

## **Uncertain Sunset Lives: British Migrants Facing Brexit in Spain**

### **Introduction**

The United Kingdom was well established in the twentieth century as a host country for labour immigration. However, although it received thousands of citizens from around the world, it also provided migrants, especially to the Commonwealth countries, but also to countries in the European Union. In fact, until 2000 the number of immigrants and emigrants in the United Kingdom was fairly balanced. From that moment on, the number of immigrants started to increase (Salt, 2011). A few years earlier, in 1992, the application of the Treaty of Maastricht had facilitated freedom of movement throughout the EU12, not only for workers as in the previous treaties but also for leisure, as well as guaranteeing the right to political representation and introducing, at least theoretically, European citizenship. Henceforth, the presence of British residents in other EU countries was more noticeable: first, on the Normandy coast (Drake and Collard, 2008), but also particularly in Mediterranean enclaves such as Spain, southern France, Italy or southern Portugal (King et al., 2000).

The motivation for these population movements was no longer work, as most of the new migrants were retirees. Among the reasons for migration, the most important were the climate, the pace of life and its positive effects on health, but also the economic advantages from living in a Southern European country while receiving a pension from a Northern one (King et al., 2000). Official statistics have underestimated the true migrant British population, because only those people who are effectively registered are included and it is widely acknowledged that part of this population is “off the radar” (Huete et al., 2013; Rodríguez et al., 2010). Thus, in 2018 it was estimated that the total British population in other EU countries was 784,900 (Office for National Statistics, 2018), although it can be fairly presumed that the total amount was higher. According to the Office for National Statistics, the majority are located in Spain (37%), France (19%) and Germany (12%). Within this scenario most of the Brexpat community could not vote in UK elections and referendum, having lost their right to suffrage after 15 years of residence abroad (Main, 2018). Hence, after 2016 a liminal period of high uncertainty began which will probably end when negotiations have concluded, in January 2021.

What are the consequences of Brexit for the British population living in Spain? In the following paragraphs we try to provide some answers, despite the uncertainty of this

process. In the face of uncertainty, our contribution is an analytical framework for thinking about the future based on what we do know about post-Brexit scenarios.

## **The Spanish Case**

The British population in Spain is divided between young people of working age, mainly concentrated in large cities (Madrid and Barcelona) and also in geographical areas with a high concentration of retirees, who are the other major group (Mantecón et al., 2016). In fact, the British population in Spain is the oldest demographic group of UK citizens in the EU (Benton, 2017). Most of the British community is settled in coastal enclaves of the Mediterranean, especially in a line stretching from the province of Valencia to Malaga, as well as the Balearic and Canary Islands.

In general terms, Britons tend to own the home where they live, although a significant proportion own a home in the UK (Giner-Monfort and Simó-Noguera, 2019). It could be said that most of them undertake an incomplete process of social integration within the host country, given the low numbers of Britons able to speak Spanish fluently (Gustafson and Laksfoss, 2017). In addition to a partial social and linguistic integration, we can also add a degree of isolation, as most live in housing developments or dwellings located far from the city centre, very often surrounded by other Britons or English speakers (Membrado et al., 2016). Two effects can be deduced from this reality: on the one hand, it facilitates an inward-looking integration process which takes place within the national group itself; on the other hand, it makes it difficult to perform daily tasks that require mobility. This has led to the emergence of care networks within the national group and also to the dedication of a significant part of the municipal budgets for social services to solve problems that arise amongst the British communities (Simó-Noguera et al., 2013). However, as indicated previously, given that some of the Britons live off the radar, there is a difficulty in solving urgent social and health situations and delays in their incorporation into local social services (Simó-Noguera and Giner-Monfort, 2012). In short, in most cases this population has engaged in a settlement process that is closer to tourism than to migration, with all the accompanying difficulties—but also the advantages—this can have on daily life (Huete and Mantecón, 2013).

Although sometimes the British community in Spain has sometimes been characterised as wealthy, situations of vulnerability are also very common, and if there is one group that is more vulnerable to the consequences of Brexit, it is the retirees. The current population of British nationals residing in Spanish territory is 250,392 people, of which

55% are 55 years old or more according to the National Statistics Institute. In general terms, their situation can be considered good, at least during the years when they are self-sufficient and can earn a living for themselves. Problems arise when situations of fragility or dependence occur within the household (Hall and Hardill, 2016; Hall et al., 2017). If these situations could be jeopardising before Brexit, they may be even more so after, due to the aforementioned mobility limitations.

Despite the emergence of Brexit, there has thus far been no mass exodus from Spain, but rather the opposite. Statistics show that the arrival of British citizens has continued to increase along with the purchase of properties (Giner-Monfort and Simó-Noguera, 2019). Regarding return movements towards the United Kingdom, although they have been increasing in recent years, it cannot be said that the threat of Brexit or its possible consequences have acted as a push factor for the British population.

### **Brexit and its consequences as far as we know**

After three years of high uncertainty, the withdrawal agreement approval in January 2020 was a relief for Brexpaters in the EU. Even though there are several terms to decide during the transition period, some of the main points of interest have already been agreed on, including those concerning individual rights and healthcare. The most probable impacts are summarised in table 1.

Table 1.

