

First Brexit, then COVID: Exploring unsettling events and (un)settledness in the lives of young Lithuanian and Polish migrants in the UK

Paula Pustulka ^{1,*}, Irma Budginaitė-Mackinė², and Agnieszka Trąbka³

¹Youth Research Center, SWPS University in Warsaw, Chodakowska 19/31, Warsaw, 03-815, Poland

²Department of Sociology, Institute of Sociology and Social Work, Vilnius University, Universiteto st. 9-413, Vilnius, 01513, Lithuania

³Institute of Applied Psychology, Jagiellonian University, Łojasiewicza 4, Kraków, 30-348, Poland

*Corresponding author. Youth Research Center, SWPS University in Warsaw, Chodakowska 19/31, Warsaw, 03-815, Poland. E-mail: ppustulka@swps.edu.pl

Abstract

This article explores how young Lithuanian and Polish migrants to the UK narrate their experiences of the spillover effects linked to macrostructural crises, namely the Brexit process and the global Covid-19 pandemic. The analysed data stems from the CEEYouth project, specifically interviews with seventy-seven migrants, collected over the five waves of a qualitative longitudinal study. The study began during the post-Brexit referendum negotiations (2019) and ended during the pandemic (2021). Building on and extending Kilkey and Ryan's framework on unsettling events, we look at the material, relational, and subjective dimensions and dynamics of two related but distinct processes: spatial (un)settlement and a sense of (un)settledness understood as the personal experience of feeling settled or unsettled. Recognizing that life-course underpins young people's complex experiences, we demonstrate variability in terms of the meanings young migrants assign to migration and mobility in uncertain times and the consequences of unsettling events for their existential and emotional state. While the interviewees with more disadvantageous life situations at the outset of the crises felt cumulatively unsettling effects of the pandemic and Brexit over time, those sufficiently settled could—especially as the time went on—distanced themselves from unsettlement. Contrarily, intersectional vulnerability experiences by some interviewees made it harder for the sense of unsettledness to dissipate. The study's broader contribution lies in showing that subjective sense of (un)settlement is dynamic and closely tied to the sense of belonging among CEE migrants in the UK.

Keywords: migration; unsettling events; (un)settledness; CEE migrants; Brexit; Covid-19; Poland; Lithuania; qualitative longitudinal research.

1. Introduction

The lives of contemporary migrants are being increasingly framed by multiple and co-occurring crises. On the one hand, structural issues, such as migration regimes, legal and political changes, and shifts in the global economy have always been important for

migrants' life chances and decision-making at an individual level (Kempny 2023; Maxwell, Leybenson, and Yemini 2024). On the other hand, the new proliferation of 'unsettling events' (Kilkey and Ryan 2021) in the twenty-first century warrants an in-depth look at how the implications of major political and global events are navigated by migrants over time.

In this study, we pose a conceptual question about the junction between new macro-structural crises and migration to analyse qualitative longitudinal data collected in the 2019–2021 period as part of the CEEYouth project. Considering the case of Lithuanian and Polish migrants in their 20s and 30s in the UK, we examine the immediate and long-term consequences of the Brexit referendum and subsequent political changes, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. The main research question is: how the spillover effects of macro-structural crises are narrated in relation to the (un)settlement and (un)settledness across the material, relational, and subjective dimensions of migrant lives.

The focus is placed on individual life situations and plans, as spatial settlement is an important part of adulthood, yet is rendered more difficult by crises (Pustulka *et al.*, 2024). Similar to Kilkey and Ryan's (2021) work on unsettling events, this study illustrates the temporal and spillover effects of major systemic shifts on migrants' lives. However, beyond a simple application of the 'unsettling events' framework, we contribute a more nuanced understanding through longitudinal focus on migrant (un)settlement and (un)settledness at a particular life-course stage (young adulthood) during polycrisis.

To clarify, Kilkey and Ryan emphasize how unsettling events disrupt settlement in a spatial sense. Our study broadens the lens to include how such events also shape emotional experiences of what we deem (un)settledness, which entails an emotional sense of non-belonging and personal identity. The sense of unsettledness might occur in response to the perceived risks and 'unsettled identities' (Moskal and Sime 2022), even when physical movement does not take place. In other words, Kiley and Ryan use unsettling events to specifically look at mobility projects, that is, the spatial unsettlement (e.g. decisions to return/migrate elsewhere), or its obverse in the sense of settlement (e.g. applying for settled status/citizenship, deciding on settlement). Accounting for this, we also draw on Pustulka *et al.* (2024) to look unsettledness in the context of uncertainty, especially tackling the subjective dimension of unsettling events causing omnipresence of risks and potential loss of ontological security (Giddens 1991).

Bringing multiple perspectives together, we propose a distinction between the consequences of unsettling events, namely framing (un)settlement in regard to (spatial) (im)mobility decisions and investigating the sense of (un)settledness, which might be seen as a broader condition of migrant lives post-Covid and post-Brexit. Specifically, the sense of unsettledness seems to characterize various life spheres and translates to some migrant interviewees feeling untethered in material, relational and subjective dimensions. The sense of unsettledness is more elusive and might not lead to mobility decisions (unsettlement), but is rather a condition that emerges periodically or lastingly, especially among more vulnerable migrants.

The article's novel contribution lies in taking a longitudinal approach and demonstrating that the initial perceptions of disruptions caused by Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic evolve over time in migrants' narratives on both feeling spatially settled or unsettled in the UK, and their general sense of settledness or unsettledness (a personal state of instability and uncertainty). We argue that a mixture of (un)settlement and (un)settledness is a processual feature of unsettling events. While young migrants may initially perceive macrostructural crises as unsettling, these events may not necessarily affect their decision to remain in the UK long-term. Similarly, the risks associated with a (potentially) unsettling event may be initially normalized or downplayed but interviewing young migrants over time allows for a better understanding of longer-term effects of unsettledness-related uncertainty that an event has triggered. Further, numerous nuances necessitate adopting a lifecourse and

intersectional (Crenshaw 1991) lenses. Beyond ethnic/migrant identity, life-stage and life situation shape evaluations of mobility and influence future planning in complex and inter-related ways.

We begin by situating our analysis within theoretical debates regarding the dynamic of unsettlement and unsettledness in young migrants' lives. We then outline our approach to analysing the impacts of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic and describe the qualitative longitudinal research underpinning this study. The findings section, structured around material, relational, and subjective dimensions, examines the nuanced and varied effects of these crises, followed by a discussion and conclusion.

2. Exploring dynamics of unsettlement in young migrants' lives

To unpack and understand the particular consequences of the major socio-political transformations at an individual level, we build on the unsettling events framework (Kilkey and Ryan 2021). Its theoretical usability lies in the authors' recognition that structural events not only have multiple consequences spilling over from the state and market into everyday life and people's biographies (see also Moskal and Sime 2022; Kempny 2023), but also that the implications of crises may vary across material, relational, and subjective dimensions of migrants' lives. Kilkey and Ryan (2021: 234) define unsettling events primarily in mobility-related terms as 'transformations on the structural level that have implications on the individual level in ways that provoke reevaluation of migration projects'.

