

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A post-national EU diaspora? Political mobilization of EU citizens in the UK post-Brexit

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Abstract

This article analyses the political engagement and mobilization of the EU citizens post-Brexit and investigates the extent to which these have led to the creation of an EU diaspora in the UK. Qualitative research took place in Liverpool and Southport—two different localities in the North West of the UK that have attracted EU citizens of different demographics. The project included participants from 18 EU different countries, which afforded the investigation of dynamics and different positionalities within the EU population in the UK. These positionalities, the findings show, are broadly organized around a typology that is underpinned by the (geo)politics of the EU: national and regional stances; EU-oriented stances; non-alignment. While Brexit triggered a stronger European identity and mobilization on the basis of it, the orientation toward, and investment in, the EU diasporic mobilization among EU citizens differs due to these positionalities. The findings, therefore, point toward the creation of a post-national EU diaspora in the UK, but also identify the strength of national and regional identities, which could indicate the development of different gravity diaspora points in future, nested in the EU diaspora. The differences in demographics and social capital within the EU citizens population across the UK have implications for local dimensions of the EU diaspora and its impact and legacy in the medium and long term.

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Brexit, EU Diaspora, nested mobilization, North West of England, political engagement

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses the mobilization of EU citizens in the North West of the UK in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum in 2016, investigating the extent to which their multi-scale political engagement and collective action has given rise to an EU diaspora. Whilst most diaspora literature is based on the study of groups originating from a specific nation-state, some writings have questioned the centrality of primordial ethnicity and the nation state in the definition and experience of diaspora formations, seeing diaspora as a social condition, a process and a political stance (Brubaker, 2005). Recent studies on the temporalities of diaspora mobilization identify 'diasporas as agents in transitional justice processes, contested sovereignty, and fragile and de facto states, as well as in civic and ethnic-based activism' (Koinova, 2018a, 1251). Therefore, in its exploration of the dynamics of diasporic identity and political engagement of EU citizens in the UK, the article is informed by the notion of political mobilization as underpinning diaspora formation.

The diasporic belongingness and mobilization of EU citizens is a completely unstudied topic; a limited number of articles have analysed their political engagement. Bell and Domecka's (2018) article precedes Brexit and only documents Polish nationals' engagements, as do others that look at the situation post-Brexit (for e.g., Botterill, 2018; Duda-Mikulín, 2019; Fleming, 2018; McGhee et al., 2017; Rzepnikowska, 2019). Belongingness before and after Brexit was studied by Lulle et al. (2018) who included Irish, Italian and Romanian young people in London, but no links were made with their political engagement and diasporic mobilization. A special issue of *Population, Space and Place* dedicated to the impact of Brexit on European citizens (Botterill et al., 2019) largely lacked a political engagement focus. This absence of interest in diasporic mobilization happens perhaps because diaspora studies consist mostly of retrospective intellectual inquiries in the geopolitics of the past (Koinova, 2018b). However, these retrospective accounts cannot fully capture 'the question of the "stuff" from which claims might be made, where and how boundaries or alliances are drawn, and how these claims might be assessed, or found wanting' (Alexander, 2017, 1549).

The pre- and post-Brexit debates and media discourse have constructed a common 'EU migrants' category in the UK, and the difficult experiences with the Settled Status application procedures have had major implications for their belongingness (Ranta and Nancheva, 2019) and political engagement (Vathi & Trandafoiu, 2020). With Brexit appearing as a 'critical juncture' and 'transformative event' (Koinova, 2018b, 1290), our findings in the field demonstrate the emergence of European diasporic mobilization based on the foundations of a European-wide consciousness.

However, while the EU citizens displayed significant (geo)-political competency, they are differently oriented toward, and invested in, the EU diaspora in the UK post-Brexit. A shared EU identity, national, as well as transborder regional identities were mentioned by our interviewees, sometimes as co-existing, and frequently framed the diasporic mobilization at personal, community and public sphere levels. Nonetheless, the histories of their nations' engagement with the EU project, with implications for their national identities, play a role in the way they view what Brexit entails in terms of their political allegiances. In turn, migrants' social capital understood as a mix of individual competencies (education, socio-economic status, multilingualism) and social ties (community participation and integration), appeared as a major variable in the way diasporic mobilization has developed since the Referendum. With the two cities—Liverpool and Southport—that served as location of our research attracting EU citizens of different socio-economic backgrounds, the dynamics of EU diaspora appear to have strong translocal dimensions. In line with Morales and Giugni's (2011, 7) findings, instances of bridging capital (Putnam, 2000) both depended on and were derived through local level engagement. The differentiated social capital in our participants' possession, thus, explains to a significant extent the diverse levels of diasporic mobilization and instances of non-alignment discussed in the remainder of the article.

The geopolitics of diasporic mobilization

Traditional diaspora studies (e.g., Brah, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Saffran, 1991) emphasize diaspora's shared heritage, its struggle with 'difference', common experiences of roots and routes, relationship with the homeland and the hope of possible return. This work often emphasizes a common origin, seen in ethnic or cultural terms, and the continuous relationship with the homeland, which affixes diaspora in place and time. However, both classic and increasingly new scholarship have also underlined the complexity of diasporas, groups whose heterogeneity and inter-sectionality challenge any fixed categorization, and which are better seen as transnational sites of struggle and fluidity. The traditional meaning of the Greek term that inspired the word 'diaspora' may denote dispersion from a common point of origin, usually due to traumatic events, yet no diasporic group is ever homogeneous, since even ethnic-based diasporas display multiple or layered identities, in the same way most homelands are ethnically, socially and culturally diverse.

