



Germans in UK navigate difficult plans amid further Brexit uncertainty

Foreign-born German migrants in the UK fear for their future and identities in an increasingly polarized society. As the Brexit transition ends, many will have to decide their future soon, reports Shafi Musaddique.



With Britain on the cusp of a clean break from the European Union, the long-standing German presence in the UK is in question. [Some 25,000 German businesses trade with the UK](#), with 2,500 of them set up in Britain.

Bernd Atenstaedt, chief executive of German Industry UK, believes the majority of German businesses in Britain expect a basic agreement and "want to be in the UK for another 40 years."

"We don't want no deal. On top of that, COVID-19 has massively affected Brexit preparation. But we are ready to work with the UK," he said in a DW interview.

German businesses employ around 400,000 people in the UK. While redundancies in January after the UK leaves the EU aren't likely because of a "long-term" culture, Atenstaedt fears for the motor industry. Luxury carmaker Bentley announced a thousand UK redundancies in June and half of Oxford's BMW Mini plant jobs were axed in September.

German electrical and pharmaceutical companies have also set up shop in Britain. According to the German Federal Statistics Office, labor costs per working hour in the manufacturing industry are cheaper in the UK than in Germany.

Recession and no-deal Brexit — a double blow to UK's economy

German migrants weigh up their future in Britain

Germans constituted the largest foreign-born group in Britain in 1861. Today, foreign-born Germans are the fifth-largest ethnic minority group in the country. Andrew Steeds, curator of the "Germans in Britain" exhibition at the Migration Museum in London, hopes migrants remain welcome [in the post-Brexit era](#) but believes Germans remain a "hidden migrant group conveniently overlooked."

Historically, Germans lived in cotton manufacturing cities across northern England. Today's 300,000 Germans work in highly skilled jobs spread across the country, still they fear for their future.

Architect Anna Rose has been in the UK for 18 years and opted for dual nationality in 2019 to secure her status.

"I don't want to be a second-class citizen. Now I don't have to worry about what benefits I qualify for," Rose told DW, citing recent government scandals such as the Windrush debacle in which the UK government wrongly detained and deported its own citizens who had arrived as children from former British colonies in the Caribbean during the 1950s.

Hendrik S. only moved to the UK from Cologne in 2018 but doesn't feel at home. "It's such a polarized climate. Britons are gravitating toward nationalism in the mainstream, but in Germany, nationalism is frowned upon," he told DW.

As an EU citizen already in the UK before the Brexit transition period ends, he has presettled status but has no official documentation and only one email from the government. This, and uncertainty surrounding the continuation of his course at a London university, has him already planning a swift return back home.

Emily Steinhauer, a researcher at the German Historical Institute London, says anxiety over curtailed freedoms is symbolic of the privilege Germans have in Britain when compared to the plight of migrants from beyond Europe, such as North Africa and the Middle East.

"If you left Germany, it's because you're interested in travel or a different culture; you were always up for leaving, but with distance you idealize your home," Steinhauer said.

UK survey shows Germany's business image improving

Uncertainty has caused Germans in Britain to confront deep-seated feelings of belonging, a sense of homelessness that can be traced back to German romanticism's *weltschmerz*, or grief, she adds.

"It's a sad melancholy or a heavy heart because you're seeing something happen that you're not quite part of. It means you're longing for something that doesn't exist," said Steinhauer, a specialist on German exile who's been in the UK for almost a decade since leaving Germany at the age of 18.

Any exodus of Germans from the UK [will damage Britain more than Germany](#), Steeds fears.

"My worry is that increasingly people think that the benefits of living here in the UK no longer outweigh the disadvantages," he said. "They can't tolerate the low level of abuse they get, for example on public transport speaking German. Britons will be poorer culturally and economically without them."

German optimism in Britain

Linda Koch has lived in Ramsgate, a coastal town formerly home to prominent euroskeptic and Leave campaigner Nigel Farage, since 2012. She remains quietly optimistic about her future.

"Britain is where I want to be. I love this country, the language, its people, the countryside and the seaside," said the German-French mother of two.

In London, Rose knows plenty of German friends and EU citizens who have left the UK since 2016. But she is adamant not to follow in their footsteps.

"I have so many positive experiences in my personal and work environments. That doesn't match the Brexit narrative. Brexit is not going to destroy what I've built over the years here in Britain," she said.

Steinhauer fears that uncertainty "could get worse before it gets better ... you can't put a timeline on that." She remains hopeful by drawing on parallels between Germany's intellectual tradition and today's migrants.

"There's a saying that in the darkest nights, the sun shines brightest on the horizon. Change follows; we just have to hold on. Perseverance is the most important thing. I tell myself that if we give up on our ideals and withdraw, those ideals have lost," she said.

"We need to be an island of hope."