In their approach, unsettlement relates to movement—both as possibility and actuality of relocating elsewhere after recognizing shifts in material, relational and subjective dimensions. As explained above, our study expands this scope. We incorporate emotional/existential components tied to uncertain futures, that is, feeling (un)settled or a sense of unsettledness. We then examine the nuanced ways migrants navigate these feelings in response to macrolevel crises over time, from a life-course and longitudinal perspective. Relatedly, we embrace an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2019) to highlight that both unsettling events and unsettledness are underpinned by overlapping identity features: migrant status, age and life-course stage, as well as life situation. Going beyond a solely spatial understanding of unsettlement and emphasizing the existential dimensions of stability and belonging—feeling (un)settled or unsettledness—makes it possible to capture how migrants make sense of (temporary) disruptions, negotiate continuity, and reconfigure their life trajectories amid prolonged uncertainty.

As the original framework acknowledges the interconnectivity between the global financial crisis and the early period after the Brexit referendum (Kilkey and Ryan 2021), it provides a structure for breaking down responses and adaptations in terms of migrants' temporal orientations and life plans, often varied and unique across the three outlined dimensions. In the context of international migration, the 'material' dimension pertains to social status and income, affecting migrants' quality of life through financial strain such as a reduced ability to spend, invest, or save. The 'relational' dimension focuses on how personal lives, family dynamics, and social bonds are re-evaluated and altered during times of crisis, for instance, due to limited home visits. Finally, the 'subjective' dimension involves the process of redefining one's life story, identity-work and meaning-making under the new conditions, including sense of belonging (see also Moskal and Sime 2020; Blachnicka-Ciacek et al., 2021) and personal (in)security. As Kilkey and Ryan (2021) noted, the experience of unsettlement varies and can evolve over time, with different dimensions being evaluated differently on an individual basis. Furthermore, the positive outcomes of unsettling events in one area could coincide with the challenges in another.

Our work is rooted in the general argument that intersectionally understood social positioning shapes the extent to which people experience events such as Brexit and Covid-19 as disruptive to their lives and life plans (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2019). Ethnic and racial

minorities, and people from migrant backgrounds, are disproportionately affected by social crises (Bundell *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, age is one of the axes that organizes individuals' perspectives. Young adults face greater instability in employment and personal bonds (Pustulka *et al.*, 2024). In this way, the three dimensions of unsettlement fuse with existing and emerging research on the unsettling impact of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of migrants in the UK and Europe in general (e.g. Hadjimichalis 2021; Kempny 2023).

From this vantage point, the article centres on particular challenges that young people who came to the UK from the 'new EU' countries need to tackle. The effects of Brexit and Covid-19 are analysed with attention to the specificity of life stages, as well as structural opportunities and constraints (Kilkey and Ryan 2021). While term 'young adults' serves as a heuristic category, we use it not strictly in a sense of an age range, but rather to describe a stage in life-course when individuals are focused on building material and relational stability and shaping their identities (see also Pustulka *et al.*, 2024). The life-course, fittingly, refers to a sequence of biographical events unfolding over time, shaped by both structural conditions and personal choices within a specific historical context (Elder 1998). In this study, we examine how the process of moving into adulthood—often marked by aspirations for continuity and security—can be interrupted or disrupted by political turbulence and global pandemic in the 2020s Britain.

In the existing literature, unsettlement in the material dimension can be tangibly inferred from 2021–2022 official statistics, showing that, unlike for UK-born employees, the workforce comprising EU citizens remained 6 per cent smaller than the pre-pandemic levels (Sumption *et al.*, 2022). Given that the vast majority of CEE migrants in the UK hold low-skilled jobs (Walsh *et al.*, 2025), the risk of material challenges is high. Moreover, as in any crisis, double marginalization and precarity can affect young migrants. Because of how both their age and ethnicity operate in an overlain manner, they generally have a lower socioeconomic status (SES) when compared to the native population in the same age group (e.g. Netto and Craig 2017; Duda-Mikulin 2023). With regard to age, there has been a stronger tendency towards stay in the UK among high-skilled employees who have been in the country longer (Markova and King 2023). Meanwhile, EU migrants were disproportionately affected by job loss in support services, agriculture, and hospitality (Sumption *et al.*, 2022), while those employed in sectors such as construction, healthcare, and gastronomy faced higher risks of exploitation (Walsh *et al.*, 2025).

At the junction of material and subjective dimensions, disappointment and resentment were expressed by lower-skilled Polish essential workers during Covid-19 in the British healthcare system (Gawlewicz, Narkowicz, and Wright 2023), alluding to unsettledness rather than just unsettlement. Ultimately, the material consequences of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic stem from individual circumstances: the length of time a migrant had been in the UK, their employment status and sector, age, gender, savings, and other material ties with the destination country, including homeownership (e.g. Sumption *et al.*, 2022; Duda-Mikulin 2023; Fitzgerald and Smoczyński 2023; Gawlewicz, Narkowicz, and Wright 2023).

Unlike the material dimension, where the effects of Brexit and Covid-19 could be seen as coalescing hostilities and interdependent challenges, the effects in the relational dimension differed. After the referendum, migrants often felt unwelcome in Britain, citing negative workplace and social experiences (e.g. Blachnicka-Ciacek *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, 'sticking together' in closer relational units, namely families, was seen as an important facet of navigating the new reality (Davies 2022), with transnational families maintaining ties 'here and there' despite political upset (e.g. Klimavičiūtė *et al.*, 2020). The relational consequences of Brexit reflect the intricate matrices of transnational family connections and legal status (e.g. Godin and Sigona 2022). While some EU citizens redefined the affective components of their new 'undeliberate determinacy' strategizing of stay and return (McGhee,

Moreh, and Vlachantoni 2017; Markova and King 2023), other mobile European families living on both sides of the channel were remade as mixed-status families through Brexit rebordering, given that geopolitical boundaries were reestablished and reinforced (Zambelli, Benson, and Sigona 2024).