Consequently, many definitions now challenge the once assumed pre-condition for the existence of the diaspora: a single nation-state as the origin and a primordially defined common ethnicity. Among these studies, Anthias challenges the idea of ethnicity being at the foundation of a group acting as a diaspora, in favour of seeing the diaspora as a particular form of 'consciousness' (1998, 559). Brubaker (2005, 3) asks whether state borders must be crossed for people to be considered a diaspora, Werbner (2015, 46) questions the common national origin as an exclusive pre-condition and Alexander (2017, 1548) inquires what the diaspora looks like viewed from the point of arrival rather than departure, or indeed how we can conceive diasporas in the absence of a nation-state as a common point of origin. These interventions prove that it is worthwhile widening the diaspora concept to include new processes of diasporization originating from political engagement at destination.

While diaspora studies scholarship is moving away from pre-conditioned ethnic commonality to take into account more complex identity processes, we also observe a shift toward highlighting post-national and transnational practices and their effects, which more adequately capture recent mobility experiences. Brubaker (2005, 13), who detached the diaspora from ethno-cultural assumptions almost two decades ago, did so to capture the stance taking and claim making capabilities of the diaspora and its ability to mobilize around common interests and projects viewed in a transnational perspective. Before him, Anthias (1998) claimed that diasporas should be thought of as imagined transnational communities. By emphasizing and privileging diaspora's point of departure—the homeland—we run the danger of obscuring commonalities among transnational processes (Anthias, 1998, 558) and ignoring the reality of diasporas being shaped by local conditions and political projects at destination (Anthias, 1998, 564).

These views, thus, recognize diaspora's multiple loyalties, with some becoming dominant or high stake at certain points and requiring a choice of engagement. A conflict or the establishment of a dictatorship in the homeland will produce diasporic mobilization, in the same way being faced with the prospect of Brexit as an EU citizen in the UK requires transgressing ethnic and language barriers between groups of EU citizens to resist or manage the process as a constituency. The existence of an EU citizen constituency in the UK post-Brexit is proven by the emergence of activist groups, such as *the3million*, who were accepted at the Brexit negotiating table by Michel Barnier, the EU's Head of Task Force for Relations with the UK, on the basis of such groups representing EU citizens' common interests post-Referendum. Diasporas can, therefore, be viewed as historically contingent social formations triggered by particular events and resulting from processes of mobilization (Sökefeld, 2006), often engaging civil society in the (re)definition of the social and political horizons of action (Mau, 2010). Thus, rather than considering diasporas to be 'given, pre-existing social actors', we should consider them as being 'generated by politics' (Lyons & Mandaville, 2010, 126).

Indeed, Koinova (2018a, 1252) emphasizes the role of the diaspora in unstable political times, as 'agents' of mobilization in the service of post-conflict reconstruction due to their 'multi-sited embeddedness' and 'linkages' to multiple contexts. The availability of choices for mobilising attention and resources is possible precisely because of the transnational character of diasporas. Van Hear and Cohen (2017) take a scalar approach when they too categorize diaspora activities as falling within three spheres: the 'private and personal sphere of the household and the extended family', the public sphere of the 'known community' and the transnational 'public sphere of the 'imagined community'' (Van Hear & Cohen, 2017, 172). As Van Hear and Cohen recognize, the third transnational sphere is 'the most volatile'

and 'least pervasive in terms of general and sustained participation', because 'it requires greater degrees of social mobilization' (Van Hear & Cohen, 2017, 174). We recognize and discuss this volatility in relation to our sample, to express the complexity of transnational diasporization.

While much of the diaspora scholarship has advanced to capture the complexity of diasporic experiences, a majority of scholars still place emphasis on the role diasporas play in their homelands, with fewer studies looking at diaspora's mobilization in the hostland and even fewer illustrating instances of mobilization across diverse national groups. Lyons and Mandaville (2010), for example, argue that nation-state politics has become a transnational affair (Lyons & Mandaville, 2010, 124). Interests and perspectives from outside the nation-state now shape national politics. However, their views are still formed by diasporic political engagement in the homeland. Yet, there is no reason why we should not see diasporas equally engaged and shaping politics within the host country, particularly if mobilization for the purpose of influencing political outcomes is key in the formation of diasporic identities and vice versa. As Lyons and Mandaville themselves acknowledge, 'ethno-national' identity and a common homeland are not enough to explain diaspora mobilization (Lyons & Mandaville, 2010, 138). Increasingly heterogeneous diasporas mobilize around common civic or political concerns triggered by key moments such as the Brexit referendum in the UK. Diasporas are not always looking over their shoulder toward the past, but they engage with contemporary threats and plan forward to guarantee a future, indicating complex diasporic dynamics and temporalities.

