

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Open Access



# Return migration and embedding: through the lens of Brexit as an unsettling event

Izabela Grabowska<sup>1\*</sup>  and Louise Ryan<sup>2</sup>

\*Correspondence:  
[igrabowska@kozminski.edu.pl](mailto:igrabowska@kozminski.edu.pl)

<sup>1</sup> Center for Research on Social Change and Human Mobility (CRASH), Kozminski University, Warsaw, Poland  
<sup>2</sup> Global Diversities and Inequalities Research Centre, London Metropolitan University, London, UK

## Abstract

This introductory paper, reflecting the Thematic Cluster of four papers, brings together two themes that are important for migration studies: return migration and embedding. Beyond any simplistic assumptions of settlement and permanent integration back into the origin country, following return, or notions of ongoing unfettered mobility back and forth over time, this article knits together data from the cluster papers, focusing on Lithuania and Poland, to explore factors that lead to return, or indeed non-return, and subsequent experiences in the ‘home’ country for those who do return. Moreover, using mixed methods, including longitudinal research, we advance a theoretical framework facilitating an examination of how returnees negotiate their lives in the origin society and whether they intend to stay, or migrate again, through the conceptual lens of embedding. While emphasising agency and effort, embedding also recognises structural constraints that may impede migrants’ expectations and aspirations. Hence, return migration may involve parallel processes of re-embedding but also experiences of dis-embedding as the hoped for return project encounters unexpected obstacles and may result in further migration. In mapping the field of return migration, through the concept of embedding, we focus on the impact of Brexit as ‘an unsettling event’.

**Keywords:** Return migration, Embedding, Unsettling events, Brexit, Central and Eastern Europe

## Introduction

Return migration of Central and Eastern Europeans (CEEs) has recently received scholarly attention, especially from the perspective of at least three unsettling events potentially pushing migrants back home after the massive out migration caused by the biggest EU enlargement in May 2004—global financial crisis of 2008, Brexit<sup>1</sup> which started in 2016 with the referendum but the UK actually left the EU in 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021. In this Thematic Cluster we focus particularly on Brexit.

<sup>1</sup> The term “Brexit” refers to the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) at midnight on 31 January 2020 CET.

The project *Comparative study of young migrants from Poland and Lithuania in the context of Brexit (CEEYouth)*, from which two papers of this Thematic Cluster are drawn (Trąbka et al.; Czeranowska et al.), captured the meanings and role of Brexit in the lives of migrants from Poland and Lithuania, with special focus on young adults. Firstly, the initial shock of the Brexit referendum results was followed by the normalization and pragmatization of Brexit uncertainty in the lives of these migrants, coupled with ‘Brexit fatigue’ and discouragement by British politics. Secondly, Brexit became an important context in the lives of migrants in Britain, but—contrary to initial assumptions—it did not cause mass returns (although more Poles than Lithuanians returned) or acquiring citizenship (although these processes were also noticeable and in motion), as discussed in more detail below.

This introductory paper, reflecting the Thematic Cluster, brings together two themes that are important for migration studies: return migration and embedding. Beyond any simplistic assumptions of settlement and permanent integration back into the origin country, following return, or notions of ongoing unfettered mobility back and forth over time, this article knits together data from the cluster papers to explore factors that lead to return or indeed non-return, and subsequent experiences in the ‘home’ country for those who do return. The key aim of this paper is to set a theoretical framework facilitating an examination of how returnees negotiate their lives in the origin society and whether they intend to stay or migrate again. In so doing, we advance understanding of the obstacles and opportunities that returnees encounter through the concept of embedding (Mulholland & Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015). Embedding illustrates dynamic and differentiated processes of attachment and belonging in place over time. While emphasising agency and effort, embedding also recognises structural constraints that may impede migrants’ expectations and aspirations. In this article we do not present our own data and findings but, rather, we refer our arguments to the articles showcased in this Thematic Cluster.

Our article serves a dual function. Firstly, it is a theoretical introduction into a research field summarising the latest developments on return migration in the specific context of returns to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), with a special focus on return as a part of a migration process, including its transnational dimension. Secondly, referring to new empirical data from the CEEYouth project, with CEE migrants in the UK in the context of Brexit as an unsettling event, we mobilise the concept of ‘embedding’, for the first time in the reference to return, in order to explain not only economic but also biographical, relational and contextual factors, as well as psychosocial dimensions (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2016), which only recently started being addressed in the return migration literature (cf. Vathi, 2022; White, 2022).

In this introductory article, we present our argument for bringing into conversation return migration and embedding—as a part of a migration process—through a discussion of Brexit as an unsettling event. We begin with a brief explanation of ‘unsettling event’ (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021) as applied to Brexit. We then move on to discuss mobility and return migration, especially in the contexts of Eastern and Central Europe. Next, we present a short overview of the conceptual framework of embedding and then in the following section, drawing on data from the three substantive articles in this cluster, we explore how an application of embedding can advance understandings

of return as well as the extent to which returnees re-negotiate belonging and attachments in the origin country. In the conclusion section, we summarise the key contribution of this Thematic Cluster to migration studies and in particular to studies at the nexus of mobilities and return migration.

### **Unsettling events and their effects**

This Thematic Cluster understands Brexit as an unsettling event (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021). Examples of earlier unsettling events include the global financial crisis of 2008 which evoked the first wave of post-enlargement return migration of Central and Eastern Europeans. The term unsettling event was originally coined by Kilkey and Ryan to analyse migrants' responses to Britain's departure from the EU. The notion of unsettling event was inspired by Glen Elder's (1998) life course framework. According to the life-course perspective, 'time operates at both a socio-historical and personal level' (Elder et al., 2003: 8). That is to say, people's lives are experienced in 'biographical and historical times' (Elder 1998, 9). In other words, personal biography such as being a child, young adult or older person at a specific moment and place in history, such as during a national economic crisis, or a global pandemic, etc. has implications for one's aspirations, life experiences and outcomes. Kilkey and Ryan drew on the temporal and spatial dimensions of the life course framework to develop the idea of 'unsettling events':

