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From EU expansion to Brexit: Free movement and the UK from 2004 to 2021

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Abstract

I examine the impact of free movement within the European Union on the UK after the decision to allow immediate access to the labour market for workers from the new Member States which joined the EU in 2004. This – and the subsequent accession of Bulgaria and Romania – led to large migration flows to the UK, with both economic and political consequences. Since the Brexit referendum, these flows have largely ceased, but the legacy of this period is a very large and now well-established group of EU-origin migrants, most of whom will ultimately acquire UK citizenship.

Keywords: *EU, Brexit, free movement, UK, EU-origin migrants, UK citizenship*

Introduction

Immigration has long been a salient and contested issue in British politics. This was the case half a century ago: the government's decision to admit a substantial number of refugees of Indian ethnicity from former British colonies in East Africa was hotly disputed, and now a large majority favoured much tighter restrictions on immigration to the UK (Anders et al., 2021). But it scarcely figured as an issue in the 1975 referendum on whether the United Kingdom should remain a member of the European Union (then the European Economic Community). Indeed, those who thought immigration was too high were slightly more likely to vote to stay in (Evans and Mellon, 2015.).

However, after more than a decade of large-scale migration from other EU countries to the UK, the opposite was the case in the Brexit referendum of 2016. Negative attitudes to immigration, and in particular free movement within the EU, were a very strong predictor of opposition to UK membership (Hobolt 2016). This article examines the impact of free movement on the UK after the impact of the decision to allow immediate access to the labour market for workers from the new Member States in 2004.

Free movement

The EU was founded on four basic principles: free movement of labour, capital, goods and services: these 'four freedoms' were set out in the original Treaty of Rome, which spoke of the "abolition, as between Member States, of obstacles to the free movement of persons" (European Commission, 1957). Free movement also applies (with some minor modifications)

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between the EU and other states participating in the Single Market (EEA members Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein, as well as non-EEA member Switzerland).[2]

While the primary driver may have been political - a desire to promote European integration for its own sake - the founders of the EU also believed that there were potential economic benefits from greater labour mobility within Europe. In fact, economic theory is ambiguous on whether factor mobility (in this context, the free movement of labour and capital) is a complement or a substitute to free trade (the free movement of goods and services). In a standard Heckscher-Ohlin model of trade, they are pure substitutes. Either free trade or factor mobility will increase the efficiency of resource allocation and will maximise overall welfare; it is not necessary to have both.

Similarly, capital mobility may in some circumstances be a substitute for labour mobility. But in more recent, and arguably more realistic, trade models the picture is much less clear, for a review). The general consensus among economists is that labour mobility, like trade, is welfare-enhancing, although there may be significant distributional effects, and that the two are likely to be complementary (see Venables, 1999, for a discussion).

However, while the economic case may be strong in principle, political considerations mean that other free trade areas (for example the United State, Mexico and Canada Free Trade Area) or even customs unions do not typically involve free movement of people. So, from a purely economic perspective, free movement was not a necessary part of the European project; it would have been possible to have a customs union, and a partially integrated economic space, without it; the decision to make it one of the founding principles was a political as well as an economic choice. Labour mobility was complementary not just to the economic aspects of European integration but to its wider political objectives (Portes, 2015)

In any event, in practice free movement was not a major motor behind European economic integration until much later. The period from the late 1950s to the early 1970s saw strong economic growth in most of the EU. Demand for labour was strong and unemployment low. However, intra-EU labour mobility remained quite low, compared to for example the US, although there were significant flows from Italy to other EU countries, especially France. Labour demand was therefore largely met by immigration from outside the EU, especially Turkish 'guest workers' in Germany, North African migrants to France and – although the UK was not yet an EU Member State – Commonwealth migrants to Britain.

