

---

FT Magazine **Brexit**

## How two decades of EU migration went into reverse

Tens of thousands of foreign-born workers have left the UK. What does it mean for them, and for Britain?

**George Parker, Robert Wright, James Shotter, Andy Bounds, Judith Evans and Alice Hancock.** Data by **John Burn-Murdoch** APRIL 1 2021

---

Be the first to know about every new Coronavirus story

Get instant email alerts

Marcin Poltorak still has the one-way bus ticket that took him from Krakow, Poland, to Manchester in August 2004, aged 26. “The plan was to work for two years then go back and buy a house,” he recalls. Poltorak found a job in a slaughterhouse in the northern town of Clitheroe and, 17 years later, remains in the UK: “It was so much better here,” he says.

When prime minister Tony Blair opened Britain’s doors to workers from eight former communist states in central and eastern Europe that year, it was a [big decision with huge ramifications](#). Over the next decade, Britain’s economy and society were transformed by hundreds of thousands of arrivals from Poland, Lithuania and elsewhere. At its peak, the number of European migrants in the UK was by some estimates five million or higher, from a population estimated to be more than 66 million. London’s Victoria coach station was packed with people starting a new life and soon the country’s bars, hotels and farms spoke with different accents.

“We’ve got to be honest with ourselves,” Blair tells the Financial Times. “We pursued an open labour-market policy because, at the time, our economy was booming and we needed the workforce.”

---

Advertisement

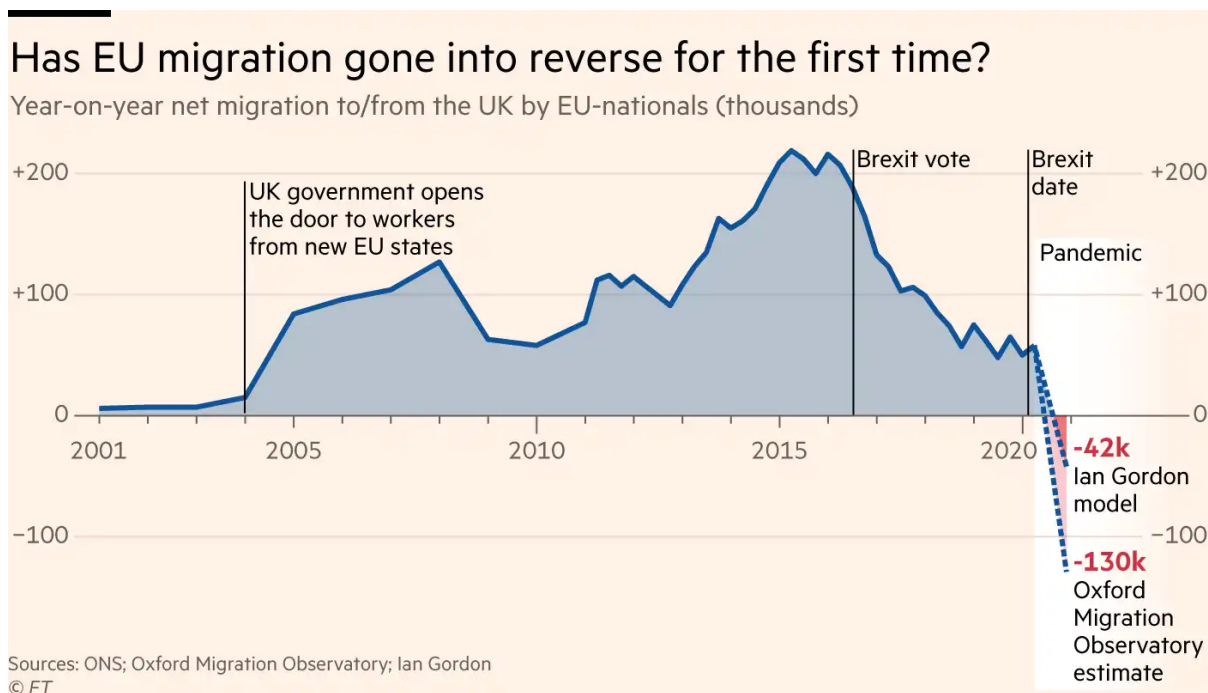
---

[The decision convulsed UK politics](#). According to Nigel Farage, former leader of the Brexit party: “That one issue had more impact on the political direction of the UK than any other political decision in recent years. No question about that.”