Ethnically different diasporas coming together as a result of trigger events, shared struggles and commonality of purpose, are no longer unique. Ong'ayo (2019) traces the roots of the African diaspora formation in Holland by showing how the legacy of Dutch colonialism, conflict-motivated emigration and common experiences and needs upon arrival have led to collective engagement and mobilization. Ong'ayo's study echoes Gilroy's (1993) seminal work on the commonality of Black diasporic experiences, shaped by multiple positionalities and shared struggles against established power hierarchies. Heterogeneous groups can come together, though differentially as we demonstrate in this article, as a diaspora through their multi-identity references and transnational ties, multi-national practices and comparative reflexivity. Diasporas' engagement in the host country is, therefore, based on their capacity to exercise their rights 'collectively as actors, individually and through their organizations', while shared experiences and diasporic identities become 'tools for mobilization [...] in the pursuit of common goals' Ong'ayo (2019, 153).

This conceptualization of diasporas recalls Bauböck's (2018) transnational citizenship concept, which takes into account the necessity of inclusion and the legitimate stake people have in the democratic polity once they are linked to its jurisdiction (Bauböck's, 2018, 20), although this often creates tensions and uncertainties between rights and obligations. We consider therefore the diaspora to be a stance, a particular form of consciousness not tied to a nation-state or ethnicity, but the trigger and the result of mobilization and activism around a common project, which is geopolitically conceived and motivated by what Bauböck calls 'affected interest' (2018, 22). In this view, the importance of the 'demos' surpasses that of the 'ethnos', to use Balibar's distinction (2004, 8); ethnic ties are outplayed by civic concerns of democratic participation.

Reconsidering diasporas in relation to both geopolitics and transnational political mobilization is 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 mobilising allegiances toward a common political goal. Its legitimacy might be contested, and its implementation questioned, but this itself is proof of the EU project's relevance. Competing affiliations, conflict and confrontation are, after all, part of Europe's identity (Balibar, 2004, 5).

EU institutions have been somewhat successful in re-contextualising nationalist topoi of popular culture (such as family, home, founding fathers, or building) to construct a sense of Europeaness (Zappettini, 2014, 396). Through focusing on the political and economic agenda, the discourse of EU institutions managed to decouple cultural or ethnic considerations from identity or rather legitimize cultural, ethnic and linguistic difference in the context of a civic Europeaness. This ideational and organizational approach (Zappettini, 2014, 377) took participation and rights as its building blocks and assembled a European identity built on political discourse, mobilization and will.

A European imaginary also evolved in relation to the 'new migrations' (Favell, 2008), a concept that denotes the free movement of people in the EU, based on a diluted role of EU member states in controlling intra-EU migration and mobility (Favell & Hansen, 2002, 582). More specifically, '... within Europe, the emergence of an increasingly integrated internal labour market has also enabled migrants to be mobile in opposition to state attempts to institutionalize more fixed immigrant residency'. It is this state power dilution and fluidity of the free EU movement that the Referendum challenged, and the implications of Brexit for EU citizens in the UK continue to unravel. Considering the patterns of the EU political project and the sense of betrayal among EU citizens, it is not surprising that a civic notion of Euro-peanness was activated by Brexit and has started to create bridges among Europeans in the UK who are emerging as a dynamic diaspora collective. The EU diaspora in the UK, thus, sees the EU as a point of origin, a united political space that is a source of common rights, such as mobility, but also a modern-day family whose ties are based on shared interests. The sense of a shared home elsewhere was also re-enforced by the 'European migrant' label used in the Referendum campaign by part of the UK media and political establishment. The constituency of EU citizens was only too happy to adopt it and use it to fight to preserve rights post-Brexit as a united constituency.

The study

The findings are based on fieldwork carried out between July 2017 and August 2019 in Liverpool and Southport, as part of a project entitled . We interviewed 25 people in each city (20 EU citizens, 5 key informants) and we also conducted a focus group with EU citizens in each city. The broader project explored the positionality of EU citizens post-referendum and their perception of involved states and supranational organizations, and also investigated their emotional response to their new and unprecedented circumstances in the UK.

We kept the sampling criteria broad, so we included any EU citizen of any nationality, except British, who lived in the UK, were not visiting or holidaying, regardless of the amount of time spent in the country. Including all European citizens counters 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). The sample, thus, comprises EU citizens of at least 18 EU nationalities, one Euro (Greek-Belgian) couple who met through the Erasmus Programme, one Kenyan/British mother of EU citizens (Danish children), and four participants with double citizenship (American-French, Portuguese-French, Moldovan-Romanian, Swiss-Bulgarian).

Recruitment was initially carried out through snow-balling and thereafter purposeful sampling, to ensure a wide diversity of nationalities and experiences. We had significantly different demographics in each city, reflecting the area's main industries and resident demographics. Southport had more low-skilled migrants from Eastern Europe, while the Liverpool subsample was composed of highly skilled, highly mobile professionals, many from Western Europe. This corresponds with a general, uneven geography of EU citizens in the UK (Lessard-Phillips & Sigona, 2019). The discussion ranged from arrival and life in the UK, views on the EU, social relationships, impact of Brexit and plans for the future, to establish how they processed the result of the Referendum from their diverse experiences and positionalities in both emotional and practical terms.

The research aimed to move beyond studies that privilege the elite 'diaspora entrepreneurs' (Koinova, 2018a, 1256) and analysed diasporic mobilization at devolved and local level (Délano Alonso & Mylonas, 2019), yet in the context of the national and the transnational. We responded, thus, to existing literature (Adamson & Demetriou, 2007) that advocates for a shift toward understanding diasporic engagement at the micro level in relation to political collective identities and state practices.

