

## Life in London on the Eve of Brexit – Polish Migrants’ Reports<sup>1</sup>

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London is home to the largest community of Polish migrants in Great Britain. The multicultural and superdiverse character of the city frequently – though not always – helps newly-arrived inhabitants to settle and decide to stay for longer or for ever. In 2016 there was a referendum on the United Kingdom’s membership in the European Union. It was a moment when many migrants (re)considered their presence and their position in the society of the United Kingdom. One of the largest affected groups of migrants were the Poles. The purpose of this article is to present the situation of Polish migrants on the eve of Brexit, from the perspective of life in a multicultural and superdiverse city – London. The spectre of Brexit has brought out social tensions, detectible to varying degrees depending on the social character of the place of residence in question. In this article I have tried to answer the question: To what extent have the social mood and the social status of migrants in their own perception changed due to Brexit in the context of London’s multiculturalism and superdiversity? The article was based on 25 in-depth interviews with Polish migrants living in London. The research was realised within the framework of the scientific program: “The process of the social (re)adaptation of Polish migrants in London when facing Brexit – change and redefinition of social status from an intragroup perspective” (Miniatura 2, NCN Register No.: 2018/02/X/HS6/02300). Interviews were carried out at the end of April and the beginning of May, and in October 2019.

**Key words:** Brexit, migration, Polish migrants, London, multicultural and superdiverse cities

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<sup>1</sup> The following article is a continuation of a research result presentation carried out as part of the research project “Process of social (re) adaptation of Polish migrants in London in the face of Brexit – changing and redefining social status from an intragroup perspective” (National Science Center; (Miniatura 2, Reg.No.: 2018/02 / X / HS6 / 02300). The first part of the results is published in: K. Winięcka, *Polscy migranci w Londynie w obliczu Brexitu–(re) adaptacja? Wyniki badań wstępnych*. *Migrations Studies – Review of Polish Diaspora*, 2020(4 (178)), 71–95. The article below concerns research results that have not been presented so far.

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## Introduction

“Tourists who visit large, British cities are struck by their ethnic diversity. In London you can eat the best curry in the world, you can hear all the languages of the world on its streets, you can see the strangest outfits and hairstyles. In the capital there live seventy thousand French, in Glasgow there are forty thousand Italians and in the whole of Great Britain – almost a million Polish (Rosiak 2018: 233).” Dariusz Rosiak has hit the mark with this short characterisation from his reportage of selected UK towns including the capital, a characterisation that emphasized the social diversity evident in many aspects of everyday life. Kathy Burrell claims (2018: 19) that this superdiversity of British cities is connected to Great Britain’s colonial past and its long history of resettlements. She believes that multiculturalism is embedded in the urban fabric and represents an inseparable part of the ‘thrown-togetherness’ of space (ibid.: 19). It gives this space its characteristically ethnic-cultural character manifested among other ways in social relations. That is also why a characteristic feature of multicultural cities is the ongoing influx of migrants – indeed this is a foundational element (Szczepański, Śliz 2011). It is thanks to migrants – their culture, values, norms and language – that cities like this can arise<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, it takes a particular ability to unite many cultures in one place. Without this ability, the social mood may become hostile (compare ibid.: 63), as it did with the anti-immigrant sentiments during the Brexit campaign and just after the referendum on leaving the EU.

The migration infrastructure (as a set of formal and informal institutions and support networks (Bobek 2016)) has been developing for many years in London and other so-called *global cities* (King 2015, Vertovec 2011). Together with chain migrations mechanisms (Anderson 1974, Prasałowicz, Makowski, Zięba 2004), these structures help newly arrived migrants to settle and stay for longer – or for good. After Poland’s accession to the European Union, London became the destination for a significant proportion of Polish émigrés. For more than 12 years there was a kind of “safe” *status quo*: Polish migrants were guaranteed the right to work, legal residence and the right to acquire property. The international EU-wide agreements legalised mass migration on an unprecedented scale, attracting large numbers of people from Poland. After 2004, the presence of Poles in Great Britain, and in London in particular, was more visible. In 2011, according to the UK Census (2011), Polish was the second most widely spoken language in London after English. The capital was full of the sound of Polish speakers and Polish microbusinesses – such as Polish shops – became part of the landscape of small and large towns (cf. Rzepnikowska 2020, Sepulveda, Syrett, Lyon 2011, Fish 1997). Polish people made their presence felt in a variety of

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<sup>3</sup> It cannot be forgotten, in order to explain the phenomenon of the creation of multicultural cities and the influx of migrants – in this case to London – one should analyze the migration policy that has been carried out in UK over the years. It is an important factor in both the influx of migrants and the creation of multicultural cities.

ways. In 2016, after the referendum results were announced, the “safe” *status quo* underwent change. 51.9% of voters expressed their desire to leave the EU structures (The Electoral Commission UK 2016a). Neither the referendum result nor the leave campaign led to immediate legal changes impacting the lives of foreigners. However, they led to changes in the social mood which were manifested in xenophobic and racist behaviour (Home Office 2016).

The purpose of this article is to present the situation of Polish migrants on the eve of Brexit from the perspective of a multicultural city – London. The spectre of Brexit has brought out considerable social tension whose intensity depends on the social character of a place of residence in question (Burnett 2016). Migrants came to be perceived as one of the more important – and negative – actors in the situation of the UK and their stigmatisation followed accordingly (Goffman 2009). Public opinion treated the issue of migration as a key topic for Brexit and anti-immigrant attitudes increased in strength.

