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The politics of embedding and the right to remain in post-Brexit Britain

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Abstract

The European Union membership referendum (i.e. the Brexit referendum) in the United Kingdom in 2016 triggered a process of introspection among non-British European Union citizens with respect to their right to remain in the United Kingdom, including their right to entry, permanent residence, and access to work and social welfare. Drawing on interview data collected from 42 European Union nationals, namely Finnish and Polish migrants living in Scotland, we explore how European Union migrants' decision-making and strategies for extending their stay in the United Kingdom, or returning to their country of origin, are shaped by and, in turn, shape their belonging and ties to their current place of residence and across state borders. In particular, we draw on the concept of embedding, which is used in migration studies to explain migration trajectories and decision-making. Our key argument is that more attention needs to be paid to the socio-political context within which migrants negotiate their embedding. To this end, we employ the term 'politics of embedding' to highlight the ways in which the embedding of non-British European Union citizens has been politicized and hierarchically structured in the United Kingdom after the Brexit referendum. By illustrating how the context of Brexit has changed how people evaluate their social and other attachments, and how their embedding is differentiated into 'ties

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that bind' and 'ties that count', we contribute to the emerging work on migration and Brexit, and specifically to the debate on how the politicization of migration shapes the sense of security on the one hand, and belonging, on the other.

Keywords
Belonging, Brexit, embedding, European Union, migration, politics of embedding

Introduction

In June 2016, the European Union (EU) referendum (i.e. the Brexit referendum) took place in the United Kingdom (UK) and 52% of the voters supported the bid to leave the EU. For British citizens, the outcome of the referendum provoked outbursts of emotions, including surprise, the flush of victory, fear, anxiety and anger. Indeed, for many, in particular those who voted to remain in the EU, the world appeared to have changed dramatically overnight (Browning, 2018). Likewise, among non-British EU citizens who lived in the country at the time of the referendum, the result generated a sense of shock, disbelief and dislocation (Browning, 2018; Ranta and Nancheva, 2019). Many felt that their lives as they knew them had been profoundly affected and their right to live in the UK was under threat (Guma and Dafydd Jones, 2019). As a result, EU citizens were compelled to rethink their futures with regard to the possibility to stay in the UK and their willingness to do so (Botterill et al., 2019; Lulle et al., 2019).

This article stems from the observation that the Brexit referendum set in motion a process of introspection among non-British EU citizens with respect to their right to remain in the UK (McCarthy, 2019; McGhee et al., 2017). We understand the right to remain as a broad set of spatial and social rights including rights to entry and permanent residence for immigrants and their families, as well as access to both work and social welfare (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Our aim here is to explore how EU migrants' decision-making and strategies for extending their stay in the UK, or returning 'home', are shaped by and, in turn, shape their belonging and ties to their current place of residence and across state borders.

In this article, we draw on the notion of embedding and an earlier conceptualization of embeddedness, which bring to the fore migrants' attachments and ties to people and places that foster 'a sense of rootedness and integration in the local environment' (Korinek et al., 2005: 780). Both of these concepts are used in migration studies to explain migration trajectories and decision-making (Erel and Ryan, 2019; Korinek et al., 2005; Ryan and Mulholland, 2015). They also play a key role in the application of the right for permanent residence and citizenship because during such an application process, the applicant must be able to demonstrate a degree of social, economic and cultural embedding in a country. For instance, under EU law, the right of permanent residence is provided for EU citizens who

have resided legally for a continuous period of five years in a member state. However, to count towards permanent residence, during this period, the citizen must also meet the criteria for the extended right of residence, including involvement in economic activity, self-sufficiency and demonstrated current family membership (Ryan, 2017).

Drawing on interview data collected from EU nationals, namely Finnish and Polish migrants living in Scotland, we answer the call to analyse embedding as a dynamic process (see Ryan, 2018). We stress that, in particular, at times of political upheaval, for instance in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, we cannot assume that embedding remains unchanged and secure. Instead, we need to acknowledge the changes that occur over time with respect to migrants' embedding and the meanings attached to them. In addition, we propose to add a new layer to the existing body of work on embedding as we believe that more attention needs to be paid to the socio-political context within which migrants negotiate their futures. To this end, we suggest employing the term 'politics of embedding' to explore the ways in which the embedding of non-British EU citizens has been politicized and hierarchically structured after the Brexit referendum. Furthermore, our aim is to contribute to the emerging work on migration and Brexit by exploring, in particular, how the result of the EU referendum has the capacity to shape the sense of security, on the one hand, and belonging on the other (Botterill and Hancock, 2018).