So when the UK joined the EU in 1973, and subsequently voted to remain a member in 1975, the potential impact on either UK immigration policy, or the level and nature of immigration to the UK, appeared to be relatively small, and hence the intersection between the debate about membership and the fraught politics of immigration was negligible. The economic crisis of the 1970s led to a sharp reduction in labour demand, and most EU countries, including the UK, attempted to reduce labour migration. Intra-EU mobility remained quite low throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Although there were concerns among UK policymakers about the accession of Spain and Portugal in 1986, leading to some restrictions on access to welfare benefits, in fact this expansion did not lead to a significant increase in migration flows.

[2] For convenience I use "EU migration" in this paper as a shorthand for migrants moving to the UK from all countries that participate in the European free movement zone.

Although they had traditionally been countries of emigration, EU accession (and large inflows of EU funding) led swiftly to rapid economic growth and ample domestic demand for labour.

The 1980s and early 1990s did see a renewed push for greater market integration, launched, with the strong support of the UK, under the umbrella of the 'Single Market'. However, the Commission's 1985 White Paper, which identified obstacles to the Single Market and set out proposals to address them, devoted only one relatively anodyne page to free movement: the focus was very much on product markets (European Commission, 1985**).**

So by 2000, although increasingly economically integrated in terms of trade, and despite the political commitment to free movement, only slightly over 1 per cent of EU citizens lived in a country other than their country of birth, and the previous decade had seen only a very modest upward trend Approximately 2 per cent of the UK population was born elsewhere in the EU, and a considerable fraction of these were probably born to Britons residing abroad, notably soldiers based in (West) Germany.

The potential downsides of this lack of mobility, despite the formal right to free movement, became more salient as the EU moved towards monetary union. The standard theory of optimal currency areas suggested that the costs of giving up the exchange rate as an adjustment mechanism (as a consequence of entering into an economic union) would be reduced if other adjustment mechanisms, in particular labour mobility, were able to operate (Mundell, 1961). There was therefore considerable concern that the lack of labour mobility posed a threat to the efficient operation of the incipient monetary union (Portes, 2015).

Partly in response to these concerns, the EU undertook a number of initiatives designed to turn "free movement of workers" from a formal right to one that appeared a realistic prospect to EU citizens. In particular, the Free Movement of Citizens Directive (European Commission, 2004) simplified, consolidated and considerably extended the right to free movement for EU citizens, not just to take a job but to look for one, and to be accompanied by family members (including non-EU citizens) as long as those exercising free movement were not an "undue burden". This also extended to non-discrimination against EU citizens, except in limited and temporary circumstances, in the operation of the benefit system. Despite the UK' s opt-out from monetary union, these provisions applied in full to the UK.

The 2004 expansion of the EU

The accession, in May 2004, of ten new Member States, including eight former members of the Soviet bloc (often referred to as the A8 – Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), radically changed the dynamic of intra-EU labour mobility. As set out above, free movement had (from an economic perspective) originally been motivated by, first, theoretical arguments about optimal resource allocation; and second, by its potential to serve as an adjustment mechanism in the face of asymmetric macroeconomic shocks. It had not been seen as operating in an area where there were very large, persistent, structural differences in wage levels, as was now the case.

Given these disparities, there was clearly a possibility of much larger intra-EU flows than had previously been the case. Most of the existing Member States therefore took the opportunity permitted by the accession treaties to impose 'transitional' restrictions on free movement of workers.

The UK (together with Ireland and Sweden), however, did not. Forecasts commissioned by the government suggested that – conditional on all EU countries granting immediate labour market access, which was not the case - migration flows would be relatively small (Dustmann et al., 2003). In any case, the forecast was not a major factor driving the UK's decision; there were several more important considerations.

First, broader geopolitical imperatives. The UK had long been the most vigorous proponent of EU enlargement among the existing Member States; they were seen (correctly) as likely allies for the UK's generally liberal positions in EU debates, not least by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair. So the decision was seen as a way of cementing the UK's relationship with them, and in particular the Polish government.