This article is an attempt to answer the question: To what extent have the social moods and the social status of migrants in their own perception changed due to Brexit in the context of London’s multiculturalism and superdiversity? The considerations reveal the particular nature of life in London during times of potential geopolitical change. The analysis of the social circumstances of Polish migrants on the eve of Brexit reveals the character of life in a multicultural city and its impact on the overall sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991) and social status security in a socio-economic sense.

The article is made up of four parts. The first is concerned with theoretical issues referring to the conception of social anchoring, multiculturalism and superdiversity in the context of large cities. The second section presents the social background that has shaped moods and attitudes towards migrants in Great Britain in the post-referendum period. The third part is a presentation of the research methods used and the last part contains a description of research material and a summary of the results.

## Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical basis for this research is provided by the conception of social anchoring (Grzymała – Kazłowska 2013, 2016, 2017), a central idea in this area. The process of social anchoring is understood as the individual’s search for points of reference and support in the surrounding fluid, complex and transnationally entangled reality to achieve relative psychosocial stability (see: Grzymała-Kazłowska 2013:11). Aleksandra Grzymała – Kazłowska (2016) has shown that psychosocial stability, a sense of security, can be disturbed by economic, political or social problems – like Brexit, for example. Furthermore, when the anchoring is in superdiverse societies that are undergoing change, this change can lead to a loss of points of reference and support,

i.e. to the loss of social anchors that had been developed mainly during the period of migration. Another point is worth adding when discussing migrants' sense of ontological, socio-economic security under Brexit within the conceptual framework I have adopted. Though the United Kingdom's exit from the EU took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2020, the processes leading up to that moment had lasted over four and a half years. So, Brexit is really a process that has been spread out over time (see Trąbka, Wermińska-Wiśnicka 2020) – not a specific moment that suddenly changed the structure of the European Union. It was a period of time that destabilised the sense of security (Kilkey, Ryan 2020) and – related to that – a time for renegotiating and redefining one's membership in British society. This renegotiation was to a great extent based on a process of verifying existing social anchors such as professional and economic positions or an affiliation to particular social groups (see: Winiecka 2020).

Social anchors can be objective and external or subjective and internal. The first group includes legal, institutional, economic and spatial-environmental anchors. Examples might be one's citizenship(s), access to formal institutions, affluence or profession. Subjective and internal anchors are connected to personal features – my conception of myself, as well as ideas and values espoused. The next kind of social anchor are cultural anchors. They refer to cultural communications, norms, symbols and values that lie behind words. There is also a fourth kind of anchor which is particularly pertinent here – so-called mixed social anchors. This group contains social-professional roles, positions in social hierarchy and group memberships, both subjective and objective (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2013). This group is especially worthy of attention in view of London's multicultural and superdiverse character. One's job and position, position in social structures or group memberships in a broad sense – all these elements can make up one's sense of security during migration and in a superdiverse social environment. A key question at this point may be: Are multiculturalism and the superdiversity of society factors that support one's sense of security and social anchoring – or quite the reverse? For this reason, it is essential to distinguish between the analytical categories of "multiculturalism" and "superdiversity" as applied to cities.

"Multiculturalism" generally means the cultural diversity of a society which nonetheless remains a coherent whole (see. Kantor 2006, Modood 2015). It is an important fact that as cultures change, the nature of multiculturalism changes too (Keith 2005). It is shaped by everyday practices in specific situations and arenas where diversity is manifested and its significance is negotiated by social actors (Wise, Velautham 2009).

Stanley Fish (1997) claimed that multiculturalism can be conceived of in two ways. On the one hand, large metropolises can represent so-called *boutique multiculturalism*: a city space with a multiplicity of ethnic restaurants and festivals. Fish suggests that boutique multiculturalism has a superficial character. When this kind of multiculturalism leads to the breaking or offending of generally accepted norms

and standards, it can lose its acceptance (Fish 1997: 378). On the other hand, there is so-called *strong multiculturalism*. This is characterised by the perception of difference as a value in itself. In broad terms, it is an attitude of respect and tolerance for all cultures as part of the right to create one's own identity (ibid.: 382).

Without a doubt, London is a multicultural city with a multiplicity of complex social relations. It is difficult to say whether its multiculturalism is of the boutique or strong variety – in the view of ethnic and national diversity represented by the city's boroughs and districts, which include areas which are predominantly only one or a few social groups. In any case, the city is definitely in some sense "multicultural". However, this term alone seems inadequate to describe and explain the post-referendum reality that migrants in London are faced with. It is worth invoking the term "superdiversity" as used by Steven Vertovec (2007, 2019).

Vertovec (2019) emphasizes that in Great Britain in the last two decades several new groups of migrants have appeared representing new ethnic, religious and linguistic practices and hailing from highly diverse parts of the world. In his opinion this diversity has been reflected in a variety of legal situations connected to the labour market, in the influence of gender and age, new arrangements of the public arena and diverse relations with local businesses and inhabitants. In his earlier work Vertovec called the dynamic effects of these variables "superdiversity" (Vertovec 2007). What is more, he emphasized that the term "superdiversity" indicates new forms of migration which make up new hierarchical social positions, statuses or strata. This in turn generates "...new patterns of inequality and prejudice including emergent forms of racism, new patterns of segregation, new experiences of space and "contact", new forms of cosmopolitanism and creolization" (Vertovec 2019: 126). Fran Meisner (2010: 557) adds that "superdiversity (...), emerged at a juncture where old concepts such as integration or assimilation as quasi-linear processes of migrant incorporation had lost their explanatory power in terms of post-migration settlement (and moving-on) practices, as did the 'ethnic communities' focus that tried to explain social patterns primarily based on migrants' origins".