Nested mobilization: Realigning political belongingness after Brexit

Brexit can be viewed as a 'critical juncture' and a 'transformative event' (Koinova, 2018b, 1290) that triggered a process of quick politicization (Vathi & Trandafoiu, 2020) and emotional mobilization based on the sense of a common

unprecedented fate for EU citizens. An important underlying element of the establishment of a post-national European diaspora is the perception of the post-Referendum period as a 'limbo' (Mas Giral, 2020; Remigi et al., 2017) that required collective engagement and action. Narratives of betrayal, vulnerability, pending fate and survival or resistance parallel EU citizens' experiences post-Referendum to the classic and yet dramatic conditions that are seen to be leading to the creation of a diaspora. Although not all EU citizens became highly politically engaged, many experienced an increased thirst for information, a desire to understand better the workings of UK politics and to follow and critically analyse the media (Vathi & Trandafoiu, 2020). Initially, politicization was present in the way EU citizens engaged with mainstream news on social media, constructed a communal sense of purpose and displayed clear political attitudes.

Beyond their national groups, the result of the 2016 Brexit Referendum also brought about the establishment and multiplication of online or offline European groups (such as *The European Movement*, *the3million*, *Forever Europeans*, *Remain in the EU*, *Post -Brexit - EU citizens in the UK* and *UK nationals in Europe*) with an important continuing role in bottom-up mobilization and lobbying. Their activities have led to increased dialogue among and between different nationalities, brought together by a common purpose. One of our participants reflected on the experience of seeking and finding commonality thus:

One of the possibilities for me to come slowly out of this shock state was to find people, other people on Facebook, to find out their groups [...] For days, on end I was just sitting in front of the computer exploring *Facebook* and these different constellations. (Dagmar, Germany)

The mobilization of EU citizens post-Referendum took three main forms: (a) EU oriented, such as becoming members of pro-EU lobby or activist groups, registering in online forums and participating in mass public demonstrations; (b) national origin oriented, such as strengthening ties through participation in online groups and taking part in information events by embassies and consulates; and (c) individualistic, such as voting (tactically), standing in local elections and contacting MPs. We also have to acknowledge that a portion of EU citizens showed lack of interest in the consequences of Brexit and displayed political apathy and 'inaction' (Vathi & Trandafoiu, 2020). This may be partly a consequence of the 'unbelonging' (Mas Giral, 2020) process they were subjected to during the Referendum campaign and its aftermath.

However, at the overall collective level, EU citizens perceived the result of the Referendum as a bordering practice, which at the same time pressed for a more defined status and stronger allegiances to Britain. Consequently, they mobilized making geo-political references that displayed their emotional positionalities and showed their own engagement with this bordering process. They differentiated themselves from the British and made reference to their own national and regional geo-political particularities and (dis)advantages, within the larger frame of Europeaness. Maria (Latvia) made it clear that she mainly felt European and Latvian: 'I don't feel British at all'. Anna (Italy), one of our focus group participants, explained that the result of the Referendum made her and her European colleagues ask 'are we really living in a country where people want to be cut from each other?' The opposed view (European versus British/English) emerged from many other accounts: 'all of a sudden you are told this is no longer your country' (Chiara, Italy); 'there's a lot of stuff that's wrong with the UK that I can't get over' (Jelena, Estonia); 'I feel like being a European is distinct from being British, actually' (Olivier, France and the US). Consequently, Eleni (Greece) observed that Brexit 'acts as a bonding thing for the rest of the Europeans versus the English'.

Our fieldwork revealed three main stances of identifying with the European mobilization framework: *national and regional stances* that include references to the national and regional political systems participants have been socialized with, their nation's geo-political standing in the EU and previous experiences with multi-national structures; *EU-oriented stances* that includes references to their emotional belongingness to Europe, loss of rights in terms of mobilities and also Euroscepticism; *non-alignment* through indifference or refusal to engage, a sense of powerlessness or disempowerment and efforts to shift perspective through naturalization and augmented belongingness to Britain.

National and regional stances

Participants made frequent national origin references, through the projection of nested identities, that recounted their country's experience with the EU, alluded to regional politics and recalled memories of being socialized within a certain national culture. 'I'm quite proud to be an EU-er; I'm proud to be Polish. And since Poland joined the EU [...], the conditions have improved in Poland. So, I'm very much pro-European Union', explained Agnieszka (Poland). Similarly, Maria (Latvia) said 'The EU is a good project, it is good for a small country like Latvia, because Latvia can now participate in big plans with the EU'. Lina (Lithuania) explained that she felt 'European, because, you know, our history before Second World War... we were a European country'. For many Eastern Europeans EU membership acted as a recognition that their countries have been welcomed back into the European family they once belonged to.

While national assignment remained relevant, the EU project allowed for the establishment of a European horizon of belonging, which was strengthened by Brexit. Edyta (Poland), who worked in banking, had already lived in Scotland and commented about her brother's life in France, summarized her positionality thus:

If someone was to ask me, is Poland your home, for me it's not like the land or the country where you're from; it's the people who you live with and if you're happy there, for me it doesn't matter [...] if I'm happy it doesn't matter where I am, it is for me just a piece of land and for me, like, that is European, Europe ... that's it!