The after-effects of Blair’s move were still being felt by the 2016 referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU; in one poll, a third of Leave voters said their [main reason](#) for voting for Brexit was to control immigration.

Now, nearly two decades of migration into the UK appear to have reached another turning point and are going into reverse. The Brexit vote shook the faith of some immigrants in the country they called home, while the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a big return of workers after their jobs disappeared or were put on hold.

Over the past year, tens of thousands of workers at least have returned to their countries of origin or to other countries in the EU, according to academics’ calculations. Some claim the return migration is on a much bigger scale: “It’s an absolutely massive deal,” says Madeleine Sumption, director of the Migration Observatory at Oxford university, on the shift to net emigration.



Many of these people will come back when the British economy returns to life, but some will not. And for the companies that have come to depend on an apparently inexhaustible supply of foreign labour, a big change is coming as post-Brexit immigration rules kick in.

The FT has spoken to political figures involved in the immigration debate over the past 20 years, to those who left their homes to come to the UK — and to those who have now decided to go back.

This is the story of how one of Europe's largest peacetime migrations shaped a country and of the people who made their lives in Britain. It is an account of how those driven to seek work and a better life inadvertently found themselves in the Brexit maelstrom and the pandemic and of the calculations they are now making on whether to stay or to go.

**There are as many migration stories** as there are migrants and each person weighs up their life and their options differently. But the upheaval caused by the pandemic has led a growing number of people to ask themselves whether the costs of remaining in the UK are greater than the benefits.

Kasia Przybylo looks pained as she contemplates the question of returning to her native Poland. Since 2010, she has lived with her husband and children in Bedford, 45 miles north of London. But Przybylo, 48, explains that she is facing a dilemma.

Her parents are growing older and she misses her homeland. It would, however, be a big shift for her 10-year-old twins, born shortly after her arrival in the UK, to move from the English education system to Poland's. Her husband is happy with his job as a truck driver in Peterborough. Her own English is improving and her older daughter, 18, and son, 25, are determined to stay in the UK.



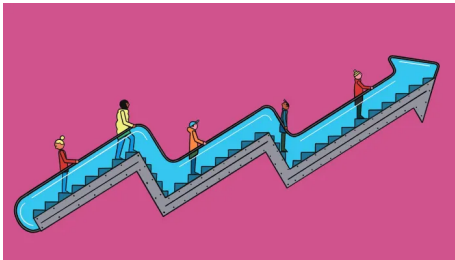
Newly arrived Polish people checking a board for jobs, London, 2005. At its peak, the number of European migrants in the UK is estimated to have topped five million © Piotr Malecki/Panos Pictures

In a sparse consultation room at the offices of PBIC, a group in Bedford that helps eastern European migrants, Przybylo says she has been thinking hard about leaving but, for now, the balance remains tipped in favour of the UK. “It would be a difficult decision because of my children,” she says. “I’m not thinking of going back to Poland now — but maybe in the future, when I retire.”

For others, the time to leave has already arrived. Michal — who declines to give his surname — moved to the UK in 2012, initially for an internship, before starting a career in technology in the financial sector. Like many people, he had frequently considered moving back, only to find reasons to stay.

Speaking to the FT from Krakow, he says: “I would say, ‘OK I’ll stay another year, because there’s a new opportunity, there’s a new company, I’m entering a different phase of life.’ It ended up being eight years. I was still considering staying a bit longer, but there were multiple things. Covid was one, Brexit was another. The [state of the] contracting market in the UK was another.”

## Are you under 35? Which issues concern you most?



We want to hear from readers aged between 16 and 35 on what life is like, and which problems need fixing most urgently. Housing? Education? Jobs? Pensions? The environment? Tell us about your experiences via a [short survey](#).

The arrival of the pandemic — with its switch to remote working, which meant that he could do his job from Poland — tipped the odds in favour of moving to Krakow, where he already had a flat.

Michal has a British passport, which means that returning to Britain would not be difficult. But now aged 30, and with a small son to look after, he says that the quality of life is just better. “It’s much cheaper, and we can live in the centre of Krakow, in a nice location, have a much bigger flat than we could afford in London, especially as we are in that stage of life when we are spending more time at home, and not just being all the time at galleries and sports events and so on.”

