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Decision-making and the trajectories of young Europeans in the London region: the planners, the dreamers, and the accidental migrants

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the intra-EU movement of young adults from Finland, Poland, and Spain who have settled, short- or long-term, in London and its wider region. In our comparative analysis, we find that the 46 interviewees differ in the way in which they took the original decision to move to the UK. Study, work, career, life goals, and lifestyle are the main variables shaping, in various combinations, migration decisions and plans. We categorize the decision-making and subsequent trajectories into three groups based on migrants' life-stories. The first group, the planners, had a long-term plan to move abroad with well-defined objectives of what they hoped to achieve. The second group, the dreamers, had the idea to move abroad someday, but then decided to activate the idea rather suddenly. The third group, the accidental migrants, moved abroad almost by accident, having had no prior plans, but responded to the opportunity when it arose out of a chance event, and had no specific plans as to what they would do abroad. The boundaries between these groups are somewhat blurred and the mobile individual's attitudes and motivation towards migration may change over time. Examining the decision-making process of current migrants helps to estimate how inbound mobility to the UK from the EU might change in the new post-Brexit migration scenario.

Keywords: EU, Free movement, Youth migration, Migration decision-making, London region, Polish migrants, Finnish migrants, Spanish migrants, Brexit

Introduction

European citizens and permanent residents of European Union (EU) member states¹ have the right to move within the European free movement area for family, work, study, retirement, or lifestyle reasons. Thanks to this legal framework, the barriers to international migration within Europe are lower than to other destinations that require more

¹ The same right also applies to member states of the European Economic Area (EEA): Iceland, Lichtenstein, and Norway, as well as Switzerland on separate agreements.

planning, funds, and often a lengthy application process to legalize the move. Young Europeans are one of the mobile groups that have embraced this freedom-to-move opportunity. Their migration project often takes place during a life-course transition, such as starting post-secondary education, finding employment after graduation, building one's work career, or starting a family (Kulu & Milewski, 2007).

Before Brexit, The United Kingdom (UK) was a major destination for intra-European migrants. An estimated 3.45 million EU-born migrants lived in the UK in 2020, making up 5.2% of the UK population and 38% of the UK's migrant population. Since 2018, when the highest number of EU nationals resided in the country, there has been a reduction of 207,000 EU8 and EU2 migrants, but a slight increase in the numbers of EU14 migrants (Office for National Statistics, 2021).² As the most global city in Europe, London has been an important destination for migrants of all skill levels and backgrounds. It has received about a third of all migrants coming to the UK and in 2020 it hosted 35% of the country's foreign-born population (Office for National Statistics, 2021). For young European graduates from different countries, London has functioned as an "escalator region" (Fielding, 1992) which has held a promise of upward social class and career trajectories (King et al., 2016, 2017).

This article focuses on the experiences of Spanish, Polish, and Finnish migrants who moved to the UK in their twenties and early thirties before the UK's exit from the EU. Through their narratives of how and why they originally decided to migrate, we tackle two research questions. First, how *intentional* is international mobility when it is not limited by visa restrictions or other types of migration bureaucracy? Second, do young migrants differ in the decision-making processes involved and, if so, along which lines of differentiation? This latter question, especially, is of interest to researchers and policy makers, as one of the anticipated impacts of Brexit is a reduction in the numbers of EU nationals moving to the UK and of Britons moving to continental Europe (e.g. Benson, 2020).

The experiences of these young Europeans on cusp of Brexit can shed light on the planning process of young adults, including uncovering the unobservable and intangible factors that shape and inform migrant decision-making. This addresses a gap in research by providing insights on how comparable migrant groups navigate their way into the UK in the post-Brexit situation. The article is structured as follows: we first focus on the intra-European migration context from a youth mobility viewpoint and present evidence in relation to migration intentions and decision-making. We then present the empirical data that this research is based on. In synthesis, we find three different migrant types in terms of the planning involved in the migration process: the planners, the dreamers, and the accidental migrants. We conclude with the insights that this research provides for youth mobility post-Brexit.

² The following countries are included in these categories: EU8 = Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, EU2 = Bulgaria and Romania, and EU14 = Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden.