Initially seen as ‘universal’, the Covid-19 pandemic soon revealed that gender, ethnicity, citizenship, age, and SES heavily influenced migrants’ relational challenges (Collins 2019; Furceri et al., 2022). Like other families, migrant households and kin struggled with typical time-space confinement and conflicts (Twamley, Faircloth, and Iqbal 2023). Intersections of SES and family life revealed the exacerbated impact of the pandemic on migrant families, as many younger migrants from CEE had jobs as essential/frontline workers and needed to reconcile these with the home lives of parenting, caring, and remote education (Anderson, Poeschel, and Ruhs 2021). The new global regime of immobility (Kempny 2023) meant that migrants were unable to visit friends and relatives, often feeling disproportionately affected by different regimes of (multi)national anti-Covid-19 measures at different times. Research on the isolated condition of living under an epidemiological threat (Twamley, Faircloth, and Iqbal 2023) shows that across all migrant age groups, prolonged communication challenges strained friendships and family bonds (Kloc-Nowak 2022). Relational breakdown had a greater bearing on young CEE migrants in the UK, who particularly depended on relational resources to reorient themselves towards the reimaged futures post-Brexit (Moskal and Sime 2022).

Finally, the subjective dimension revealed affective experiences that accompany both relational and material unsettlement and unsettledness at the meta-level of life plans and omnipresent risks. Pustulka et al. (2024) placed particular emphasis on unpacking the subjective dimension given that relational and economic descriptions are always inherently subjective when referring to the narrative perspectives of the interviewees. Accordingly, the subjective dimension serves as a meta-category linking unsettling events (Kilkey and Ryan 2021) to Giddens’ work on the loss of ontological security (1991). Instead of a momentary lapse in relational cohesion or material stability, it substantiates ‘a sense that the future will be unlike the past in ways we can hardly conceive of, much less control’ (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020: 245). King (2021), who sees Brexit as a modern-day wicked problem, specifically conceded that it was a legalistic reflection of the growing hostility towards immigrants in Britain, driven by both regional/class inequalities and austerity policies. Therefore, disruptions from Brexit and the pandemic among CEE migrants in the UK may be tied to emotional costs and extra pressure, destabilizing the sense of belonging and resulting in ambivalence, anger, and fear of the future (e.g. Blachnicka-Ciacek et al., 2021; Gawlewicz, Narkowicz, and Wright 2023), compounded into unsettledness.

Prior to the 2016 referendum, research had largely centred on attachment, anchoring, embedding, and settlement, often underscoring that family migration denotes a certain permanence of life plans in the UK (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Ryan 2022). In the aftermath, attention shifted to the mostly subjective unsettlement and challenges that came with feeling unwelcome (Blachnicka-Ciacek et al., 2021). Markova and King (2023) distinguish Brexit as ‘an “internal shock” brewing for some time’ for the native and migrant populations in Britain, conceptualizing Covid-19 as a global and ‘external shock’ with arguably more direct and possibly devastating personal consequences. Regardless, the co-occurrence of these events renders EU migrants in the UK increasingly ill-prepared for future risks, as the pandemic fuelled further anti-immigration attitudes towards certain political classes and pockets of Britain. For young people in particular, Moskal and Sime (2022) used the ‘unsettling events’ framework to posit that macro-scale crises limit young people’s individual choices and paths, challenging the familiarity, continuity, and control over one’s identity and ability ‘to belong’ (Moskal and Sime 2022).

According to Giddens (1991), individuals tend to tackle destabilization through routines that allow them to retain coherent identities and hold existential anxiety at bay. Migrants,

unlike native populations, are tangibly more exposed to dilemmas over whether to face the risks or avoid them, as they feel disoriented not only in the risk society (Ekberg 2007), but also in the foreign context of the destination state. By examining the ways in which young Poles and Lithuanians in the UK make sense of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, we also contribute to a broader field of academic literature on migrants navigating crises over time. As suggested by research on other migrant groups and economic downturns (e.g. Sacchetto and Vianello 2016) or on coping with military aggression in their country of origin (e.g. Maxwell, Leybensohn, and Yemini 2024), the complexity of the responses depends on legal status, economic resources, and social networks of support that influence mobility decisions (Klimavičiūtė *et al.*, 2020). Unlike migration driven by crises, such as forced migration and protracted displacement, we notice that Lithuanian and Polish migrants' experiences in the UK post-Brexit and during Covid-19 are characterized by more nuanced responses rather than these severe disruptions.

As risks are often socially constructed, their significance lies in ascribing meaning to structural phenomena. Both a subjective sense of 'being-at-risk' and living an 'at-risk' identity shape people's judgments about acceptability of risks (Ekberg 2007; Pustulka *et al.*, 2024). These evaluations can be modified with new information to introduce alternative reactions. For example, shortly after the Brexit referendum, risks could be equally exaggerated, normalized, or downplayed (Blachnicka-Ciacek *et al.*, 2021). Kilkey and Ryan (2021) tie unsettling events with a life-course perspective (Elder 1998), acknowledging that biographies are shaped by the historical context in which individuals live at a given age or time of their life. Notably, this principle also guides qualitative longitudinal research (Neale 2020), bringing together personal and social perspectives on time and temporality.

3. Data and methods

This article analyses the CEEYouth project, designed as a qualitative longitudinal study (QLS), consisting of individual in-depth and asynchronous interviews (Ratislavová and Ratislav 2014) conducted in five waves from 2019 to 2021. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant ethics board of the leading institution of the Polish-Lithuanian research project consortium.

In relation to mapping the reactions to and effects of unsettling events such as Brexit and Covid-19, the data collection referred to subsequent social crises, particularly the Covid-19 pandemic, which partly overshadowed the experience of the post-Brexit-referendum Britain, but allowed comparisons with the narratives regarding Brexit. The first wave (W1) of the seventy-seven semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) took place in March and April 2019, followed by asynchronous interviews with participants during the summer of 2019 ($n = 72$; W2). Subsequent waves included a mixture of in-depth synchronous and asynchronous interviews that took place in early 2020 ($n = 64$, W3) and late 2020/early 2021 ($n = 60$; W4). The final wave (W5) was in the summer/autumn of 2021 ($N = 51$). With manageable dropouts, the data offer a long view of the lives of Polish and Lithuanian migrants as they unfolded from 2019 to 2021.

In line with 'walking alongside' (Neale 2020) interviewees in QLS entails openness towards data collection methods, including face-to-face and online interviews (particularly during the pandemic), as well as asynchronous interviews (written communications and recorded messages). Asynchronous interviews were conducted between synchronous IDIs to grasp people's immediate reactions to the key events connected to Brexit and the pandemic, reducing the burden of numerous face-to-face meetings for the study participants. They typically include two to three exchanges of email, voice, or text messages between a researcher and an interviewee. Such flexibility allowed us to adapt to the interviewees' different preferences.

The interview guides and asynchronous prompts included questions about the changes brought about by Brexit and the pandemic in various spheres of the interviewees' lives. While mobility/migration were overarching themes, fine-grained approaches were deployed in questions regarding personal life (significant relationships and transnational family practices), material circumstances (work experiences and finances), and sense of belonging, understood as the type and quality of objective and subjective social anchors that may foster or hinder embeddedness in the destination state. All data were collected in the participants' native languages.