The terms discussed above are interrelated, but the category which most accurately describes the circumstances of Polish migrants in London under Brexit is "superdiversity". As the phrase itself suggests, "superdiversity" refers to the individual's involvement in a range of social relations that generate new statuses and hierarchies as well as social reactions. With reference to the conception of social anchoring, both superdiversity and objective and subjective societal membership (or disassociation) can create space for the anchoring or, conversely, limit it. It is also worth noting that both these terms appeared in the discussions. They represent an attempt to describe not only the character of the city itself, but also particular social realia prompted by the planned exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

## London – Antiimmigrant Sentiment – Brexit

London, the subject of the deliberations, has the largest percentage of foreigners – if we count on the basis of country of birth. The figure for Inner London is 23%<sup>4</sup> (Office for National Statistics 2016). If we include subsequent generations – those whose parents were born abroad – the proportion becomes much bigger. At the time of the last census, the London Evening Standard (2011) reported: “In the past six or seven years, London has become the Babel of the modern world. More than a third<sup>5</sup> of Londoners are now foreign born – that’s around 2.5 million people. Our city encompasses more than 270 nationalities and 300 languages.” One could say, as Meissner (2014) put it that in London we encounter “normality of ethnic difference”. But the referendum on the UK’s exit from the EU and the approach of Brexit led to many new attitudes, views and kinds of behaviour and this revealed that the considerable ethnic and national diversification of British society does not suit many British people.

In the year of the referendum there were 185 000 Polish people (by country of birth), meaning that at that moment they represented the largest national minority not only in London (Data London 2016), but across the whole of the United Kingdom. This was one reason why Polish migrants (among others of course) frequently became the object of attacks from Brexit supporters. In 2016, the number of racially motivated crimes in England and Wales (where leave support was predominant) rose by 42% in comparison with 2015 (Home Office 2016). Verbal, psychological but also physical violence was noted (ibid. 2016). The announcement of the referendum results was a trigger for many British people to express their deep discontent with the presence of migrants in Britain. However, as Alina Rzepnikowska (2020) and Joe Burnett (2017) have stated, it was not only the referendum result that served as to sanction racial abuse – it was also the racist elements in national politics, evident for decades, together with an anti-immigrant and xenophobic media discourse. Migrants from the European Union, including from Eastern Europe, came to represent a particular category. Although their phenotype allowed them to visually blend in with the dominant community (see Rzepnikowska 2020, Rayan 2010), in the eyes of many British people they remained outsiders, even more so after the referendum (Botterill, Burrell 2019, Kupis 2017). It can be assumed that the leave slogans appearing during the campaign like *‘We want our country back’* or *‘Take Back*

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Greater-London> (accessed: 21.04.2021). The administrative area of London is divided into Inner and Outer London. Inner London – a group of London boroughs that are part of Greater London and are surrounded by Outer London. The latter area was officially marked out in 1965 and has changed several times since then for statistical and other reasons.

<sup>5</sup> This claim refers to Greater London, which includes both Inner London and Outer London. This explains the differences in data from the Office for National Statistics and data from the London Evening Standard.

*Control*<sup>6</sup> – whatever they might have meant to their authors – had for voters a strong connotation of “internal others” i.e. migrants from the EU (Virdee, McGeever 2018). The feeling that these “internal others” had taken over more and more social, economic and cultural space provoked a sense of resentment in a large portion of British society nostalgic for the Empire and for whom the referendum result confirmed that “the country was not only now ‘theirs’, but that it was theirs ‘again’” (Burnett 2017:82).

Together with the discussion on Brexit, the process began of the diversification of social awareness in terms of defining what British society is or should be (cf. Bhambra 2017). The social atmosphere around Brexit and its anti-immigrant rhetoric did not ease the concerns of migrants – indeed they provoked considerable anxiety (Winięcka 2020, Szkudlarek 2019, Mazzilli, King 2019, Bierzyńska-Sudoł 2018). The question arose as to whether, in those circumstances, migrants had any right to be a part of this society (Lulle, King, Dvorakova, Szkudlarek 2019). Theresa May, the then prime minister of Great Britain, spoke for a large part of British society when she admitted: *“If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere.”* (BBC 2016). This kind of statement served to undermine the belongingness and the social status of migrants. The concept of belongingness, or in the broader sense of citizenship, demanded renewed discussion and redefinition. It had turned out that the post-accession wave of migration had “provoked” the creation of further social hierarchies (cf. Bhambra, 2017), hierarchies which were held to have led to Brexit.

In London, there were 5 424 768 eligible voters, out of which 69.7% voted. 59.9% of voters voted for the UK to remain within the EU structures and 40.1% voted leave (The Electoral Commission UK, 2016b). London was one of a few regions (alongside Northern Ireland and Scotland) where a majority of voters wished to remain. The media published numerous reports about the negative social mood and incidents accompanying the referendum campaign and the referendum itself. The events described took place across the UK. Jon Burnett (2016) analysed 134 racist incidents reported in the media in the month following the announcement of the referendum results in 2016. A definite majority of the incidents were noted in England – 84%, 7% were in Northern Ireland and 3% in Scotland. Taking a more detailed look, the largest percentage of racist incidents reported in the media took place in Greater London. So how do the interviewed migrants react to this Brexit reality?