Another Pole who has left the UK is Piotrek Przyborowski. When the pandemic hit, he was in the final year of a degree in film production at York university. He was due to start a one-year masters in international journalism in London after graduation but, with the virus raging, decided to move back to his hometown of Poznan in western Poland in June to complete his studies remotely. “It just made more sense if we were only going to spend one day a week on campus,” he says. “Also, I would have been almost alone in London at that time, because all my Polish friends who were studying in London went back to Poland and my international friends from York also went home. So I just decided to go back home.”



Piotrek Przyborowski completed his final year at York university remotely from his hometown of Poznan in Poland, and has shelved plans to return to London for a masters © Kamila Lozinska

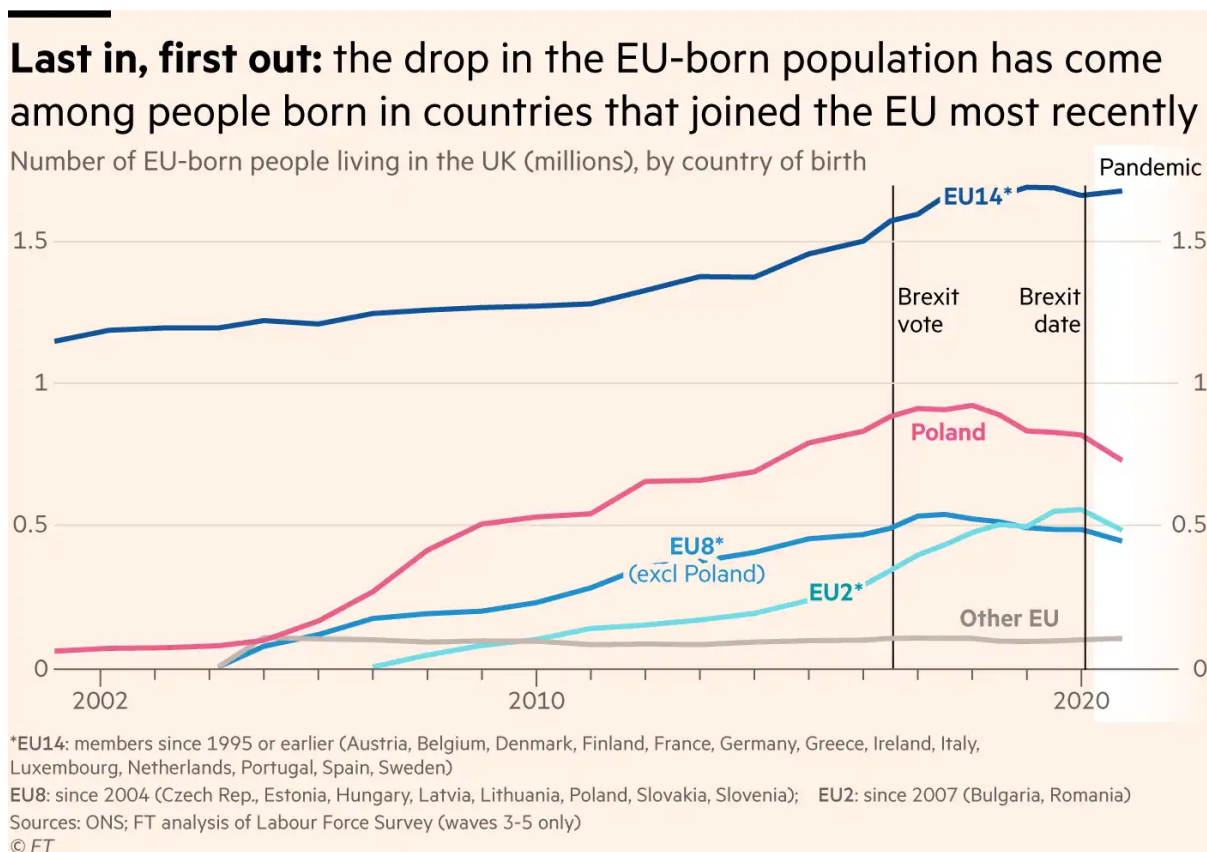
The day before he left York, Przyborowski applied for pre-settled status — the post-Brexit “right to remain” system for established EU migrants — to ensure that he had the option of coming back to the UK. But soon after returning to Poland he got an internship running the YouTube channel of Warta Poznan, one of the city’s football clubs. For now at least, he’s staying put. “It’s kind of a dream job,” he says.