The initial recruitment used purposeful selection, which foregrounded the consistency of age cohorts while maximizing variety in participants' life situations. Participants were identified through researchers' networks, targeted ads, and snowballing. The intake interviews were conducted with forty-one Poles and thirty-six Lithuanians born between 1983 and 1997 (avg. age was $M = 30$, $SD = 3.9$). There were twenty-nine men and forty-eight women who had lived abroad for an average of seven years (range being 2–15). Intentional diversity of destination locality in the UK resulted in the following split: circa 1/3 lived in London, approximately 1/3 in Midlands, and approximately 1/3 in Scotland. Reflecting the general overeducation of the migrant populations from Poland and Lithuania in these age cohorts, the sample was biased towards those with higher education (fifty-six degree-holders, eight students). Apart from students and two persons, everyone worked, but often below their formal qualifications. During W1, eighteen participants were single, fifty-nine were in a relationship, and thirteen had children. Both the professional situation and relationship status changed in some cases during the course of the project.

For this article, data analysis followed QLS standards (Neale 2020) and began by reviewing dynamic case vignettes, which synthesized changes in the experiences of interviewees in the course of the project. These were input into thematic grids enriched by excerpts from interview transcripts for both the Polish and Lithuanian datasets. In the next stage, a thematic reanalysis informed by the three-pronged model of material, relational, and subjective unsettlement (Kilkey and Ryan 2021; Pustulka et al., 2024) was performed, including validation of saturated themes. Hence, we ensured that the analysed phenomena occur in both datasets and checked whether there are some significant differences between the narratives of Poles and Lithuanians. Neither significant national differences nor other discrepancies (e.g. regarding gender) were observed in the data. Instead, longitudinal analyses, especially in the first two stages of data analyses, were paramount to discern the unsettling effects of Brexit (retrospectively and presently) and the pandemic (in vivo accounts), guiding the ultimate focus on nuances in reactions over time.

4. Findings

In this analysis, we explored how young Polish and Lithuanian migrants articulated their experiences of unsettlement and unsettledness in the context of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. Structured around the material, relational, and subjective dimensions, the findings concern the entire dataset, although some prompts were not repeated in each wave. Crucially, the analysis revealed that both Brexit and the pandemic were deeply unsettling and shaped lasting unsettledness for some interviewees, whereas others barely felt impacted, instead continuing with their settled lives and settling process. The former cases will be discussed at length as a way to explore the nuanced and particular, rather than the generic or universal, sense of unsettlement.

4.1. Material dimension

The impact of both the Brexit and Covid-19 pandemic on the material situation of migrants in the UK varied vastly depending on their life circumstances, especially their professional and household situations corollary to the life-course stage. Although many

interviewees declared that the economic consequences of Britain leaving the EU may be serious, few admitted that they were personally affected. For instance, Vaiva did not see her migratory background as experience-defining; instead, she imagined the universal effects of the post-Brexit economy.

Uncertainty, [it] will have an impact, (...) all those loans, mortgage rates will go up, so that might affect me (laughs). Or, you know, the rates might drop, something else happens, house prices go up, in short, it can just affect the quality of life, (...) But it's for everyone, it all depends on the economy. (Vaiva LT, mid-20s, W1S)¹

Vaiva mentioned uncertainty, a feeling widely shared among migrants in the years following the referendum, particularly when the terms of the UK leaving the EU remained unclear. However, while this sense of incertitude prevails when interviewees speak about society at large, they often exclude themselves from those who become vulnerable, indicating that they feel sufficiently settled, both spatially and mentally. Material uncertainty was more pronounced when paired with a sense of feeling personally unwelcome as a migrant worker.

I fear that if I was compelled to change jobs,—it could be constricted. (...) I am afraid that they will be trying to employ British people first, and we will become secondary employees and it will be harder for me to (...) It's just guesswork, though, it doesn't have to be like that at all. (Kornelia, PL, mid-30s, W1S)

In many interviews, participants expressed general concerns about the economic situation in the UK post-Brexit, worrying about increasing prices, food and medicine supply chains, and a reduced variety of goods in stores. These concerns were exacerbated by the pandemic. Interestingly, the interviewees discussed these issues as potential and general risks rather than immediate personal experiences. For instance, Rita (LT, mid-20s, W3) was afraid of the accumulated consequences of Brexit and the Covid-19: 'The financial part makes me especially anxious, as [we're] having a financial crisis now, the end of the transit could mean even more economic problems'. Still, when asked about herself and these circumstances, she confidently claimed foreseeing no major changes: 'I believe that having a settled status will not allow major changes, as I still have my right to work, health insurance, pension'. Despite recalling general opinions on the worsening economy, most interviewees, like Rita, saw their citizenship and settled their status as providing reassurance and stability, contributing to their sense of material settledness.

Consequently, many migrants continued their material plans to put down roots in the UK, for instance, by buying property. Some even noted that real estate prices fell after Brexit, speeding up the fulfilment of their plans. Despite being fresh in the job market and transitioning from education to work during the study period, Rita managed to move up the career ladder and started cohabiting with her British partner. Upward professional trajectory and long-term relationship allowed her to take advantage of lower property prices. Her further embedding in the host society occurred through material investments:

My partner and I decided to start saving for our own home, so we both enrolled in [this] government scheme that helps first-time home buyers in the UK. I contemplated various aspects before making this decision because it means I will be committed to living in the UK for another 5 years at least, and our first home will always be here. I have also convinced myself that I truly see my future here. (Rita, LT, mid-20s; W3S)

Among those who admitted that global trends, including the devaluation of the British pound, had a negative impact on their personal lives, we primarily identified those living

transnationally, that is, not necessarily excluding long-term plans of remaining in the UK, but maintaining strong anchors back home. For them, it became harder to remit money while thinking about returning and investing capital back home. Krzysztof, who planned to return to Poland to support his mother, clarified that what hurt him the most was ‘that the pound started to drop’ and might continue to lose value (Krzysztof, PL, mid-30s, W1S).

Longin, who worked in the financial sector, argued that being in the ‘London bubble’ protected him from daily Brexit worries faced by other migrants, but his savings were ‘melting’ due to unfavourable currency exchange rates. Despite retaining his job, Longin considered financial losses in light of the destabilization of his life goals, including his long-term plans of return:

Personally, mainly the savings (were affected), to be honest. I did not exchange money on time and the currency rate dropped from 5.7 to below 5. Because I was thinking about returning, and because I do not want to work for the rest of my life, it’s been an issue. (Longin, PL, early-30s, W1S)

In line with what has been established in the literature so far (Sumption et al., 2022; Duda-Mikulín 2023), material concerns connected with Brexit and even more so with Covid-19 were particularly severe for those in precarious financial situations in the UK. Rima (LT, early-30s), who worked in hospitality in London and rented a small flat, was initially unconcerned about Brexit when the study started (W1S), hoping for the benefit of less competition in the labour market. However, her situation changed dramatically with the onset of the pandemic, as she lost her job and was forced to relocate.

