14 "Am I welcome in this country?" - Expatriation to the UK in times of BREXIT and its "hostile environment policy"
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INTRODUCTION

Deciding to work abroad and live an international life away from one's home country is not an easy task in itself. Expatriates are driven by many motivational factors such as an exciting new culture to experience, new professional challenges and opportunities, and a whole new world. When expatriates decide to embrace this new chapter in their lives, they will probably expect a positive and welcoming attitude from this new country they want to call "home". Why would this not be the case? After all, they regard themselves often as able to substantially contribute to their new home. However, what if living abroad is not turning out how they envisaged this? Many expatriates actually do not feel as welcome in their new country – Many feel that the host country does not actually seem to want them. Could it be that a country, such as the United Kingdom, that might be seen as a top expatriate destination from professional and multiculturalism points of view, actually suffer from a diminished reputation in the eyes of some expatriates due to recent political events? Could such a development make these foreign professionals reconsider their international experience?

In this chapter, we will discuss expatriation to the United Kingdom and the feeling of being unwelcome related to the country's "hostile environment policy". This potentially unwelcoming new immigration policy was already in place before the United Kingdom's (UK) exit from the European Union (BREXIT). This policy might have been developed to target a particular group of illegal immigrants, but its implications are affecting a much larger pool of internationals – including expatriates. Expatriates are legal workers temporarily residing in a foreign country pursuing a career-related objective They have relocated internationally either with the support of an organisation, as a self-initiated move, or have been hired directly in the host country (McNulty & Brewster, 2017).

Currently there is a scarcity of research addressing the issues of how expatriates might be threatened by such institutional changes and narratives (Sedes et al., 2022). Thus, this chapter aims to contribute to this timely and emerging discussion on the impact these policies may have on expatriates and their perception of their host countries.

With the view to explaining why the UK's hostile environment policy was originally created and how it is being applied, we first must define what we consider as a "hostile" environment in this chapter. Then, we will look at real-life stories and experiences of expatriates in England, as well as their views on this expatriate-hostile environment policy and what it means for their experience in

the country. Finally, we will compile recommendations for individuals and organisations on how to combat these hostile threats arising from the government and the country's society.

HOSTILE HOST ENVIRONMENTS TO EXPATRIATES

Characterising an environment as being "hostile" generally means that the environment is considered as being difficult or unsuitable for someone to live in. This difficulty can, for example, be related to a "hostile" or "unfriendly" reception (Cambridge dictionaries, 2020). This chapter looks at hostile environments from the perspective of expatriates, more specifically, at their perceptions of their host country's "hostile" characteristics.

Expatriation literature discusses different categories of hostile host environments and their characteristics. One category includes physically hostile environments, such as countries with high-levels of "human-made threats" stretching to conventional crime and terrorism (e.g., Faeth & Kittler, 2017; Harvey et al., 2019; Stoermer et al., 2017). A subsequent category consists of psychologically hostile environments, where different forms of discrimination are felt by expatriates for various reasons such as their nationalities and cultural characteristics, gender, race, and sexual orientation (e.g., Altman & Shortland, 2008; Moeller & Maley, 2017; Napier & Taylor, 2002; Rodriguez & Rigway, 2018). another category is concerned with institutionally hostile environments, which are comprised of multiple forms of threats such as legal barriers and hostile regulations towards expatriates (e.g., Fee et al., 2019; Forstenlechner, 2010; Mujtaba & Cavico, 2012; Paetkau, 2009).

A "hostile host environment" to an expatriate does not imply that one form of threat will be exclusive from the other. On the contrary, it is common that multiple hostile threats are present in a singular environment, sometimes interacting with one another. This is the case when we look at the UK through a "hostile host environment" perspective, in the light of its own "hostile environment policy". The institutional threats to be discussed in this chapter are centred in the country's Home Office[7]'s "hostile environment policy", its detailed regulations and constitutive national-level narrative "against (certain) immigrants". These are further unpacked to also include psychological threats related to discrimination due to an individuals' "foreigness" (e.g. nationality(ies) and foreign characteristics). This is related to the government's national level "hostile" narrative, but is seen in individual interactions between certain host country nationals and expatriates.

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[7] "The Home Office is the lead government department for immigration and passports, drugs policy, crime, fire, counter-terrorism and police" (Home office, n.d.).