**While stories of people leaving are plentiful**, experts have been peering through the muddiest of waters to decide how big the exodus has been overall. There is general agreement, however, that we have reached a historical turning point.

As recently as the year ending March 2020, **58,000 more** EU citizens arrived in the UK than left. The **peak inflow** occurred in the year to June 2016, when 189,000 more Europeans arrived in the UK than left. Now we know this has gone into reverse.

Figures are unclear, however. In March 2020, the government suspended the survey of passengers at ports and airports that provides the backbone of analysis of changes in the UK’s migrant population, and nearly every statistical tool used to check its results has been suspended or disrupted.

The highest estimate of the fall in the UK’s foreign-born population — by the government-funded Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence in January 2021 — suggested up to 1.3 million people born abroad (both EU and non-EU citizens) left the UK between the third quarter of 2019 and the same period in 2020. The **lowest estimate** — by Ian Gordon, emeritus professor of human geography at the London School of Economics — puts the outflow at 235,000, with 42,000 of those EU citizens.



Madeleine Sumption says all the evidence currently suggests a “substantial decrease” in the UK’s migrant population “for the first time in a long time”. “That in itself is something that absolutely no one would have anticipated a couple of years ago,” she adds.

She is reluctant to put a number on how many EU citizens she thinks have left, but estimates that they account for just under half the approximately 450,000 foreign-born citizens she calculates have left the UK. “Anything in the 100,000 to 300,000 range would be broadly plausible,” she says. In other words, it is as if most of the population of Cardiff had abruptly decided to leave the UK, and no one is sure when — or if — they will return.

**In 2004, globalisation was at its peak** and Britain was booming. Expansion of the EU was seen by successive British governments as a means of binding former communist states into the west. It was also seen as a way of diluting the influence of France and Germany. “Wider, not deeper,” ran the mantra in London. Little more than a decade later, that decision contributed to Britain’s own departure from the EU.

Farage was one of a small band of Eurosceptic MEPs who voted against the enlargement in 2004. “I turned to my colleagues and said that was the best day’s work we have done in our lives,” he recalls to the FT. Farage argues that, although they lost the vote, the Eurosceptics had helped to define the debate.

## Voters saw the impact [of immigration] on their daily lives — it was utterly decisive

Nigel Farage, former leader, Brexit party

In big cities, which generally voted Remain in 2016, the new arrivals from Europe after 2004 had added to the cosmopolitan buzz, while providing middle-class families with a ready supply of builders and cleaners. But elsewhere, particularly in rural areas, they put pressure on school places and health services. In Boston, Lincolnshire, for example, the town’s migrant population [quadrupled between 2004 and 2014](#); EU migrants are thought to make up

more than 10 per cent of the population and it had the highest Leave vote of anywhere in the UK.

All this helped make EU membership a big issue for many ordinary voters, and gave the Leave side leverage. “They saw the impact on their daily lives — it was utterly decisive,” says Farage.

Along with Sweden and Ireland, Britain was one of only three EU countries to open its labour market immediately, while others, including Germany, decided to apply controls on workers coming in for seven years. When Romania and Bulgaria joined the bloc in 2007, the UK did apply [a seven-year jobs freeze](#) on nationals from those countries.



Blair admits his government vastly underestimated how many people would come but defends the policy. He argues that since all EU citizens had the right to travel freely across the bloc, many Poles, Lithuanians, Czechs and others would simply have come to Britain and worked in the black economy: that is what happened in Germany, he says.



A Polish delicatessen in London, 2007. Restaurateur Jeremy King says EU migrants brought culinary expertise and culture to the UK: 'I call it the continental influence' © REUTERS/Agnieszka Flak

Critics say Blair wanted to import cheap labour to hold down prices and supercharge the British economy. "I don't think that's fair," he says, adding that many new arrivals were highly qualified. "It was only in particular areas where there's any evidence there was a downward pressure on wages." However, he does admit that, had he known how many people would come, he would have imposed "a lot more controls", for example limiting access to benefits or requiring people to find a job within a certain period of time.

Does Blair think people who left during the pandemic will come back? "I think for those people who left because temporarily their job had gone — which would be quite a significant number — they may come back," he says. "But they may find it more difficult to come back. And those people who left because they didn't feel welcome in Britain any more — I doubt if they will come back." What happens if they don't? "You just deprive yourself of a highly motivated group of people."