*transformations on the structural level that have implications on the individual level in ways that provoke re-evaluation of migration projects. Geopolitical episodes which have unsettling potential for migrants may be isolated events in history, but they may also be intertwined, in part because of the cumulative and spill-over effects of the changes each event puts in train (2021: 234).*

The term 'unsettling events' has become widely cited in the literature, especially in relation to Brexit (Benson et al., 2022; Hall, 2021; Moskal & Sime, 2022; Zontini & Genova, 2022), but its applicability to other transformative events such as the COVID-19 pandemic has also been noted (Kloc-Nowak & Ryan, 2023). In this way, as mentioned above, geopolitical episodes may become intertwined to have a cumulative effect on migration projects. It is not the aim of this paper to provide a more detailed elucidation of 'unsettling events' that has been done elsewhere (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021). Instead, in this paper, we now focus on the usefulness of this term for understanding return migration. In the following section we bring the two bodies of literature on 'return' and 'unsettling events' into dialogue with a specific focus on CEE contexts.

### **Return Migration of Central and Eastern Europeans**

The topic of return migration has received increasing scholarly attention in recent decades (for an overview see King & Kuschminder, 2022). There is also emerging scholarship on return in different regions across the globe (see for example, Moret, 2018 on Somalia and Scharrer, 2020 on Kenya). It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage more fully with that wider literature. Instead, our focus is on the particular context of CEE and return migration to this region. In order to understand the wider context of this particular return migration, as discussed in this Thematic Cluster, we first present a brief overview of outward migration of CE Europeans during the post-accession period

from 2004 up to Brexit and then we discuss return migration of CE Europeans in relation to key theoretical approaches where return migration was considered.

The out-movement of CE Europeans to Western Europe after the biggest historical EU enlargement in May 2004 established a social phenomenon described in the literature as ‘post-enlargement migration’ (cf. Ruspini, 2005, 2008; Gerdes & Wadensjo, 2009; Hazan & Philips, 2009; Kahanec, 2010; Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2019) or ‘post-accession migration’ (cf. Friberg, 2012; Snel et al., 2015; Galasińska & Kozłowska, 2004; Eldring et al., 2012; Black et al., 2010; Grabowska-Lusińska & Okólski, 2009; Garapich et al., 2023) although CE Europeans migrated already massively in 1990s and were also engaged in migratory flows after WWII. Why is post-accession migration highlighted here? Because between three and four million people moved from Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe in a short period of time (cf. Black et al. 2010; Glorius et al. 2014), within one continent, exercising free movement of labour. The shift on a migration destination map happened rapidly, making the UK quickly the leading destination country for post-accession migrants, followed by the traditional top destination—Germany—then the Netherlands, and ‘a new kid on the migration block’—Ireland which experienced an unprecedented inflow of post-accession migrants from CEE, mostly from Poland. The socio-demographic composition of post-enlargement flows was also phenomenal consisting of one third of university educated young adult migrants below 35 years of age (cf. Grabowska-Lusińska & Okólski, 2009). This post-accession migration of young adults was to some extent ‘forced’ by high youth unemployment rates around 2004 in CEE, especially in Poland. The UK and Ireland became the main destinations for post-accession young adult migration. The young wave had certain ‘generational’ qualities such as being born after or soon before 1989 and not remembering communism much, coming from families where education mattered but also going abroad for ‘a school of life’ (see e.g. Burrell, 2016; Szewczyk, 2015; Krzaklewska, 2008). This was a wave, which ended, partly because of developments in CEE, over the years CEE urban and especially metropolitan labour markets become attractive to young middle-class people, but also ended with Brexit. Today, some young people from big CEE cities continue to ‘migrate’ in the sense of studying abroad, or as lifestyle/professional migrants who end their programs and contracts and return more often than would have happened 10 years ago as there are many more prospects in Warsaw, Vilnius and Bucharest (see e.g. Lulle et al., 2019; Garapich et al., 2023). Therefore, post-accession migration of CE European involves also return migration which we discuss below.

According to classical definitions, return migration is defined as *the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle* (Gmelch, 1980: 136). This definition does not include any circulatory, back-and-forth movements or short-term return visits which also became features of post-accession returns of CE Europeans, next to longer periods of return. It treats return as a one-off event not as part of a migration process or migration cycle. Let us relate here the specificity of CEE post-accession migration and return to socio-cultural and transnational approaches (cf. Snel et al., 2015; Angel et al., 2019) which are relevant approaches for this paper.

According to Snel et al. (2015) socio-cultural integration approach shows a negative relation between the socio-cultural integration of migrants and return intentions. This approach can be identified with the sense of belonging and attachment to

the receiving country, development and sustainability of networks, civic engagement (Snel et al., 2006; de Haas & Fokkema, 2011) which is applied and tested in-depth in this Thematic Cluster, especially in Trąbka et al. and Czeranowska et al. papers. The transnational approach refers to the process by which migrants create and maintain multi-sited social relations that link their societies of origin and destination (Basch et al., 1994: 7). In the case of CE Europeans, EU enlargement in May 2004 and 2007, free movement of labour and lowering costs of transportation and communication, facilitated their participation in transnational social spaces. According to Samers (2010) having transnational ties and networks impacted on the duration of stay in destinations. This is exacerbated by sending both economic and social remittances, frequent visits, regular contacts giving a sense of a participation in each other's daily life. Frequent visits home, can also prepare for a longer term return, especially when the attachment to a destination is weaker than to an origin (cf. Snel et al., 2015). Many scholars (King, 2000; Ley & Kobayashi, 2005; Sinatti, 2011; Oeppen, 2013) postulate, however, that return migration is embedded in transnationalism and therefore return is not the end of migration process or migration cycle but it is just a part or a stage of it. There are all kinds of temporary returns as showed by White (2014a, 2014b) who coined a term of 'double return migration' where post-accession migrants from Poland decided to return to their places of origin and, after a while, decided to return to the destination due to enduring lack of opportunities and economic constraints at home. It is also connected with the fact that the majority of CE Europeans return to their places of departure which were usually middle-to-small towns and villages and not to big cities with more opportunities (cf. Fihel & Górny, 2013). These themes are further discussed in the empirical papers by Trąbka et al. and Czeranowska et al., in this Thematic Cluster. But for now we continue with our conceptual discussion.