We begin the paper by discussing the interdisciplinary work on embedding with a focus on more recent research on settling, belonging and Brexit. After this, we outline the methodology that we employed. The following analytical sections explore how Finnish and Polish migrants discussed their embedding in Scottish society vis-a-vis their intentions and ability to remain in the UK if/when it leaves the EU by focusing on what we propose to frame as the politics of embedding in the context of Brexit. We conclude by suggesting that embedding needs to be reviewed as a multi-dimensional process, which is shaped by migration policies and discourses as well as wider political and legal frameworks. As such, it draws upon the intersection of individual ties and attachments, as well as on social and political opportunities and constraints.

EU migrants and the politics of embedding

The concept of embedding – first proposed by Ryan and Mulholland (2015) – is closely tied to that of embeddedness, which has been used across a range of social science disciplines to explain migrant decision-making regarding the place of residence. For example, Korinek et al. (2005: 794) have argued that the 'features of social embeddedness are among the most influential factors for migrant settlement, onward movement and return'. In this article, however, we concur with Ryan and Mulholland (2015), who have argued that, rather than a static, achieved state of embedded*ness*, it is more useful to adopt the dynamic concept of embedd*ing* as a way to explore migrants' ongoing activity and effort involved in developing

attachment in a new home country. According to Ryan (2018), embedding through various ties and relationships is crucial in order for migrants to make decisions over time about returning to the country of origin or extending their stay in the country of residence. Ryan (2018) further argues for the differentiated analysis of embedding to capture the nuanced interplay of the structural, relational, spatial and temporal dimensions involved in the process.

Embedding shares many common features with other conceptual frameworks, such as integration (Ager and Strang, 2008), anchoring (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2016, 2018) and belonging (Anthias, 2002; Datta, 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006). All these concepts refer to the processes through which migrants navigate their lives in new (foreign) circumstances and forge social and other relations that enhance their connectedness to places and people (Grzymala-Kazlowska and Phillimore, 2018). Wessendorf and Phillimore (2019) have noted that, in comparison with other concepts, embedding relates less to the role of social relations in regard to the practical aspects of settlement and more to the notions of belonging defined by Yuval-Davis (2006) as emotional attachment to a social group or location and feeling 'at home'.

Though indeed deeply relevant, the focus on emotional attachments and feelings of embedding has turned scholarly attention away from the political mechanisms involved in the production of socially salient narratives and practices of embedding. Consequently, the existing body of work has not sufficiently addressed how migrants embed in political systems or how nation-states control and govern embedding by limiting the admission of foreigners to their territories on the one hand and citizens' rights on the other. Lister (2003: 47–48), for one, has argued that to politically embed themselves, immigrants need to pass a set of 'gates', or administrative boundaries, which regulate their full or partial membership in the state, as well as the associated rights and obligations. Such processes cannot be overlooked when considering embedding and the decisions migrants make about when and where to go and when to return.

EU migrants have been an exception to other migrants in the UK in a sense that their right to remain has been more prevalent and partly governed by their membership in the EU (Koikkalainen, 2019). However, since the Brexit referendum in 2016, they have been experiencing similar insecurities and uncertainties about their residence rights and future as many other migrant groups before them (Lulle et al., 2019). According to Guma and Dafydd Jones (2019), Brexit has affected EU migrants' settlement and sense of identity and belonging and intensified the already existing racial and class hierarchies between migrants and other citizens in UK communities (see also Bhambra, 2017; Botterill, 2018; Rzepnikowska, 2018; Virdee and McGeever, 2018).

Against this backdrop, it is important to highlight the interplay between EU migrants' embedding and their decision-making and strategies for extending or terminating their stay in the UK in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. As Ryan and Mulholland (2015) note, embedding needs to be understood as a dynamic process because relationships with, and attachments to, people and places

change over time. Furthermore, embedding unfolds in a wider socio-political context, which likewise goes through changes and affects individuals' opportunities to embed and belong. By employing the phrase, *politics of embedding*, we refer to the processes through which EU migrants' ties and belonging have become politicized and hierarchically structured in the context of Brexit. To analyse these processes, we consider the politicization of embedding to be situated within the Brexit-mobilized increase in the significance of social ties and belonging in the lives of EU migrants. This includes, first, a polarization of opinion of what it means to embed and, second, a multiplication of actors and audiences that the EU migrants perceive as being involved in the monitoring and evaluation of their embedding. We thus engage with Brexit as a new and politicized context in which the dynamics of embedding need to be explored (Botterill et al., 2019).