In the next part of this article, the research methodology will be presented. Then, in the subsequent part, the reports of Polish migrants living in London will be presented, on the influence of a multicultural and superdiverse city on the shaping of social sentiment and the social status and social position of migrants under Brexit.

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<sup>6</sup> Both slogans were used by leave supporters. Remain supporters never came up with a similarly short and catchy slogan to unite their side. wSee: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/perspective/eu-ref-haughton.aspx> (accessed: 01.12.2020).

## Research Methodology for Original Research

The research presented here was carried out at the end of April and the beginning of May 2019, and in October 2019. The research material was gathered as part of the scientific project: "The process of the social (re)adaptation of Polish migrants in London when facing Brexit – change and redefinition of social status from an intra-group perspective" (Miniatura 2, NCN reg. no.: 2018/02/X/HS6/02300). The research used a qualitative approach. The main goal of the research was to analyse the process of social adaptation/re-adaptation as Polish migrants, living in London, reoriented themselves around their redefined social status. The research studied strategies of (re)adaptation by migrants to adapt to a "new" life situation that was the result of social and political changes brought on by Brexit as it approached. Two main research problems were posed:

- What kinds of (re)adaptation strategies do Polish migrants in London adopt in the face of Brexit? And:
- Are there connections between a potential Brexit and the perception of one's social status as part of a group of Polish migrants living in London?

London as a city was treated as the study zone. It had not been treated in research problems as a significant element impacting processes related to social adaptation and changes in the perceived status of migrants. However, the material gathered here has revealed London – as a place of residence, with its multicultural, superdiverse character – to be a significant element of the narratives of the interlocutors, one deserving of separate treatment and analysis.

Structured in-depth interviews were used with a script as a research tool. During the interviews, the order of the questions was modified to facilitate a more natural conversation. The script questions were open questions.

Since the research was investigating adaptation strategies, it was assumed that the adaptation process was time-bound. (Winięcka 2016). As a result, specific research areas were selected, and this influenced the construction of the research tool. Three fields of investigation were set: 1) the pre-referendum reality – recollections, 2) post-referendum reality – experiences, 3) the future – expectations. In this context, questions were posed on the experience of life in London in general and when facing Brexit, relationships with the London society encountered on migration, the perception of London's multiculturalism and the social status of migrants in a so-called global city. As per our theoretical assumptions, the research subject was considered in the context of "social anchors" (Grzymała – Kazłowska, 2013) like social bonds, economic assets and economic activity, group memberships, the position in social structures, social and cultural roles, linguistic competence, awareness of norms and customs, law and institutions.

25 people took part in the research – 13 women and 12 men. The interlocutors were aged from 28 to 52. 3 people had vocational education, 9 had secondary and



14 higher education, including one person at the bachelor's level and one with a doctoral degree. Two respondents were not engaged in any professional activity. They were women who kept the house and raised their children. Interlocutors' positions at work in most cases corresponded to their qualifications. At this point, it should be mentioned that in the period from the Brexit referendum to the date of the study there were no significant changes in their professional positions. In the sample selection, a relative balance among the men and women was sought in terms of their place of origin, age, professional status and length of time following emigration. One of the more important criteria in the sample selection was the time spent in emigration in London – at least 5 years. The Brexit referendum, and above-all its result, were treated as a key determinant in the (re)adaption processes. So it was essential to analyse the fate of migrants who had had pre-referendum experience and who were familiar with the migration situation that had existed before Brexit and the referendum on EU memberships entered the scene and influenced their personal and social situation and social sentiments in general.

All the interviews took place in London. This choice was dictated by the fact that London contains the largest number of Polish migrants across Great Britain. The interviews took place at the interviewees' homes and in public places like cafes and restaurants. The shortest interview lasted 40 minutes; the longest was 2 hours and 5 minutes. Respondents were reached mostly by means of snowball sampling (21 persons), with the search being begun from several independent sources to avoid carrying out the research among one social circle. Participants were also recruited by means of social media announcements on Facebook (4 persons). All the interviews were recorded on a dictaphone. After each meeting a reference note was prepared. The analysis was carried out on the basis of a transcription of the interviews. To preserve anonymity, all the names of interlocutors were changed.

## Original Research Results

### London's multiculturalism

The experience of migration to the migrant's destination is also dependent on the place of origin of the migrant as well as the social character of the destination. Poland is considered a homogenous country – ethnically, nationally and religiously. London, on the other hand, is a multicultural city (cf. 2015, Wise, Velayutham 2009, Fish 1997) and is superdiverse (Vertovec 2019, 2007, Meissner 2010), a feature which may represent a cognitive, adaptational and emotional challenge for those coming from homogenous communities (Winięcka 2016). On the whole, the interlocutors perceived London as their place, their home; they declared that they had become accustomed to life in the city. Most of them had no plans to return to their country of origin (cf. Trąbka, Wermińska – Wiśnicka 2020) because *culture and organization*

*of work is better than in Poland (W\_10) or the British mentality is better (W\_9) and have the intention to buy a property (W\_25).* This is evidence, among other things, of social anchoring (see. Grzymała – Kaziłowska 2017) – at least for a part of the Polish community in London. Nevertheless, the multiculturalism of the city represented a key element for adaptation to life in the new reality of migration.

