

Post-Brexit plans of the Bulgarian citizens in the UK

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Abstract

This report examines the underlying complexities in the decisions of Bulgarian migrant workers to remain in the UK or leave following Brexit¹. Based on an online questionnaire survey of 361 Bulgarian citizens working in the UK, comprising migrant employees/entrepreneurs, unemployed and those out of the labour force, in different regions in the UK, different age groups and professions in 2019, the report studies the implications of the Referendum outcome for migrants' experiences on the UK labour market, including the observable and perceived changes in attitudes of their colleagues, British people, employers and customers, where applicable. The data suggests that gender, age, length of stay in the UK and labour market integration are important determinants of the decision to remain in the UK or leave, either for Bulgaria or another destination.

Key words: Bulgarian migrants, UK, Brexit, host labour market integration

Introduction

The aim of this report is to highlight some of the intentions of the Bulgarian citizens, residing in the UK at the time of the survey, for changes in their place of residence, particularly their plans to return to Bulgaria after the official exit of the country from the EU. It should be noted that at the time of the survey, this date was set at 31 March 2019.

Bulgarian migrants' socio-economic position in the UK as well as their level of labour market integration and access to social services and state health support are considered the main factors shaping their intentions to leave the country following BREXIT.

¹ At the time of finalising this report, the UK and the whole world are being ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic. This has muddled the role of BREXIT in any return decisions, compounding the complexities involved through job losses as well as newly emerging shortages in the agricultural sector of the UK.

The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2017) estimated that 71,700 Bulgarian citizens were resident in the country between 2014 and 2016². In the same period, Bulgarians and Romanians made up approximately 11% of all EU citizens in employment in the UK. Of the Bulgarian citizens aged 16 to 64 years, resident in the UK, some 85% were employed, 2% were unemployed, 13% were economically inactive; 5% of them were inactive due to studies. The main employers for Bulgarians were the distribution, hotels and restaurants industry (employing 20% of Bulgarian citizens) and the construction industry, which employed 23% of the Bulgarian workforce in the country. One in five Bulgarian citizens were estimated to work in the construction industry (ibid).

According to the most recent data released by the ONS (2019), based on the Annual Population Survey (APS), in the period June 2018 - June 2019, Bulgarians ranked 24th among the 60 most common countries of birth in the UK. An estimated 16,000 of them were holding dual nationality, British-Bulgarian while 98,000 were Bulgarian nationals and 1,000 were Bulgarians of other nationality.

The EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) enables resident EU, other EEA or Swiss citizens, and their family members to obtain UK immigration status. The Scheme launched in full operation on 30 March 2019, following two testing phases. Approximately 150,000 Bulgarian citizens have applied for settlement or pre-settlement status (91% of the Bulgarians eligible to apply) (Home Office, 2020).

Sample and sampling strategy

An online survey of Bulgarians living and working in the UK for at least a year was conducted in the period February - April 2019. The questionnaire was designed to capture their demographic characteristics, experiences of life and work in the UK and their access to social support and health services, with a particular focus on the impact of the Referendum of June 2016. Multiple entry points and snowballing within these were used to access a diverse range of respondents. The link to the questionnaire was publicised through regional Facebook groups, Bulgarian community associations, language schools, ethnic shops, dance formations as well as personal contacts and cold calls in public spaces. Such a non-probability sampling strategy

² <file:/Living%20abroad%20dynamics%20of%20migration%20between%20the%20UK%20and%20the%20EU2.pdf>

excludes the possibility for a representative sample of the Bulgarian population in the UK. Nevertheless, the utilisation of a wide spectrum of contacts and access routes to respondents has compensated to a great degree for the lack of sample randomness. The final sample includes respondents with a diverse range of socio-demographic characteristics in terms of regions of residence in the UK, citizenship status, age, education and duration of stay in the country as well as labour market status (e.g., students, employees, self-employed and out-of-the labour force).