Youth migration intentions and decision-making in the European context

There are several overlapping migration flows taking place in Europe (King & Okólski, 2019). Intra-European migrants move to specific destinations depending on the movers' nationality, age, occupation, and motivation. The three main forms of cross-state mobility for EU movers have been work-driven mobility, mobility motivated by personal and affective relationships, and quality-of-life motivated mobility (Recchi, 2008). The accession of 12 new member states to the EU in 2004 (EU8 + Cyprus and Malta) and 2007 (EU2) created a new migration system and led to significant East–West mobility of especially young people who wanted to explore the opportunities offered by countries such as the UK (e.g. Favell, 2008a; Recchi & Triandafyllidou, 2010). Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) suggest a “regimes-of-mobility” approach to show how mobility is differently allowed or restricted for individuals belonging to different categories and how those with the freedom to move—such as young European citizens—may migrate many times before deciding where to settle. Following King (2018), the diverse mobility patterns in Europe have been analysed from at least five theoretical frameworks: (1) free movement of persons and the labour market; (2) the core–periphery model; (3) liquid migration; (4) the intersection of migration with youth transitions, and (5) lifestyle migration. None of these theoretical frames is sufficient in itself to fully explain new European youth mobilities, but they provide ways in which to understand the phenomenon in all its diversity and the dynamics at play at various levels.

The question of who migrates is one of the key issues of migration theory. Research has focused both at the macro level on understanding large-scale migration networks and flows and at the micro level on the decisions of individual migrants (e.g. Arango, 2000; Brettell & Hollifield, 2015; De Jong, 2000; Faist, 2000; Massey et al., 1993). The mobility decision has been explained by, for example, external push and pull factors, both economic and social (Czaika, 2015; Van Hear et al., 2017); migration networks (Faist, 2000; Haug, 2008); the experience of inequality and relative deprivation (Czaika & de Haas, 2012); and the promise of a better life imagined abroad (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; Halfacree, 2004; Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2015; Kyle et al., 2018). As Salazar (2011, 586–587) concludes: images and ideas of other, better possible places to live are “filtered through migrants' personal aspirations” and, therefore, also play an important role in where one desires to migrate.

The decision to migrate can be influenced by social networks that connect an individual with possible destinations. The existence of migrant ties in origin and destination areas increases the probability of individuals migrating by decreasing the costs, increasing the benefits, and lessening the risks of international movement (Massey et al., 1993). It has been proposed that the individual needs to have both the aspiration to migrate and the ability and capability to do so; that is, access to necessary social networks, funds, knowledge, and skills (Carling, 2002; Carling & Schewel, 2018; de Haas, 2021). Further, it has been proposed that one has to first cross a mental, a locational, and a route threshold for the idea of migration to become a reality (van der Velde & van Naerssen, 2011, 2015).

The decision-making process is often thought to consist of different phases: considering or imagining the need for a particular action, planning that action, and executing it. According to Kley and Mulder (2010), in migration decision-making these phases are the pre-decisional phase (considering migration), the pre-actional phase (planning

migration), and the actional phase (migration). The process is naturally context-specific as social and economic conditions and one's options differ widely depending on where one lives, what kind of resources one possesses, and whether one is planning to move alone or with a family, for example. In fact, most people do not migrate, either because they do not aspire to, or do not have the capacity to do so and are thus "involuntarily immobile" (Carling & Schewel, 2018).

In recent years the importance of imagination as a driving force in human mobility has been recognized in many fields, including the sociology of migration (e.g. Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2015) and in sociocultural psychology (e.g. Cangià & Zittoun, 2020). Hagen-Zanker and Hennessey (2021) examine subjective and intangible factors in migration decision-making based on an extensive literature review. They note that in different socio-cultural contexts, imagination, personality traits, emotions, feelings, beliefs, and values are factors to be considered when we try to understand migration decisions at the individual level. They argue that there is a dynamic interrelationship between tangible factors, such as cost and benefit analyses of moving versus staying, and these less concrete, more personal factors that also play a role in who chooses to stay and who decides to migrate.

Williams et al. (2018) provide a review on research on migration intentions and note that there are macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors that play a role in who intends to migrate and who in the end decides to realise those intentions. They conclude that about 30% of the young people who took part in their survey in nine European countries thought it likely they would migrate within the next five years. However, future intentions do not equal actual migration (e.g. Erdal & Ezzati, 2015; Ryan, 2015), as it is relatively easy to imagine oneself living abroad (to have the aspiration), but more difficult to find a study place or a job and have the means to actually migrate (to have the capacity and capability). Other literature suggests that the migration journey itself influences the migration decision-making process. Migrants meet people *en route*, change their travel plans, or encounter unexpected situations that lead them to change their mind and/or their destinations (Collyer, 2007; Kuschminder & Waidler, 2020).