    This conceptualization of the politics of embedding, which draws on the insights from political and migration studies (Antonsich, 2010; de Wilde et al., 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006), allows us to organize our discussion about migrant embedding around two analytical dimensions. First, embedding can be perceived as personal and intimate attachments that migrants themselves regard as 'ties that bind' them in time and space (Ryan, 2018). Second, embedding can be analysed as a discursive and narrative resource which constructs, justifies and, at times, resists certain forms of socio-political inclusion/exclusion. In this second frame, embedding comes into view as 'ties that count' in the eyes of others (i.e. wider society) and afford a more secure position and, eventually, the right to remain. In what follows, we argue this distinction between ties that bind and ties that count to be highly relevant to the analysis of embedding as it helps to expand and deepen the understanding of embedding as a concept.

Methods and participants

In this article, we draw on two qualitative research projects undertaken with Finnish and Polish migrants in Scotland: 'Brexit and Finns in Britain' funded by the University of Eastern Finland (June 2017–December 2019) and 'Living together with Brexit: Migrant-"host" encounters in the East End of Glasgow' funded by the Urban Studies Foundation (March 2017–December 2019). The Polish participants were interviewed in Glasgow, while the interviews with the Finns were conducted in Edinburgh, Glasgow and neighbouring towns. Rather than comparing these two datasets, we have combined them to expand the sample and identify common patterns of embedding. Our decision to combine these datasets is further supported by the fact that there are significant similarities in the research designs, as well as the methodological and analytical approaches, of the two projects. For example, we both conducted our fieldwork at roughly the same time (Sotkasiira: July to August 2017; Gawlewicz: from July 2017 to April 2018), asked similar interview questions and used a narrative approach to analyse our data. Also, while migrant decision-making among Poles in the UK is relatively well researched (Botterill, 2018; Drinkwater and Garapich, 2015; Erdal and Lewicki, 2016), the

literature on Finns in the UK is almost non-existent. This is partly related to the much larger size of the UK's Polish community in comparison to the Finnish one, as well as to the disproportionate focus on in-migration rather than out-migration in Nordic migration studies (Lundström, 2017: 79).

Altogether, we analysed 42 interviews (with 20 Finnish and 22 Polish nationals). The interviewees included 32 women and 10 men who had lived in the UK between 1 and 19 years. The Finnish participants had lived in the UK longer than the Polish ones – between 1 and 19 years (nine years on average) – while the Polish partic-ipants between 1 and 12 years (seven years on average). This is partly explained by the fact that Finnish citizens have benefited from the freedom of movement and residence in the EU since 1995, while Poland joined the EU almost a decade later, in 2004. The ages of participants ranged between 23 and 56. While the interviewees shared a variety of education levels and employment statuses (including, for exam-ple, highly skilled professionals, business owners and students), the sample was skewed towards the better-educated, employed and female interviewees. The Finnish participants were recruited mostly through social media (e.g. the 'Finns in Scotland' Facebook group), and the non-social media users were contacted via the newsletter of the Scottish–Finnish Society. The Polish participants were approached through leafleting in Polish venues (e.g. delis and hairdresser salons), community organizations and other gatekeepers in Glasgow, and through social media and chain referral as well. Given that gender is reportedly significant in the process of embedding – alongside other intersecting characteristics, includ-ing educational background and class (Erel, 2015; Kilkey, 2017) – in recruiting, all efforts were made to diversify the sample. For example, Finnish male migrants were directly approached during the functions organized by the West of Scotland Finns Association. While it is difficult to assess how exactly the higher share of women in the study affected our findings, our impression is that the experiences of precarity, the lack of job security and the attachment to the private sphere of family life were among the features highlighted in our research material, which resonates with previous research on the gendered implications of the Brexit vote (Duda-Mikulin, 2019). In the case of Finns, the challenges in recruiting male participants could also be related to the gendered nature of Finnish migration to the UK: in young age groups (15–34 years old) up to twice as many Finnish women migrate than Finnish men (Heikkilä, 2011).