As noted earlier, we argue in this paper that the notion of 'unsettling events' is useful to help understand particular socio-political events that may have triggered patterns of return. Post-accession return migration of CEE migrants was caused, among other factors, by at least three unsettling events—the global financial crisis of 2008, Brexit marking a special point on a post-enlargement migration map, with the COVID-19 pandemic in the background and overlapping with Brexit. Returns come usually, however, with some time-lag to all these events and they are gradual and less rapid than outflows connected to the opening of EU borders in May 2004. Returns are also caused by different reasons and motivations than outflows. While Central and Eastern Europeans predominantly left their origins for economic reasons, they returned to their destinations mostly for family reasons which sets different conditions for embedding (cf. Dzięglewski, 2021).

As our combined data (secondary and primary data) show, post-enlargement return migration as a socially complex and non-linear phenomenon, discussed in this Thematic Section, to Central and Eastern Europe from Western Europe started mostly during and after the financial crisis of 2008—the first unsettling event—since EU enlargement in 2004—and has been taking place gradually. Initially the return flows consisted largely of lower-educated migrants and migrants whose contracts had terminated who were returning to their localities of origin, usually rural areas. Higher-educated migrants and migrants from urban areas initially remained abroad mostly throughout the financial crisis. However, the pattern changed over time. Return

mobility to Central European countries continued after the crisis ended, until the occurrence of the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the UK's exit from the EU in 2020.

As noted in our Introduction, return is not necessarily the end of the story—not the end of migration cycle—and, as will be discussed in more detail in the articles in this Thematic Cluster, returnees may later migrate again. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse post-return experiences and in this paper we apply the conceptual framework of embedding to advance understanding of the complex processes involved in re-adjusting to the origin country.

### **Embedding**

Louise Ryan and Jon Mulholland introduced the concept of embedding in 2015 as a way of capturing migrants' complex, dynamic and multi-dimensional processes of belonging and attachments in particular places over time. They were inspired by Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness. However, the word '*embeddedness*' itself, and its application within migration studies, tended to imply a static, achieved state. However, longitudinal research with migrants (Ryan et al., 2016), suggested processes that were quite dynamic and even reversible over time. Moreover, it could not be assumed that migrants would eventually embed in destination countries. Indeed, evidence suggests that some migrants either did not wish to or simply could not achieve embeddedness in destination societies (Trąbka, 2019). These observations reflected wider concerns in the migration literature about the limitations of existing conceptual frameworks, such as integration, which implied a static stage achieved in a linear way over time (Grzymała-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018; Schinkel, 2018; Spencer & Charsley, 2021).

In an effort to make sense of complex, dynamic and differentiated experiences, the term '*embedding*' was coined (Ryan, 2018; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015). Furthermore, a key feature of the embedding concept is its differentiation across various sites and sectors. Rather than a single measure of attachment or belonging, migrants are negotiating embedding across multiple sectors simultaneously, e.g. civic and institutional settings, the labour market, welfare regimes, educational settings, neighbourhoods, friendship and familial networks etc. For example, it is possible for a migrant to experience deep embedding in kinship and friendship networks, thus forging a sense of belonging in local neighbourhoods, while simultaneously experiencing shallow labour market embedding through precarious employment.

Highlighting effortful and agentic dimensions of belonging, differentiated embedding also includes structural dimensions and notes the obstacles, such as labour market discrimination or exclusionary immigration regimes, that frame migrants' embedding opportunities. For example, as discussed below, seemingly deep embedding in the destination society, achieved over many years, can be unsettled by changing immigration regulations that suddenly undermine migrants' rights and migration projects, resulting in a process of dis-embedding as migrants' attachment and sense of belonging are weakened or undermined (Mulholland & Ryan, 2023).

Therefore, in migration research, embedding is defined as: 'dynamic and contingent social practices through which migrants develop, maintain or withdraw relations and attachments both in and across time and space' (Mulholland & Ryan, 2023: 605). Instead of an achieved, static state, embedding is inherently processual. Moreover, embedding is

understood as multi-speed, multi-depth and multi-directional. In other words, migrants may experience differentiated embedding, and indeed disembedding, in particular aspects of their lives, e.g. immigration status, employment, housing, local networks and transnational connections (Mulholland & Ryan, 2023). Furthermore, applying the transnational lens, it is necessary to note that embedding can occur not only in the destination society but also simultaneously back in the origin country, particularly through inter-personal ties to family and friends (Ryan, 2023). These spatially dispersed ties can help to inform decisions about staying or returning, as discussed in the empirical sections, below.

In recent years, this concept of embedding has become widely cited in the migration literature (see Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019; Lubbers et al., 2021; Sime et al., 2020; Trąbka & Pustulka, 2020; Barber, 2021; Speed et al., 2021; Sotkasiira & Gawlewicz, 2021; Seminario, 2022).

In this article we now use embedding, to advance understanding of how returnees actively negotiate their attachments and sense of belonging back in their origin countries. Rather than taking for granted the ease of their return back into familiar contexts, applying the lens of embedding helps to understand the efforts required as migrants attempt to re-adjust and rebuilt their lives. In so doing, we explore not only practical processes of re-embedding in the labour market, e.g. finding a job and transferring human capital from the destination to the origin society, but also emotional and relational dimensions of return such as rebuilding social ties and the sometimes unanticipated obstacles of re-embedding into inter-personal networks. As discussed later in the paper, difficulties in re-embedding into the origin society may result in returnees migrating again. Hence, as noted earlier, return is not necessarily the end of the migration story.

### **Bringing unsettling events, returning and embedding into interaction**

After presenting above the issues of unsettling events, approaches to embedding and post-enlargement returns to CEE in the context of Brexit, in this part of the article we ask the questions: What is the relationship between unsettling events, return migration and embedding? What are the possible indicators connecting the three?