Since our last conversation quite a lot has changed (...) I’m talking more about the Covid-19 pandemic and how it changed lives for us all (...) Life in London without a job is quite expensive, so temporarily I moved in with family members and friends, who live beyond London’s borders, with a hope that soon it will be possible to find another job and then to try to rent a flat. (Rima, LT, early-30s, W3A)

The unsettling effect of Brexit was even more apparent for Kinga, whose life situation was compounded into two spheres by single motherhood and unemployment. Preoccupied with taking care of her child and studying to obtain a better job in the future, she did not work and relied on benefits when joining the study. After the referendum, she expressed a sense of being trapped and vulnerable, making her consider leaving the UK.

Maybe the UK forces me to leave, either (...) because I don’t work and don’t bring any contribution for this state, or they withdraw all the benefits, saying ‘you’re on your own now’ (...) However, even if I take my daughter back to Poland, my ex-partner can sue me and make her come back to the UK. (...) I feel like sitting on a bomb (...) since the (referendum). More and more often I consider returning, I start to calculate in Excel (to see) if it is feasible, but every time it’s a ‘no’. (Kinga, PL, early-30s, W1S)

Over time, these emotions became less intense, but Kinga nevertheless felt that her financial situation restricted her opportunities to choose where to live and what to do. Moreover, her story demonstrates how material concerns are connected to relational woes, engendering vulnerability specific to migrants.

4.2. Relational dimension

During the intake interviews in 2019, most of the research participants discussed shifts in the social climate in the UK. While many felt unwelcome in public life, citing exclusionary remarks such as ‘Go, extend [your ID] or they will deport you’ (Ada, LT, late-20s, W1S),

‘You will not live here for long’ (Rita, LT, mid-20s, W1S) and ‘They’re going to kick you all out’ (Zosia, PL, early-30s, W1S),² others reported receiving apologies from colleagues, clients, and acquaintances post-referendum. For some, the referendum outcome even served as a catalyst for forming migrant solidarity groups.

I haven’t really made that many contacts with other EU citizens [in the UK] before. But when it came to (...) this referendum result, automatically a few groups formed (...) I’ve made some really nice friends just through Facebook, with people who are EU citizens, including Germans, Romanians (...). We even meet up from time to time, it’s definitely a positive feature. (Sebastian, PL, mid-30s, W1S)

While unsettling events’ effects could be felt in social life, close personal relations—both local and transnational—mostly remained intact in interviewees’ lives. In fact, they were often described as sources of support in the context of political upheavals, contributing to a sense of stability and relational settledness. A few notable exceptions emerged for those who experienced tensions within their immediate circles, namely, when family members or partners supported Brexit.

For Vaiva (LT, mid-20s, W1S), it was her boyfriend, a UK citizen with whom she co-owned property in the UK, who voted ‘Leave’. While she faced teasing from friends (‘So how is it going in your family then?’), she regarded it as a minor issue, emphasizing open discussions, her own doubts, and even a shift in her stance from ‘Remain’ towards ‘Leave’ over time. In contrast, Kamila was deeply disappointed that her in-laws supported Brexit, despite her presence in the family. She resented their reassurances—‘it is not about migrants like you’—and their rhetoric distinguishing between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ migrants:

My husband was very, very unhappy because he knew it caused me unhappiness, (...) (His parents) sort of contributed to my unhappiness. (...) The reaction [in my surroundings] was very sad, people around me were not happy. (...) Some of my husband’s family, his parents and brothers, were happy because they voted for it, but there was a phone call from my husband’s sister who apologised for what happened. (Kamila, PL, late-20s, W1S)

While rare in our dataset, such cases illustrate the complexities of migrants’ navigating personal relationships within politically charged contexts, particularly when close family members make voting decisions that could negatively affect their kin. While these situations do not alter their plans of settlement in the UK, they can undermine their sense of settledness.

An analysis of the subsequent waves of interviews revealed that the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic had a more immediate and profound impact on the relational dimension. On one hand, it made visiting family and friends abroad difficult, causing concern for some participants. Travel opportunities were reduced, and extra caution was taken when meeting others, as Vaidas noted: ‘One tries not to visit older people and generally one tries to have fewer contacts’ (Vaidas, LT, late-20s, W3A). On the other hand, Covid-19 improved some relationships, often through virtual interaction. Several interviewees spoke about the usual social interactions moving to virtual spaces and becoming more intense. Others, such as Milda (LT, early-30s, W4A), got to know her neighbours better and established links in the local community while walking her dog.

Though Covid-19 was initially seen as a universal crisis, research has shown that ethnicity, citizenship, and SES have significantly shaped its impact, particularly on migrant family relationships (e.g. [Furceri et al., 2022](#)). Our data highlight how the pandemic strained family life for migrant parents of young children, as Karolina’s life-course stage made a difference in several ways in the relational dimension.

My husband and I have little time for each other, with two children and his work from home. We are so at the end of our tether that we have neither the desire nor the strength for any activities besides trying to keep this home together. (...) Covid 19 has definitely negatively impacted our lives. First of all, we haven't been to Poland since last summer. We don't see anyone (...) It is awful! (Karolina, PL, early-30s, W4A)

The effects of Covid-19 were also evident in the narratives of interviewees living apart from their romantic partners, both within the UK and transnationally. The challenges in maintaining romantic relationships across (reinforced) national borders have led to the reconsideration of future paths. Some, such as Vaidas, had their prior long-term plans disrupted, leading to a series of rapid mobility decisions.

Covid affected my life very much. The plan was to base my life here and bring my girlfriend over to live (in the UK) together, but now everything got messed up (...). My thoughts are now set on [a Nordic country he moved to], but I also don't reject the possibility that I will be in Lithuania. (Vaidas, LT, late-20s, W4A)

While Vaidas portrayed himself as a primary decision-maker in the couple's mobility decisions, his subsequent decisions suggested a continuous search for compromise between prioritizing personal relationships (his girlfriend's wish to remain in Lithuania) and economically driven migration. After spending the first lockdown in Lithuania, Vaidas began short-term manual work in Scandinavia, spending some time in-between work assignments back home to be close to his girlfriend. By the final interview (W5S), he secured an office job in Lithuania and returned, claiming that he moved there permanently. His experience highlights how the pandemic not only disrupted mobility plans of settlement, but also triggered a deeper, existential sense of unsettledness—prompting him (and his girlfriend) to renegotiate earlier mobility plans in light of their broader life circumstances amidst multiple global crises. While Brexit itself did not change mobility plans, the relational and material dynamics of feeling unsettled in Britain (in an existential sense) over time eventually led to the spatial act of returning and settling in Lithuania.