**Marcin Poltorak's story is typical** of the experiences of many who arrived in Britain after 2004. He joined friends at the Clitheroe slaughterhouse, sleeping on a mattress on the floor of a shared house and sending most of his earnings back home. "It was the hardest I have ever worked," he recalls.

By 2009, he had bought a house on a former council estate in Preston, a city of about 142,000 in the north of England. It contains touches of his homeland, such as wooden furniture and carvings from the Tatra mountains. His wife Alicja, who spoke no English when she arrived, now works in a sewing factory where almost the entire staff are Polish.



From left: Marcin, Karina, Kasper and Alicja Poltorak at their home in Preston, last month. Marcin says Britain has been good for him, but describes Brexit as 'a sad moment' © Christopher Nunn

The couple have two children, both born in the UK. "In England you work hard, you get a house, car, a foreign holiday once a year," he says. "It has been so good for me."

But the atmosphere around the Brexit vote soured the mood, admits Poltorak, who has worked as a go-between for the police and Preston's eastern European migrant community. As well as experiencing abuse in the streets, he recalls youths damaging a car and even setting fire to a hedge. "Brexit was a sad moment," he says.

Jakub Krupa, a journalist and board member of the POSK Polish Centre in London, says that Brexit was when many began to consider whether they really had a future in the UK: "That was the first moment where they were faced with the question, 'What do we do with this?'"

He adds: “For the first time in many years, people sat down and discussed all sorts of issues together. So the conversations, even if they were prompted by Brexit, were not necessarily about Brexit.”

Speaking to the FT, Sadiq Khan, London’s Labour mayor, argues that Brexit unsettled many migrants from the EU, describing migrant workers at City Hall as “traumatised not just by the Brexit result but by what happened next”. Some Brexiters contest claims that the 2016 referendum campaign — which had a heavy focus on migration — was responsible for an increase in reported hate crime. However, 10 police forces in the UK reported [an increase of more than 50 per cent](#) in the number of suspected hate crimes between July and September 2016, compared with the previous three months.

But it is the pandemic that has forced the hand of many migrants and left a cloud of uncertainty over [a British economy that has been hit harder](#) than any other in the OECD. With leisure, hospitality, culture, tourism and retail all frozen, Khan says people without jobs cannot afford to stay: “People have returned home to mum or dad, rather than paying high rents in London.”

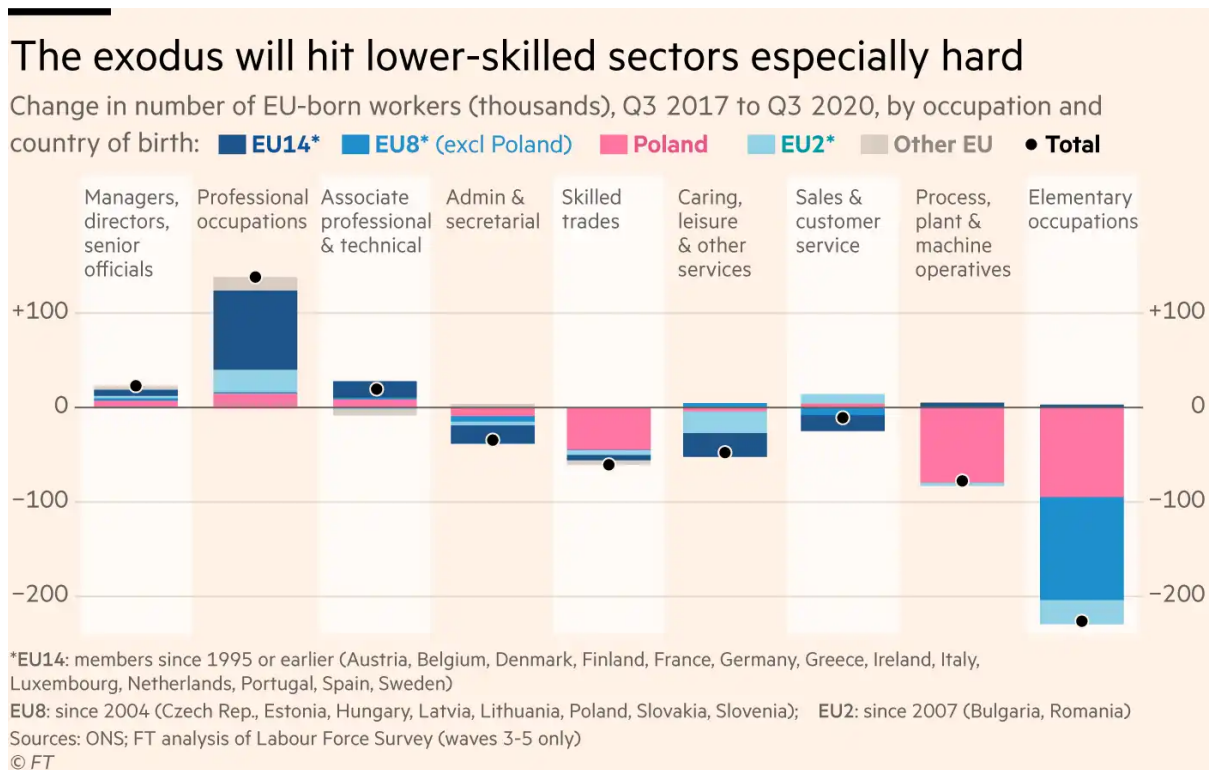
Although the mayor believes many will come back to the capital if they enjoy settled status — “they love London” — he fears for its services sector if they don’t; “It’s going to be difficult to fill those vacancies without EU citizens.”