In these examples, Brexit and the losses implied by its consequences became a conduit for revaluing the benefits of being linked up with the rest of the continent and reassessing the geopolitics of post-Brexit European belongingness and mobility. Piroška (Hungary) summed up these advantages: 'I think it's just a helpful community really... it just makes things simple, like trading and employment rules. It makes everybody mobile. You can work wherever you want to and have the same rules. So, it just makes people equal and life easier in many ways'. One of the strongest themes that came out of the interviews was the advantage of European mobility: 'Schengen is the best' said Agata (Poland); 'the best about it [EU] are the open borders' (Amalia, Lithuania); 'no barriers' (Margot, France); 'you can work wherever you go, you can live wherever you go...' (Doreen, Germany); 'it [EU] united us' (Katarzyna, Poland); people coming together 'is a natural consequence' of facing the same challenges (Anna, Italy); 'all people are citizens of the European Union and all have equal rights' (Emmanuela, Greece); 'Europeans possibly having no rights here [UK], it just doesn't make sense' (Aleksi, Finland); 'if I become a British citizen I lose all my EU rights [...] Why should you choose one country over twenty-seven others?' (Jelena, Estonia). These interventions show the existence of an imagined European community built on rights (hence organizations like *the3million* focusing on preserving these rights after Brexit), which nevertheless has an added symbolic dimension. Brexit threatens this European bond: 'this isn't Europe [...] most people here [UK], they don't identify themselves as European' (Jelena, Estonia).

Regina (Portugal) provided a good description of her multiple positionality and nested identification that she too interpreted within a European civic frame:

I have double nationality. I am both French and Portuguese. Well, I was born in Portugal, but I also have French nationality. And I live in the UK now, so I consider myself more of a European than anything else, yes. [...] Obviously, I feel in my heart that I am Portuguese, that's where I was born. I go back a lot; my parents are there. Yes, there's a special love for Portugal, but I've lived [laughs] in three different countries, so I'm kind of European.

We also noticed references to distinct regional identities within the EU, based on shared experiences and interests. Jeroen (Belgium) recounted how his travels to Italy and Spain, as well as having family living in France, cultivated a 'contact with other countries' in the region, which enhanced his European identity. He observed that in contrast with a Hungarian friend who had applied for British citizenship in fear of losing her right to work, he felt calmer, having grown

up with the guarantees offered by the EU, which he took for granted: 'I've never had these worries in life'. Sofia (Spain) explained how because of her travels (working as an au-pair) 'I can see myself very similar to continental Europeans, French and Germans'. EU mobility for work and travel seems to have enhanced regional knowledge for our participants.

Federico (Italy), a doctoral student, observed that academia was more diverse than other professions and so 'the majority of people I spend time with, apart from one or two outside academia, are not English'. Some professions, therefore, were more likely to bring Europeans together around professional interests, not just region or country of origin (a sort of professional diaspora).

In the case of Eastern European participants in Southport, there were also communal experiences arising from working together on the farms and in the food packing factories typical for the area. Mathis (Lithuania) shared that he made lots of friends among other Eastern Europeans because 'there are lots us Bulgarian, Polish, Romanian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Hungarian, Slovakian...'. Andris (Latvia) also pointed out that while the 'contract guys' were English, among agency workers there were Hungarians, Romanians, Portuguese, Latvians and Lithuanians, 'so nearly all countries'. Gheorghe (Moldova and Romania) observed that working together with other Eastern Europeans on a potato farm also had its drawbacks, since there was little opportunity to learn English.

South Europeans took shelter in their memories of resilience and political awareness forming in the face of autocratic political leadership (Italy) and EU neoliberal politics (Greece). Martha (Cyprus) explained how her Greek friends felt ambivalent about the EU, but they quickly came together to see what can be salvaged in the immediate aftermath of the referendum result. Melina (Greece) explained their feelings thus: 'I mean I think I kind of feel probably more European since I moved, you know, away from Greece just because the perspective has been changed, in a way, like culturally'. Anna (Italy) commented: 'I used to live in a country when Berlusconi was there for seventeen years [...] and every year you wake up ... he's still there. So, once you have lived all these big disappointments, yeah, you can survive Brexit'. Disappointing national experiences reoriented some participants towards engaging more with Europeanness, as the preferred alternative.

More widely, citizens of Nordic countries commented on Brexit with reference to their ideas of democracy and their perceptions of the UK and its political 'behaviour'. Participants from Benelux countries discussed the welfare state and UK's careless attitude towards Brexit. Citizens of the old EU member states showed their indignation toward the UK's disregard for the EU project. This again strengthened their identity as Europeans.

The national and regional culture focus also helped plan for future generations. Adiran (Spain) explained how her community has taken steps to set up an 'association of parents of Spanish origin with children which are usually bilingual and they all live in the area of Merseyside [...] it's basically a funding for preserving the culture and the language amongst immigrants of Spanish origin'. In this case, we see an attempt to future-proof the EU opportunities of the next generation, making sure they retain access to the EU labour market. Caitlin (Ireland) applied for an Irish passport for her son with the same aim: maintaining EU-wide mobility and labour rights.