Migration is, therefore, a dynamic and constantly evolving process, not a one-off action. Motivations for migration also change temporally. Migrants' decisions about the duration of their stay may shift and develop over time based on personal, relational, and structural factors (e.g. Gawlewicz & Sotkasiira, 2019; Ryan, 2019). Recent research has shown how the prolonged Brexit process has had an impact on the plans of migrants living in the UK, as some have considered returning or onward migrating to other destinations (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021; Lulle et al., 2018; Lulle et al., 2019; McCarthy, 2019; Sredanovic, 2020; Trąbka & Pustulka, 2020). We now turn our attention to the life stories of intra-European migrants in the UK. How did they decide to move to the UK as young adults?

Data and methods

We focus on Spanish, Polish, and Finnish migrants living in the UK before Brexit. The situation of these three migrant groups differs in several ways: length of their country's EU membership, and hence access to free movement rights; the country's geopolitical

and economic situation; and its migration history and ties with the UK. Spain joined the EU already in 1986, Finland in 1995, and Poland during the first Eastern expansion in 2004. Polish nationals are among the largest groups of immigrants living in the UK (815,000), Spanish nationals are a sizable immigrant group (185,000), whereas Finnish nationals (14,000) are a significantly smaller group (Office for National Statistics, 2021).³

Our data consists of 46 interviews conducted in London (24), Brighton (18) and elsewhere in Southern England (4) with the same questions and structure. There were 20 Spanish, 14 Polish, and 12 Finnish participants, of whom 27 were female and 19 were male. The participants had different educational backgrounds: some had no post-secondary education, while others had completed BA, MA or even PhD degrees. Six participants were studying in the UK when interviewed. All the interviewees were either Polish, Finnish, or Spanish since birth, but one interviewee was Mexican-Spanish and another a Spanish-Argentinian dual citizen. At the time of the interview, no one had acquired British citizenship, even though some were planning to do so. The interview included clusters of questions on personal and family background; migration history and motivation; study and employment experiences; life satisfaction; identity, social inclusion and feelings of belonging; travel and remittances; policies for migrants; and future plans.

The Spanish and Polish interviews were conducted within the European research project YMOBILITY in 2015–2017 and the Finnish interviews in 2019. The interviews of participants from Spain and Poland were conducted in Spanish and Polish and translated into English; the Finnish participants were interviewed in English. Many of the participants had moved back and forth between the UK and their home country or lived in another country prior to moving to the UK. At the time of their latest move to the UK, the Spanish participants were on average 26, the Polish 25, and the Finns 28 years old. The average year of moving to the UK was 2012 and the average time lived in the country at the time of the interview was five years. Our comparative analysis does not focus on possible differences between the three nationalities, but rather on the similarities and/or differences in the interviewees' migration decision-making, trajectories, and the intentionality and amount of planning related to the move to the UK.

In this paper we focus on the following interview questions: "What prompted your decision to come to the UK?", "In your opinion what differentiates you from those who didn't migrate?", "Where do you think you will live in one and in five years' time?", "What kind of future plans do you have?", and "Do you intend to return to your country of origin, and if so, under what conditions do you think that could happen?" The responses were analysed with qualitative content analysis. Interviews followed standard ethical procedure: obtaining each participant's written or oral consent and permission to be recorded, for example. The recordings were transcribed and, if applicable, translated to English for comparative analysis by the authors. All names used are pseudonyms.