**That raises a big question:** who will do these jobs if EU migrants won’t? Priti Patel, Conservative home secretary, argues that if Britain reduces the supply of labour from central and eastern Europe, then employers will have to recruit locally or provide training for the roughly one-fifth of Britons aged 16-64 classed as [“economically inactive”](#) — even though many of them are students, looking after families or long-time sick.

The challenge in the hospitality sector is particularly vivid. Just before the first lockdown, hospitality software provider Fourth analysed 4,000 businesses in the sector and found that just over two-fifths of their workers came from the EU, with the majority paid an average hourly wage of £8.85.

As lockdowns end, restaurants, hotels and pubs now face a sudden rise in demand but fewer staff to cope with it. The sector has about two million on furlough and “we simply don’t know how many will say ‘I’ve moved on’ or ‘I’ve moved home’,” says Kate Nicholls, head of trade body UKHospitality.

Ludovica Pilot, assistant manager at London pub Aragon House, says that recruitment is a growing concern among the managers of her pub company, City Pub Group: “We are aware of how many people have left the UK and gone back to Europe or found other jobs during the pandemic like become delivery drivers for Amazon [and] I’m sure that a lot of the European citizens might not come back. It’s definitely a big weight on our minds.”



Many operators in the sector are contemplating ways to encourage more UK nationals into hospitality careers, although multiple restaurant and hotel owners told the FT that, for whatever reason, many British-born workers don't feel that entry-level service-sector jobs are for them. "Past evidence would suggest that there is no appetite on the part of UK residents to be frontline staff, doormen, housekeeping," says Chris Mumford, a headhunter for hotels.

The problems are similar, albeit in a grander setting, for Jeremy King. He sits amid the empty tables at one of his restaurants — The Delaunay, on Aldwych in central London — and explains how his business thrived on the UK's previous open-door policy for European migrants. King, who set up the restaurant with his business partner Chris Corbin in 2011, says that before coronavirus, about 70 to 75 per cent of staff at The Delaunay and other restaurants in the Corbin & King chain were from mainland Europe.

**I think we will end up losing if we don't have those people coming in from Europe any more**

Tony Blair, former UK prime minister

The dark wood panels of the Delaunay's dining room make clear its debt to central Europe's grand café-restaurants and King, like many business people, insists that there was more to free movement than cheap, willing labour. "It's the expertise and it's the culture," he says. "While Britain has had this surge in culinary expertise and reputation over the last 30 years, I put it down in the majority to what I would call continental influence and support."

His staff now feel “disenfranchised, unloved and unwanted” in the UK, he adds. “We immediately lost a very high proportion of the Polish workers after the 2016 vote because a lot of the residents on the estates where they lived thought that was a mandate to harass and bully them and tell them to go home,” King says. “A lot of them did.”

**In other industries, the stakes are even higher.** Workers from eastern Europe have become integral to the UK’s food-supply chain. In food and drinks processing, about a quarter of workers are eastern European, according to the Food & Drink Federation.

