Commentary

The Impact of Brexit on Human Mobility Between the UK and the EU After Five Years

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Abstract

This commentary examines the impact of Brexit on human mobility between the UK and the EU five years post-implementation. It highlights the significant decline in EU migration to the UK, attributed to the imposition of a points-based immigration system, and the corresponding rise in non-EU migration. Statistical data from the ONS reveal a dramatic shift in migration patterns, reflecting policy changes and societal adjustments. The analysis explores the economic ramifications, including labour shortages and increased costs, and the political consequences, such as the rise of far-right ideologies across Europe. It further discusses the social impacts, including increased xenophobia and altered perceptions of multiculturalism, alongside effects on educational mobility. The commentary concludes that Brexit has fundamentally reshaped human mobility, with lasting economic, political, and social implications for both the UK and the EU.

Keywords: *Brexit; immigration; EU; freedom of movement; far right surge*

Introduction

The decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, commonly known as Brexit, was one of the most politically contentious moves in recent British history. While much of the debate centred around economic policies, trade agreements, and sovereignty, one of the most profound, yet often under-discussed, consequences of Brexit has been its impact on human mobility between the UK and the EU. This has affected not only the free movement of workers, students, and families but has also influenced the political climate across both regions, contributing to a rise in far-right ideologies in recent years. Migration, a key ingredient in anti-EU sentiment and a key driver for Brexit decision, has also been shaped by the outcome of the 2016 Referendum. In this commentary, we are discussing this aspect of the UK leaving the EU.

Almost a decade after the referendum and five years following the implementation of Brexit decision, volume of immigration has not declined but exponentially grew in the UK. In the years prior to the referendum, net migration of EU nationals to the UK was around 180,000. We have seen the volume shrank in 2017 to around 100,000, and around 70,000 in 2018. In 2020, net migration from the EU was just about 30,000 according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). In following years, this figure remained to be low around 40,000-50,000. Nevertheless, net migration from non-EU countries have increased from about 190,000 in

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2014 and 2015 to 250,000 in 2019, to 330,000 in 2021 to about 400,000 in 2023 according to the ONS.

The Immediate Effect: Severing the Free Movement of People

Before Brexit, the UK benefited from the EU's Schengen Area, which allowed citizens of member states to travel, live, and work freely across borders without fully joining the border union. This freedom was a cornerstone of the European Union's identity, and for over four decades, British citizens were able to live and work in EU member states, and EU nationals had the same privilege in the UK. The 2016 referendum, however, brought a dramatic shift in this fundamental aspect of EU-UK relations.

The transition period that followed the Brexit referendum, culminating in January 2020, saw a significant disruption in human mobility, aka freedom of movement within the EU. Under the post-Brexit immigration rules that came into force on January 1, 2021, the UK implemented a points-based immigration system, replacing the previous freedom of movement with a more restrictive system inspired by similar systems in place in Australia and Canada. Citizens from EU countries now face the same immigration requirements as those from outside the EU, which includes meeting certain salary thresholds and having job offers from licensed sponsors. Hence substantially reducing the appeal of immigration to the UK among European citizens.

Statistical Impact: A Sharp Decline in Immigration from the EU

The changes to immigration rules are clearly reflected in the numbers. According to data from the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS), net migration from the EU to the UK fell significantly after Brexit. Between 2019 and 2020, EU net migration dropped by 87,000 individuals, from +226,000 to +139,000 (ONS, 2021). The trend of falling migration has continued in the years that followed. For instance, in 2021, the number of EU nationals coming to the UK was the lowest in a decade. It continued falling in the years following.

On the other hand, the number of UK nationals moving to the EU has also decreased. The number of British citizens seeking to live and work in the EU fell by 30% in the first year after Brexit. This sharp drop has been attributed not only to the barriers created by the new immigration rules but also to the added complexities of residency requirements, healthcare access, and social security coordination between the UK and EU countries (European Commission, 2021).

These reductions in mobility are not just a matter of numbers but reflect deeper shifts in the ways people relate to their political and economic environments. The EU was once seen as a land of opportunity for British workers, especially in industries like healthcare, agriculture, and education, where EU nationals have traditionally filled essential roles.