From our perspective, the obstacles that Brexpaters in Spain will face after 2021, depending on the final deal, are twofold: those linked with the freedom of movement and those dependent on economic factors. Both of them have consequences in terms of urban and regional development. As for the former, from the point of view of maintaining a transnational lifestyle, the onset of Brexit entails the emergence of more difficulties with borders, which did not exist before or were more moderate. For example, it is well known that Britons commonly engage in a transnational lifestyle with frequent visits to the UK or even working and living between the UK and Spain. This will become more difficult, expensive, and cumbersome. Depending on the final deal, flights will become more expensive, customs controls could be more stringent, and quarantine is contemplated in the case of transportation of live animals, such as pets. This may also affect the importation of certain goods from the UK, which may increase their cost depending on the trade agreement reached with the EU.

On the other hand, there are several economic consequences depending on which trade deal is adopted during the transition period. A no-deal Brexit would be dreadful for Brexpaths in the EU because every single product from the UK would increase in cost due to import tariffs. This would affect, for example, British supermarkets and services that are offered along the Mediterranean coast, especially in Alicante, Malaga and Murcia. Moreover, fluctuations in the exchange rate between the British pound sterling and the euro could affect retirees' pensions, allowances, and the wages of transnational workers. This would not only make it more difficult for them to buy a house in Spain, but also to rent or spend holidays, which would affect the Spanish real estate market, especially in Alicante and Malaga, which fundamentally depends on British buyers. Most of the economic predictions point to a decreasing British GDP after Brexit (Oliver, 2018), which would have consequences in terms of wage reductions, job cuts and limited access to credit. Even in the case of the triple lock, the revaluation of pensions is subject to currency exchange, which affected British retirees during the economic crisis (Sredanovic, 2020).

Brexit will involve the loss of individual rights, such as the right to reside, especially for those who cannot prove their long-term residence in Spain, such as those who live off the radar. It could also affect access to some professions in the public sector. However, one group that may see their future severely affected are the retirees. Those who were already registered before the end of the transition period will have their pension updated via the triple lock. Conversely, this is not guaranteed for people arriving in 2021 and beyond, depending on future negotiations.

The other major concern regards the healthcare system. It is well known that the Spanish Healthcare System is well regarded among the British community, especially the pensioners (Legido-Quigley et al., 2012). With Brexit, the right to receive free healthcare through the European EHIC card could be affected. This card covers aspects such as medication or pre-existing medical conditions. Coverage until 2021 is guaranteed and in the case of pensioners it is also guaranteed from 2021 onwards (Department of Health and Social Care and Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2020). Healthcare coverage for workers arriving after 2021 will depend on future agreements.

On the other hand, one of the minor changes that will affect British residents is the change of driving licence to a Spanish one, as British licences will only be valid to drive in Spain for a six-month period as of 1 January 2021 (Ministerio del Interior, 2020). There

are no changes regarding the municipal elections, both to vote and to be elected. In contrast, British residents will lose the right to vote in European elections.

These difficulties could affect the number of British retirees and pensioners arriving in Spain and may trigger a return migration towards the United Kingdom. The consequences a falling population, new customs controls and exchange rate fluctuation would especially affect the coastal economies: first, the real estate economy, particularly taking into account that Britons have historically been the foremost foreign property purchasers in Spain. Net population losses mean less buildings, less taxes and more unemployment, especially in the coastal areas, where the building industry represents up to 10% of the labour market. The decline in real estate development could also reduce public budgets since each new building represents an extra contribution to the public purse via taxes. Secondly, it would affect the hospitality sector, given the fact that the British are the foremost national group of tourists in Spain. With regard to the retail and services sectors, British businesses could be affected both by the loss of population and also customs controls (i.e., British oriented supermarkets and professionals such as plumbers, electricians, carpenters, etc.). Furthermore, municipalities and their budget depend on the number of people registered. If being registered is going to affect the pensions of those arriving after 2021, newcomers will prefer to live off the radar, resulting in a lower municipal budget to attend to their needs, such as health and social care for example. The population ratio would also affect other services like the police, public transport, cleaning or sports utilities. In general terms, the regional economies of several provinces could also be affected, especially those of Alicante, Malaga and Almeria, where registered Britons represent up to 4% of the population.

## **Conclusions**

One of the difficulties in predicting the problems of different Brexit scenarios is the rapidness of changes in circumstances, agreements, and legislation. This makes writing and research on Brexit prone to become out of date rapidly, be it academic, journalistic or legislative. In fact, at the time of writing this article, negotiations between the EU and the UK are still ongoing, with the latent threat of a no-deal on trade still looming.

This new reality between the transition period and the implementation of Brexit must be framed in a pre-existing dual crisis that has affected Spain in a differentiated way. To the impact of Brexit must be added, first, a financial crisis that has been affecting the country since 2008, alongside the health crisis caused by COVID19 that has also struck the

country hard. These events have caused a feeling of uncertainty amongst Britons living in Spain, who see how everything they had previously taken for granted (in terms of freedom of movement, future prospects, lifestyle, etc.) is now being called into question (O'Reilly, 2020).

It can be said that the implementation of Brexit will bring difficulties for the British population living in Spain, especially for the population of retirees and those in more vulnerable situations, including those in social isolation, suffering loneliness, low pensions or without a support network. It also can be said that it will be more difficult to return to the UK, especially for those who must reassert their right to stay and to receive healthcare. And finally, more troubles are expected in the field of economy, purchasing power and currency exchange. At the regional level, coastal enclaves where British migration is concentrated could face a loss of population, a decline in the building industry, and thus, less taxes to provide health and social care to a population with an increasing average age at a historical moment in which multiple crisis are putting the Spanish welfare state under pressure like never before.

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