Research material on the influence of London's multiculturalism and super diversity on social attitudes and the social position of migrants in the situation of Brexit will be presented below. First of all however, it is worth learning how multiculturalism was defined by interviewees and how they reacted to it. Research participants were asked: *What is multiculturalism for you and what was your reaction to London's multiculturalism?*

The attempted definitions were similar. On the one hand, the interlocutors pointed to the large number of ethnic groups, nationalities and faiths gathered in one place, on the other hand – to communication skills or attitudes which ought to appear in relations between diverse groups. Opinions on the multiplicity of groups were expressed in claims like the following: *a lot of people from everywhere – that's normal in large cities (W\_17); there is a huge amount of diversity (W\_16); I call it "Noah's Ark" (W\_22); it's a mixture of people from all over the world (W\_9).* When it came to abilities and attitudes, the participants shared the opinion that multiculturalism is from this perspective: *an open perspective on other cultures (W\_13); the ability to be politically correct (W\_21) or respect for cultural difference (W\_9).* So, we might conclude that life in such a diverse environment demands certain specific social competencies and experience. But these skills are not acquired easily by all. Agnieszka has been living in London for 9 years. When she arrived in London, she worked in a factory. Today she works in an office. She has worked throughout this time in a culturally diverse environment, yet she says:

*The most difficult thing is to be open to multiculturalism. Although I am a very open person, there is so much diversity here that you have to be careful who you speak to and what you say. (...) Even today I find this difficult. I am still learning this culture (...).*

Agnieszka, 28, 9 years in Great Britain, W\_21

Initially, the interlocutors approached London's multiculturalism highly emotionally and with an element of surprise. The diversity provoked shock and amazement as well as other, unexpected, reactions. Many of the participants had not known how to react and admitted they had felt strange. One of the interviewees said with embarrassment:

*In the beginning, I would be sitting on the underground as we were going somewhere, and I would just gawk at people! Because that one is black, and that one is yellow, and that one that colour and this one is wearing that. In Poland there isn't that degree of diversity and people aren't used to others. (...) As time went on, I got used to it.*

Alicja, 33, 13 years in Great Britain, W\_13

The next interviewee told the story of her own mother:

*When my mum came ... that was something (laughter – noted by author)! A friend came to us – he was black – to pick up a child who was white and had been playing with our children. When Mum opened the door and saw a black man, she froze. She stood there motionless in the doorway, dumbfounded. Like a statue! She is from the older generation and had never seen things like that.*

Kasia, 34, 15 years in Great Britain, W\_3

We can see that, regardless of age, multiculturalism surprises and provokes wonder. A factor which may be significant here might be, rather than age, a lack of experience in this kind of social space. The kinds of answers above were typical, especially for those who had no previous experience of migration. What is more, social and cultural diversity can be just as problematic in communication – it can even be hard to describe and define multicultural phenomena. Take Mirek, who is fascinated by the multicultural character of London and as he says himself *gets as much from this city as he can* (W\_16). There is a lack of confidence in the way he speaks about specific social groups in London, something in evidence in the responses of others, for instance Agnieszka's aforementioned answer (W\_21).

*I get on the metro at Seven Sisters; the carriage is full of Jews. Hmmm ... I hope that is not an offensive word... Today, I don't know what is politically correct and what is not (spoken sadly and pensively – noted by author)? By the metro station there is a mosque, which is next to a Turkish shop. This is multi-culti... a kind of diversity where each place is completely different from the last.*

Mirek 34, 5 years in Great Britain, W\_16

Migrants also indicated that it had been initially difficult to understand the identity and sense of belongingness with British society (see. Bhambra 2017) felt by people of decidedly non-British extraction – from non-Caucasian races (compare Rzepnikowska 2020). Hanka, who is a highly qualified employee in an international company and had previous migration experience, but in a less culturally diverse place, at first felt cognitive dissonance towards people who are – let us say – settled but, in her eyes, “other” – having roots outside of Europe. Hanka says:

*I see an Asian person. I ask her where he is from. And he says he is from London. “And your parents?” I ask. “Also from London.” But I can see that he is not from London! “Your grandparents?” – I ask. Well, the grandparents are from Shanghai ...*

Hanka 31, 6 years after emigration, W\_4

It is probable that migrants have a tendency to judge other Londoners through the lens of their own experiences with emigration. Everyone who is not British and does not have European features may strike them as being from the first generation of migrants who are only just discovering the realities of a new world. These kinds of

dilemmas are written into the discourse on the perception of the belongingness of migrants to the dominant social group (cf. Rzepnikowska 2020, Rayan 2010, Mazzilli, King 2019, Bhambra 2017) and these phenomena are all the stronger when faced with Brexit. Migrants witness new forms of stratification and social hierarchy; they negotiate the membership of others and their own; one learns about this multicultural world at the same time figuring out where to step on this social ladder. Despite the difficulties in understanding and sometimes in getting by in a multicultural environment, the interlocutors tended to view the diversity of London as an interesting phenomenon.