A section in the questionnaire focused on the labour market integration of the respondents, distinguishing between employees, self-employed and those out of the labour force. Employees were asked questions about their sector of employment, position and work conditions i.e., hours of work, monthly income, their employer's nationality, career development, time spent on the job alongside job and income satisfaction. Self-employed respondents were asked about the nature of their business as well as the time of operation in the UK. Those who were unemployed at the time of the survey were asked questions about their last job, their access to state support and satisfaction with it and, the duration of unemployment. Inactive individuals were asked about their reasons for being out of the workforce, their length of inactive stay and main source of income. All respondents, where applicable, were asked questions about their experiences of changes towards them in the attitudes of local people, colleagues, employers and clients, following the Referendum of June 2016 and the BREXIT negotiations with the EU at the time.

Profile of the sample

The final sample comprised 361 respondents, with partially or fully completed questionnaires. Some of them were reluctant to answer questions on income, work, immigration status and their plans for leaving or staying in the UK after BREXIT.

Table 1 below presents their main socio-demographic characteristics. The majority (just under $\frac{3}{4}$) of the responders were women. The age distribution was even in the 25-54 age groups and over 10% of the participants were under 24 years of age. There were no particular differences in the age distribution between men and women, with the exception of the 25-34 age group, which included 40% of the men surveyed and 24% of the women. Nearly 10% of all women (n=24) were over 55 years of age compared to only three men in this age group. It seems

that women in this age group are more likely than men to use social media and participate in online surveys.

About 60% of the respondents had completed University education (of them, almost two thirds were women), ¼ - secondary specialized education, nearly 15% - secondary education and less than 1% were of lower educational level. The majority of respondents (80%) had completed their education in Bulgaria and 18% in the UK. The variable on ethnic origin won't be included in the analysis as only a fraction of the respondents (5%, n=18) self-identified as ethnic minority Bulgarians. Twelve of them were Bulgarian - Turks, three - Bulgarian-Roma and another three of 'other' Bulgarian origin.

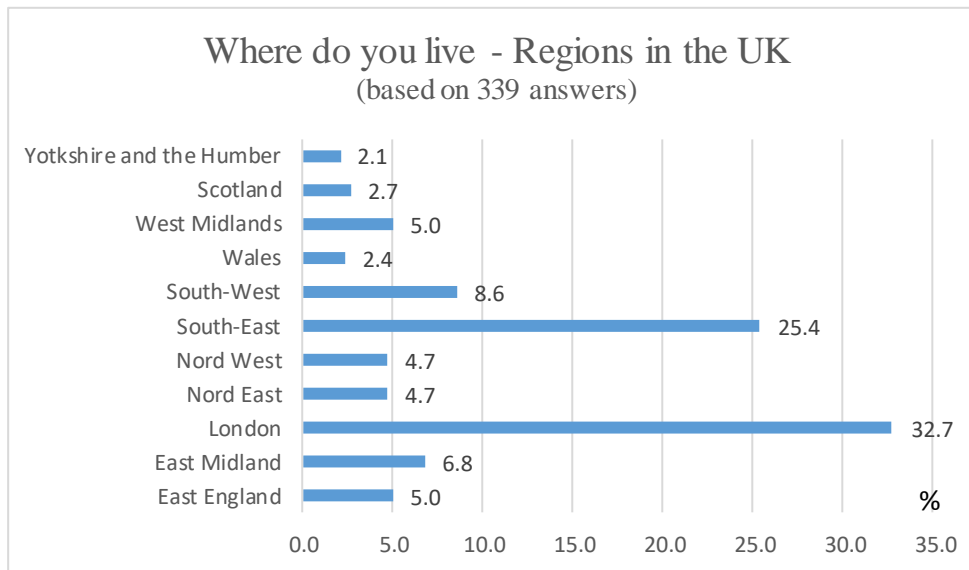
Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics

		Number	%
Gender	Male	97	26.9
	Female	258	71.5
	Prefer not to say	5	1.4
	No answer	1	.3
Age Group	18- 24	40	11.1
	25-34	101	28.0
	35-44	104	28.8
	45-54	85	23.5
	55+	28	7.8
	No answer	3	.8
Highest Level of education	No formal or primary education	3	.8
	Secondary	53	14.7
	Secondary vocational	87	24.1
	University degree	128	35.5
	Post-graduate (MSc., PhD, Post Doc)	89	24.7
	No answer	1	.3
Country where education was obtained	Bulgaria	286	79.2
	UK	65	18.0
	Other country	9	2.5
	No answer	1	.3
Ethnic origin	Bulgarian	343	95.0
	Bulgarian-Turkish	12	3.3
	Bulgarian-Roma	3	.8
	Other	3	.8

Source: Online survey, February - April, 2019

The respondents in the sample were residing in all regions of the UK, except Northern Ireland (Figure 2). Most of them were in London (about 1/3) and the South East of England (25%).

Figure 2. Region of residence in the UK



Source: Online survey, February-March 2020

All respondents were asked questions about their immigration status in the UK and their expectations about the implications of Brexit for job security, political change, immigration procedures, currency fluctuations, deteriorating attitudes of employers and British citizens. Respondents were also given the opportunity to point out other consequences that they expected to see after the UK's exit from the EU. Particular emphasis was placed on their plans after BREXIT - whether to stay or leave the UK, whether they intend to change their place of residence and work, and whether they intend to apply for British citizenship. In light of the purpose of this report, it is also of considerable interest to answer the questions regarding their plans to return to Bulgaria or settle in another, third country.

Bulgarians in the UK and their position in the British society

The majority of the respondents in the sample (95%) had resided in the UK for more than two years. Some 30% had been in the country for over 10 years, 24% - between six and 10 years and 42% - between two and five years. About three fourths of the respondents were living with their families and 28% of them were living with young children, under 18 years of age.

Moreover, of the 120 who answered that they had underage children, 100 were living with them in the UK. Of all respondents, 54 (15%) answered that they lived in their own homes and $\frac{3}{4}$ - rented by a private owner. Nearly $\frac{1}{3}$ declared that they had an excellent level of English (written and spoken); only 17% indicated basic written English and 14% - basic spoken English.

Over half of the respondents (53%) confirmed that they participated in the last three years, personally or by a member of their family, in various forms of educational services - primary, secondary or secondary vocational school, college, university, language and other courses. Over the same period, more than two thirds of the study participants or their family members visited their GP at least once and more than 15% - five or more times. Half of the respondents used other health services and 18% used social services for them or their families.

Crucially important for the integration of Bulgarians in the UK is their participation in the labour market. Of the 329 respondents, two-thirds were employed and 21.5% were self-employed. The unemployed were 8.2% and out of the workforce - 2.4%. This means that about 90% of all respondents in the survey were employed in the UK at the time of the research. The breakdown by major socio-demographic characteristics and by labour market status is shown in Table 2. As expected, the distribution by age and employment status indicates that most individuals who were outside the workforce or unemployed were young, below 24 years of age. They were more likely to be still in the education system or to have recently graduated. Similarly, the share of the unemployed was highest among the graduates of secondary specialized education and those who had received their education in Bulgaria.

Quite expectedly, there were significant differences in the employment status of respondents who had been in the UK for a year or less compared to those who had been in the UK for a longer period. In the first group, the unemployed were 28% and out-of-the workforce - 7%, which was almost 3.5 times higher compared to all respondents (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of respondents by employment status and socio-demographic characteristics

