

The EU diaspora in the UK cannot be ignored

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*While formally Brexit may be behind us, the EU diaspora in the UK is becoming a political actor Brexiters could not foresee, write **Zana Vathi** and **Ruxandra Trandafoiu** (Edge Hill University). They argue that a 'civic' Europeanness was activated by Brexit and has started to create bridges among Europeans in the UK who are emerging as a dynamic diaspora collective of political significance.*

The promises made by the UK government to EU nationals in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 Referendum have not been fulfilled. Instead, they were quickly replaced with the lengthy bureaucracy of the [EU Settlement Scheme](#) (EUSS) and the stark choice of continued residence in the UK under tougher conditions or return to the countries of origin. What Brexiters and the UK government did not foresee was the powerful mix of geopolitical interests and emotional stakes shared by EU nationals, who bonded together to become political actors in their own right, across linguistic and cultural differences. This commoning and mobilisation process was primed by EU nationals' mutual experiences of valued mobility and the European Union's decade long politics of shared belongingness beyond nation-state borders. Faced with the prospect of Brexit and no recognised voice, EU nationals had to resist or manage the traumatic Brexit process as a constituency, underpinned by, and further contributing to, their political engagement.

Political engagement and diasporic mobilisation

Although not all EU nationals became highly politically engaged, many felt unwelcome and insecure in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit Referendum. They became thirsty for information pertaining to their newly diminished status, keen to understand the workings of UK politics and be better informed of decisions directly impacting their life choices. Initially, they built a communal sense of purpose and displayed clear political attitudes via social media, spurred by the challenge posed to their long-standing residence and mobility rights. Soon after nevertheless, mobilising structures in the form of activist organisations, forums, charities and networks, some with strong transnational links in continental Europe, started to emerge. Beyond national groups, Brexit brought about the establishment and multiplication of online/offline European groups (such as [*The European Movement*](#), [*the3million*](#), [*Forever Europeans – Remain in the EU*](#)) with an important continuing role in bottom-up mobilisation and lobbying.

Brexit was therefore a trigger event that led to commoning language, discourse and practices, as well as mobilised action at personal, local, national and transnational levels. Its emotional impact has compelled European identity to come to the fore, as Brexit made EU nationals feel that, faced with adversity, they had something in common, not just a mutual adversary, but also shared structures of feelings and values.

The issue of mobilisation of the EU nationals and an EU diaspora emerging in the UK post-Brexit has so far escaped the attention of the British and EU politicians. Academics are also guilty of neglecting this phenomenon. Diaspora studies tend to either look back at the links migrants maintain with their homelands, or the common regional historical and political experiences that give rise to migration. Migration studies are typically focused on groups that embody significant cultural difference when compared to the mainstream or majority, groups that originate from countries with little political bargaining power in the international arena. In this sense, the EU and its deriving European diaspora in the UK are an unprecedented experience: a politically engineered supranational imaginary, activated by a traumatic event that threatened the loss of previously held rights and status.



Photo credit: The 3 Million

The implications of an EU Diaspora

The mobilisation of an EU diaspora in the post-Brexit UK tells us that diaspora studies should also consider that some diasporas can be defined by their future, not just their past. Narratives of betrayal, vulnerability, pending fate and survival/resistance may echo the classic, and yet dramatic, conditions that are seen to lead to the creation of a diaspora, but in this case, they are deployed in the service of a future for EU nationals and their children.

It is also worth reconsidering diasporas in relation to both geopolitics and transnational political mobilisation, which are all the more important in the current European context. Even those who oppose the idea of a European 'primordial' identity, have to acknowledge the cultural, social and political consequences of the European Union project, which has managed to create an imagined community around shared historical experiences and common values by mobilizing allegiances towards a common political goal. It is therefore not surprising that a 'civic' Europeanness was activated by Brexit and has started to create

bridges among Europeans in the UK who are emerging as a dynamic diaspora collective. Considering their political and social capital and potential, including transnational links with one of the most powerful international organizations, an EU diaspora cannot be ignored.

As many EU nationals choose to naturalise, to regain some lost rights and preclude an uncertain future, British political parties may wish to consider them as future voters. Sections within the EU institutions have already wondered what their fates will be in the UK. A sense of separation and worry in the European Parliament gave rise to informal 'friendship groups' between MEPs and their departing British colleagues in late January 2020, but it remains to be seen if the EU infrastructure will develop beyond the EU Delegation to the UK and its focus on EU nationals' rights. The recent diplomatic tension surrounding the appointment of the EU Ambassador in the UK because the Foreign Office is uncomfortable with the idea of treating the EU as a nation-state is in itself a sign of interesting developments to come. Nonetheless, the EU nationals' countries of origin may shift their attention towards them as national diasporans in the UK, who, just like other national groups, will want to maintain their identity and transmit their language to the next generations, establish cultural and political associations, vote in the home country elections and so on.

Since UK's home nations are very differently positioned in relation to Brexit, governments in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland are working with the 'Europeans' for different geopolitical purposes (such as a future Scottish Independence Referendum). As the media infer that significant changes are possible in the way the UK government deals with post-Brexit political fractures, with a Minister for the Union being proposed to keep the UK intact, the political institutions at all levels may want to consider more closely the future of EU nationals. They have evolved from being just neighbours or co-workers; they are now fully-fledged political agents, with the potential to impact both internal and foreign UK politics.

Further attention should be given to subnational, regional and local dynamics, as has become evident in the North West, for example. EU nationals settled in the UK have different social capital, closely linked with one's interest and ability to engage politically. In our research with EU nationals in Liverpool and Southport, those originating from older EU members states tended to be more critical of EU politics and policies and therefore there was, at times, clear Euroscepticism invoked, despite a strong European identity. This may link to the different social capital and (geo)political competency in our subsample. Disempowerment due to poor language skills and social capital were evident among the lower-skilled EU nationals, with implications for the current and future dimensions and magnitude of the EU diaspora. Apart from the overall political engagement and mobilisation as Europeans, the way they have experienced the EU project as nationals of their countries of origin and the hierarchies within the EU have also surfaced as Europeans came together, or as decisions to not engage politically were made. Some EU nationals originating from Southern or Central-Eastern Europe decided their stake was too low, not least because they lacked successful examples of changing

politics through activism in their countries of origin. There is, after all, significant heterogeneity and different forms of vulnerability among EU nationals which Brexit has exacerbated.

Final reflections

Brexit is behind us, but for many EU nationals in the UK, its ramifications are just starting to unravel. One thing is to go through a complicated registration system, another to relearn to belong to a country that many have called home, but one which pulled the rug from beneath their feet and reduced their rights over the course of four years. And yet another is the unlearning of the fluidity of allegiances and openness that the EU offered to many of them. Their growing political engagement as an EU diaspora needs therefore to be chartered in order to highlight the importance of mobilisation of EU nationals as an expression of, and impacting factor on, multi-level governance in the UK post-Brexit.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.