³ According to the Annual Population Survey, in 2019–2020 India (847,000) and Poland (746,000) were the two most common countries of birth of migrants in the UK, followed by Pakistan (519,000) and Romania (370,000). Spain was at the 16th place (159,000). Finns are so few that they do not feature in the Survey summary table of the 60 most numerous migrant groups (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

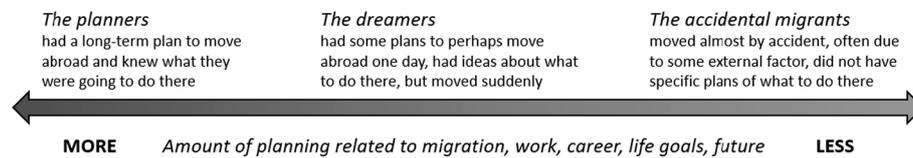


Fig. 1 The interviewees according to the amount of planning involved in migration to the UK

Mobility intentions and the decision-making process

The European free movement regime can be understood as a kind of research laboratory for voluntary migration because it is one of the least restrictive migration regimes in the world (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Due to the privilege of free movement, one may decide to migrate to another country to pursue a long-term plan of studying in a prestigious university and aiming for a particular career path. It is equally possible to migrate almost by accident when an opportunity for mobility presents itself. Intra-European migration, therefore, differs from many other migration types in terms of the amount of risk involved. When moving from France to Belgium or Italy to Germany, the migration itself is usually relatively cheap and easy, and thanks to the rights guaranteed by European citizenship, at least in theory one should not face discrimination in the country of destination (however, see e.g. Rzepnikowska, 2019; Simola, 2021). These factors play into how an individual thinks about migration and lower the threshold of leaving as the costs of migration are relatively low. In fact, because of geographical proximity and visa-free travel, the move can begin with a holiday and develop into a more permanent stay over time. As a process it is, therefore, very different to the situation of asylum-seekers or other migrants arriving from outside Europe, who have to embark on a risky, undocumented migration journey with limited knowledge of what to expect (Crawley & Jones, 2021).

In our analysis we found that the interviewees differ considerably in the way in which they made the decision to move to the UK and in the timeframe in which they realized the move. Based on the details of their life stories, we identify three groups of participants who differ in the amount of time and effort they used to plan their move, including its role in their work and career, life goals, and plans for the future. The first comprises those who had a long-term plan to move abroad and knew what they were going to do there; the second groups those who had some plans to perhaps move abroad one day, but then decided to do so rather suddenly; and the third includes those who moved almost by accident and did not have specific plans to migrate or knew what to do once abroad. These three groups are situated along a spectrum in Fig. 1 and will be further elaborated in the following sections of the article. We identify the groups respectively as *planners* (18 individuals), *dreamers* (12), and *accidental migrants* (16).

The planners

The migration decision of a planner typically included contemplating different migration destinations based on one's ambitions in studying at interesting institutions, thinking about one's career progression, or life goals in general. The decision would include cost and benefit analyses on how the choice of location influences one's prospects, how

visits back to home country could be arranged, and how life in a particular destination would help widen one's horizons or boost one's career. The story of Rodrigo from Spain is typical of a young person determined to migrate for the purpose of study in a prestigious university. He explains: "I had two possibilities, one was San Diego and the other was [name of UK university]; in that moment I had an idea I wanted to go to an English-speaking country (...) and I chose this because of my ex-girlfriend, because it was closer to Spain and if I wanted to continue with a distant relationship it was going to be easier. (...) Here everything was clear, with a salary and everything was more stable" (Rodrigo, 25, PhD student, Spain, 2013).⁴ Adam from Poland also explains that he chose London because he wanted to study in English in a good university: "Prestige, I guess. In my opinion graduating from London universities is more prestigious and it sounds much better, when you say that you've been studying in England, in London even better" (Adam, 20, student and part-time waiter, Poland, 2016).

Student mobility is an important form of intra-European migration and for many it is a step towards a more permanent migration (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003) and possible career paths that are unachievable at home, where salaries may be lower and working conditions tougher. A degree from a 'good university' may also provide better job prospects if one decides to return home. Young, ambitious prospective students also consider the kinds of job opportunities that they believe are available in different countries or cities, if an international career is their goal. Miriam arrived in the UK as an exchange student from Spain, but decided to stay in London for good because of her career aspirations: "In the first place because with my degree, History of Art, and my interests in my subject, I think London is the capital of the art that I am interested in right now (...) I decided to look for a destination that was an opportunity further than just finishing my degree (...) I came with the idea of not returning, to be able to live here, work and be independent" (Miriam, 23, student and shop assistant, Spain, 2015).

Paulina from Poland also saw London as a city where she could work towards her dream career: "In the profession I've chosen, acting, if I'd graduated in Poland, I'd have less opportunities. But to go abroad, study drama in English makes that a lot easier. (...) I reckon that London and New York are the two places in the world where you can find everything and I was also very fascinated with English culture, before I've moved here, so London was an obvious choice for me" (Paulina, 22, student, works part-time in a theatre, Poland, 2015).