Second, the broader economic and labour market impacts. The UK labour market was buoyant; and both internal analysis and external research suggested that immigrant workers – particularly the reasonably well educated and motivated ones likely to arrive from the new Member States – were likely to boost the UK's economy without doing much, if any, damage to the employment or wage prospects of native workers (Dustmann and Glitz, 2005).

And third, and perhaps definitive, the practicalities, given the UK's relatively light touch approach to labour market regulation. There was no legal provision which would have allowed the UK to deny the right of visa-free entry to the citizens of the new EU member states: "transitional measures" could only apply to labour market access, that is to prevent them from working legally as employees once in the country. The assumption within government was therefore that, given the lack of behind-the-border enforcement, the impact of imposing transitional restrictions would be a very large increase in illegal working. This hardly seemed like an attractive alternative to UK policymakers.

Migration flows

The impact of accession on intra-EU migration flows was large, with substantial increases in migration to all the major economies of the existing EU, but especially to countries that did not impose restrictions, like the UK and Ireland. It is difficult to say how large a factor this was, but some diversion – especially from Germany – clearly occurred.

A further boost was provided by another expansion of the EU in 2007, when Bulgaria and Romania joined. After the experience of 2004, the UK and most other countries imposed transitional restrictions. These were eventually lifted in 2014, and this too led to a significant increase in flows, again much larger than originally anticipated, although this time Spain and Italy were major destination countries alongside the UK.

When looking at migration to the UK, five distinct phases can be identified (Portes 2022, Portes 2024)

> The period from 2004 to the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008, which, in the context of a healthy economy and labour market, saw large flows from the "A8" countries, in particular Poland and the Baltic states, although migration from outside the EU was still higher than EU migration for this period.
>
> The global financial crisis and its aftermath, where unemployment was relatively elevated and the demand for migrant labour correspondingly low. Both EU and non-EU migration fell sharply.

The recovery period, after about 2012, where much more stringent restrictions on migration from outside the EU, introduced by the newly elected Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, combined with a more healthy labour market, saw a renewed uptick in migration from the EU.

The ending of transitional controls on Bulgaria and Romania in 2014, which led to very large flows from these countries. This coincided with a further period of very buoyant labour demand, particularly in some relatively low-paid occupations. Net migration from the EU exceeded migration from outside the EU for the first time in this period, and peaked at about 300,000 in 2015 and 2016.

The Brexit referendum in 2016, after which migration from the EU began a sustained fall, driven both by the psychological impact of the referendum result and other more economic factors, such as sterling weakness and strong economic growth in some of the new Member States. Note however that from a legal perspective free movement did not end until January 1, 2021.

By the time of the pandemic – which led to significant return migration, although this is poorly captured in official statistics – migration flows between the UK and the EU were broadly in balance, for the first time since 2004 (Chart 1).

Between 2001 and 2021 the number of UK residents born elsewhere in the EU rose from about 1.7 million to 3.5 million, or from 3% to about 5.5% of the resident population. For some new Member States, the increase was far greater: the Romanian born population went from negligible levels to more than half a million, with almost all of this increase taking place in the 2014-2019 period (Chart 2).

Labour market impacts

The primary motivation for migration to the UK was work, and most new migrants quickly moved into employment, with employment rates well above rates for existing residents. One notable feature of migrants from the new Member States was that, although they were not necessarily low skilled, they primarily moved into relatively low-skilled and low-paid employment, and were concentrated in certain sectors, including administrative and support services, retail, hospitality, manufacturing (often food processing) and construction.

Inevitably, such a large increase in inward migration, focused in certain sectors, gave rise to considerable debate about the impacts, both real and perceived. Public and policy concern focused on the distributional impacts – in particular potential negative impacts on employment and wages for low skilled workers. Although the broad consensus in the economic literature is that negative impacts of migration for native workers are, if they exist at all, relatively small and short-lived, much of this literature is US-based; there was almost no empirical literature on the economic impact of immigration to the UK before 2004.