THE UK'S HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT POLICY AND BREXIT

The UK has a long history of foreign individual immigration. Accentuated within the last 30 years by the country's population in 2019 comprising over 14% of foreign-born individuals. Of these, 38% came from other EU countries (Migration observatory, 2020), as at that time the UK was still part of the EU. According to the Migration Observatory (2020), by 2019 the main reason for non-EU nationals to immigrate to the UK was for family (49% of them). By 2019 a similar percentage (48%) of the EU population who moved to the UK that year, moved for work (Migration Observatory, 2020), taking advantage of free movement within EU countries and no work visa requirements.

Among the UK's foreign-born population, expatriates are an important part of it. Although usually motivated by work, expatriates are also commonly driven by personal goals such as experiencing a new culture (Arifa et al., 2021). The UK has historically been an attractive country to expatriates coming from a variety of countries. However, this attractiveness has seemingly diminished in the past decade, after the country's government developed a "hostile environment policy" relating to immigration to the UK. From the aforementioned European context, as argued by Sedes et al. (2022), this has threatened the relocation of EU self-initiated expatriates (SIEs[8]) to the UK and has raised a lot of uncertainties for EU SIEs residing in the UK prior to the referendum.

Over 10 years ago, during Teresa May's role in the Home Office, the UK began working with the narrative of "removing (foreign) people who should not be here" (Yeo, 2018, p. 2). This is when it developed a "hostile environment" immigration policy that preceded the country's exit from the European Union (BREXIT). Despite the government's allegation that they only wanted to create a "really hostile environment" to irregular immigrants, research has already shown that this policy is having effects beyond illegal immigrants and might incentivise discrimination against other types of foreigners (such as expatriates) and ethnic minorities (Holloway, 2018). Theresa May made an interesting comment in a speech delivered in 2016 saying that *'if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere'*. It seems that this institutional change might have indeed also targeted a more elitist type of international worker - such as SIEs (Sedes et al., 2022) and other types of expatriates.

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[8] Individuals who expatriate to another country on their own initiatives, for personal and professional purposes (Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

THE RISE OF THE PERCEPTION OF AN "UNWELCOMING COUNTRY" TO EXPATRIATES

Recent literature has already provided arguments for implications of the policy to foreign-born individuals, beyond illegal immigrants, as was initially intended with the policy development. Redclift and Rajina (2021, p. 208) argued that BREXIT's institutional threats and host government's narrative might lead to foreigners (both legal and illegal in the host country) "being made to feel 'unwelcome', or having life become so difficult, that returning to Bangladesh is the only option". This was also stressed by Jones et al. (2017) who argued that soon after the vote, several reports were distributed around social media and the press of British Muslims being told to '*go home now*'".

Sedes et al. (2022) provide an extensive discussion of European SIEs experiences in and perceptions of the UK in the light of BREXIT. In their findings, they argue that many SIEs "interpreted the referendum result as a threat not just to their perceived mobility, but also in part to the way they saw themselves, leading many to subsequently express a desire to distance themselves from the UK" (Sedes et al., 2022, p. 35). Many of these expatriates have also noticed hostility targeted at them that they never faced before the BREXIT process. Additionally, some of their interviewed SIEs were shocked with the idea of being clearly treated "like a foreigner" in the future and were now identifying less with the UK (Sedes et al., 2022).

Next, we will present three real-life stories[9] of expatriates in England during the times of BREXIT. They will illustrate some of the negative implications BREXIT and its hostile environment policy is having on some expatriates. This data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the expatriates who are currently living or have recently lived in England, and were held in the year of 2020, via Zoom. This data is part of larger EU sponsored research[10].

STORY 1:
"THE CONCERNING RISE OF NATIONALIST POLITICS AND ANTI-IMMIGRATION NARRATIVES"

Gustavo is a Brazilian who decided to move to England due to his own motivations, both personal and professional. His expatriation happened through a local-plus expatriation type[11]. Wanting to have an experience working and living abroad, he considers his expatriate experience in London as generally being a positive one. He and his wife have embraced the cultural experience in England and

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[9] Due to confidentiality purposes, we used fictitious names for the expatriates.
[10] https://glomo.eu/
[11] Individual expatriated with the support of a home organization, but hired on a local contract (McNulty & Aldred, 2013).

like to travel to other countries. While he is happy with his work in a multinational company, Gustavo has been increasingly concerned over the past three years by some political changes in England:

> *"I do worry (…)* **with the rise of nationalist politicians, or this kind of nationalist politics that came up kind of, you know, after BREXIT. And there's this kind of mentality of "UK first, and foreigners are the reason for…", you know, immigration is one of the big reasons for BREXIT.** *And it's always on the agenda. It's always on the news. I think in general, there's a bit of* **hostility from parts of the British media and part of the British establishment,** *if you will, against certain types of immigrants. Against immigration in general, and certain types of immigrants. And I think that is something that in the long term worries me. It concerns me. (…) You see stuff in the news and you read stuff in the media. And I think that's what worries me.* **As people, you know, in the past couple of years, people be more outspoken about their reservations in relation to immigration and in relation to people from outside. The rise of far right movements, or even far left movements, there are really, you know, based on nationalist identity politics, Britain first, you know, these kind of things that worries me. That's something that worries me".**

He stressed that he has been seeing a change in the overall narrative of the UK's government, and the British society who agree with it. These negative narratives haven't just begun in recent years, but his perception of the degree of their expression seems to have increased.

> **"When you start seeing people on TV saying, you know, bad things about immigrants or saying bad things about people who are not from here.** *And you start seeing that come up more and more again, I think it kinds of, you know,* **gives you the balls to do the same thing."**

> *"I think someone was saying in the media "look,* **London doesn't feel like an English city anymore".** *So, it doesn't. It's as international city. And I* **think it bothers a lot of people.** *Bothers a lot of people. People feel that they're losing something, you know, there's something there, an essence that's being stolen from them. I don't know. I don't know where it comes from. But* **I certainly feel that there's a rise in anti-immigration rhetoric. Both in the media and in politics. And that's something concerning."**

Although Gustavo is an expatriate working in a large international organisation, and a legal resident of the UK, he is still being psychologically impacted by this country's "hostile" narrative. He is not the only one being impacted by this perceived threat, as we can see in the following stories.

"THE LOST ADMIRATION FOR THE UK AS A GOOD ENVIRONMENT FOR FOREIGNERS"

Pedro is a single SIE who was also born in Brazil, but who has expatriated to England as an EU national, thanks to his Portuguese dual citizenship. Before the UK left the EU, the country had the additional attractiveness to EU national expatriates of not requiring a visa to work or live there. This was one of the factors that attracted Pedro, aside from its economy, the language being one he spoke, and good professional opportunities. Nevertheless, after over four years living and working in London, this pre-departure admiration seems to be decreasing, and Pedro is questioning his future in the country:

> *"I had an admiration for the UK, you know, and it really decreased that to a point where I don't admire the country. I don't think it's a horrible place, and by any means, I really don't think so. (...) But it really, really kind of, it makes me think that maybe the UK is not really a place to admire. It's just another place, you know, it's a place like anywhere else. (...) I still think it's a high quality place for foreigners to move in, but it is a quality that I think it's been decreasing. Because of BREXIT. (...) The country itself is becoming less welcoming. The whole hostile environment policy that the foreign office has here. The whole idea that the main posture of the government is to be hostile to foreigners. Something that is the very opposite of being a good environment for foreigners. (...) It diminished my will to stay. So, when I first moved in and everything was going fine, I thought "okay, I finally found my place. I really like living here...". And I still like my life here. But now, I think about living in other places, which two years ago I was not thinking."*

He has already experienced discrimination at work multiple times, because he is a foreigner. The discrimination typically relates to him, as a foreigner, taking a job away from an unemployed UK professional. Even though these instances did not have practical consequences to him or his job, they were psychologically hostile factors that have strongly impacted him emotionally and behaviourally:

> *"I know of (...) instances of people in the team that I was working with, going to management and asking why were they hiring foreign (professionals) when, you know, there are British people in the market for them to hire. And I know the person. I know personally the person who asked this. It was someone that would go out with me and drink beer in a Friday night "happy hour"" (...) This particular person who was criticising why was I hired, because he... that person had a daughter, who is a lawyer and was unemployed. And was personally offended*

*by the fact that they hired a foreign person. (...) I don't think he had anything personal against me. It's not that. It was more the frustration of seeing, you know: "oh, here is my daughter, a real British person in the UK, she cannot find a job. And then you have this guy from Latin America, coming in here and, you know, swooping in, and getting the job". **That old "foreigners are coming in and taking our jobs" logic.***

Incidents like these, and his perceptions of the entire BREXIT narrative and consequences to foreign-born individuals, built up negative perceptions of his expatriate life and experience in a country that he once thought he might one day call "home".