Nested identities became important for a number of reasons: bonding with like-minded EU citizens, reinforcing European identity and planning for the future, taking advantage of alternatives that British citizens have now forfeited.

EU-oriented stances

References to European identity have been highlighted in previous research with EU citizens in the UK after the 2016 Referendum, such as Ranta and Nancheva (2019) and Botterill and Hancock (2019) but it emerged even stronger in our research. This should not be a surprise, since the mechanisms that brought EU citizens to the UK in the first place, were meant to encourage mobility with the goal of achieving a cosmopolitan imagined community. Katarzyna (Poland) expressed this when she commented that the EU 'has really opened the door to people being connected [...] we are able to go wherever we want, and we mix. [...] And I think that's what EU did, you know, that it just united us'. Federico (Italy) pointed to the EU policies that were part of a strategy to strengthen European identity:

I am part of the ERASMUS generation. And ever since my ERASMUS experience, which was in 2002 - I was in the first generation of ERASMUS going across Europe, I started to feel, and I really still feel, European.

Federico's experiences allude to the EU representing more than rights and opportunities, but also becoming a homeland, an imagined community constructed through travel and multicultural experiences. The results of the Referendum also compelled many to reach out to fellow Europeans and find validation for their thoughts and feelings in other people who were in the same position. This not only led to a stronger identification with Europe, but new alliances started to be forged, based in a sense of togetherness that became stronger. Several observations made by our participants indirectly acknowledge a collective fate. Eleni (Greece) alluded to a new 'European' intimacy: '... since Brexit, the Europeans speak to each other, like Italians, French, Spanish. They tend to be more open to other Europeans, so they tend to make stronger bonds as Europeans.' Faced with adversity and a perceived common enemy, EU citizens felt that they had something in common, that set them apart from the British majority, while bringing them closer, at the same time, to other European citizens. However, their views also expose geo-political groupings within the EU, such as the South European region. Anna (Italy) reflected in the focus group that her community has remained one of foreigners, people shared the experience of migration with, as well as living together in Liverpool as foreigners: 'my well-being is linked to the people I have around me [...] they are the communities from Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy. This is where my community is'.

The loss of rights and the impending change in status led to a polarization of stances, clearly expressed by Eleni's voice: '...it is us and them. It is us, the Europeans, and them, the English, that they do not want us here anymore, although we do all the dirty work' (Eleni, Greece). This sense of exclusion, which cuts both ways, expressed the hardening of the symbolic opposition between 'us' and 'them', when EU citizens realized that they were not included in the newly imagined community crafted in the aftermath of the referendum. There is also a tendency to subsume all English people within the same category of 'them', with no differentiation between those who voted to remain and those who voted for Brexit. The exclusion was double-edged because while positioning herself against 'them', all the English, Eleni also performed a symbolic self-exclusion.

This polarization 'disrupted' the original sense of belonging (Ranta & Nancheva, 2019) and caused a recalculation of one's place within the UK collective, leading to a repositioning away from the British and closer to fellow Europeans. Faith (Kenya and the UK, mother of half-Danish children) explained this process at length:

... the Leave vote was so symbolic because it ended up not being just about European citizens. It was basically telling anyone that was non-British, native British, that we don't want you here, and I think, collectively, immigrants in the UK felt that's what Leave was saying to them: we don't want you here, we just want to be ourselves, you know, native British people in our island, and we don't care for you. And I think that's what's when you have neighbours that you think, you know, if they had their signs or whatever, you'd think, okay, so basically, I've been living next to this person for years...

The feeling of exclusion was echoed by Regina, who was born in Portugal, grew up in France and studied and worked in the UK: 'I love being here [UK]; it gave me a lot of opportunities. I've had loads of different jobs here. It was great; it allowed me to save money. I'm very grateful for that. But, as a country, I don't know. It's probably the one that I feel most excluded in'. This themed occurred again and again, sometimes in very categorical terms: 'Do I feel European? Oh, yes! [...] Irish and European, not British, never British, no!' (Caitlin, Ireland)

Federico (Italy) provided a similar comparative and reflexive social analysis, where the same 'us-them' polarizing distinction and the same strategy of grouping feature, but this time we could see an emphasis on the cultural features of socialization. When asked why the British voted to leave the EU, he replied:

The English have an ... individualistic approach to social life [...] And they're used to emancipate themselves from family pretty early [...] used to live a life that doesn't rely very much on social interactions, or at least not as much as in Italy, I would say, where family's very important and you hardly move away from home [...] and I think that has implications also in the way people live their lives, and they're used to deal with their problems independently. Whereas perhaps what I'm used to is more a need of sharing [...] sharing something deeper.

In this reflection, we see different models of socialization and diverse social and family structures at play, which were brought sharper into focus by Brexit. Piroška (Hungary) also reflected in a similar vein on the difference between Spain and the UK: 'I lived in Spain for two years and that was very different, people are very friendly, but here they are distant. So... it's more difficult to make friends.' These opinions show that Europe is viewed not just as origin, but also as a cultural space of familiarity and collective socialization, an impression which was enhanced by the lack of communal spirit in the UK.