*In my first week – this happened. I'm sitting in the emergency room and a small boy with payot is running around and playing with a small Arabic girl. And I thought to myself: well... this is London ... This is London! Such a melting pot. It was amazing! People from every social and cultural group were sitting there. At first that was so surprising. People say that London is so intolerant, but I thought to myself that in fact everyone is together here. A nice set up.*

Hanka, 31, 6 years into her emigration, W\_4

The majority of the interlocutors were conscious that life in London is some kind of cultural challenge; it is a city of migrants and everyone came here with quite a definite purpose in mind (see. Winiecka 2016). Sebastian, who cannot imagine living anywhere else, claims that:

*Except of New York, this is the city where the greatest mixture of people from all over the world live. In New York there are 290 languages spoken, but here 300 to 304, I suppose... So, if you come here you have to accept that... We have to create something together, build a shared London. We can't be quarrelling amongst each other.*

Sebastian, 40, 13 years in Great Britain, W\_9

London's diversity and life in London are both presented in a positive light in the majority of the interviews. There were only a few answers that were critical of multiculturalism and they were from those employed in low-skilled work. The latter responses pointed to complicated relations in places of work between those of different nationalities. These issues go beyond the scope of this research and would require separate analysis. However, Brexit did provide a common reference point for the whole of Great Britain, including London, revealing a diversity of social relations between the dominant community and migrants in general (cf. Vertovec 2019). With the approach of Brexit, we have had the opportunity to analyse the nature of a place of residence (homogeneous and heterogeneous locations) and processes that take place there as a key set of social anchors (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2013) which have the potential to contribute to a sense of security or, contrariwise, can cause the loss of important reference points or elements of support needed in the pursuit of psychosocial stability.

## Life in London facing Brexit

For many UK inhabitants, the referendum on EU membership was a pure formality that was just supposed to confirm the wish of British citizens to remain in the Union. However, the announcement of the results revealed that the vision of belonging (see. Mazzilli, King 2019, Bhambra 2017) to something – in the words of one of an interlocutor: *something bigger, better and shared* (W\_1) – had collapsed. The Brexit situation meant that *now Poles would be like any other migrants* (W\_1). Research reveals that a time of anxiety and fear then began. Fears concerned: economic matters, residence rights but also the redefinition of social status and, in many cases, the question of membership in the British society in which migrants were already domiciled. Many also felt anxiety over the worsening social atmosphere and relations – exacerbated by the aggressively anti-immigrant leave campaign and the result itself. Dorota is one of those with a keen interest in the UK's exit from the EU. She observed that:

*People here with more radical views were given permission to speak (to express their discontent about the large presence of migrants – author adding). This was stronger outside of London. And I'm not altogether surprised. There are places where Polish people have taken over and have not integrated at all. I'm not surprised at the reaction of other people living there. There has been an invasion of foreigners and they have remained foreign. It was hard to like the foreigners in those circumstances.*

Dorota, 43, 16 years in Great Britain, W\_18

So, the course of the campaign and the referendum result were seen to be causes of worsening social relations. Dorota is aware that in areas that had previously been mainly homogenous and where the presence of migrants was notable and “overwhelming”, the divisions into “us” and “them” are very sharp (cf. Botterill, Burrell 2019, Kupis 2017). So, once the trigger factor came along – in this case the result of the referendum – antiimmigrant social sentiments were activated. Laura also draws attention to the negative effects of the referendum campaign on social relations and on relations in homogenous communities. She attempts to capture this mechanism precisely:

*Well, those migration fears were effectively awoken during the campaign leading up to the 2016 referendum. By many irresponsible people who hadn't wanted migrants... and so the situation changed, as it were. That is to say, people in large cities like London, working in large in large companies – they are aware that this was a campaign based on spreading fear about migration and not on genuine facts. But for those living in smaller towns, towns with a population of seven thousand where there was a sudden arrival of two thousand people from Bulgaria, Poland etc., people working on the lowest wages... Well that might have brought about a definite fear.*

Laura, 38, 5 years in Great Britain, W\_11

In both of the above cited statements, it is interesting to note that negative relations between the native British and migrants were more noticeable outside of London, in small towns. Though they did not say it directly, the interlocutors nevertheless emphasized that a cause of these situations was the degree of ethnic or national diversity in a given community. This view was confirmed by other participants. On the other hand, the analysis of the interviews has revealed that, in the subject of Brexit, London should be distinguished from the rest of Great Britain precisely because of *London's* multicultural character (this observation indeed provided the inspiration for writing this article). This is clearly illustrated in Eliza's statement:

*London is divorced from this whole situation (Brexit and related attacks on migrants – author adding). Because London is a state within a state. My girlfriend – Polish – has always lived outside London and our impressions as to what Great Britain is like are totally different.*

Eliza, 34, 5 years in Great Britain W\_6

The material here gathered reveals that direct personal experience of racist or xenophobic behaviour from the British was a rarity in London. Among the respondents it was only a sporadic circumstance. The most frequently reported stories were second-hand reports from friends or the media. The interviewees noted that the most difficult period was on and around the referendum itself. It was said that: *it was such an unpleasant time just after the referendum, my friend was accosted in a shop in a very ugly way (W\_2); there was some racist, xenophobic graffiti on the walls in a Polish centre, but there wasn't any physical violence in London (W\_9); sometimes there were "jokes" like "go home" said with a smile (W\_20)*. It is worth emphasizing that the interviewees stressed the significance of particular factors in London society: political correctness (a certain kind of communication norm governing interactions in London) and the general reticence characterising locals. There were frequent claims to the effect: *You'll never really know what they're thinking (W\_23)*. The attitude of political correctness may be partly the result of many years of experience of London's inhabitants with foreigners. We might say that it is a kind of social skill as well as a cultural feature.