Socio-demographic Characteristics		Employment Status (%)			
		Employee	Self-employed	Unemployed	Out-of-the work force
Total		67.5	21.9	8.2	2.4
Gender	Male	66.7	24.1	8.0	1.1
	Female	67.4	21.2	8.5	3.0
	Prefer not to say	80.0	20.0	-	-
Age group	up to 24	60.0	5.7	17.1	17.1
	25-34	77.8	15.6	5.6	1.1
	35-44	67.0	28.9	3.1	1.0
	45-54	65.4	22.2	12.3	-
	55+	45.8	41.7	12.5	-
Highest level of education	No formal or primary education	66.7	33.3	-	-
	Secondary	66.7	22.2	4.4	6.7
	Secondary vocational	54.5	28.6	14.3	2.6
	University degree	71.8	20.5	6.8	0.9
	Post-graduate (MSc., PhD, Post Doc)	73.3	17.4	7.0	2.3
Country where education was obtained	Bulgaria	64.3	23.6	10.1	1.9
	UK	75.8	17.7	1.6	4.8
	Other country	100.0	-	-	-
Total number of years in the UK	≤1 year	42.9	21.4	28.6	7.1
	2-5 years	70.4	17.6	9.2	28.0
	6-10 years	65.5	28.7	5.7	
	More than 10 years	68.6	22.1	5.8	3.5

Source: Online survey, February - April 2019

Bulgarians' experiences of the consequences of Brexit and their plans for leaving vs. staying in the UK

Of the 361 respondents in the sample, 224 said they had been in the UK during the EU Referendum on 22 June 2016, and 74 had arrived in the country after that date. The remaining 63 did not respond. It would be insightful to find out whether Bulgarians who were in the UK at the time of the Referendum had noticed any changes towards them by employers, colleagues, clients and the British public.

The results show that the majority of the respondents (over 70%) did not notice any changes in the attitudes of employers, clients and colleagues. About 55% did not notice any changes in the attitudes of the British public. As far as any changes were noticed, these were articulated as "rather unsupportive", with this tendency being particularly pronounced in their interactions with British citizens - about one fourth of the respondents answered that they had noticed negative changes in the locals' attitudes towards them (Table 3).

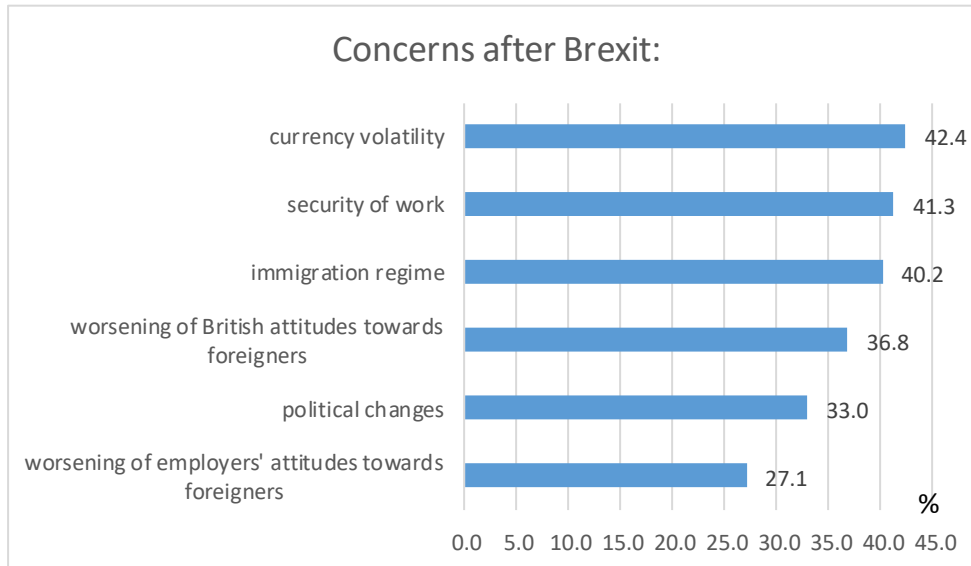
Table 3. Attitudes towards the Bulgarians in the UK after the Referendum (in %)