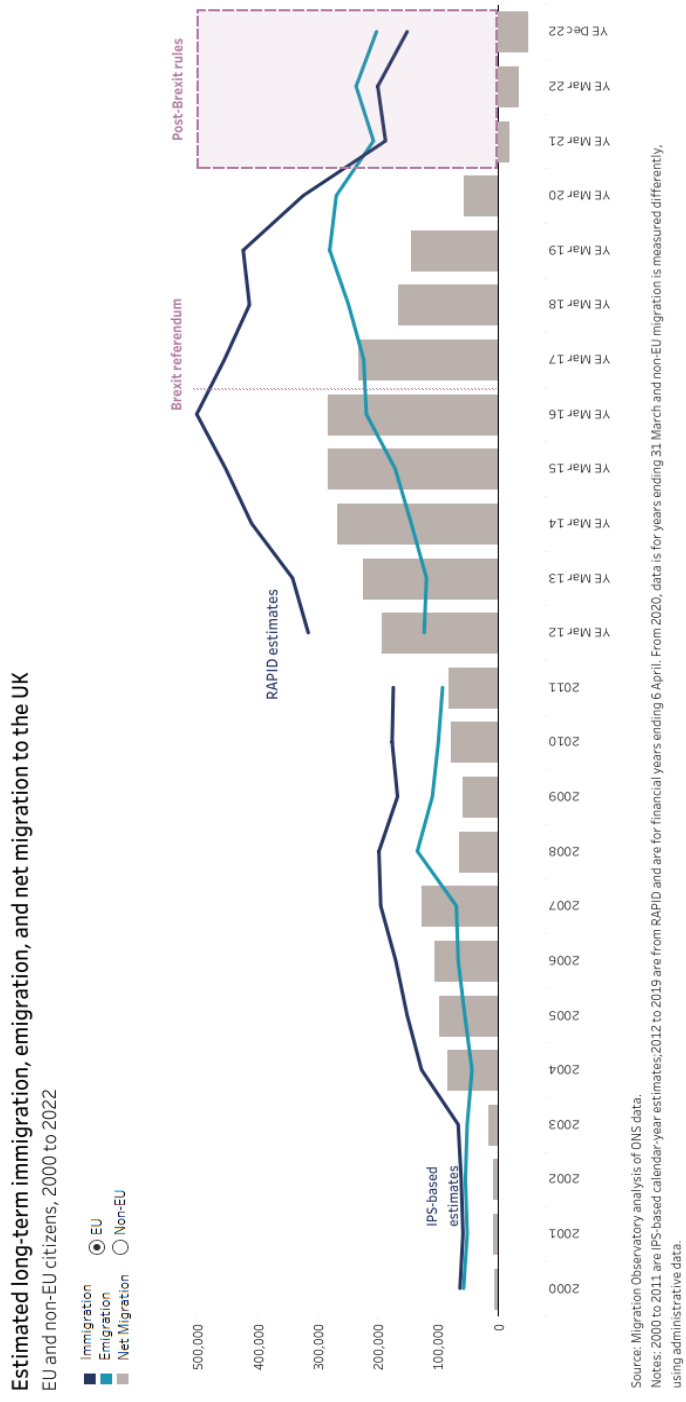

Chart 1. [Reproduced from Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, using data from UK Office of National Statistics]

https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/migobs/viz/EU2023/FIG1