Even as Eurosceptics, EU citizens remain pragmatic about maintaining their rights. As one of the few EU citizens in the UK that could vote in the Brexit referendum due to her Cypriot citizenship, Martha used tactical voting in the Brexit referendum, voting Remain despite her critical stance toward the EU. In this case, the vote itself was not really an opt in; it was rather a rejection of something: of the UK politics and the inevitable consequences of Brexit for EU citizens in the UK. Voting tactically and prioritizing interests—Martha chose loss of rights instead of Euroscepticism to prevail in her decision—is an expression of a collective stance. Martha is part of a group that avidly exchanges information and discusses alternatives to inform common action. This is a clear example of a group that acts as a coherent politicized diaspora in response to political events. Martha's comment that 'Maybe it would be even the start of, you know, breaking this whole EU thing and building something new from scratch', is also an example of seeing opportunity in a bad situation, an instance of mobilization and finding alliances in the elaboration of a common political project, such as improving the EU due to the lessons of Brexit.

Interestingly, seeing the disparities between our Liverpool and Southport samples, EU citizens of older EU members states tended to be more critical of EU politics and policies and therefore there was, at times, clear Euroscepticism invoked, though this may link to the different social capital and (geo)-political competency in this subsample. In the Southport sample, which was dominated by Eastern Europeans and therefore more recent EU members, there was a clear majority support for the EU, seen as an enabler, a conduit for projecting national interest onto a European stage.

Despite recurrent critique of aspects of EU policy, the European imaginary remains a stable feature in the identity of EU citizens in the UK, demonstrating the makings of a European diaspora in the aftermath of the Referendum. Dagmar (Germany) recounted how she attempted to repair the rift between her and a Greek friend who had been upset by Germany's stance during the Greek financial crisis. Dagmar reached out to all the EU citizens she knew: 'I called everybody after the Referendum, after this traumatic experience, I decided to call everybody I knew and invite them to a party'. Reaching out to fellow EU citizens online she also began to participate in protest events—'a spontaneous, not organized demonstration' in London, which she 'desperately tried to share with other Facebook groups locally,' then a silent chain in Manchester. 'I went to Manchester and I met a lot of people there that I'm still in contact with here locally or regionally, you know, not just from Manchester. There was also someone from Yorkshire and Humber, someone from Fleetwood [...] there are people coming together'. Eleni (Greece) also talked about coming together after the referendum: 'We keep discussing this [...] we meet up, exchange newspaper articles, so it has become an issue. It's something that it was not there before, and now it is, and we have to consider it'.

Coming together is possible because of prior cohesion as part of the EU. For Levin (Switzerland and Bulgaria) 'Europe is about countries helping other countries', 'working together is better than pulling apart in different directions' (John, Ireland). '...being European [...] involves that feeling I feel every time I go everywhere in continental Europe', explained Federico (Italy), 'I feel I can understand the people there [...] there is something shared among some nationals in Europe...' Faith (Kenya and the UK, mother of half-Danish children), similarly felt reassured that herself

and her children were 'part of a family'. These reflections show both a symbolic attachment to Europe seen as a home, a family, and Brexit acting as a catalyst for choosing an identity (European rather than British) and choosing to mobilize.

Non-alignment

Collective and individual experiences also led to instances of 'mainstreaming' and 'disengaging' (Vathi & Trandafoiu, 2020: 489), with some participants like Margot (France) planning to naturalize and attempting to integrate further in the British society, while others dismissing any concerns about Brexit, since they thought it unlikely to impact on their rights. Amalia (Lithuania) made it clear that, 'I am not political, and I do not pay that much attention' while she also declared 'I don't think Brexit affects me. The new rules won't be before 2019 or 2020 and I think whoever comes till then, they will be ok. If they are here now, they will be able to stay here'.

Similarly, Marek (Poland) seemed to be more concerned about practical considerations such as retaining his job and securing British citizenship for his daughter. He could not offer a definite opinion about whether Brexit was a good or bad thing and simply said, 'I am not afraid that much about my future because I have been working here for ten years'. Matis (Lithuania) also commented: 'I'm not afraid actually about that [Brexit]... they can't kick out, you know, everybody, especially as I pay tax and everything'. When asked what he thought about the EU, Andris (Latvia) simply answered, 'Actually, I don't know, and I don't care'. He could not see Brexit impacting on his future life choices either, as his family was already in the UK. This opinion was also shared by Ruta (Lithuania) who didn't think Brexit would change anything for her personally.

Non-alignment and disengagement should not be a surprise, since existing literature focusing on diasporic political engagement in the host country has often observed uneven mobilization and the importance of stakeholding for mobilization. Only a minority of diasporans get involved, mainly those with some history of activism (Bermudez, 2011, 136) and prior existing political and social capital. In the case of some of our Eastern European participants, the barriers were mainly linguistic and economic. Lack of English language skills meant little access to mainstream media and political discourse and long work shifts among the lower skilled did not leave time for activism. Bermudez's research with Colombians in London also observed divisions and mistrust within migrant communities (Bermudez, 2011, 137).

In the case of EU citizens coming from countries who had experienced a painful post-communist transition, there was a certain pervasive lack of trust in institutions and politicians, because of poor prior experiences. Stelian (Romania) observed that 'I lived in Romania for decades through high amounts of instability, and I know exactly how much that wrecks the economy and the society, and how it affects even the levels of trust between people'. In this case, prior negative experiences made it difficult to engage effectively with the political process in post-Brexit UK.