*"**I feel less welcome. And I feel like the whole, the economy of the country is going to go to a bad place very soon.** (...) Once BREXIT starts dragging it down, **it's going to make it even worse for foreigners because of the targeting that I talked to you about. "Oh, you are a foreigner and you have a job. I'm British, and I don't have one".** And this is one of the main drivers of BREXIT for a lot of people. Not everybody, of course. (...) But this one, I think, is an argument that is going to get worse, worse and worse. And [it] **makes life for all foreigners more and more and more miserable by the day".***

This increasing feeling of being unwelcome by his host country and its nationals shows evidence of how the consequences of the UK's "hostile environment policy" is going far beyond its initial target. This can also be seen in the next example story.

STORY 3:
"AN UNWELCOMING COUNTRY FOR EU NATIONALS"

Olivia is a female SIE, born in Belgium, who spent four years living and working in England with her partner, before deciding to repatriate to their home country in 2019. They decided to move to the UK to pursue their professional development. With the added benefits of it being close to their home countries for ease of regular travel, the UK also did not have a complex relocation process, and both, she and her partner, spoke English. They moved to the country amidst the BREXIT discussions. After the referendum and the decision to leave the EU, the uncertainty during the drawn out discussions of withdrawal terms caused concern to the expatriate couple, and their future in their new country:

*"When they actually got the vote, I was like, "**what does it mean for us?**". (...) "So I was like, "Yeah, what's next then? Because we are European. We are in*

the UK. So what's next?". And like the ping-pong thingy happening in the news-papers and stuff like that. It was like, "yeah, we still don't know what's gonna happen".

These new concerns are impacting previously "friendly and smooth" self-initiated expatriations of EU nationals, such as Olivia and her partner. They have led to feelings of not being welcomed by a country that has voluntarily decided to quit a union of European countries. In their particular case, even though nothing has effectively impacted their legal situation in the UK, this uncertainty and increasing feeling of being unwelcome was enough to make them decide to leave the country and return to Belgium.

*"**We felt like, as Europeans, we weren't as welcome as before**. And so… they kind of didn't say anything to us personally, but we felt like, okay, **we weren't welcome anymore**. (…) There were a lot of people saying, "**Ah, Europeans are stealing our jobs**", and stuff like that. And so, yeah, we went back, we were like, "okay, **we are done with the UK**".*

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This chapter aimed at providing an evidence-based discussion on the impact of institutional and psychological threats on expatriates. More specifically, on how anti-immigration narratives and policies might impact the perceptions and experiences of some expatriates. This seems to be particularly the case for expatriates who really wish to engage with their host cultures, going beyond professional experiences and pursuing personal experiences. These could include learning about and living the new culture, finding host country national friends, and being part of their new "home". As seen in our findings, these threats might negatively impact expatriates' "sense of belonging" and feeling of being welcomed into these host countries, which might potentially be perceived as being institutionally and psychologically hostile.

Whilst the context of this chapter is of a hostile host environment from an "anti-foreigner" perspective, it is important to remember that this lens does not mean that every expatriate will perceive their host country in this way. Some will not perceive these "threats", or will not be affected at all. The perception of a "hostile environment" will vary according to *who* is experiencing it. Depending on the expatriates' individual characteristics, as well as the context they are immersed in, the same host country may or may not be perceived as being "hostile". In the three example stories discussed in this chapter, the expatriates had strong personal motivations to expatriate, such as experiencing a different culture. This makes their involvement with their chosen host society and culture even more

important, and consequently the importance of feeling welcomed (Arifa et al., 2021). However, considering those who are negatively affected by these expatriate threats - such as those in this chapter's example stories - it is important to raise awareness of this potential obstacle in an expatriate's life.

We thus theoretically contribute to the important contextualised discussion of expatriates' international experiences, in environments that might be perceived as being less hospitable for certain immigrants (Sedes et al., 2022). In a practical sense, we raise the awareness of possible threats of expatriation to institutionally hostile environments. This allows individuals to have a clearer understanding of potential threats they might face, and make an informed decision regarding their international experiences.

Key recommendations & Takeaways:

- What would you consider as a threat to your expatriate experience?
- Would these threats be a deal breaker for your expatriation intentions, or would it be something you would try to overcome or adjust to? If it is the former, you might want to re-think your destination. If it is the latter, you should form a plan before your departure on how to cope with these potential threats.
- Think moving to a potentially hostile environment through, and prepare accordingly – individually, with the support of your available networks (e.g., family, friends, other expats), and with the potential support of organizations.
- With all of that in mind as yourself: **should I stay or should I go?**

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