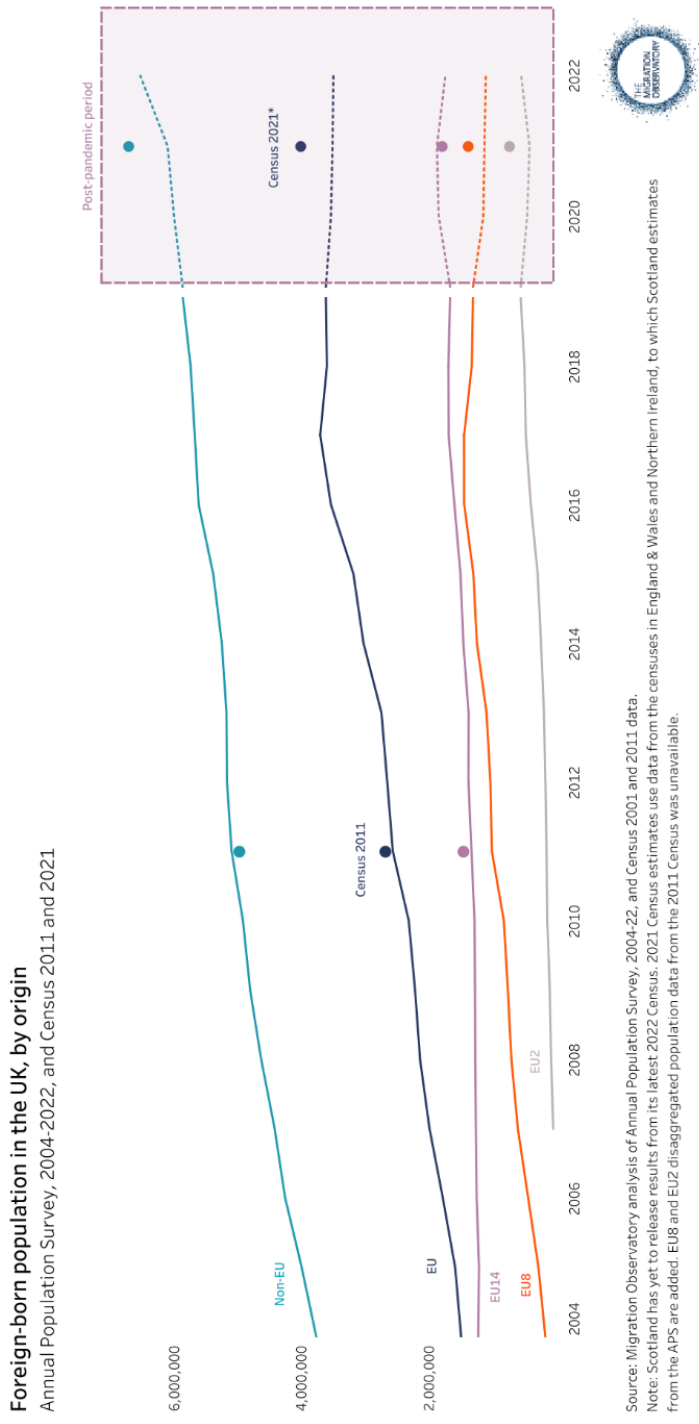

Chart 2. [Reproduced from Migration Observatory, University of Oxford. Source data from UK Office of National Statistics.]