Despite the small number of personal experiences of the interlocutors with racist and xenophobic attitudes, they concurred that outside of London Polish people encountered unpleasant situations much more often. Their opinion was that this was both due to the lack of cultural diversity in small towns, but also because the media honed in on any attacks concerning migrants. It was a hot topic, so your individual impression reacting to media reports became more sensitive and you attached more significance to these events and behaviour than before. Klara admits:

*When people were going on about Brexit, more attention was paid to this kind of behaviour. You know... when you read in newspapers, on Facebook, various articles showing*

*how people speak, "Get out of England" etc., I got the impression that... well I became more sensitive, but that was more because of the media, because actually no one told, "You're from Poland so go back to Poland."*

Klara, 40, 17 years in Great Britain, W\_7

Media reports about racist and xenophobic attacks were more frequent than they had been before the referendum, and they reported real events including a large number in London (Burnett 2016). Home Office data (2016), corroborated the post-referendum situation of migrants. Respondents however, declared a relative sense of security, to some extent in opposition to official data. Possible explanations of this discrepancy might be the size of a town from a demographic perspective (e.g. the population, degree of ethnic diversity) or a geographical perspective (its physical size). In contrast to smaller towns, events in large cities can be less "visible".

The attacks on Polish people that took place in London or in other parts of Great Britain were not the only effect of the referendum. On the one hand, the majority of the interlocutors believed that Brexit would not directly influence their daily living, in view of their stable economic position, familiarity with the local culture and their adaptation to emigration. On the other hand, they felt that Brexit could impact the perception of Polish people as a national group and on their subjective sense of their social position. The earlier common membership in the European Union, the "European citizenship" which in some way united Polish and British people, ceased to be an element of the sense of security of Polish migrants. In this context, some of the answers manifested the superdiverse character of London. Although a multicultural city, London is perceived as a place where the various national groups are treated differently by the British and as a result have differing economic or social opportunities in daily life (see. Vertovec, 2019, 2007). I asked the question: *How are migrant groups perceived in view of their ethnic origin and is there any noticeable difference in the treatment of these groups?* Many answered affirmatively and with considerable emotion.

*Yes! It all depends on how rich the group in question is. For example, Russians ... They are wealthy. If there is a Russian in London, then it is almost for sure that they are in the mafia or are connected to oil. The English treat rich people as culturally sophisticated people. As a nation of masters. Because if, for example, someone comes from Poland, then they will think "Oh I remember, Poles are the ones digging ditches."*

Mirek, 34, 5 years in Great Britain, W\_16

*For sure, minorities who are from the Commonwealth are in a better position – minorities who fought for England (...). If an Australian comes here ... speaks the language better, knows their way around the culture. It's easier for them. Or for those who come from an English-speaking country. Easier to get a job n'all. (...) Minorities who have been here for 3, 4, x generations are thought of as better. In the UK, Polish migration does not go back 3–4 generations. Whereas Indian, Chinese migration does.*

Wincent, 33, 8 years in Great Britain, W\_10

In these answers we can see that the interlocutors – inhabitants of London – perceive discrepancies in the social position of various national groups in economic, linguistic and cultural terms. However, we should note that the factor that appeared most often in this context was the length of time a migrant group has been in the UK – how rooted they are in British society. It is felt that post-accession migrants from Eastern Europe are not treated equally with other migrant groups and this situation came to the fore after the Brexit referendum. In recent years it is post-accession migration that has had the greatest impact on the structure of British society and has led to the most intense discussion on the acceptability of receiving such a large number of migrants into Great Britain. In this way the newest migrant groups became the subject of comparison with other more well-rooted groups.

When asked about potential changes to their own social status, the interlocutors expressed the opinion that on the day the referendum results were announced, besides shock and disbelief, they felt afraid about their future and ask themselves: Who am I really in this society? Andrzej was the only one of the participants who experienced a direct, verbal attack.

*I was en route to work outside London. I was insulted in a very dirty way, "fucking immigrant". Or: "Get the fuck out of this country." Employees spoke to me like that, to their boss. (...) She started to have a go at me... that I'm an immigrant, that she can feel what kind of accent I have... Later on, I felt regret... I thought to myself that I am not at that level I had thought, that for sure I had fallen a few steps down. (...) I am about to work in London again. I am very happy that my company is transferring me back again. That fact is comforting to me somehow.*

Andrzej, 37, 15 years in Great Britain, W\_1

Andrzej is very concerned about Brexit, in particular about the social mood that developed in British society with regard to Polish people. He is redefining his social status in terms of his professional position. He thinks that Brexit has revealed that his status as a migrant is stronger, in fact, than his professional position. He and many other respondents emphasized that they are honest inhabitants of the United Kingdom: they work, pay their taxes, are contributing to building this country. But it turned out that these arguments were not strong enough to alter attitudes towards migrants "under Brexit", especially among leave supporters. So, the anti-immigration attitudes that appeared after the referendum provoked fear, disappointment among the interlocutors and led them to question their own social status. We should also note Andrzej's satisfaction in his story at his imminent return to London. We can infer from this conversation that it is precisely the heterogenic working environment in London that gives him a sense of security as a migrant. In the interviews in general, there were many answers that the national and ethnic diversity in London was a reference point for many migrants that was associated with a sense of comfort, among others, in the context of belonging to the host society. The referendum results in London that



expressed pro-remain sentiments gave a sense of security to participants who said that in this city migrants are appreciated. One of the respondents said:

*I mean, as far as London goes, the whole of London was against Brexit. Here, émigrés are simply loved. It's not that ... migrants are disliked. That would be something if it were true!*

Sebastian, 40, 13 years in Great Britain, W\_9

Another participant adds:

*I was disappointed by the referendum results. (...) But I regained confidence from the fact that London voted against. I got a lot of comfort from the fact that London is for Remain.*