All interviews were conducted in the first language of the research participants (Finnish or Polish) by a researcher of the same national background. While aware of the complexities of researching migrant co-nationals as a fellow migrant (Gawlewicz, 2016), we found that shared migrant status and language facilitated the recruitment process and the interview discussion. All the interviews were tran-scribed in the original language but, for the purpose of data analysis, sections of the transcripts were translated into English as this is the only language that we share. In this article, we use pseudonyms for the participants to maintain their anonymity.

In developing this article, we have spent a significant amount of time discussing and exploring the data, building up a common analytical framework and generating findings together. First, we conducted a narrative analysis of all interview transcripts (Sotkasiira of the Finnish transcripts and Gawlewicz of the Polish ones), focusing on how participants narrate their embedding in the UK and transnationally. The second phase of the analysis involved thematic coding across the full dataset (again, with Sotkasiira working with Finnish data and Gawlewicz with Polish data) to identify patterns of embedding in connection with future trajectories regarding participants' staying in the UK. As the analysis progressed, we cooperatively focused on Finnish and Polish migrants' sense of belonging and ties within wider socio-political structures vis-a-vis their right to remain.

It is important to note that both Finnish and Polish nationals are EU citizens and consequently share the same legal status and mobility rights within the EU. However, in the UK (and Scottish) context, these two national groups differ considerably in terms of size, prominence and motivations for migrating. As of mid-2019, there were around one million Polish nationals in the UK, including nearly 90,000 in Scotland (ONS, 2018), and they formed the largest non-British national group in both places. Reflective of this is the fact that Polish nationals are relatively prominent in UK media (e.g. Bulman, 2018; Campbell, 2019; Davies, 2019). In contrast, the estimates of the number of Finnish nationals alternate between 15,000 and 20,000 in the UK, including around a thousand in Scotland (FinEmb, 2018; ONS, 2018; Statistics Finland, 2018). They are also practically invisible in the UK media discourses of migration. Although motivations to migrate among Finns are diverse, advancing one's professional career and education are quoted alongside migrating for relationships and/or marriage (Heikkilä, 2011). While Poles also migrate for a variety of reasons, economic motivations and job opportunities tend to be quoted frequently.

Ties that bind in flux

As outlined above, embedding is usually understood as negotiations around migrants' emotional attachments and belonging, particularly in terms of their feeling 'at home' and 'safe' (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 197), as well as their ties and experiences of engagement with the people and places that make up their social world (Ryan and Mulholland, 2015). In this regard, the participants' narratives reveal that their life stories and the extent of embedding in Scotland are quite diverse. Some of them had lived in the UK for decades, while others had moved in fairly recently; the majority of participants had a relatively broad and multinational circles of friends, while a few mostly spent their time with co-nationals; some told us that they mainly socialized with people in their current place of residence, while others had maintained close ties with friends and family in their country of origin. At the same time, during the interviews, the participants largely described themselves as relationally, emotionally and economically well-embedded in Scotland.

Typically, the narratives through which the participants presented themselves as embedding included a reference to the length of their residence in the UK, and to settling down in Scotland, followed by a list of the ways through which they participated in, and contributed to, British society. For the majority of participants, the length of residence, the depth of embedding and the right to remain were closely connected. They argued that those with long personal histories experienced the strongest embedding and also had the most reason to be confident in their right to remain in the UK (see also Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira, 2020). These sentiments are illustrated in the following interview excerpts:

> I don't think Brexit has had any impact on my life yet. What happens next? I'm kind of optimistic. I think this is related to the fact that I've lived here for 11 years. If I'd been here for two years, then I would be worried. But because I've been here so long, my kids were born here, I feel nothing should change. Well, I hope so. (Kinga, PL, 35–40, f)

> I have lived here for 17 years and, well, we have a house, a mortgage and I have given birth to two future taxpayers in this country, so I don't think I will have any problems with that [obtaining citizenship]. (Anna, FIN, 40–45, f)

On the other hand, the interviews demonstrate that the relationship between these factors was not always straightforward. Wojtek, a Polish man, is an example of a newcomer claiming a deep emotional attachment to Glasgow. He had lived in the city for one and half years and said that he felt 'at home' and – in his own words – 'spiritually secure' there. He was terrified of the prospect of being forced to move back to Poland. Some other newcomers, including a Finnish woman called Saara, echoed Wojtek's sentiments. At the time of the interview, Saara had lived in Scotland for less than a year but already felt a strong sense of embedding and a fear of having to leave for Finland:

> I have started to fear needing to leave as I have settled, and it feels like home here. I have built my life here. […] I have many friends and school is going well. I enjoy it here a lot. I don't miss Finland. I came here to stay. […] I had completed my schooling in Finland. I left my apartment there. I don't have much family there or anything. (Saara, FIN, 20–24, f)

Saara moved to Scotland after the Brexit referendum with the intention of putting down her roots. She was committed to her relationship with her Scottish partner which, she stated, was the main reason for her to move to Scotland in the first place. Both Wojtek and Saara claimed that they belonged in their current place of residence: they felt at home there.

While bringing to the fore the strong subjective dimension that pertains to the negotiations of embedding (Ryan, 2018), the above citations also illustrate the concerns of research participants, when they reflected upon their chances to stay

in the UK in the event of Brexit. Based on media coverage and widespread rumours, there was an understanding among participants that some security could be achieved by applying for permanent residency, which was possible after five years of exercising the EU's free movement rights.[1] However, as the criteria for residency at the time were unclear and news about migrants not being able to obtain residence permits, and even being deported from the UK, circulated in the media (Dearden, 2017), the participants did not believe that securing permanent residency would automatically guarantee permanent status after the UK's exit from the EU. Some participants were particularly anxious about being able to comply with the rules set by the government:

> We organized an event during which an immigration lawyer told us about these [possible changes in the immigration law]. It was good because it made me realize that I have to dig my head out from wherever it had been until then, take this [situation] seriously and not just be annoyed. I must face the reality. It came out strongly that we should apply for that permanent residency thing. There is still a problem with my background. For my husband, who has worked full time, all the time, it is all very straightforward – nothing exciting about it. For me, having been a student, a part-time student, having worked temporarily and part-time, having been ill a lot and all, it is a really difficult and complex process. Moreover, the timing of our stay in [another EU country] was unfortunate. It is a real swamp. (Aili, FIN, 35–40, f)

> I feel threatened a bit because I've only been here a year and a half, right? There's nothing in Poland I could return to. I wouldn't want to return there – the worst thing that could happen to me now is that they ask me to go back there. I'm really worried that when Brexit happens, they can do things to us ... deport us – I know that they're deporting people for minor offences now. (Wojtek, PL, 25–30, m)

Aili and her husband, for example, had temporarily interrupted their stay in the UK by moving to another EU country, which under the new circumstance presented them with unforeseen difficulties. For others, who had stayed in the country long enough and felt confident of their right to remain, the Brexit referendum was a wake-up call to start legalizing their status in the country of residence (McGhee et al., 2017).

Prior to the Brexit referendum, none of our research participants had felt a desire to apply for British citizenship. Instead, they had mostly believed that the bureaucratic hassle involved, and the relatively high cost of the application fee, outweighed the possible benefits of formal recognition of their residence in the UK. This opinion, however, largely changed in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, when political indecisiveness unsettled and shook up EU migrants' confidence in their lives and futures in the UK (see Lulle et al., 2017, 2019). A participant explained her view on the revived importance of legalizing her status through citizenship:

> As an EU citizen, you don't need [British] citizenship because you have the same rights and responsibilities, except you can't vote [in the UK] and then there are certain

places where you can't work, like the tax office or the military [laughs] or the police, but these have never been on my career list. (Kaisa, FIN, 40–44, f)

Other participants agreed with this position although, in some cases, the lack of attention paid to legalizing one's status was reflective of a shorter stay in the UK. Interestingly, Polish participants were *relatively* less preoccupied with legalizing their status compared to Finnish ones (we have discussed this elsewhere: Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira, 2020). We believe that, rather than indicating a wider national pattern, this difference is related to the fact that the number of Poles in our study who followed English-language media and British politics more broadly was smaller in comparison to Finns, whose interest in politics had increased due to Brexit negotiations.