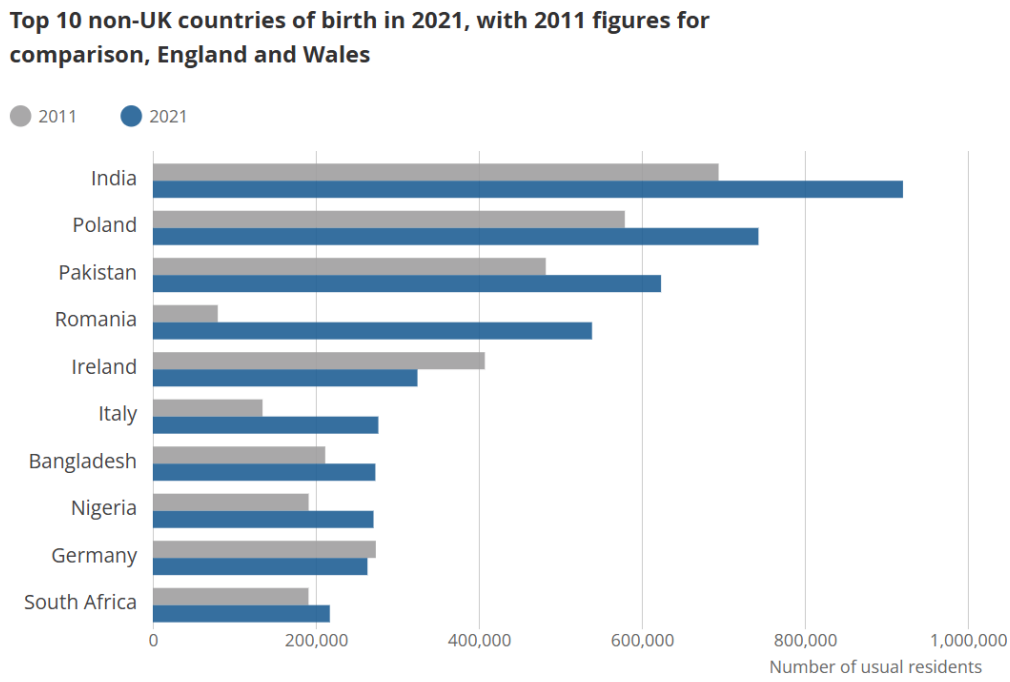

Chart 3. [Reproduced from UK Office of National Statistics]

This deficiency has now been remedied. There is a now a considerable literature on the impact on the UK economy and labour market. Early analyses (Lemos and Portes, 2014) found no significant negative impacts on employment for resident workers, subsequent work broadly confirmed this. The evidence was reviewed and summarised by MAC (2018), which concluded "Taking all the new evidence into account we found that migrants have no or little impact on the overall employment and unemployment outcomes of the UK- born workforce."

Arguably, given strong employment growth overall and low unemployment throughout almost all of this period (with the exception of the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis) this is less surprising in retrospect: the UK's relatively flexible labour market means that residents who are actively seeking work tend to find it quite quickly, even when they are competing with new migrants. A more serious concern was the impact on wages particularly in some of the lower-paid sectors most directly affected.

Here, while evidence on wage impacts is less conclusive, the emerging consensus is that recent migration has had little or no impact overall, but possibly some, small, negative impact on low skilled workers. Nickell and Salaheen (2017) found that a 10 percentage point rise in the immigrant share leads to approximately a 1.5 per cent reduction in wages for native workers in the semi/unskilled service sector; this would mean that EU-origin migration since 2004 would have reduced wages for native workers in that sector by about 1 per cent. Reviewing the evidence, MAC (2018) concluded that "taken altogether the existing evidence and the analysis we presented here suggests that immigration is not a major determinant of the wage

growth experienced by existing residents. There is some suggestion that the impact on lower skilled groups may be more negative than for higher-skilled groups, but again these estimates are imprecise and subject to uncertainty."

Beyond the aggregate impacts on employment and wages, there may also be other impacts on labour market institutions and structures, positive and negative, particularly if migration results in labour market segmentation (MAC, 2014). The increased use of temporary work and flexible contracts in low pay sectors such as hospitality and food manufacturing, as well as the expansion of "gig economy" work and the use of zero-hours contracts, was almost certainly facilitated by the availability of flexible and mobile migrant workers. However, migration is unlikely to be the most important driver of these changes, which reflect wider technological and labour market developments. Certainly, there is no evidence that the end of free movement has reversed these trends, and indeed they may have intensified. The consensus, then, is that the overall impact of EU migration on the UK labour market has been relatively benign.

Given the labour market impacts, wider economic and fiscal impacts too might be expected to be positive. Dustmann and Frattini (2014) found that migrants from the EU to the UK made a significant positive contribution to the public finances, even during periods when the UK as a whole was running a fiscal deficit. Of course, it is hardly surprising that young migrants in employment make an initial positive fiscal contribution; proper assessment of fiscal impacts requires a lifecyle perspective. Taking account of the likely trajectory of future wages, as well as return migration, analysis suggests that EU migrants will make a substantial positive net contribution over their lifetimes (Oxford Economics, 2018; OBR, 2024) although there is considerable uncertainty, given the strong assumptions needed to model future outcomes at an individual level.