As noted, unsettling events, such as Brexit, may cause migrant dis-embedding and trigger plans to return back to the origin country. Heretofore, embedding has been applied to migrants in the destination society. In this paper we add new insights by applying the framework of embedding to returnees. Far from simply assuming that returnees can fit back into their origin country, it is important to explore the effortful nature of their differentiated re-embedding across multiple sectors of society and the obstacles they may encounter in so doing.

Both topics of embedding and returning received scholarly attention but separately. Studies on embedding discuss it mostly from the perspective of destination countries as an alternative for migrant integration. Studies on returning discuss mostly motivations for returns, types of return migrants or models and strategies of return, reintegration processes back to origins and obstacles to them.

Both embedding and returning are dynamic social processes which take place in societies in flux—both in origin and in destination. In both processes people react to unsettling events (but in different ways as discussed below) and adapt to new circumstances

due to spatial moves. When examining different spheres or segments of migrants' lives, we notice many interactions between embedding and returning, especially when we take an actor-centred approach of a migrant—their biography, labour market situation, interpersonal networks, economic situation, emotions, psychological security connected to nostalgia in a wider sense of missing both an origin and life in a destination and place attachment and belonging.

There are several strands of literature on return migration, especially to CEE, which are also linked to various aspects of analyses presented in the papers of this Thematic Cluster, e.g. Trąbka et al. discuss four dimensions of reintegration and place attachment after return (cf. Antonsich, 2010): autobiographical, emotional, relational and economic. The common denominator of the literature on return migration to CEE is its human-centred approach. Vathi (2022), for instance, shows the multifaceted links between return migration and psycho-social well-being. She emphasises the importance of links between social interactions, relations and emotional consonance along with personal experience and considers vulnerability of return migrants. Vathi claims the need for intersectional research on return migration taking into account aspects neglected until now: well-being and health, reintegration and relationality, mobility and transnationality intersecting with gender, class and ethnicity. White (2022) discusses specifically the experience of return CEE migrants in the context of place and transnationality. She emphasises that return migration is an individual process influenced more by personal motivations than by economic ones. Return migration depends on different bundles of identities, resources and aspirations which are also connected with age, life-course, gender, parental status, sexual orientation, educational attainment, skills and competences, income, social status (at home and abroad), degree and nature of identification with country of origin, and transnational ties whilst abroad and upon return.

The human face of both of these processes, returning and embedding, matters the most to us in this Thematic Cluster. Strategies for returning and embedding, both before embarking upon return, as well as after return, but also after double return, are personal choices of individuals engaged in migration process who act locally, living their everyday lives, responding to unsettling events, structural opportunities and constraints such as service provisions, job opportunities and work environments, life style possibilities, housing conditions, social networks etc. We can also ask how unsettling events limit or enhance migrants' agency in relation to dis-embedding, embedding or re-embedding upon returning?

### **Return migration: empirical data from the Thematic Cluster contributors**

The first paper in this Thematic Cluster by Grzymała-Kazłowska and Ryan (2022), focuses on the impact of Brexit for Polish migrants in two UK cities, Birmingham and London. Drawing on longitudinal qualitative data generated over several waves of interviews, that paper brings the concepts of anchoring and embedding into conversation for the first time. In so doing, the authors advance understanding of how this unsettling event impacted on migrants' sense of belonging, attachments and participation in UK society. The extent to which these participants decided to leave or stay depended in large part on the number of anchors they had created in the UK and the overall level of their embedding across a range of societal sectors including the labour market.



The other two papers in this cluster, by Trąbka et al. (2022) and Czeranowska et al. (2023), drawn from the CEEYouth project, focus on returnees to Poland and Lithuania. In these papers it is clear that the impact of Brexit on the life strategies of participants, mostly young adults, was nuanced and not obvious. Among other things, Brexit manifested: (a) Questioning the sense of belonging or place-attachment to the UK, though not necessarily to their place of residence on a local scale (after the initial shock of the referendum, some migrants bought real estate and took further steps to settle); (b) Realizing one's position in the social structure in relation to the social class, income, professional group, which was sometimes associated with the exposure of the "glass ceiling" or "sticky floor", i.e. phenomena describing difficulties with promotion in the social structure; (c) Highlighting hidden social dimensions such as 'race' or ethnicity, especially in combination with social class, which was an often overlooked category in migration research. These impacts were related to the *post-referendum discourse on "good" and "bad" migrants, on who "deserves" to stay in Britain* and who is not desired there. This discourse, combined with the British policy of "hostile environment", forced migrants from Poland and Lithuania to constantly negotiate their right to stay in Great Britain and a sense of belonging to it (Klimavičiūtė et al., 2020). With regard to the latter thread, as a result of the project, an in-depth debate was also carried out between the concepts of embedding and anchoring as alternatives to the concept of integration, which is considered more and more problematic.

In the CEEYouth Project an online survey with 740 return migrants to Poland and Lithuania from the UK, which was conducted in 2020 (two papers of this Thematic Cluster discuss its findings in details; cf. Trąbka et al.; Czeranowska et al.), we established that Brexit caused or encouraged returns among 34% of Polish and Lithuanian migrants in a general sample. Among Polish migrants 23% said that their return was caused or encouraged by Brexit. For Lithuanians the causal effect of Brexit was much stronger than among Polish returnees and nearly 80% surveyed Lithuanians indicated Brexit as a push factor for return: 'yes' to Brexit causing returns (21%) or Brexit encouraged them to return (58%).

In the CEEYouth Project, returnees spent in the UK more than 12 months which classifies them as long-term migrants. Around 35% of Lithuanians and 40% of Polish returnees sent between 1 and 5 years in the UK, while nearly 40% of Lithuanians and less than 28% of Poles spent between 5 and 10 years in the UK. 33% of Poles and 27% of Lithuanian returnees had spent more than 10 years in the UK. In both subsamples more than every second respondent was employed in the origin country before going to the UK. A bit less than 10% of both Poles and Lithuanians had been self-employed before departing for the UK. Nearly 20% among Poles and less than 17% among Lithuanians were unemployed before going abroad. Less than 4% in our samples were students before going abroad. The duration of stay correlates with age of returnees. Those who spent 1–5 years on average were 33 years old, those who stayed 6–10 years were 35, and those who stayed longer than 10 years were aged 40 and older. The older returnees are, the longer they stayed in the UK which shows the argument that their transitions to adulthood were most probably happening in the UK, during migration.