The narratives above also outline that, in the context of Brexit, some domains of embedding have become valued more than others. Although the research participants claimed that social and emotional dimensions were key to their decision to stay or leave, they considered economic embedding, preferably through permanent employment, to be the most *useful* kind of embedding. By useful, they meant embedding that enhanced their chances of obtaining the right to remain. Some participants were keen to demonstrate that, in contrast to some other migrants, they had the 'right' kind of ties, i.e. they made contributions to the national economy and thus deserved to be allowed to remain. Others were more critical of such problematic narratives but also positioned themselves as those who had the ability to demonstrate a desirable kind of embedding. For instance, Anna (quoted earlier), while employing sarcasm in describing herself as a mother of 'taxpayers', still reviewed her family ties, and her role as a mother of children born in the UK, as ties that count towards residency.

Another Finnish participant, Piia, argued:

Decision-makers cannot be so foolish that they would divide the nation into two, into citizens of two values. If you live here and you pay your taxes here, of course you should have the exact same right as any other person. If you are unemployed, it is a different matter then, but then again, if you have lived here for a long time and then you become unemployed for some reason, why shouldn't you have the same rights? (Piia, FIN, 45–49, f)

In Piia's interview, the reference to the length of stay in combination with employment and being a taxpayer is particularly revealing for our argument about the differences between the ties that bind and ties that count. While being critical of the government's intentions to set EU migrants apart from British citizens, Piia, like many others, reinforced the idea that access to the right to remain needs to be 'deserved' (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2012; Monforte et al., 2019). For EU citizens to argue for their right to remain, the ties that bind – that is, their sense of belonging and the attachments that they themselves regard as quintessential for their decision to leave or stay put – are not viewed as enough here. What matters is

the ability to establish the ties that count in the eyes of society, as well as public institutions, which effectively handle their bid for the right to remain.

In this regard, it is important to note that Scotland is a specific context for researching Brexit-related implications since, in contrast to the UK as a whole, in the EU referendum, Scotland voted largely to remain (62% voted to remain as opposed to 38% who voted to leave). Scotland also has a distinctive immigration context and ethnic diversity (Smith and Simpson, 2015), and its devolved government has expressed largely positive attitudes towards immigration since the referendum. This was reflected in the interviews: the participants expressed their sympathy towards Scottish politicians who had spoken favourably of the role of EU migrants in Scottish society. Many felt this discourse of welcome reinforced their belonging and strengthened their connection and ties that bind them to Scotland. On the other hand, the participants largely realized that immigration in the UK is a *reserved matter*, that is, decisions about migration are made by the UK parliament at Westminster. They were acutely aware that local positive sentiments were unlikely to have a significant impact as the legal consequences of Brexit for EU citizens in Scotland are the same as elsewhere in the UK.

Brexit and the inequalities of embedding

Crowley (1999) defined the politics of belonging as 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance' (see also Yuval-Davis, 2006: 204). We find the boundaries that the politics of embedding are concerned with in this case to be the boundaries that define membership in British society for those who are in the possession of the ties that count. The ties that bind, on the other hand, may place individuals in dire situations, particularly if such ties are not supplemented with the resources that allow easy relocation or ties that are recognized by the authorities and society at large as those that count.

The ambiguities related to embedding through ties that count and ties that bind in the new post-Brexit vote context are particularly apparent in the case of Kaisa who, alongside many others, had started to collect documents in 2017 in order to establish a continuous paper trail to prove her long-term residency in the UK. Kaisa has lived in Scotland since 2000. She is married to a British man, they have a child who is a dual citizen, she is in employment and stresses that she has never claimed any benefits other than tax credits and family allowance. Yet, during the interview, she was particularly anxious because, back in 2012, long before any inkling of Brexit, she had moved with her family to work in another EU country for a period of two years. Therefore, despite her long history and deep ties to the UK, she felt insecure and unsure of how she would be treated by UK authorities if she wanted to legalize her status. She was certain that had she applied for a citizenship before she moved to another EU country, she would have easily received it. Now, after she returned to Scotland, she felt she had no choice but 'start building up my five years again'.