Restrictions also caused some interviewees to re-evaluate their transnational family relationships. Modesta (LT, mid-20s, W4A) shared how it reminded her of what was important for her, namely 'family and friends and love for Lithuania', which enveloped her 'personal safety net' and encouraged return migration. She made new migration plans, deciding to relocate to Lithuania for the sake of a previously long-distance relationship formed shortly before the pandemic. In a similar vein, Waclaw (PL, early 30s, W5S), living in London with his fiancée and then wife, re-evaluated the importance of settlement in a neighbourhood they moved into after buying a house, with the pandemic pushing him to become more locally oriented in the UK.

Overall, both Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic affected the relational dimension, although the effects differed. The aftermath of the Brexit referendum primarily shaped interactions with the broader population in the UK, with limited effects on close personal networks, with a few notable exceptions. In contrast, interviewees placed greater emphasis on the pandemic's role in prompting re-evaluations of personal lives, in some cases leading to both significant changes in living situations affecting the feeling of (un)settledness and mobility decisions (e.g. Klimavičiūtė et al., 2020). These shifts in relational landscapes also affected subjective well-being, as discussed in the next section.

4.3. Subjective dimension

In addition to material consequences and disruptions in social relations, unsettling events like Brexit and the Covid-19 immensely impacted the sense of belonging and ontological security of the interviewed migrants. To begin with Brexit, reactions to the referendum

results were almost univocally negative, albeit differing in scale. The typical pattern encompassed the initial shock and emotions of fear or anger, which diminished over time. Klaudija was one of the many migrants for whom Brexit was deeply and subjectively, albeit temporarily, unsettling:

Not long after, while talking to people, everything calmed down. It became clear that people who live here cannot be kicked out of the country, (...) people including me, because I already love it here. (It became clear) that the ways to stay connected with the family will not be cut off. Then I started to feel safer. (Klaudija LT, mid-20s, W1S)

Fear and sense of insecurity were connected to a lack of reliable information about the consequences of Brexit for migrants. In response, some sought to secure their stay and rights in Britain by applying for permanent residence, settled status, or citizenship, creating 'ties that count' (Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz 2021). For instance, Edita, who obtained resident status, stated that it helped her 'to deal emotionally, because no one will be able to say in a couple of months, take your belongings and leave, because you cannot prove that you were [living] here' (LT, mid-30s, W2A). She was among many interviewees for whom the most upsetting and long-standing consequence of Brexit was the questioning of their sense of belonging as foreigners: 'The referendum hit me hard in terms of thinking that I don't belong here, or a lot of people believe that I don't' (W1S). The general sense of rejection after the referendum was deepened by the 'politics of belonging' (Yuval-Davis 2006) which manifested in the discourses about being or not being 'deserving' or 'good migrants' (Blachnicka-Ciacek *et al.*, 2021).

Although no massive waves of returns after Brexit were noted, at the individual level, we see that the lasting feeling of unsettledness made people less willing to permanently attach themselves and settle in Britain. Like Una, CEE migrants felt unwanted and tricked.

The feeling was that both the country and the people don't want you and you feel cheated because maybe you wouldn't have come those five or seven years ago, if you'd known how it would be. (Una, LT, mid-20s, W1S)

Although her initial intense emotions eased over time, Una no longer saw her future in the UK. She considered it to be a matter of principle: 'if they want to leave the EU, I do not want to live here'. During the course of the study, she returned to Lithuania and planned to relocate to another country, showcasing the feeling of unsettledness post-Brexit can translate into tangible mobility outcomes in the longer run.

Simultaneously, most interviewees noted little to no impact of Brexit on their lives. Unsettlement was often seen as something affecting 'others'. Kristina, for example, felt secure and unaffected, thought she acknowledged potential difficulties Brexit could cause for some migrants in general: 'I do not feel anything myself, but there are people who are worried, (...), there are maybe people on benefits, you know, (...) [or those], who came here and work without having English language skills' (Kristina, LT, late-20s, W1S). Others, like Justyna, viewed Brexit as a process 'in the background', while their attention was focused on life course transitions into adulthood, such as engagement, buying a property, or career advancement:

My life has changed a lot since the referendum, but I don't feel any changes related to Brexit at all. The biggest change that comes to mind now is a new relationship because we met around that time. (Justyna, PL, early-30s, W5A)

It seems that Brexit's impact revolved primarily around issues of belonging and plans to settle permanently in the UK. In the last wave of our research, when Brexit actually occurred, almost no one mentioned feeling unsettled or troubled by it.

Comparably, reactions to the pandemic were more diverse and nuanced. While re-evaluations were common, the impact of Covid-19 was not always seen as negative. As mentioned in the 'relational' section, migrants were particularly affected by border closings and impossibility to travel to visit friends and family in their home countries. These restrictions often hamper their general well-being, making them feel isolated, trapped, and overwhelmed. Young migrant mothers staying at home with their small children expressed losses stemming from the lack of local support, suggesting that broader structural inequalities were exacerbated by the crisis along the lines of migration compounded by gender. To this end, changes in the relational dimension spilled over and impacted people's sense of certainty about trusting institutions such as the state:

It was hard to work from home during the first four months when the kindergarten was closed. (...) There was a lot of tiredness, lack of sleep, disappointment that there were no (governmental) decisions to help parents. (Plus) anxiety about the security of my job'. (Sabina, LT, early-30s, W3A)

The narrative goes beyond a single dimension, illustrating how Sabina felt insecure at the meta-level. In addition, those employed as 'essential workers' revealed how emotional challenges during the pandemic were interwoven with overlapping challenges in the material and relational dimensions, resulting in existential reflections. These complexities can be seen in the story shared by Erikas, whose wife became pregnant in 2020.

Speaking about Covid, at the beginning of the year it was a bit worrisome. Empty store shelves, closed country borders, a failing economy. We had some concerns, but at the same time, we knew it wouldn't be like this forever. Now the situation is significantly worse, but we have no choice but to move forward. (...) (My wife) worked from home practically throughout her entire pregnancy, so I was the only potential person who could get infected (...) I didn't get to work from home, but I was put on the government's furlough scheme for about six weeks. The timing was great because I managed to do some house-related tasks and finish my studies. (Erikas, LT, early-30s, W3A)

Erikas' words reflected the ambivalence present in reactions to Covid, where anxiety about avoiding infection is filtered through unexpected positive outcomes. Kinga, the single mother cited in the first part of the analysis, might serve as another example of mixed feelings regarding the impact of the pandemic. She spoke about the first lockdown as a 'holiday' because she managed to use the 'return home' flight organized by the Polish government and spent several months of spring and summer in Poland with her family. However, she was far less positive about the second lockdown in the UK.