	<i>If you were in the UK at the time of the Referendum, have you noticed any changes in the attitudes of:</i>			
	Employers	Colleagues	British people	Clients
Yes, supportive	3.1	2.3	5.4	3.2
Yes, neutral	4.9	3.2	9.0	2.3
Yes, unsupportive	12.1	11.1	25.3	9.5
No	71.4	75.5	54.8	69.7
No answer	8.5	7.9	5.4	15.4

Source: Online survey, February - April, 2019

Overall, even though they did not feel much change in attitudes towards them after the Referendum, the expectations of the Bulgarians were for changes in social, economic and political terms. Figure 3 shows the relative proportions of those who answered positively that they expected changes in the respective areas. The largest share (over 40%) of those surveyed had concerns about changes in the exchange rates, job security and the immigration procedures. About one third said that they expected the attitudes of the British people towards foreigners to worsen and unfavourable political changes to come. Slightly over a quarter of respondents (27%) indicated that they expected a deterioration in the attitudes of employers towards foreigners.

Figure 3. Concerns after Brexit



Source: Online survey, February - April, 2019

It would be interesting to find out which socio-demographic groups were more likely to expect change. Table 4 summarizes the relative proportions of those identified in different groups. Where are the biggest differences? First of all, more men than women had indicated job security, political changes, changes in the exchange rate and the immigration regime.

Older respondents were less likely to be concerned about job security, political changes or a deterioration of the employers' attitudes towards them. More than 50% of the graduates from UK Universities said that they expected political changes, changes in the exchange rate and the immigration regime, as well as a deterioration in British attitudes towards foreigners.

In terms of the length of stay in the UK, there is evidence to suggest that those who had resided in the country the longest were the least likely to expect any changes following Brexit. This could be interpreted to some extent as an indicator that they felt well integrated and were not concerned about social, political or economic consequences. It is expected that the unemployed would be more likely to expect job insecurity for migrants and a deterioration in employers' attitudes.

Table 4. Distribution of respondents by their concerns after Brexit and socio-demographic characteristics (in %)

Socio-demographic Characteristics		Concerns after Brexit					
		Security of Work	Political Changes	Immigration Regime	Currency Volatility	Worsening of employers' attitudes towards foreigners	Worsening of British attitudes towards foreigners
Total		41.3	33.0	40.2	42.4	27.1	36.8
Gender	Male	45.4	40.2	44.3	48.5	28.9	40.2
	Female	39.5	29.5	37.6	39.9	25.6	34.5
	Prefer not to say	40.0	60.0	80.0	40.0	60.0	80.0
Age group	up to 24	42.5	50.0	57.5	40.0	45.0	40.0
	25-34	46.5	33.7	41.6	47.5	26.7	41.6
	35-44	37.5	29.8	32.7	43.3	26.9	29.8
	45-54	45.9	29.4	35.3	41.2	20.0	36.5
	55+	25.0	25.0	53.6	28.6	28.6	46.4
Highest level of education	No formal or primary education	33.3	-				33.3
	Secondary	43.4	32.1	45.3	41.5	26.4	35.8
	Secondary vocational	54.0	40.2	39.1	41.4	32.2	39.1
	University degree	30.5	28.1	35.9	45.3	25.0	32.0
	Post-graduate (MSc., PhD., Post Doc)	42.7	34.8	46.1	41.6	27.0	42.7
Country where education was obtained	Bulgaria	40.9	28.7	38.5	40.2	26.6	33.9
	UK	38.5	53.8	50.8	53.8	32.3	50.8
	Other country	70.0	20.0	20.0	30.0	10.0	30.0
Total number of years in the UK	≤ 1 year	64.3	28.6	42.9	42.9	28.6	57.1
	2-5 years	43.3	30.7	45.3	43.3	28.7	38.0
	6-10 years	44.3	34.1	37.5	47.7	34.1	43.2
	10+ years	33.0	35.8	34.9	36.7	19.3	27.5
Employment status	Employee	45.0	35.1	41.0	48.6	27.5	37.8
	Self-employed	31.9	30.6	45.8	37.5	30.6	45.8
	Unemployed	70.4	40.7	44.4	44.4	37.0	40.7
	Out-of- the work force	50.0	75.0	75.0	37.5	37.5	50.0

