-bordering are currently taking place across Europe, changing the future and the shape of intra-EU mobilities, simultaneously redefining the hierarchies of ‘desirable’ and ‘less-desirable’ migrants.

Notes

¹ Under the principle of the freedom of movement, European citizens have the right to enter an EU member-state freely and remain without declaring their purpose for a period of up to three months. However, not only have there been restrictions to EU mobility but these restrictions have been unevenly applied to migrants who belong to different waves of EU enlargement. This has been particularly the case with regards to access to the labour market, with the so-called EU8 – or the countries that joined the EU in 2004 – being the first group who had to register to work, albeit without restrictions. These latter were then introduced for EU2 (Bulgaria and Romania) in 2007, whose migrants were required to apply for registration certificates. This requirement was only lifted in 2014 after the full seven-year period of labour restrictions was implemented.

² The abbreviations denote the country of origin of participants: IT for Italy and BG for Bulgaria.

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