A shared European imaginary and an EU diaspora through Brexit

Brexit was a trigger event that led to commoning language, discourse and practices, as well as mobilized action at personal, local, national and transnational levels. Its emotional impact has compelled European identity to come to the fore, as Brexit made EU citizens feel that, faced with adversity, they had something in common, not just a common adversary, but also shared structures of feelings and values. While the UK was still a full member of the EU, many EU citizens did not look beyond the commonalities that linked their countries of origin and the UK and saw mainly the advantages of the common market and of free movement, without dwelling too much on the differences between social and political systems. It looks as if they needed a cataclysmic event to make them more aware and make them want to actively engage with political discourse (Vathi & Trandafoiu, 2020), but also develop more distinct collective subjectivity in the process, based on imagined national and European communities and identities.

This explains why a European diaspora has begun to emerge in the UK, despite EU membership, elite participation and media and public discourse being nation-state based and in the absence of an established European public sphere.

It was made possible by prior collective socialization into the European imaginary and personal experiences of mobility, Brexit as a trigger event that transformed EU citizens' perception of integration and practical understanding of rights, as well as the ability on the part of EU citizens to engage at a transnational level due to multiple positionalities.

Interviews with EU migrants in the UK uncover post-Brexit geo-political positionalities and nested identities, based on varying levels of political competency and resiliencies. At a more pragmatic level, these positionalities are affected by participants' differentiated access to EU citizenship rights over time and the traumatic loss of rights they enjoyed as EU citizens. Three main stances of mobilization emerge from the study: those for whom national and regional identities remain dominant, those who identify strongly with the EU and those who prefer non-alignment. The histories of their nations' engagement with the EU project, with implications for their national identities, play a role in the way they view what Brexit entails in terms of their political allegiances, propelling them in different ways toward an identification with an EU diaspora. For the EU citizens of the established EU member states, strong national identities and geo-political positioning in the EU underpin the sense of betrayal and their orientation toward the EU. For the citizens of newer member states, the EU served as a legitimising or commoning agent, awarding mobility rights and positioning them more favourably within the continent, but this is differently engaged with by EU citizens of this subsample, depending on their socio-economic background.

While the pro- and anti-EU stance, as well as the more indifferent, non-aligning attitudes among Europeans living in the UK, are indicative of the complexity and fluidity of one's nested identity position, we also noticed an almost taken for granted European imaginary lurking in the background. Not all EU citizens can be expected to have similar attitudes toward the European Union or feel a commonality with fellow EU citizens, as differences are often dependent on the sophisticated geopolitics of modern Europe and the EU project. Yet all these types of mobilization emerge around a European imagined community that is often just assumed or implied. They also emerge as a reflection of the changing UK-EU relationships, whereby EU citizens begin to identify as European in opposition with Britishness.

CONCLUSIONS

Brexit can be seen as a catalyst for identity and political choices among EU citizens in the UK that would not have existed otherwise. While some media and public discourses aimed to 'migratize' EU citizens and further marginalize them, EU citizens used the 'migrant' and 'European' badges to provide visibility to a new political constituency steeped in strategies of survival and common purpose. The underlying European imaginary connecting the reflections of EU citizens speaks of the EU's long-term work and legacy. Sometimes contested and occasionally rejected in institutional terms, the EU project allowed EU citizens in the UK to use their memories of traveling, learning, working and accessing rights in Europe as a conduit for expressing a European consciousness. Our study has also highlighted the importance of shifting the research focus to the micro-level. The grounding of the project into the experiences of EU citizens in the North West of England has uncovered collective attitudes, discourses and actions that have wider implications for future minority-majority relations in the UK.

An EU diaspora in the UK post-Brexit, therefore, emerges as a collective process of civic stance taking and claim making on the basis of, and further strengthening, a process of local, national and transnational political engagement, with distinct temporal and spatial reference points. Unlike the 'traditional' diasporas that are inspired by distant pasts, political mobilization that underpins the EU diaspora is based on contemporary trauma and concerns toward the future. Instead of a shared homeland in a particular nation state, the post-national EU diasporas bond on the basis of a transnational project and their diasporic identities are based on transnational mobility rights and practices. The three main stances of identifying with the European mobilization framework— the national and regional oriented, EU oriented, and non-alignment—reflect the varying social capital, stakes and engagements with the EU political project among the EU citizens population in the UK.

While studying an on-going process and a post-national diaspora in the making had its challenges, especially in terms of capturing the multitude of engagements inspired by diverse historical experiences and types of social capital,

the approach also had the advantage of working with a range of EU citizens, not just diaspora entrepreneurs (Brubaker, 2005; Koinova, 2018a). Our findings give voice to a diaspora constituency that contests the primacy of primordial, ethnic ties and gives legitimacy to future research into the emergence of transnational diasporas. The experiences of the EU diaspora in the UK post-Brexit must shift the focus in diaspora studies from diasporas defined by the relationship with the homeland toward diaporas shaped by the political realities of the host country. They also reveal a shift from ethnic to civic identification as the basis for future EU diaspora mobilization at a national level, which will require further attention. As political and economic crises linger in the UK and beyond and the outcomes of Brexit at different levels become more apparent, our study has therefore the potential to become an important marker in further political engagement and diaspora research.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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