Eliza, 34, 5 years in Great Britain W\_6

The interlocutors stress that after the referendum results, they often received words of support from their workplaces. This support came in various forms. There were many texts in which British co-workers apologised or explained the results in order to ease the minds of the migrants and to convince them that they are an important element of society and the whole system. Another kind of support came from the HR departments of individual companies providing legal information with guarantees about keeping jobs and residence. Alicja works in a university. She says:

*At my work there were meetings with a lawyer which was also kind of nice. HR organised it. (...) We also got legal support, a large meeting where everyone could ask questions and where everyone really had the same questions: Can I stay? Or – How long can I stay? Can I still work?*

Alicja, 33, 13 years in Great Britain, W\_13

Regardless of their place of work, whether employing highly skilled or unskilled staff, many of the interlocutors spoke about this kind of support from their employers. This may be evidence of the level of awareness of the employing individuals and institutions that migrants are a key human and social capital for the entire city (Szczepański, Śliz 2011) and society. In his narrative, Marek illustrates how migrants are an important and large part of London. In virtue of the specific nature of his work, he is in touch with both highly skilled and unskilled staff.

*I am 100% sure that it would be impossible! Ethnic cleansing. In London it is practically impossible because, simply, there wouldn't be anyone left! There wouldn't be anyone left to work on the building sites. Our offices would be half empty. In every office in London there are many foreigners. I often travel for meetings to building sites, I meet architects, other professions and sometimes there is 10 people at the meeting and not one English. Here in London ... it is completely impossible that we would be in anyway threatened.*

Marek, 50, 12 years in Great Britain, W\_24

London's multiculturalism was a factor that gave interlocutors more confidence when faced with Brexit and was emphasized in many ways. It was frequently emphasized that a multicultural environment rarely, if ever, allows one to feel alien, because there are so many foreign inhabitants in London or people with accents. And this situation means that migrants feel they are part of this city. One of the interlocutors commented both on this peculiar nature of London and on the anti-immigrant sentiments that appeared across Britain:

*I mean, I think it is a feature of this country that if you're working then you've got people from Norway, China, Denmark, Poland, England and this is that so to say openness. I think that people in London are still open to migrants and this whole Brexit thing is built on the fears of those living in smaller towns or villages.*

Laura 38, 5 years in Great Britain, W\_11

In the narratives of the interlocutors, there is a lot of significance attached to one's place of residence and to the social structure of small and large towns, in the context of anti-immigrant sentiments in Brexit's Great Britain – especially in England where the greater majority of inhabitants expressed their wish to leave the European Union.

## Summary

The purpose of this article has been to provide an answer to the question "To what extent has the social mood and the social status of migrants in their own perception changed due to Brexit in the context of London's multiculturalism and superdiversity?" The Brexit referendum followed by the actual departure of the United Kingdom from the EU was a turning point for many migrants. It was certainly a key moment in their set of migratory experiences. The classic division into "we" and "them" or rather "ours" and "other" emerged in the UK with unexpected force (cf). Although most of the participants had not personally experienced attacks from opponents of migration in Great Britain, we cannot say that anti-immigrant feelings have not impacted them. The analysis of the material gathered leads us to three points that group our answer to the above questions.

First of all, the research was carried out using a qualitative approach. This revealed the character of the phenomenon under investigation and of the trends appearing in the narratives of the interlocutors. The tendencies which had a marked presence in the descriptions of the experiences and social reality of Polish migrants living in London concerned the significance of living in a multicultural city on the sense of security and psychosocial stability when faced with Brexit. The multiculturalism of the city is perceived as a positive factor impacting the well-being of migrants, their sense of belonging – but with regard to London and not to the entire country and the whole of British society. Taking into consideration the conception of social anchoring

(Grzymała-Kazłowska 2013) which represents the theoretical basis for the research, we may claim that the multiculturalism of one's place of residence may be listed among one's set of social anchors (points of reference and support) – anchors that provide settlement for migrants in cities that are ethnically and nationally diverse. Yet it is worth emphasizing that social anchors need not be permanent. An anchor that at some time is important in supporting adaptation, may at another time cease to play this role. In the process of Brexit, a city's multiculturalism seems to play a stabilising role.

Secondly, the interlocutors emphasized the clear boundary between opinions about London and small towns in the context of racist and xenophobic acts and the advancing anti-immigrant sentiments. London was perceived as a decidedly safer place with a much lower probability of these kinds of incidents. This means that marked cultural diversity positively impacts social attitudes towards migrants when faced with Brexit. However, we should emphasize that opinions on smaller towns were not based on personal experience. A proper consideration of this subject would require comparative research.

Thirdly, life in London, in view of its superdiversity, might feature distinct social hierarchies in terms of the perception of the status of Polish migrants in London society. On the basis of the interviews carried out, a connection between the social self-perception of Polish migrants facing Brexit and the superdiverse character of London in a negative way was not observed. Rather, being an émigré from Eastern Europe and from the European Union was more significant, broadly as a factor influencing one's sense of belongingness to the whole society and one's subjective perception of one's individual social status. Moreover, considering such a factor as the professional position of the interviewees, it was not noted that as a result of the referendum and the upcoming Brexit, their social status objectively has changed or it could be in risk. Rather, their stable professional position, paying taxes and being honest were perceived as an aspect that strengthened their status as members of London and the wider society.

When we consider the anti-immigrant sentiments felt across the whole of Great Britain and brought on by the referendum campaign and the referendum result, we may conclude that the multicultural, superdiverse character of London, at least for that moment, provided a kind of safety buffer for migrants in a changing social reality. Multiculturalism and the superdiversity in London seems to support the sense of security and social anchoring of Polish migrants.

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