Florin Flavius Luca, a 41-year-old from Romania, spent two years from 2014 to 2016 working night shifts at a factory near Sheffield, assembling pots of prepared food for sale in supermarkets for just above the minimum wage. Most of his colleagues were from eastern Europe.

“The work was not easy, you were working on a [production] line at speed,” he says. “You started with sauce and added meat and vegetables to the pots, then on the end there was a sealing machine. Everything was fast-paced and it was cold, minus two or minus four degrees.”

Luca moved to the UK seven years ago for his son’s education and had hoped to buy a home here. However, he gave up that dream after he was made redundant from the factory and later had to shutter a Romanian restaurant he opened.

He now expects to move back to Romania in a couple of years.

Trade groups and unions warn that, again, British-born workers don’t seem inclined to take up food-factory jobs. Before Brexit took effect, eastern European people accounted for almost all of the [70,000-80,000 seasonal farm workers](#) who each year gather the UK’s fruit and vegetable harvest, so farmers are also bracing for a year of deep uncertainty about recruitment.



Packers at a farm near Dorchester, 2020. Pre-Brexit, UK farmers relied heavily on seasonal workers from eastern Europe, and now worry about recruitment © ADRIAN DENNIS/AFP via Getty Images

When coronavirus blocked some overseas workers from travelling in 2020, farms held a campaign to attract UK workers, with [very limited success](#): just 11 per cent of workers last year were from the UK and many of those did not stick at harvesting for long. Of workers placed through Pro-Force, one big agency, fewer than 4 per cent were still employed by the end of the season.

A pilot scheme for seasonal workers, previously used to bring people to the UK from non-EU countries such as Ukraine and Belarus, has [now been expanded](#) in terms of numbers. This could bring in up to 30,000 overseas workers for the harvest, in a notable exception to post-Brexit rules, which prioritise skilled workers earning at least £25,600 a year.

Tom Bradshaw, vice-president of the National Farmers' Union, says farmers were “delighted” with the expansion of the pilot scheme, which previously allowed in 10,000 workers, but that the sector expects labour shortfalls in the future.

“The pool of EU workers [with settled status] will begin to exhaust itself,” says Bradshaw. “There is going to have to be a drive to recruit from the UK workforce — a much more targeted campaign.”

**If the UK is about to have its demographics reshaped** once more, hotels, pubs, farms, Catholic churches and schools could all look very different. Sumption says: “I think there are people who have left who will never come back. It’s a very important inflection point.”

Farage insists his campaign for Britain to take “control” of its borders was never about xenophobia. Despite the Leave campaign’s relentless focus on immigration, “The question wasn’t a racial one — it was a numerical one,” he says.

But Blair warns that the tone of the Brexit debate — and the aftermath of the decision to leave the EU — will hang over Britain. “Overall, I think we will end up losing if we don’t have those people coming in from Europe any more,” he says. “I think we’re going to struggle because there are many reasons why people have gone back. They’ve gone back partly because in countries like Poland there has been a very substantial rise in real wages. But they’ve also gone back, frankly, because they don’t feel so welcome.”

For those who have made their homes in Britain, decisions on what to do next are often bittersweet. The UK has been a source of adventure and work — and in some cases a bastion of liberal values compared to less tolerant regimes in countries such as Poland and Hungary. At the same time, their home countries have grown richer while they have been in Britain — and the post-Brexit rules make it harder for friends and family to join them.



Five years after arriving in Britain Marcin Poltorak bought a house on a former council estate. But he says that if he were in his twenties now he would not have had to come to the UK © Christopher Nunn

For Marcin Poltorak, Britain is home for his family and three Alsatian dogs. His 19-year-old son Kasper played youth football for Preston North End and is now a student in the city; his 12-year-old daughter Karina wants to be an actress. But he says that, after 15 years of EU investment in Poland, the UK no longer has the same allure for young Poles. “My region is now a tourist centre. There are great roads, cycle paths, restaurants. When I grew up, all people did was drink vodka.”

In a sign of progress, Poland itself is now a magnet for Ukrainians searching for a better life. Poltorak says: “If I was in my twenties now I would never have to come to the UK.”

But one day, he and his wife Alicja will head back to Nowy Targ, a town at the foot of the Tatra mountains, by car rather than coach — the reward of their labours. He smiles: “I am going to retire at 67 to a log cabin in the mountains for us and the dogs.”

*Follow [@FTMag](#) on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first.*

---

Advertisement

---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited  
2021. All rights reserved.