For many of the planners, the move was quite an individualistic choice: only a few said that a partner or next-of-kin influenced the choice of destination, even though some did move with their friends or as couples. Heidi from Finland moved with her boyfriend, because they were both pursuing careers in marketing and in the early 2000s London was the "place to be" for this sector. "I moved here in 2005 originally [from Paris] because I had a French boyfriend and we thought that this would really be the best place for both of us. Back then in Europe London was absolutely the place to go to and buzzing, kind of growing, super cool city" (Heidi, 40, senior marketing manager, Finland, 2007). Alekski did not consider other destinations either, because he moved to London to work with a

⁴ Age refers to age at the time of the interview and the year to the year of migration to the UK.

specific group of academics he knew from an earlier visit: “The research group was the primary motivation (...) I mean they are really good friends as well so just, yeah, the professional development” (Aleksi, 35, university lecturer, Finland, 2016).

In a sense the planners are ideal examples of individuals engaging in a rational migration decision-making process, where one balances the pros and cons of migration in respect to specific destinations and ahead of time. Planners had both the aspiration to migrate, were able to get the necessary information, and had the resources to make an informed decision – or at least the interviewees tended to rationalize their decision in this way when asked about it later. The planners may have thus engaged in “cognitive migration”: the narrative imagining of oneself inhabiting a foreign destination prior to making the actual physical move (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2015). Thanks to their life situations and resources, young migrants also had the capabilities to achieve their educational or work aspirations and make the migration a reality (Carling & Schewel, 2018). In sum, our analysis of the migration behaviour of planners demonstrates how the geographical context (situatedness in Europe, relative proximity) and the power of the English language and ‘good universities’ conditioned young migrants’ plans to migrate to the UK.

The dreamers

The prospect of perhaps living in another country one day had been in the horizon for many of our interviewees, but they had not proceeded to the planning stage of doing so. What prompted the migration for some was the initial move or migration aspirations of someone else close to them, like a friend inviting them over, or a partner who wanted to work or study in the UK. The choice of location was easy for Raul who migrated for the purposes of finding work and already had social networks in the UK: “[I came to] Brighton because my friend Juan came here. And we wanted to share accommodation and to be together” (Raul, 21, works at a restaurant, Spain, 2015). Jani explains his move to London as follows: “My then-boyfriend, who is also Finnish... wanted to do a master’s degree here, so he moved here to study. And I joined him, I had a permanent job as a journalist in Finland at the time, but I got an unpaid leave for a year, so I moved here with him. (...) He moved back to Finland and eventually we broke up... and here I am” (Jani, 36, journalist and freelancer, Finland, 2015). For Jani, what started as a temporary stay abroad turned into a more permanent migration, even though finding work in his own field proved to be difficult. His decision-making process shows that youth migration is not only driven by economic motives but also by personal and emotional dimensions such as romantic love and intimate attachments (Hagen-Zanker & Hennessey, 2021).

Many of our Polish interviewees explained that they had migrated as a part of a larger Poland-UK migration stream, so they knew people who were already living in the UK. In this respect the migration follows the model proposed by social network theory: interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination regions lower the costs and risks of migration (Massey et al., 1993; see also Epstein, 2008). As they were aware of the work opportunities available, the prospect of better salaries was an important motivating factor for migration. This was the case for Michal: “Economic reasons. Earning opportunities, to keep it short” (Michal, 36, works in a manufacturing company, 2003). Likewise Agata explains that she first came to the UK in 2009 to work at a summer job to fund her university studies back in Poland: “It

was my first job, before I started uni, during the longest holidays of my life, I just wanted to earn money (...) my next holidays I spent the same way (...) and in 2011 I moved here for good" (Agata, 24, works in insurance, Poland, 2011).

None of the Finnish participants mention higher salaries or standard of living as a motivating factor, and economic motives were also less prominent among the Spanish interviewees. However, many of the Spanish stress that their primary motivation was to learn English (see also Adserà & Pytliková, 2015). Alejandra, who arrived in 2012 to work as an au pair, is a typical example: "Well, I came to improve my English because in Spain I think it's something that we don't do very well, the learning of other languages, it's a lot of theory but then we don't practice it. (...) I came with my mind opened to other possibilities" (Alejandra, 26, works in a children's nursery, Spain, 2012). While the motivation of the dreamers is in many cases quite straightforward, their plans of what to do when in the UK were often less clear than those of the planners.