Economic Ramifications and the Far-Right Surge

The diminished flow of people has had direct economic implications. UK businesses, particularly in sectors that heavily relied on EU workers, have reported severe labor shortages. In healthcare, for example, the NHS faced a recruitment crisis as the number of EU nationals leaving the UK surged. According to NHS Digital data, between 2016 and 2020, the number of EU nurses working in the UK dropped by over 7,000 (NHS Digital, 2020). Similarly, the agriculture and hospitality sectors experienced acute worker shortages after Brexit, leading to

increased reliance on non-EU immigration to fill gaps, which further strained resources and policy debates.

Politically, the fallout from Brexit has contributed to a broader rise in far-right ideologies across Europe. In the UK, Brexit emboldened nationalist groups that equated EU migration with economic and cultural decline, a narrative that resonated with voters who felt disconnected from the globalized economy. The "taking back control" rhetoric that underpinned the Leave campaign set the stage for a political environment where anti-immigrant sentiments flourished.

This shift has been reflected different priorities and political landscapes in EU. Eastern European Countries, such as Hungary and Poland, focus on national control and adopt restrictive migration policies. As such, immigration has been framed as a security threat, with rising populism and anti-immigrant sentiments (Hlatky, 2023; Durdynets et al., 2024; Roos et al., 2024). The rise of far-right populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński has been partly fuelled by fears of immigration and the perceived erosion of national. These leaders have utilized the UK's exit from the EU as a cautionary tale, arguing that the EU's embrace of open borders threatened local cultures and jobs.

In contrast Southern European countries like Spain, Italy, and Greece advocate a more unified EU response to migration. These countries emphasize integration and cooperation with EU standards, but implementation varies greatly across these countries. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum includes provision for "solidarity cooperation" aimed at redistributing migrants and providing financial and technical assistance to the first-receiving countries (European Commission, 2024). However EU has difficulty reaching consensus on refugee redistribution (Karavaychenko & Sarakutsa, 2024). For instance, in Italy, migration policies have become stricter due to the increased migration flow into the country (Sidorova & Zherlitsina, 2023).

Western European countries, particularly Germany and France have called for comprehensive EU-wide reforms to address migration challenges. These countries highlighted the need for a unified and effective system that balances security, solidarity, and protection. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum is seen as a step towards normalizing EU migration policies. It aimed to integrate internal and external factors of migration management (Stępka, 2023). Therefore, Germany and France have cooperated African countries to manage migration flows, which has led to the rise of anti-immigrant parties reflecting internal tensions over migration policies (Stoetzer et al., 2024). Without the UK, the EU's ability to decide more freely on migration policies has led to a mix of unified policies and a focus on broader security and internal solidarity.

The Political Climate Post-Brexit: A Europe Divided

Brexit has not only altered the dynamics of migration but also reshaped the political climate across Europe. Nationalist parties have increasingly used the rhetoric of sovereignty, national security, and anti-immigration to gain traction. In the UK, the Conservative Party, which backed Brexit, has seen the rise of hard-right factions calling for even stricter immigration policies. Similarly, in other EU nations, far-right parties have made substantial gains in national elections, feeding into a broader trend of scepticism and hostility towards the EU's open-border policies.

In the UK, Brexit's aftermath has led to an uptick in anti-immigrant sentiment. Politicians who championed the Leave campaign, such as Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party (UKIP, later Brexit Party and Reform UK) and the Conservative Party's Boris Johnson, have continued to stoke fears about immigration. In the years following the Brexit referendum, there was an increase in hate crimes and xenophobic attacks, particularly directed at people perceived as migrants or foreigners. This shift has also been reflected in the increasing prominence of the far-right in UK politics, with more radical parties and movements advocating for stricter border controls and even the dismantling of the country's membership in international agreements like the United Nations Refugee Convention.

Impact on Social Cohesion and Multiculturalism

Brexit has led to significant changes in xenophobia, discrimination, cultural dynamics, and economic inequality in the UK. These changes have been influenced by anti-immigrant policies and attitudes, cultural and demographic shifts, and economic regulations. In particular, the Brexit vote has been observed to intensify xenophobic and racist attitudes especially towards Polish and Central/Eastern European migrants (Rzepnikowska, 2019; Sime et al., 2022).

Another example is that of immigrant NHS nurses who reported feeling unwelcome and uneasy in a post-Brexit environment that fosters xenophobia and othering (Spiliopoulos & Timmons, 2022). Some studies suggest that anti-immigrant attitudes softened post-Brexit, as individuals distanced themselves from overt xenophobia (Schwartz et al., 2020). However, this softening is complex and may involve strategic masking of intolerance (Creighton & Jamal, 2020).