Source: Online survey, February-April, 2019

Attitudes towards leaving the UK after Brexit

The main theme of this study was to reveal the respondents' attitudes towards changes regarding leaving the UK after Brexit as well as about changing their jobs and their place of residence. Of all the respondents to the question "*After the UK exists from the EU, do you plan to stay in the UK?*", almost two-third answered "yes" and "rather yes", and only 12 answered in the negative.

About 14% did not decide at the time of the survey and another 18% did not respond (Table 5). This shows that despite the changes that respondents were expecting to one degree or another as well as the changes in their attitude after Brexit, they were not inclined to leave the UK. Moreover, the majority of the respondents did not intend to change their place of employment and their place of residence. which shows that the Bulgarians were well integrated and the expected political, social and economic changes would not greatly affect their current life.

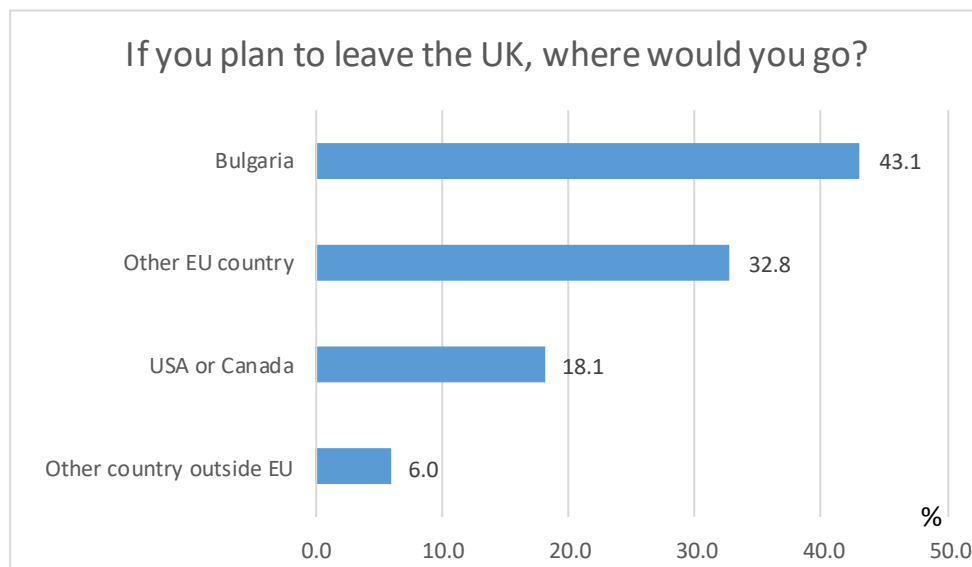
Table 5. Intentions to leave the UK after Brexit

	<i>After the UK exits from the EU, do you plan to stay in the UK?</i>		<i>Do you plan to change your current job?</i>		<i>Do you plan to change your place of residence?</i>	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<i>Yes, for sure</i>	139	38.5	30	8.3	14	3.9
<i>Perhaps yes</i>	94	26.0	32	8.9	23	6.4
<i>I have not decided yet</i>	50	13.9	68	18.8	57	15.8
<i>Perhaps no</i>	8	2.2	63	17.5	95	26.3
<i>No, for sure</i>	4	1.1	37	10.2	43	11.9
<i>No answer</i>	66	18.3	131	36.3	129	35.7
Total	361	100.0	361	100.0	361	100.0

Source: Online survey, February - April, 2019

It is of particular interest to analyze the answers to the question "*If you plan to leave the UK, where do you plan to go?*". Some 64% answered this question and the remaining 36% did not answer. Of those who answered, 43% said they were returning to Bulgaria. About a third of those leaving the UK said that they were planning to move to another EU country and 18% were planning to move to the US or Canada. Only 6% indicated other non-EU countries as their next destinations (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Intended designations after leaving the UK