For some interviewees, the sudden occurrence of an opportunity abroad made them decide to leave. Laura explains that she was offered a permanent contract in Finland but wanted to look for other possibilities so she could experience life abroad before accepting a more stable career path: "I had a dream to live at some point a little bit, a little time abroad. I thought now is the chance and I looked for different ways to do volunteer work and then I just noticed that [name of organization] has opportunities and I applied to Brussels and to here and then I chose to come to London" (Laura, 34, charity social worker, Finland, 2011).

Julia was thinking about leaving Poland for abroad, but she made the decision only after her boyfriend decided to move to London in 2012: "He was urging me to join him and because I graduated and finished my internships in Poland and nothing was keeping me there, I also had an Erasmus experience from Italy, so I was open to new experiences. (...) So, I just came here to see how it would be" (Julia, 29, recruiter in a company, Poland, 2012). Thanks to the international experience gained via the Erasmus exchange program, both Julia and her partner had already had the opportunity of living in other countries. This made making a new mobility decision much easier (King & Ruiz-Gelizes, 2003).

Interestingly, as Ryan (2019) observes, a 'sliding scale,' meaning shifting attitudes and plans during migration, can be equally applied also to the pre-migration stage. The dreamers had the aspiration or curiosity of moving abroad, but until an external factor or event influenced their decision, they had not yet progressed to the actual planning stage, let alone proceeded to make the move a reality. They had, therefore, imagined possible lives abroad and thus somewhat engaged in cognitive migration (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2015) but were less specific about when and where (if ever) the move would take place.

The accidental migrants

The third category emerging from our interview data is the accidental migrants. Their move abroad was often prompted by the actions of a friend or relative or a sudden work or study opportunity that presented itself. The major way in which they differ from the planners and the dreamers is that when talking about their life back home prior to migration, the idea, dream, or even any kind of plan of moving abroad one day, were not

readily mentioned. They also differ from the planners and dreamers in having an especially vague idea of what they were going to do once abroad. Their decision to migrate, therefore, was spontaneous, impulsive, and not associated with any kind of plan.

Jenni from Finland, who describes herself as an anglophile, is a typical example: “I came to London to see my friends and to see *The Hobbits* film and we had lots of fun. And my friend happened to mention that her flatmate would be moving back to Australia and that was kind of like, yeah, I might just move to London and see what happens” (Jenni, 36, funding operations manager, Finland, 2013). She and the other accidental migrants may have the personal characteristics, such as a relevant educational background or prior mobility experience, that make them more prone to migration than some of their peers back home. Yet, the decision to move at this specific time and to this destination was somewhat random. For Kasia the initial move was also an ad hoc decision: “My cousin is living here for about 10 years and he has two children, so I first came here for two weeks holidays, because I was still working in Poland at that time and he asked me if I would like to look after his baby (...) so I came here for good” (Kasia, 28, part-time waitress, Poland, 2013).

The ease and privilege of moving within the European free movement area—basically just buying an airline ticket—was an important factor, as the interviewees explained how it was easy to “just go there and see how it goes”. This was the case with Lucia from Spain: “One of my best friends was living in Brighton and she encouraged me to come here (...) it was a bit of a crazy decision, it was not planned at all, it was like now or never so I packed my suitcase and I arrived. I didn’t come with a specific reason like trying to find a job or anything like that, it was only the need to make a change, I wanted to have more experience living here and that was basically what brought me here” (Lucia, 29, research executive, Spain, 2013). Krzysztof from Poland also explains that he was looking for some kind of change in his life and ended up in the UK: “(...) it was about 13 years ago, when there was a great wave of emigration. (...) Yes, yes, after we joined the EU. A lot of people were moving abroad, so I also wanted to try my luck. (...) I wanted a change of scenery. I wanted to take my chances” (Krzysztof, 34, works at an IT company, Poland, 2005).