The articles in this Cluster clearly show, using diverse empirical data, the challenges that surround; firstly, the decision about whether or not to return, even in the face of

unsettling events, and then, for those who do return, the efforts required for re-embedding back into the origin society. We argue that the concept of embedding is useful because it allows us to understand the dynamic and multi-dimensional processes at play in order for dis-embedding from the destination society and then re-embedding in the origin country. As noted earlier, embedding is differentiated to varied depth across multiple sectors (economically, politically, relationally, socially, civically, etc.). While deep embedding in one sector, e.g., economically, may have been able to compensate for shallow embedding in other sectors, e.g. politically, this arrangement may be challenged by unsettled events such as Brexit. However, as illustrated by the papers in this cluster focusing on post-return experiences, differentiated embedding may also occur in the origin country. Returnees may be deeply re-embedding in personal networks of family and friends, while simultaneously feeling dis-embedded from wider political institutions and social values or returnees may struggle with re-embedding in the labour market and not achieve the standard of living they expected.

In the next section we present the articles in more detail and indicate the usefulness of the embedding framework in analyses of returning.

### **Applying the conceptual framework of embedding to advance understandings of how returnees re-negotiate attachments and belonging in the origin country**

The three substantive articles in this cluster, drawing on diverse research methods and including longitudinal data, clearly evidence the dynamism of migrants' belonging and attachments in different places over time.

The article by Grzymała-Kazłowska and Ryan bringing embedding into conversation with the concept of psychological security through the use of anchors, demonstrates how Brexit, as an unsettling event, had the potential to transform Polish people's migratory projects in the UK. Focusing on two areas, London and Birmingham, the authors use rich case studies generated through follow-up interviews during several years, to explore change over time. In so doing, they analyse how Brexit threatened to undermine migrants' sense of belonging, civil rights, psychological security and economic well-being in the UK. Nonetheless, it was apparent that those migrants who had managed to develop anchors, such as a house/ flat, or a worthwhile job, and thus, who were embedding deeply within specific domains of British society, such as within local neighbourhoods or in the labour market, were more likely to withstand the shock waves of Brexit and decide to remain in the UK or at least to 'wait and see' how events unfolded in the coming years. This is clearly illustrated by the case of Mateusz, who had lived in London for almost twenty years, had a good job in the health sector, was married to a Polish woman met in London, with two school age children, and who had strong friendships in his local area. Despite his fury at Brexit and the anti-immigrant discourses propounded by some politicians and the media, Mateusz was deeply embedding in London, expressed the view that he would remain in the city and had secured his status by applying for British citizenship. This example suggests that deep embedding may enable migrants to withstand unsettling events.

By contrast, those who had only fragile anchors, or whose anchors were undermined by challenges such as serious illness, redundancy or eviction, were more likely to have

shallow embedding across particular domains of society and hence were especially prone to react to Brexit by planning return to Poland or moving on elsewhere. This is apparent in the case of Paulina who had lived in the Birmingham area. Having arrived in the UK, with her child, to join her husband, Paulina had mainly mixed with other Polish people and had only very fragile anchors within British society. She felt insecure about her English language skills and expressed a sense of alienation from the community around her. Hence her overall sense of embedding in Britain was very shallow and this was further undermined by the anti-immigration rhetoric surrounding the Brexit referendum. Paulina decided to return to Poland with her child. She eventually managed to persuade her husband to join the family back in Poland, resulting in the family's complete dis-embedding from the UK. Through her strong anchors including social networks as well as new ties forged through the children's school, Paulina began re-embedding back into Polish society and during the follow up interview seemed very happy with the decision to return.

Return migration, especially the experiences of returnees as they attempt to rebuild their lives and re-embed in the origin society, is the focus of the two other articles in this cluster. While much has been written about return migration, these articles contribute to the literature in a number of ways. Firstly, while there is considerable research on the decisions to return, there is, by contrast, less work on what happens to migrants in the years following return to their origin country (cf. Dzięglewski, 2021; King & Kuschminder, 2022). Secondly, although there is a large body of work on retirement migration and decisions to return in later life, post-retirement, there are still many gaps in our understanding of return among young adult migrants, especially those who have only been away from a few years. It is perhaps easy to assume that returnees aged in their 20s and 30s, who have been abroad for 5 or even 10 years, can easily fit back into their origin society. However, focusing on migrants with an average age of 36, who have mostly been abroad for less than 10 years, these two articles significantly advance understanding of the challenges encountered and the strategies adopted by younger returnees. Thirdly, by using mixed methods including survey, interviews and longitudinal data collected over several years, these articles present rigorous and diverse data to show complex and nuanced experiences as well as change over time. Finally, while much research has been carried out on the topic of Polish migration, including some research on return, less is known about the Lithuanian context. By bringing together data from Polish and Lithuanian returnees, these two articles contribute to widening our knowledge base in migration studies.

As the two articles drawn from the CEEYouth Project make clear, the act of return should not be seen as the end of the migration story. By following up participants in the years after their return to Poland and Lithuania, both sets of authors, illustrate how the reasons for initially returning and the reasons for continuing to stay may be different. Moreover, while some participants managed to re-embed back into their origin society with the help of strong anchors to family and friends, for example, others struggled to re-adjust to the attitudes and lifestyles in their origin societies and were already thinking of re-migrating or in the case of Artur had already left by the time of the follow up interview.