Increased racism and separation of immigrants could lead to a less multicultural society and affect social cohesion. The Brexit campaign has both normalized and stigmatized anti-immigrant sentiment, leading to a nuanced landscape of expressed and masked intolerance (Creighton & Jamal, 2020).

The absence of low-wage migrant labor has increased costs and inefficiencies, particularly in regions dependent on such labour. This has affected job opportunities and social mobility for UK citizens. EU countries have therefore adjusted their labour markets in response to Brexit, highlighting the broader economic impacts of these demographic shifts (Kim, 2023). Another impact on the social cohesion and multiculturalism after Brexit is education mobility. With Brexit, the growth of international student applications and enrolments has fallen, particularly affecting STEM fields and students from weaker economic countries (Zotti, 2021). The withdrawal from the Erasmus and introduction of Turing programme have limited the academic and student exchange across Europe. This has also affected research collaboration with EU institutions, reducing resources and capacity (Highman et al., 2023).

Brexit has exacerbated social division within the UK, particularly across generations and regions. This polarization has impacted public trust and political participation, with younger generations feeling more disconnected from the political process (Dodourova et al., 2019).

Conclusion

In the five years following the implementation of Brexit, the landscape of human mobility between the UK and the EU has undergone a profound transformation, marked by a sharp decline in EU migration to the UK and reciprocal reductions in UK nationals moving to the

EU. The imposition of a points-based immigration system has effectively severed the free movement of people, leading to significant labour shortages in key sectors of the UK economy and contributing to a complex interplay of economic and political repercussions.

Immigration of EU nationals to the UK has declined substantially after Brexit. This trend is pretty understandable given additional barriers on free movement applied. However, non-EU immigration to the UK has increased significantly since Brexit, reflecting the country's evolving immigration policy. As EU migration fell following the referendum, the UK's reliance on non-EU nationals grew, particularly in areas like healthcare, education, and technology. The introduction of the points-based immigration system has further encouraged non-EU immigration, leading to stronger flows of skilled workers and international students. This shift highlights the UK's changing relationship with global migration post-Brexit, where non-EU migration now plays a central role in meeting labour demands and contributing to economic stability.

Statistically, the shift is stark: net EU migration to the UK plummeted from approximately 180,000 pre-referendum to around 30,000 by 2020, remaining low in subsequent years. Conversely, non-EU migration has surged, reaching approximately 400,000 in 2023, highlighting a recalibration of the UK's immigration sources. These numerical changes reflect not only policy shifts but also deep-seated societal adjustments, including increased xenophobia and altered perceptions of multiculturalism.

The fall in migration flows between the two regions is not just a matter of numbers; it reflects the broader political and social shifts in both areas. While the immediate effects have been a decline in migration and economic disruptions, the long-term consequences may be even more profound. The rise of the far-right in both the UK and across Europe has been fuelled in part by the anxieties surrounding immigration and national identity—issues that Brexit has brought to the forefront. As the political landscape continues to evolve, it is crucial to consider how the lasting effects of Brexit on human mobility will shape the future of both the UK and the EU.

Politically, Brexit has catalysed a rise in far-right ideologies across Europe, with nationalist narratives gaining traction both within the UK and in EU member states. While some EU nations advocate for unified migration policies, others have adopted more restrictive stances, revealing a fractured approach to a shared challenge.[2] The "taking back control" rhetoric that fuelled Brexit has fostered an environment where anti-immigrant sentiments thrive, impacting social cohesion and exacerbating existing divisions within the UK.

Furthermore, the economic consequences, such as labour shortages and increased costs, have disproportionately affected sectors reliant on EU workers. Socially, the post-Brexit era has witnessed a nuanced shift in xenophobia, with studies indicating both an intensification of prejudice towards certain groups and a strategic masking of intolerance. The impact on education mobility, exemplified by the decline in international student applications and the limitations imposed on academic exchange, further underscores the multifaceted consequences of Brexit on human mobility and societal integration.

In summary, the five-year post-Brexit period has demonstrated that the decision to leave the EU has not only altered migration patterns but has also reshaped the political and social fabric of both the UK and the EU. The long-term implications of these changes, including the

potential for further economic disruptions and the sustained rise of nationalist ideologies, remain critical areas for ongoing research and policy consideration.

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