Kaisa was not alone in understanding her embedding differently from how she believed the UK immigration authorities would interpret it. Others also had to revise their sense of embedding in relation to the legal criteria. This was particularly emotional for Beata, a Polish participant who felt that she had been forced into an extremely precarious position as a female spouse, who had followed her husband to the UK with their children. She feared that she would be subjected to different treatment by the state than her other family members:

> When Brexit happens, I'll have only been here for three years. My husband will have been here for five years, so he'll be able to apply for permanent residency, but what about me and the rest of the family? What if they tell me that I cannot stay? What if he's able to stay with the kids and I'm not? (Beata, 40–45, f)

Such perceived unfairness and boundaries that have now risen for EU migrants, may result not only in strong emotions but also in active resistance and political mobilization (see Botterill and Hancock, 2018). That said, the stories narrated by the participants explicate that such boundaries do not affect everyone in the same way. Monika, for instance, presented herself as unconcerned about the possible rejection of her residence application:

> If we have to leave, that's not the end of the world for me. I'd just pack up, sell everything [her flat and two cars], pay off whatever I can [her mortgage] and off I go. I don't have a bad situation back in Poland. [...] If I had, I'd be stressed out, but for me [...] If we have to leave, my partner has – his mum has a huge house there: it's a two-storey house, Canadian style – we could move there. My partner's very resourceful, so we would come up with something sustainable pretty soon. We could also go to my mum's: she also has a huge house in Poland – eight bedrooms, three bathrooms. (Monika, PL, 30–35, f)

A quote from an interview with Esa illustrates a similar approach to the possible relocation:

> We [my wife and I] don't have any major reason to be here. If at some point we choose to move, it will be quite easy for us to leave. We have an apartment in Finland, we have a place to go and it would be quite easy to find work. In that sense, our situation is quite stress free. (Esa, FIN, 30–34, m)

From the outset, Esa and his wife came across as people who are deeply embedded in Scotland as both were in employment, owned their flat and were involved in a local immigrant organization. At the same time, Esa himself described his embedding as relatively shallow. He explained his easy-going attitude by referring to their previous mobile lifestyle. 'We are the travelling kind of people', he claimed and elaborated on his experiences of being an exchange student, living and working in various European cities and his extensive business travels. At one point during the

interview, Esa, however, paused to consider a reason for him and his wife to settle down: the baby they were expecting. He pondered about the upcoming birth and concluded that children might turn out to be the reason for them to stay, i.e. the tie that binds them in Scotland. This highlights the importance of exploring embedding across different sectors of society (Korinek et al., 2005) and recognizing that individuals review certain ties as more binding than others. While work or his family's active social life did not present Esa with a reason to settle in Scotland, the experience of having and raising a baby there could be the cause for them to start working towards residency in the UK.

Arguably, Esa's and Monika's carefree attitudes are, at least partly, due to their substantial economic means, as well as to their labour market position as a white-collar employee in an international company and an entrepreneur. Contrary to this, a number of participants, both highly educated and blue-collar workers, were hesitant about the idea of leaving Scotland because much of their social life was there and their skills, qualifications or work experience might not be acknowledged elsewhere. Sabina, a Polish social worker, argued that it would be difficult for her to move and continue her career in Poland:

> Counselling and psychology and doing any therapeutic work is very – it's kind of regional because of different types of accreditation and different rules that apply. [...] It would be very difficult to take it [her profession], for example, to Poland because I think that in Poland you need to be a psychiatrist or a psychologist to do therapy – something like that. So, it wouldn't be that easy. (Sabina, PL, 30–34, f)

The experiences of participants like Monika, Esa and Sabina highlight the hierarchies related to embedding that the debates around Brexit have brought to the fore. This is in line with previous research which has acknowledged that, although Brexit is deemed disruptive and to be leading large numbers of EU migrants to question their status and belonging, it is likely to have uneven impacts on different groups (McCarthy, 2019; Migration Observatory, 2018). For some of our research participants, their embedding had clearly become a resource, a tie that counts and means for making strategic decisions about the future. For others, the Brexit vote meant that complex and sometimes unwanted relationships and circumstances had unfolded, causing a great deal of anxiety. As pointed out by Erel (2010), not everybody is able to carry their various forms of capital acquired through embedding across borders in a rucksack. Clearly, Brexit-related policy changes have accentuated differences among EU migrants with a widening gap between the rights of the most precarious and the most privileged.