In the article by Czeranowska et al., we meet Artur, from Poland. Artur had a good job in his chosen profession in London and could be described as achieving deep embedding in the British labour market through securing employment commensurate with his qualifications and earning a good salary. However, Artur had a strong anchor connecting him to Poland: his girlfriend. Having commuted for some years, the couple decided to reunite and Artur returned to Poland. Initially he seemed happy in his personal life and got a job in Warsaw where his girlfriend was a student. But then the pandemic struck and Artur had to work from home for a protracted period during the lockdowns. The pandemic can be regarded as an 'unsettling event' that disrupted and reshaped Artur's plans for the future. He found enforced working from home boring and isolating and felt increasingly dissatisfied with his life in Poland and considered re-migrating. Thus, it could be argued that an anchor, his job, proved fragile and unsatisfactory and his overall embedding in Poland seemed to be somewhat shallow. In the follow up interview, we learn that Artur and his girlfriend have now migrated together to Italy and he is working remotely for a company in Germany. This rich case study shows the importance of longitudinal research to understand change over time. In the initial interview Artur appeared to be successfully re-embedding in Poland but when followed up, post-pandemic, he had migrated again. Thus, Covid-19, can be understood as another unsettling event that undermined re-embedding back into the origin society.

Artur's experiences contrast with another participant cited in the paper by Czeranowska et al., that of Egle. From Lithuania, Egle moved to the UK, as a 'love migrant' to join her boyfriend. They married and had three children. Egle initially had high expectations for her career in the UK but was disappointed to discover that her lack of English language fluency meant she could not achieve a job commensurate with her qualifications. Over time she became frustrated about her economic prospects in the UK. Thus, while her motivation for migration may have been 'love', economic motivations were also apparent. Therefore, we should avoid any simple dichotomy between these two motivations. Moreover, she missed Lithuania and wanted her children to be close to their grandparents and to be schooled within the Lithuanian educational system. Her embedding in British society was shallow due to her limited English language proficiency and relatedly, her lack of a professional career. Meanwhile, taking a transnational lens, we can see that she was deeply embedding in strong relational ties back in Lithuania especially with her parents. Following the family's return, Egle quickly began re-embedding in Lithuania. She found a fulfilling job and had strong support from her parents who helped with childcare. Thus, she was embedding in the labour market as well as in strong relational networks. However, that is not to say that her re-embedding was automatic or easy. As Czeranowska et al. show, Egle described how, following her years in the UK, her attitudes on some social issues had changed and she found that she often disagreed with the opinions of those around her and so she had to become somewhat guarded about expressing her views. Her experiences show that migrants' transnational perspective, i.e. their social remittances (Grabowska et al., 2017) in the form of different attitudes and expectations, are not always welcomed and appreciated in the origin country. Hence, even for returnees like Egle who appeared to be very well settled back in their home country, re-embedding is far from automatic and actually requires active effort, careful negotiations and adjustment over time.

The third article in this cluster, by Trąbka et al., draws on quantitative data from an online comparative survey of 740 Polish and Lithuanian returnees conducted in 2020. Rather than focus on motivations for return, instead this article examines the factors that influence returnees' attachment to their places of residence in Poland and Lithuania. In so doing, the article addresses a gap in studies of return migration by examining the factors that facilitate, but also constrain, returnees' attachment to their place of re-settlement or re-embedding back in the origin society. As noted by Trąbka et al., it is important to consider a range of factors framing post-return experiences across multiple social domains. As Anne White (2014a, 2014b: 35) has shown, for example, returnees to Poland were "mostly integrated emotionally and culturally into Polish society", but "not well integrated into the Polish labour market". Thus, to use the framework of differentiated embedding, one can argue that rather than a single, one-dimensional measure, it is necessary to explore the diversity of experiences across a range of factors, social domains and the course of migration, including return. Migrants may be satisfied with their re-embedding on some levels, such as relationality within family and friendship networks, but not on other levels such as economically. These diverse factors are analysed by Trąbka and her colleagues.

According to the analysis of their survey data, Trąbka et al. found that social networks in the local place were strongly correlated to a sense of place attachment and belonging. These can be seen as important for enabling relational re-embedding in place. However, these should not be taken for granted and about 1/4 of the sample found some difficulty in building up new networks or in re-kindling previous networks, which echoes the experiences of Egle who returned to Lithuanian, as discussed earlier. Having family in the area or even having returned because of family reasons did not necessarily enhance place attachment—which suggests that there may be some complexity and possible tensions among families.

Trąbka et al. also found that cultural factors were by far the most important in terms of effect strength, providing evidence for their crucial role as predictors of attachment. In other words, experiencing a sense of home sickness and missing the familiarity of home, while abroad, appears to motivate returnees to develop re-attachment back into their local area. However, as also noted in the cases of Egle described in the paper by Czeranowska et al. described above, Trąbka et al. found that, upon return, feeling different from others or thinking differently or not feeling accepted by those around you, emerge as significant factors in not developing attachments. Thus, we can argue that re-embedding even among those who are highly motivated to return, cannot be taken for granted. Overcoming obstacles to re-embedding requires effort and strategies, if returnees are to acquire the desired sense of attachment and acceptance in the origin country. This is not easy or guaranteed. As noted earlier, Artur, who had returned to Poland from the UK, found himself unable to re-embed and later migrated to Italy.

### **Conclusions and future research**

In this article, we introduced our Thematic Cluster on return migration and embedding in the context of Brexit as an unsettling event. Taking this article in combination with the other three papers that constitute the Thematic Cluster, we have sought to make three contributions to migration research.

Firstly, we aim to show the usefulness of the embedding conceptual framework (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015) to analyse and make sense of experiences of return to origin countries. Drawing on data from the CEEYouth Project, we explored the reasons why young people have returned to Lithuania and Poland as well as the opportunities and obstacles they encounter following their return. While embedding has mostly been applied to migrants in destination societies, we have shown how the dynamism, differentiated and effortful nature of embedding is also relevant to understanding experiences of return.

Secondly, we have extended the notion of ‘unsettling events’ to the post-return contexts. As noted (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021), unsettling events may trigger return, but in this cluster of papers we consider how return migrants may also experience unsettling events in the origin country. As shown by examples discussed here, and elaborated in the later articles in the Cluster, unsettling events in the origin country, such as for example the economic conditions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, may trigger subsequent re-migration.