The thing that surprised me most about the pandemic is that my life hasn't actually changed much. I don't have much contact with people on a day-to-day basis, I sat at home all day anyway. I was a bit horrified by how poor my life was in the UK. (...) I decided to start therapy with a Polish psychologist (online). (Kinga, PL, early-30s, W4A)

Kinga was not the only person who felt that she should re-evaluate her life and make changes. Several interviewees decided to work on their mental health. Ania recalled: 'during the pandemic I had the time and money to take care of my mental and physical health, I worked through many things both on my own and with therapists' (Ania, PL, early-30s, W5A). Thus, while the pandemic negatively impacted the social lives and relations of interviewees regardless of migrant status, this self-work became an opportunity to recognize the burdens of being a foreigner in Britain. These themes are the cornerstones of the subjective dimension.

There was finally time to do a lot of different things that I've wanted to do for a long time. This break from work allowed me to reflect, of course, and I decided to go back to university (...) I think my priority was myself (...) I invested in my health even more than before, and I think it serves me very well. (Patrycja, PL, early 30s, W4S)

From this perspective, the pandemic caused heightened reflexivity, encouraging interviewed migrants to reassess their lives from a distance. On a subjective level, the initial emotional challenges led to reorienting priorities and lifestyles, resulting in local mobility decisions for some. Several interviewees highlighted that they worked too much and spent a lot of time commuting, which motivated them to leave London in search of a better quality of life in smaller cities with greater access to nature than that in a large metropolis. Justyna (PL, early 30s, W5A), who initially missed city life after relocating to the London suburbs, came to appreciate the (re)discovered '*community vibe*'. For those who moved within the UK, the pandemic strengthened their local sense of settlement and belonging:

This neighbourhood has a very cool atmosphere, people know each other. After a while, in the shops, cafes they start calling you by your first name, there is small talk, life goes on slowly but very nicely (...) We live very well here—in fact, if it wasn't for the pandemic, we probably wouldn't have discovered these local charms because we'd be more drawn to the centre or bustling districts. (Justyna, PL, early-30s, W5A)

In summary, we can observe a broad spectrum of people's reactions to the pandemic, depending on their professional, personal, and economic situations, but also on the particular moment in time and in life when the events that have potential for spatial unsettlement or emotional unsettledness took place. Considering the evolving influence of the pandemic, interviewees emphasized how they have realized the unpredictability of life, the risks inherent to it, and the necessity to accept a certain lack of control over planning the future (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020: 245), especially as a migrant. Such concerns transpired from Una's (LT, mid-20s, W3S) narrative:

I would say that Covid brought a lot of unpredictability and the inability to plan, requiring us to wait until the last minute. Many plans fell apart, and it wasn't possible to participate in everything. (...) My family and friends are mostly healthy and alive, so I feel like I can't ask for much more. [...] My plans of working [in another country] were delayed by a few months from the original date, and everything didn't go as smoothly as I would have liked. In the end, it happened, which I'm very happy about.

The atypicality of the global pandemic, in accordance with Giddens' (1991) framing of ontological losses in late modernity, engendered reflexivity and prescribed normalization of risks. This also spanned ambivalence inherent in the subjective processes of thinking about one's path, including pondering whether the UK or another country is the best place for potential settlement at the crucial time of young adulthood as a life-course stage.

5. Discussion and conclusion

To answer the chief research question posed in this study, namely, how changes brought by the social crises are narrated across the material, relational, and subjective dimensions of young migrants' lives and to what extent they are experienced as 'unsettling', our main arguments are related to the non-universal trickle-down effects of social crises seen through the prism of life-course and migration status. We broadly recognize that while young migrants may initially perceive macro-structural crises as causing unsettlement and unsettledness, these events may not necessarily affect their long-term sense of settling and

settledness in the UK. At the same time, the risks associated with a (potentially) unsettling event (Kilkey and Ryan 2021) may be both initially and later on normalized or downplayed, meaning that interviewing young migrants over time allows for a better understanding of the long-term effects of uncertainty that the event (or events) trigger (Pustulka et al., 2024).

To that end, we have argued that unsettling events (at the macro-level; Kilkey and Ryan 2021) can manifest in different ways at the individual level. They may trigger direct or future unsettlement in spatial sense—such as (re)migration or changes in mobility plans—or provoke a more internal—temporary or lasting—affective sense of unsettledness marked by uncertainty, doubt, or re-evaluation of life choices connected to migration. The feeling of unsettledness over a prolonged period of time can result in both reconsideration of earlier mobility decisions, leading to movement to the country of origin or elsewhere, as well as prompt a turn towards further anchoring in whether in the UK or elsewhere, as a way to cope with uncertainty. These observed nuanced responses warrant a life-course perspective, as they unfold in the narratives over a longer timespan and intersect with key milestones of early adulthood, such as buying property, developing one's career, forming a long-term partnership or marriage, or becoming a parent (see also Pustulka et al., 2024). Drawing on the experiences of the young adult migrants we interviewed, we propose three new ways in which the framework of 'unsettling events' can be extended in light of this study.

First, the data show that political events at the global and national levels prompt more serious reflections among those previously precarious in a given sphere, such as the unemployed, unwillingly single, or already feeling unanchored abroad. The interviewees disadvantaged at the outset of the crises felt the overlapping and cumulative effects of their positionalities as young people, migrants, low-skilled workers, single parents and so on. Their life-situation often worsened in the face of two 'unsettling events' (see also Netto and Craig 2017; Sumption et al., 2022; Duda-Mikulín 2023; Fitzgerald and Smoczyński 2023; Gawlewicz, Narkowicz, and Wright 2023; Walsh et al., 2025).

Our study as such reveals that what the migrant interviewees experience in terms of unsettlement and unsettledness can neither be seen through a single-identity axis of their migrant status, nor even a summative recognition of ethnic background and age or class. Instead, we argue that the lasting sense of unsettledness in response to unsettling events is particularly critical for those whose identities and social positions are weaker/minority ones. The experience of intersectional vulnerability (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2019)—driven by migrant/minority background, age, economic (labour market/housing) precarity and atypical family situation (e.g. being a single mother)—is analytically irreducible to singular dimensions. The choice to focus on the cases of interviewees who experienced more turbulence and unsettledness—rather than those unaffected or temporarily touched—has made it possible to zoom in on this finding, pinpointing a need for more intersectionally oriented research in migration studies.

Nevertheless, corollary to what Markova and King (2023) argued, many research participants whose paths in the UK were stable pre-2016 were able to distance themselves from the consequences of both Brexit and the pandemic. Specifically, the interviewees leveraged their material, relational, and social resources (related to a sense of belonging and anchoring) to avert the associated uncertainty and megarisks of modernity (see Ekberg 2007). Thus, the study shows that while migrants—especially those younger in age—could be expected to be more prone to risks in the face of macro-structural changes (Moskal and Sime 2020), there is a strong inner differentiation of individual life situations, which means that some have little need to tackle the spillover effects of political crises and subsequent unsettling events. The findings shed light on the dynamics between vulnerability and resilience, which intersectionally affect how migrants can cope with unsettlement and unsettledness.