This group comes closest to what Engbersen and Snel (2013) characterize as “liquid migrants” as they show a spontaneous willingness to move, like to keep their options open, and often talk about their plans with an air of “intentional unpredictability” (see also Drinkwater et al., 2009). Such a flexible life orientation is typical of young movers who are at a crossroad in their life after leaving school or after graduation. The term “liquid migrants” has generally been used to refer to Eastern Europeans looking for opportunities in the West after the free movement area was opened to them after EU enlargement (Engbersen et al., 2010). Yet this was the case also with Katja who moved from Finland to join a friend working in a bar: “So, she was already here and established, and she just said that, well, if you want to come for a summer. (...) I was planning to just stay for that summer working in a bar and living in a flat-share and then I was planning to go to Spain to do a university course there. And then, of course, I met my husband while I was here, and I am still here [twenty years later]” (Katja, 40, market analyst, Finland, 1999). Another example is Anna, who visited her cousin in Brighton not long after Poland’s accession to the EU, fell in love with the city and decided to stay: “It was in 2005

(...) we came here just to take a look how it is here, on holidays (...) I didn't expect that I would stay for so long, but we liked the city" (Anna, 35, shop owner, Poland, 2005).

Like the planners and dreamers, the individuals categorized in this group may also have had an interest towards the UK, but they had not seriously thought about moving or made plans to migrate there. Some moved as family members following the career of their partner while others were ready to embark on an adventure and move to look for work opportunities almost at a moment's notice. For them the process of cognitive migration, imagining a life in the UK (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2015), led to a quick migration decision. This is illustrated by the example of Julieta "I didn't have any job, my boyfriend was studying outside my town so I couldn't see him very often and I thought 'now or never' (...) Me and my friend, we decided to have an adventure, we were thinking 'let's change our lives and make a new one there because here we have nothing'" (Julieta, 22, restaurant worker, Spain, 2016). Sylwia also made a quick decision to migrate to be with her partner: "I felt happy in Poland and to be honest I never thought that I'd be living abroad, and I'm still surprised that I'm here" (Sylwia, 29, waitress, Poland, 2014). In respect to their life orientations, the accidental migrants are thus either in a stage in their life when a sudden change of direction is possible or even desirable, or they may simply be inclined to live their lives with rather limited forward planning.

Discussion

The data on Spanish, Polish, and Finnish migrants in the UK shows that there are different types of mobility within this sample of young Europeans. While some follow a planned trajectory and see migration as an important step in their career and as a way of gaining new experiences and knowledge abroad, others follow a more flexible and open-ended plan. All three nationalities were represented in each group—the planners, the dreamers, and the accidental migrants—so the differences in the intentionality of their migration decision are not based primarily on nationality. Age at migration was not a decisive factor either, as the three groups each have migrants of different ages: the mean age of the planners was 23 when they moved, of the dreamers 26 years, and the accidental migrants 25. There was also considerable variation in the year of migration to the UK within each group.

The macro socio-economic context in 'home' countries did feature in the interviewees' decision to migrate. For example, while many of the Spanish participants had middle-class backgrounds, some of them belonged to lower-income families and had not gone to university, spoke little English when they arrived and their decision to migrate was in part driven by the Spanish economic crisis and their failed attempts to find well-remunerated jobs in Spain. The Poles mention economic reasons more often than the two other groups, but still most of them migrated not only for economic, but also for lifestyle reasons, such as having an adventure or an opportunity to study in an international environment. Nothing kept them in Poland, so they were pulled by the opportunities at the UK's labour market. The Finns do not speak about their financial situation back home, but rather focus on explaining what drew them to the UK. Coming from a Nordic welfare state, unemployment or fear of poverty was not a significant push factor for them.

The boundaries between the groups are fluid and some interviewees bridged two categories. However, some differences could clearly be detected. In general, the more planned the migration was, the more likely it was an individualistic plan. In comparison to the planners, with the dreamers and especially the accidental migrants, the actions of others were much more important triggers of migration. The planners had set out a clear path for themselves to follow and often saw migration as a form of self-realization. Young people in this group were quite career-oriented and knew what they wanted out of life and where to best achieve their goals. The dreamers were more flexible in their life goals and saw migration as a possibility, not a specific target to be achieved *per se*, or an explicit means to an end. The accidental migrants moved spontaneously and for adventure and were often influenced by the decisions of others, as they were willing to just move and see what comes next. Their decision-making matches best the “liquid migration” framework, which stresses the European free movement regime as an enabler for flexibility and unpredictability in young people’s lives lived across borders (Engbersen & Snel, 2013). Further, in reference to the aspirations-capabilities framework (de Haas, 2021), all the interviewees had the capability to migrate within the free movement area, and they had access to the necessary networks and resources to move. However, they differed in their migration aspirations, i.e. the significance that they placed on moving abroad as a goal to be realized at some point in their life.