Beyond the direct impacts, less is known about the broader consequences of immigration on the UK economy and productivity in particular. The UK's low level of labour productivity, compared to many other advanced economies, has long been recognized as a key weakness, and this has been greatly exacerbated by its extremely poor productivity performance since the global financial crisis. It has often been argued that immigration, and free movement in particular, may reduce the incentive to invest in productivity-enhancing physical capital, perhaps because the availability of low-skilled labour is partly a substitute for automation. However there is little evidence to support this thesis except at an anecdotal level. Most UK evidence find neutral or positive impacts of migration to the UK on overall productivity (Campo, Forte and Portes, 2024; Nam and Portes, 2023). Given data constraints it is difficult to isolate the impact of EU migration, although the skill and sector mix suggests that it may be less positive than for non-EU migration.

The EU Settlement Scheme

Much initial commentary suggested that migrants arriving in the UK under free movement were less likely to remain permanently than those from outside the EU, especially those from the "New Commonwealth" countries of the Caribbean and South Asia. However, while there was considerable circular and return migration, the data shown above demonstrate that many, perhaps most, EU-origin migrants ended up remaining indefinitely, even if this was not their original intention. Unlike non-EU migrants, even those who settled in the UK mostly did not

acquire UK citizenship, even after becoming eligible, since as long as the UK was part of the EU, it afforded limited additional rights.

This meant that the Brexit vote left EU-origin residents in the UK in a state of considerable uncertainty, despite pre-referendum pledges from the Vote Leave campaign that their existing rights would be protected. In the event, this pledge was largely (if not wholly) honoured in the Withdrawal Agreement, which gave all EU-origin migrants who arrived before the end of the Brexit transition period (December 31, 2020), as well as some family members, the right to "settled status" (or, for those with less than 5 years residence, "pre-settled status", with an eventual path to full UK citizenship.

Take-up of this scheme substantially exceeded expectations, with some 5.7 million EU citizens and non-EU family members) being granted status. The difference between this and the Census figures shown above largely reflects the fact that many of those who were resident in the UK at some point before 2021 remained eligible to apply for status, even if they had returned to their countries of origin temporarily or permanently. (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#eu-settlement-scheme)

The post-Brexit immigration system

There was considerable debate about what the "problem" with immigration was that Brexit was intended to resolve, in either political or economic terms. Was it excessive immigration per se, or merely that free movement meant that the UK had little or no control over immigration from the EU, as highlighted by the successful slogan "Take Back Control"? During the referendum, Vote Leave – the "official" campaign arguing for Brexit – adopted the latter interpretation, avoiding specific promises to reduce immigration, and instead stating that after Brexit, the UK would introduce "A fairer immigration system that is better for Britain, stops discriminating on the basis of where you come from, and instead allows us to pick people on the basis of skills" (Vote Leave, 2016).

This system, which was based on salary and skill thresholds, was designed to ensure that work visas were mostly not available for lower skilled and lower paid occupations. It was introduced in January 2021, alongside wider changes to the UK's economic relationship with the EU, after the end of the "transitional period" that followed legal Brexit in January 2020 (Home Office, 2020). This coincided with the post-pandemic reopening of the economy, which led to widespread labour shortages in some sectors, as resurgent demand met reduced supply. This was particularly acute in sectors where significant numbers of EU-origin migrants had left the workforce, such as accommodation and hospitality, as well as in the health and social care sectors, where the pandemic appears to have led to both persistent increases in demand and increased exit rates among existing staff, as a result of pressure on working and conditions and wages (Portes and Springford 2023). Partly as a result, visa restrictions on care workers were significantly relaxed in early 2022, resulting in a very large influx of relatively low-paid care workers; the vast majority of these, however, were not from the EU.

Meanwhile, Brexit also meant not only that EU nationals wishing to study at UK universities needed to apply for study visas, but more importantly that they needed to pay the much higher fees applicable to "international students"; combined with a liberalisation of the rules applying

to those coming from outside the EU, this has resulted in a very sharp shift from EU-origin to non-EU origin students in UK universities.