Finally, as outlined in this introductory paper, our Thematic Cluster of articles makes methodological contributions to the analysis of migration. Firstly, we highlight the value of longitudinal methods, applied over time, to track decisions about whether or not to return but also to assess the extent to which migrants are re-embedding in origin societies. Through such methods we offer insights into the factors that shape whether or not migrants decide to stay or return, especially in the context of unsettling events, and, for those who do return, whether they seem to be re-embedding or indeed planning further migration again. The second methodological contribution relates to the use of mixed methods, including survey data, in-depth interviews and case studies, to identify indicators of belonging, identification and embedding in the origin countries.

Thus, while the papers in this Cluster focus in particular on migrant and returnee young adults from Poland and Lithuania, we aim to contribute to wider understandings and conceptualisations of migration and return.

#### **Acknowledgements**

Authors thank all contributors to this Paper Cluster for their efforts and contributions. We also thank the reviewers for their helpful comments.

#### **Author contributions**

Equal contributions of both authors (50% each).

#### **Funding**

The publication was supported by a grant from National Science Centre Poland No. 2020/37/B/HS6/ 02342.

#### **Availability of data and materials**

According to Grant Agreement with a funding body.

#### **Declarations**

##### **Competing interests**

No competing interests.

Received: 2 December 2022 Accepted: 17 January 2024

Published online: 01 February 2024

#### **References**

- Angel, R. G., Fauser, M., & Boccagni, P. (Eds.). (2019). *Transnational return and social change: Hierarchies, identities and ideas*. Anthem Press.
- Antonsich, M. (2010). Searching for belonging—An analytical framework. *Geography Compass*, 4, 644–659.

- Barber, T. (2021). Differentiated embedding among the Vietnamese refugees in London and the UK: Fragmentation, complexity, and 'in/visibility'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(21), 4835–4852.
- Basch, L., Glick Schiller, N., Szanton-Blanc C. (1994). *Nations unbound: Transnational projects and the deterritorialized nation-state*. New York: Gordon and Breach.
- Benson, M., Sigona, N., Zambelli, E., & Craven, C. (2022). From the state of the art to new directions in researching what Brexit means for migration and migrants. *Migration Studies*, 10(2), 374–390.
- Black, R., Engbersen, G., Okólski, M., & Pantiru, C. (2010). *A continent moving west. EU Enlargement and Labour Migration from Central and Eastern Europe*. Amsterdam: IMISCOE.
- Burrell, K. (Ed.). (2016). *Polish migration to the UK in the "new" European Union: After 2004*. Routledge.
- Czeranowska, O., Parutis, V., & Trąbka, A. (2023). Between settlement, double return and re-emigration: motivations for future mobility of Polish and Lithuanian return migrants. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 11(1), 28.
- De Haas, H., & Fokkema, T. (2011). The effects of integration and transnational ties on international return migration intentions. *Demographic Research*, 25, 755–782.
- Dzięglewski, M. (2021). *Coming home to an (Un) familiar country: The strategies of returning migrants*. Springer Nature.
- Elder Jr, G. H. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development*, 69(1), 1–12.
- Elder, G. H., Johnson, M. K., & Crosnoe, R. (2003). The emergence and development of life course theory. In *Handbook of the life course* (pp. 3–19). Springer
- Eldring, L., Fitzgerald, I., & Arnholtz, J. (2012). Post-accession migration in construction and trade union responses in Denmark, Norway and the UK. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 18(1), 21–36.
- Fihel, A., & Górny, A. (2013). To settle or to leave again? Patterns of return migration to Poland during the transition period. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, 2(1), 55–76.
- Friberg, J. H. (2012). The stages of migration. From going abroad to settling down: Post-accession Polish migrant workers in Norway. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(10), 1589–1605.
- Galasińska, A., & Kozłowska, O. (2004). Discourses of a 'normal life' among post-accession migrants from Poland to Britain. In *Polish migration to the UK in the 'new' European Union: After* (pp. 87–106).
- Garapich, M. P., Grabowska, I., Jaźwińska, E., & White, A. (2023). Koniec fenomenu migracji poakcesyjnych? In M. Lesińska & M. Okolski (Eds.), *30 wykładów o migracjach* (pp. 277–292). Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Gerdes, C., & Wadensjö, E. (2009). Post-enlargement migration and labor market impact in Sweden. In *EU labor markets after post-enlargement migration* (pp. 163–179). Springer.
- Glorius, B., Grabowska-Lusinska, I., & Kuvik, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Mobility in transition: Migration patterns after EU enlargement*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Gmelch, G. (1980). Return migration. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 9(1), 135–159.
- Górny, A., & Kaczmarczyk, P. (2019). European migration transition in the context of post-enlargement migration from and into Central and Eastern Europe. *The SAGE Handbook of International Migration* (p. 358).
- Grabowska, I., Garapich, M., Jazwinska, E., & Radziwinowiczowna, A. (2017). *Migrants as agents of change. Social Remittances in an Enlarged European Union*. Springer.
- Grabowska-Lusinska, I., & Okólski, M. (2009). *Emigracja ostatnia?* Scholar.
- Granovetter, M. (1985). Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology*, 91(3), 481–510.
- Grzymała-Kazłowska, A. (2016). Social anchoring: immigrant identity, security and integration reconnected? *Sociology*, 50(6), 1123–1139.
- Grzymała-Kazłowska, A., & Phillimore, J. (2018). Introduction: rethinking integration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(2), 179–196.
- Grzymała-Kazłowska, A., & Ryan, L. (2022). Bringing anchoring and embedding together: Theorising migrants' lives over-time. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10(1), 1–19.
- Hall, K. (2021). Care precarity among older British migrants in Spain. *Ageing & Society*, 1–19.
- Kahanec, M. (2010). In K. F. Zimmermann (Ed.), *EU labor markets after post-enlargement migration* (pp. 3–45). Springer.
- Kilkey, M., & Ryan, L. (2021). Unsettling events: Understanding migrants' responses to geopolitical transformative episodes through a life-course lens. *International Migration Review*, 55(1), 227–253.
- King, R. (2000). Southern Europe in the changing global map of migration. In *Eldorado or fortress? Migration in Southern Europe* (pp. 3–26). Palgrave Macmillan.
- King, R., & Kuschminder, K. (2022). *Introduction: Definitions, typologies and theories of return migration*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Klimavičiūtė, L., Parutis, V., Jonavičienė, D., Karolak, M., & Wermińska-Wiśnicka, I. (2020). The impact of Brexit on young Poles and Lithuanians in the UK: Reinforced temporariness of migration decisions. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, 9(1), 127–142.
- Kloc-Nowak, W., & Ryan, L. (2023). Negotiating long-distance caring relations: migrants in the UK and their families in Poland. In *Handbook on migration and the family* (pp. 154–169). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Krzaklewska, E. (2008). Why study abroad? An analysis of Erasmus students' motivations. *Students, staff and academic mobility in higher education*, pp. 82–98.
- Ley, D., & Kobayashi, A. (2005). Back to Hong Kong: Return migration or transnational sojourn? *Global Networks*, 5(2), 111–127.
- Lubbers, M. J., Molina, J. L., & McCarty, C. (2021). How do migrants' processes of social embedding unfold over time? *Global Networks*, 21(3), 529–550.
- Lulle, A., King, R., Dvorakova, V., & Szkudlarek, A. (2019). Between disruptions and connections: "New" European Union migrants in the United Kingdom before and after the Brexit. *Population, Space and Place*, 25(1), e2200.
- Moret, J. (2018). *European Somalis' post-migration movements: Mobility capital and the transnationalisation of resources* (p. 213). Springer Nature.
- Moskal, M., & Sime, D. (2022). Young Europeans in Brexit Britain: Unsettling identities. *Global Networks*, 22(2), 183–196.