While research participants never mentioned Brexit as the main reason for relocation, they described the outcome of the referendum as a catalyst which had set in motion otherwise vague future plans. Importantly, however, for the vast majority of our participants, returning to their country of origin was not a

desired move. Rather, the idea of moving out came across as a form of defiance and taking control over one's fate. As one of our Polish participants put it: 'If they kick me out, I'll leave'. Similar claims were made by others. For example, Sari, who had recently moved to Scotland, did not want to move back but was mentally preparing herself for the difficulties that she saw lying ahead:

> I am not going to fill in your 85-page long residence applications. I am not going to be anyone's pawn. If it gets difficult, I will get out. (Sari, FIN, 40–44, f)

This quote, once again, speaks of the different forms of hierarchy in making which are connected to the request to be able to document one's embedding, or the lack thereof. In addition, it reveals and makes visible the boundaries which prevail between those who are tied to their localities with the ties that bind and those who can pack up their bags and 'get out'.

Conclusions: Embedding as a contested and politicized experience

This article aligns with the body of work which argues that the Brexit referendum set in motion a process of introspection for EU migrants regarding their attachments, ties and positioning in the UK as well as elsewhere (Guma and Dafydd Jones, 2019; Miller, 2019; Ranta and Nancheva, 2019). Here, we approached this issue from the perspective of Finnish and Polish migrants to Scotland, and as narrative negotiations of embedding, which take place within the discursive and political system that regulates their right to remain in the UK. The narratives presented in the article suggest that embedding is not only differentiated (Ryan, 2018), but also contested and politicized.

As noted above, there are many signs of the politicization of embedding in the interview data. First, we have found that the negotiations of embedding have become more salient in the lives of non-British EU citizens. Furthermore, the opinions about what is involved in embedding and who qualifies as rightfully embedded have differed and become polarized. The sense of belonging (subjectively defined ties that bind), while still critical to embedding, is giving way to a specific kind of thinking wherein emphasis is placed on the ties that count (i.e. the social relationships and resources that migrants draw on when they argue for their right to remain in the public domains of law, media and politics). As Ryan (2018) predicted, the EU migrants' civic embedding is gaining in importance as migrants are attempting to formalize their ties to the UK, first by obtaining the (pre)settled status and then by acquiring citizenship.

However, this path is not equally available to everyone. As we have argued, subjectively felt embedding, a sense of belonging and social ties that connect individuals to people and places are not enough to qualify someone who has the right to remain. In fact, ties that count are needed to demonstrate the ownership of

this valued position. This development has further instrumentalized EU migrants' attachments and relationships. The politicization of embedding also means that more and more actors are drawn into the debate and evaluation of what counts as embedding. The boundaries between private and public spheres are becoming blurred as EU migrants' economic and social ties, as well as family matters, are decreasingly perceived as those that belong within the intimate sphere of personal and family life. Instead, they are scrutinized in the media, in everyday encounters, in political debates and, most importantly, by state authorities in the process of evaluating EU migrants' right to remain.

From a wider perspective, our findings are reflective of recent changes in the ways socio-political membership has been (re-)defined globally and managed by the state. They not only add nuances to the general and documented trend towards the politicization of migration (Van der Brug et al., 2015) and the economization of social relationships and various aspects of everyday life, including family (Murphy, 2017), but expose the production of highly problematic and oppressive hierarchies within migrant population and the construction of the 'worker citizen' in particular (Anderson, 2015; Anthias, 2016). Such hierarchies are particularly exclusionary towards those in more precarious positions, such as stay-at-home parents, elderly people or people with disabilities. For this reason, the intersecting hierarchies of embedding deserve further investigation.

Migrant embedding is not merely *objective* and cannot be measured solely by tracking down tangible markers, such as employment or tax records (Ryan, 2018). Neither it is entirely *subjective* as it unfolds within increasingly politicized everyday lives. When embedding is perceived to be threatened, as is happening in the UK since the Brexit referendum, it becomes *instrumentalized* (i.e. used as a tool in everyday struggles) in order to claim a 'right' or 'deserving' status on the one hand and to deny a 'wrong' or 'undeserving' status on the other. As such, it turns into an expression of political and discursive power, and has a growing capacity to influence identities, lives and social relationships. Immigration is a highly contested and politicized issue in most contemporary societies (Grande et al., 2018). Accordingly, more research is needed to better understand the broader social and political relations that constitute embedding as a key determinant of who belongs, who can feel safe and who is denied their right to remain.

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Note

1. In 2019, the UK government introduced the EU Settlement Scheme requiring all EU citizens permanently living in the UK to apply for the settled (or pre-settled) status in order to continue living in the country. At the time of the interviews in 2017, however, EU citizens were advised to go through with the procedure of applying for permanent residence. Hence, in the paper, we largely focus on the latter.

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