Second, we posit that it is a life-course (Elder 1998) and life situation that frames young migrants' experiences, rather than just their non-native status. This sets the study apart from the *a priori* assumption about migrants' and young people's inherent and unavoidable vulnerability during crises (Bundell *et al.*, 2021; Hadjimichalis 2021; Moskal and Sime 2022). With a few exceptions, namely those who experienced significant disruptions in subjective and relational dimensions post-Brexit, the majority of the interviewed migrants seemed resilient to crises and continued their paths of settlement in the UK. While some faced challenges, their legal status, financial stability, and established networks bolstered their resilience. Unlike cases of forced displacement or severe economic hardship (e.g. Saccetto and Vianello 2016; Maxwell, Leybenson, and Yemini 2024), the feeling of unsettledness among CEE migrants in the UK was temporary and negotiable rather than existential.

In the case of Brexit, the length of stay was an important factor: those who lived in the UK for 10 years or more tended to have many anchors, felt well embedded (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Ryan 2022) and less vulnerable. The role of the family situation was more apparent in the case of the pandemic, the effects of which were felt more acutely in the relational and subjective dimensions by migrants with young children and rebordered romantic couples, for whom long-distance relationships became harder (Zambelli, Benson, and Sigona 2024). While the Covid-19 restrictions heightened the challenges of balancing work and family for native families as well (see Anderson, Poeschel, and Ruhs 2021; Twamley *et al.*, 2023), for migrants the relational strain—such as loneliness in the foreign land and inability to visit home have (Kloc-Nowak 2022)—often extended to the sense of a deeper feeling of unsettledness in the subjective realm.

The polycrisis, which is understood as a confluence of challenges in security, political stability, energy, economy, and climate that are interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Pustulka *et al.*, 2024), seemed to force evaluations across spheres. The interviewed migrants reflected on pre-existing relationships and jobs (relational and material spheres), with life changes often accelerating. In particular, those in their mid-30s fought for subjective work-life balance and self-assurance in prior mobility decisions and settlement choices. If they could not see the benefits of staying (longer) in the UK, they explored settlement options elsewhere.

Third, data analysis revealed key themes across each dimension. Similar to other studies (e.g. Moskal and Sime 2022), the consequences of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic were subtle rather than glaring in most narratives. To begin with, interviewees almost ubiquitously criticized Brexit as a political path for the UK, albeit not necessarily feeling personally impacted when it came to their everyday lives and life plans. The sense of unsettledness was primarily connected to the subjective sense of instability caused by prolonged lack of information regarding the actual consequences of Brexit. It was also tangible in the narratives grappling with the need to reconcile feelings of being unwelcome (e.g. Blachnicka-Ciacek *et al.*, 2021; Zontini and Genova 2022) with simultaneously settling into adulthood and anchoring one's life spatially to the UK in parallel. Despite subjective challenges, the themes around material (e.g. prices, currency conversions, and availability of goods) and relational (e.g. disappointment with family members post-Brexit vote) implications remained relatively minor. In the end, most interviewees continued to settle in the UK, acknowledging the potential unsettling effects of Brexit, but not being deterred by them.

The Covid-19 pandemic generally influenced the interviewees to a greater extent since all declared its observable effects. However, nuanced and immensely varied narratives were collected during this study. Contrary to Brexit, the relational sphere was afflicted heavily in terms of social isolation, household strain, and curtailed transnational relations with kin in Poland and Lithuania (Godin and Sigona 2022; Kloc-Nowak 2022). While Brexit was rarely narrated as life-altering, the pandemic forced more interviewed migrants to reevaluate their lives, particularly in terms of career and lifestyle, as well as their mobility plans

and possible rebordering (Zambelli, Benson, and Sigona 2024). Overall, this time for reflection was positively assessed, especially if prominent problematic issues in one dimension (e.g. care burdens) could be effectively downplayed if positive developments structured life paths in another area (e.g. promotions at work).

It should be emphasized that the longitudinal character of our study allowed us to identify transformations in the interviewees' reactions to the Brexit and Covid-19 pandemic, equally in terms of emotions, materialities, practices, decisions, and plans. In the subsequent waves, the interviewees continued to re-engage with these events, re-evaluating the impact of Brexit and the pandemic through the lens of their life situation, migrancy and other positionalities. For the majority, especially those feeling sufficiently settled in the UK, it can also be seen how they adjust to the 'new normal' and—to a certain extent—normalize the sense of unsettledness and risks connected with subsequent crises.

For the minority, mostly migrants experiencing overlapping material or relational challenges (e.g. job loss and separation/divorce), the cumulation of unsettling events has placed them at the point of 'no return'. Over time, it is evident that they disassociate themselves from feeling settled in any way. Their profound sense of unsettledness and precarity make them question their belonging in the UK. Practically, they ponder or actually realize a plan to spatially unsettle by returning home or moving to other countries (see also Klimavičiūtė et al., 2020). The observed duality in whether the initial unsettling effects lead to real unsettlement and unsettledness in the longer term shows the advantage of longitudinal approaches.

From this perspective, it seems that both Brexit and the pandemic resulted in some crucial biographical concerns regarding mobility. While the temporality of data collection should be acknowledged, people were still unsure during the first wave of the study (three years after the referendum) about laws governing free movement between the UK and their CEE home states. In the case of the pandemic, reported in vivo lockdowns and limitations regarding international travel deprived migrants of the possibility of visiting their countries of origin whenever they wanted, with similar uncertainty surrounding options to travel. Such concerns dismantled the 'lightness of moving' (Janurová 2018) which was a distinctive feature of post-EU enlargement migration from CEE countries, such as Poland and Lithuania. It irrevocably shifted the narrative to 'undeliberate determinacy' in recent years (McGhee, Moreh, and Vlachantoni 2017), as the interviewees created more material and legal anchors via resident permits or properties, signalling settlement in the UK (see also Grzymala-Kazłowska and Ryan 2022).

Finally, while the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to overshadow Brexit in the interviewees' narratives (see also Markova and King 2023), reflections on the impact of these two events in some cases made it difficult to disentangle their distinct effects, particularly in material and subjective dimensions. Both crises contributed to the development of the perception of living in turbulent times, which shaped expectations of future unsettling events. The latter frame the proposed notion of unsettledness, seeing it as connected with the broader context of polycrisis and heightened risk experienced by individuals.

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee for Empirical Research with Human Participants at the SWPS University (consortium leader).

Notes

1. The quotes have been described according to the following scheme: pseudonym, country of origin (LT—Lithuania and PL—Poland), age approximation at the moment of the first interview in early 2019, the wave of the study (numbered from 1 to 5), as well as the interview type (S-synchronous and A-asynchronous).
2. Negative incidents were often seen as affecting others elsewhere, while most interviewees felt shielded by their relatively secure position in the UK.

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