So, although EU nationals were eligible to apply for work and study visas under the new system, and, as described above, many of those who had returned to their home countries had nevertheless acquired settled status, meaning that they retained free movement rights, net EU migration has continued to fall, and is now estimated to be negative. Flows of new EU-origin migrants into the UK labour market have fallen very sharply - fewer than 4,000 visas were issued to French nationals (the largest single source country) in the year to September 2023, compared to over 150,000 to Indians. The result has been (Portes 2023) "a complete reorientation of UK migration flows away from the EU and towards the rest of the world, especially India, driven both by the operation of the new post-Brexit migration system and broader demographic and economic trends." The era of free movement is well and truly over.

The legacy

Meanwhile, Brexit and the end of free movement have certainly not resolved the UK's fractious political debate about migration; politicians who complained that the problem was not migrants per se, but the lack of "control" that resulted from EU membership have pivoted seamlessly to complaining about the results of a migration system that was devised and implemented entirely in Westminster and Whitehall. The result is that the current debate focuses less on labour market impacts, and more on the ethnic, racial and religious makeup of current migration flows. Paradoxically, then, the UK's migration debate in some respects now resembles that of other EU Member States (where intra-EU migration is not normally a subject of much public or political concern, except at the time of enlargements) much more than it did when the UK was actually a member.

However, despite the current backlash against both Brexit – now regarded by a clear majority of the UK electorate as a mistake – and the high levels of non-EU migration resulting from the post-Brexit migration system, there is little political or popular pressure for a return to free movement. Even relatively modest proposals for a Youth Mobility scheme between the UK and the EU, which would parallel existing schemes with non-EU countries like Australia, have been described by pro-Brexit politicians and press as reopening the door to uncontrolled migration from the EU, and even the new Labour government, despite its urge to improve the economic and trading relationship with the EU, appears very nervous about the potential political backlash.

But this does not mean that the migration flows of the 2000s and 2010s under free movement will not have a lasting legacy. Like Caribbean and south Asian migrants before them, those EU migrants who remain in the UK now are (mostly) here to stay. So far, they are far less visible than their more long-established counterparts. There are no Romanian-origin MPs or TV chefs; contrast that with the political and cultural weight of Britons of Indian, Jamaican or now West African heritage.

All of this will change. The direct economic and labour market impacts of migration last a few years, after which it is no longer very useful or meaningful to distinguish between natives and not-so-recent arrivals. But the broader political, social, and cultural impacts will take decades to work through.

It was almost 40 years from the arrival of the Windrush generation to the election of the first Afro-Caribbean MPs. And, while there were MPs with Asian backgrounds in the 19th Century, south Asians only began to be represented in any significant numbers in the 1990s. In many respects – notably our attitudes to our own history, especially that of slavery, Empire and colonialism – we are still working through the resulting change in perspective.

Europeans will be different for many reasons. Most obviously, racism is likely to be less of an issue – not just because most (though by no means all) of those of European origin are white, but because the UK has moved on considerably from the 1960s and 1970s. Enoch Powell's view that immigrants and their children, even if they are born here, couldn't really be 'British' has much less resonance in the 2020s.

Meanwhile, most UK residents of EU origin are not yet UK citizens, and therefore do not yet have the right to vote. Again, that is likely to change as they move from settled status to full citizenship over the next decade. Many, probably a substantial majority, will eventually acquire British citizenship.

And while political representation and activism to combat racism may be less urgent, and less of a focus, than it was for black and Asian migrants, the UK's relationship with the EU and its member states will remain both important and contentious for the foreseeable future and these new British Europeans are likely to retain a strong interest in this debate. What difference will it make if, in 2030, nearly one-tenth of the UK's electorate is of EU origin or part of a family that is?

It would be presumptuous to make predictions. But the story of recently arrived Europeans in Britain is not over. In many respects it has only just begun.

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