Instead of settling down in a permanent job and a predictable lifestyle in Spain, Poland, or Finland, our interviewees wanted to migrate to achieve their life ambitions, seize an opportunity to experience life in the global city of London, or postpone “growing up” (Moroşanu et al., 2019) by choosing to migrate with minimal planning. For some, migration acted as a sort of an escape; an adventure before settling down in their respective countries of origin. Our findings add a comparative nuance to narratives of settling in the EU mobility context (Ryan, 2019). As Ryan (2019) argues, initial aspirations can change considerably over the life course and time. For many young migrants, like our interviewees, career often takes a priority and constitutes a crucial turning point in decisions to settle or move. At the time of the interview, most interviewees in each of the three groups were planning to stay in the UK for at least a year. When asked about where they think they will be in 5 years, around half in each group are still undecided, but the share of those considering return migration is highest among the accidental migrants.

It is clear that there are many non-economic factors involved in the decision process amongst young people, and the individual’s characteristics, personality traits, life goals, emotions, beliefs, and values play a role in how, if, and when they decide to migrate (Hagen-Zanker & Hennessey, 2021). In terms of the three-phase migration decision-making process (Kley & Mulder, 2010), one may argue that the pre-decisional phase (considering migration) and the pre-actional phase (planning migration) tend to be more profound with the planners than with the dreamers and accidental migrants, who were less goal-oriented in their migration process. The time it took for them to proceed from the initial planning stages to the actual move varied according to each individual’s situation and specific context. Those individuals whose migration

is “accidental” and their stay in the UK less planned, will perhaps be the most vulnerable after Brexit, even though it will be contingent in terms of class, gender, and skills.

Conclusion

The European free movement area has provided fertile ground for young Europeans to undertake open-ended migration projects – and the London region with its numerous job opportunities is often seen as the ideal destination to experiment with living abroad (Favell, 2008b). Thanks to information shared by migrants already living in the UK and the popularity of British films and TV series, for example, it is easy for young Europeans to think they know what living in the UK would be like, even if they have not visited the country before. The perceived familiarity of the destination country provides the necessary ingredients for mental time travel (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2015) to an imagined future in the country. Our participants used their imagination in different ways: while the planners saw a clear future with certain steps along a study or career path, the dreamers and especially the accidental migrants relied upon the idea of the open British economy, their knowledge of the English language, and occupational skills being able to provide them with jobs and income.

Our key contribution to understanding contemporary migration is the three-fold typology, which is important because it crosscuts national groups, is youth-specific, and contingent in terms of historical time and place. Therefore, we deliberately decentred the often taken-for-granted focus on national groups or regional migration patterns per se. We demonstrate that there are youth-mobilities related intentions and decision-making, which spread horizontally across the Northern, Central and Southern parts of Europe. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that economic macro-contexts matter: there are relatively privileged and resourceful migrants in all national groups, but macro-narratives of economic improvement still play a more important role in the case of Polish participants compared to Finnish, with the Spanish somewhere in-between.

The UK's decision to leave the EU provided a “natural experiment” on how a major change in public policies and the reintroduction of borders within the European free movement area affects migration patterns. Examining the decision-making process of existing migrants helps us to imagine how mobility towards the UK may change as the new post-Brexit immigration rules are put in place. Due to Brexit, those interested in following in the footsteps of our interviewees will do so within a different, and much more restrictive mobility regime (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013), having lost the (near) absolute freedom of experimenting with living in the UK. The points-based system introduced after Brexit resembles the process required for moving to the United States, Canada, or Australia, for example, so it will deter some of those not willing or able to invest in the application process or who lack resources to cover the new costs associated with the move. It is likely that in this new migration regime, those whose life orientation resembles that of the planners are the ones who will continue to move to the UK, while those who are more like the dreamers or accidental migrants will either stay home or move somewhere else in Europe where free movement still is a possibility.

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Author contributions

SK, AS and CHM carried out the interviews in the London region. SK did the initial analysis of the data and thereafter all authors equally contributed to the analysis and writing of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations**Competing interest**

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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