- Mulholland, J., & Ryan, L. (2023). Advancing the embedding framework: Using longitudinal methods to revisit French highly skilled migrants in the context of Brexit. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(3), 601–617.
- Oeppen, C. (2013). A stranger at 'home': Interactions between transnational return visits and integration for Afghan-American professionals. *Global Networks*, 13(2), 261–278.
- Ruspini, P. (2008). The post-enlargement migration space. *International Migration in Europe*, 179.
- Ruspini, P. (2005). Forms and features of the post-enlargement migration space. *The Romanian Journal of European Studies*, 4, 9–18.
- Ryan, L., & Mulholland, J. (2015). Embedding in motion: Analysing relational, spatial and temporal dynamics among highly skilled migrants. In *Migrant capital: Networks, identities and strategies* (pp. 135–153). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ryan, L., Rodriguez, M. L., & Trevena, P. (2016). Opportunities and challenges of unplanned follow-up interviews: Experiences with Polish migrants in London. In *Forum qualitative sozialforschung/forum: Qualitative social research* (Vol. 17, No. 2).
- Ryan, L. (2018). Differentiated embedding: Polish migrants in London negotiating belonging over time. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(2), 233–251.
- Ryan, L. (2023). *Social networks and migration: Relocations*. Policy Press.
- Samers, M. (2010). *Migration*. Routledge.
- Scharrer, T. (2020). "It Is Better to Do Business in Africa than in Europe"—socio-economic positionings among business-minded European Somalis moving to Kenya. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 18(3), 270–285.
- Schinkel, W. (2018). Against 'immigrant integration': For an end to neocolonial knowledge production. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 6(1), 1–17.
- Seminario, R. (2022). Timing and networks: Embedding patterns of Peruvian migrants in Switzerland. *Social Networks*, 71, 49–60.
- Sinatii, G. (2011). 'Mobile transmigrants' or 'unsettled returnees'? Myth of return and permanent resettlement among Senegalese migrants. *Population, Space and Place*, 17(2), 153–166.
- Sime, D., Moskal, M., & Tyrrell, N. (2020). Going back, staying put, moving on: Brexit and the future imaginaries of Central and Eastern European young people in Britain. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, 85–100.
- Snel, E., Engbersen, G., & Leerkes, A. (2006). Transnational involvement and social integration. *Global Networks*, 6(3), 285–308.
- Snel, E., Faber, M., & Engbersen, G. (2015). To stay or return? Explaining return intentions of Central and Eastern European labour migrants. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, 4(2), 5–24.
- Sotkasiira, T., & Gawlewicz, A. (2021). The politics of embedding and the right to remain in post-Brexit Britain. *Ethnicities*, 21(1), 23–41.
- Speed, F., Scurry, T., Edward, P., & Moufahim, M. (2021). Networks amongst Syrians: Situated migrant positionalities and the impact on relational embedding. *Social Inclusion*, 9(4), 243–253.
- Spencer, S., & Charsley, K. (2021). Reframing 'Integration': Acknowledging and addressing five core critiques. *Comparative Migration Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00226-4>
- Szewczyk, A. (2015). 'European generation of migration': Change and agency in the post-2004 Polish graduates' migratory experience. *Geoforum*, 60, 153–162.
- Trąbka, A., Klimavičiūtė, L., Czeranowska, O., Jonavičienė, D., Author, X. I., & Wermińska-Wisnicka, I. (2022). Your heart is where your roots are? Place attachment and belonging among Polish and Lithuanian returnees. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10(1), 1–16.
- Trąbka, A., & Pustulka, P. (2020). Bees & butterflies: Polish migrants' social anchoring, mobility and risks post-Brexit. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46(13), 2664–2681.
- Vathi, Z. (2022). Return migration and psychosocial wellbeing. In R. King & K. Kuschminder (Eds.), *Handbook of return migration* (pp. 226–240). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Wessendorf, S., & Phillimore, J. (2019). New migrants' social integration, embedding and emplacement in superdiverse contexts. *Sociology*, 53(1), 123–138.
- White, A. (2014a). Polish return and double return migration. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66(1), 25–49.
- White, A. (2014b). Double return migration: Failed returns to Poland leading to settlement abroad and new transnational strategies. *International Migration*, 52(6), 72–84.
- White, A. (2022). Return migration experiences: The case of Central and Eastern Europe. In R. King & K. Kuschminder (Eds.), *Handbook of return migration* (pp. 299–314). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Zontini, E., & Genova, E. (2022). Studying the emotional costs of integration at times of change: The case of EU migrants in Brexit Britain. *Sociology*, 00380385211063355

## Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.