Source: Online survey, February - April, 2019

Who are the Bulgarians in the UK? Who, if they leave, would return to Bulgaria? Firstly, it should be noted that with the increase of age and residence in the UK, the proportion of those who would prefer to move to Bulgaria increases. Nearly three-fourths of the Bulgarians over 55 years of age and half of those who had resided in the UK for over 10 years had indicated Bulgaria as a country they would live in. Also, 58% of the self-employed and 63% of the respondents with secondary education indicated this possibility. It is expected that those who had been educated in Bulgaria would be more likely to return than those who had been educated in the UK or a third country. It could be concluded that younger and better educated individuals who had resided in the UK for five years or more were less likely to move to Bulgaria. This would mean in practice that, despite state efforts to attract young professionals back to our country with the help of various incentives, this measure would still be not very popular among the Bulgarian respondents in the UK (Table 6).

Table 6. Distribution of respondents by their intended destination after leaving the UK and socio-demographic characteristics (in %)

Socio-demographic Characteristics		If you plan to leave the UK, where would you go?			
		Bulgaria	Other EU country	USA or Canada	Other country outside EU
Total		43.1	32.8	18.1	6.0
Gender	Male	39.7	34.9	19.0	6.3
	Female	44.2	31.9	17.8	6.1
	Prefer not to say	40.0	40.0	20.0	-
Age group	18- 24	43.8	25.0	21.9	9.4
	25-34	34.8	37.7	21.7	5.8
	35-44	42.4	33.9	16.9	6.8
	45-54	44.4	33.3	16.7	5.6
	55+	76.5	17.6	5.9	
Highest level of education	No formal or primary education	-	-	100.0	-
	Secondary	63.9	16.7	13.9	5.6
	Secondary vocational	44.6	32.1	17.9	5.4
	University degree	37.2	35.9	20.5	6.4
	Post-graduate (MSc., PhD, Post- Doc)	37.7	39.3	16.4	6.6
Country where education was obtained	Bulgaria	46.7	30.4	16.8	6.0
	UK	31.0	35.7	26.2	7.1
	Other country	16.7	83.3	-	-
Total numbers of years in the UK	≤ 1 year	20.0	30.0	40.0	10.0
	2-5 years	39.6	35.1	19.8	5.4
	6-10 years	46.9	28.1	20.3	4.7
	more than 10 years	51.1	34.0	6.4	8.5
Labour market status	Employee	38.8	37.5	16.9	6.9
	Self-employed	58.3	22.9	16.7	2.1
	Unemployed	43.8	18.8	31.3	6.3
	Out-of-the work force	20.0	20.0	40.0	20.0

Source: Online survey, February - April, 2019.

Conclusions

This report examined Bulgarian's experiences of Brexit and their intentions to change their place of work and residence, particularly their plans to return to Bulgaria, following the country's official exit from the EU. The results showed that the majority of the respondents did not notice any significant differences in the attitudes of employers, colleagues, clients and local people. Where any such differences were reported, these were articulated as "rather unsupportive". Gender variations were observed in the reported concerns following Brexit. More men were worried about job security, unfavorable political changes and changes in the exchange rate as well as tightened immigration controls. Our data suggested that those who had resided in the country the longest were least likely to expect any alterations following Brexit. Two-thirds of the sample were hoping to remain in the UK after the country's departure from the EU. Older Bulgarians, who had spent years away from their home country, were most likely to consider repatriation.

At the time of finalising this report, the UK and the whole world are being ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic. This has muddled the role of Brexit in any return decisions, compounding the complexities involved through job losses as well as newly emerging shortages in the agricultural sector of the UK. Future research should focus on these issues whereby it keeps up with the dynamics of our current times.

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