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NATURALISATION AND (DIS)INTEGRATION FOR EU FAMILIES IN BREXITING BRITAIN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The share of applications for British naturalization by EU residents in the UK has increased from 5% in 2007 to 26% in 2017. Just over 80,000 EU residents have applied for naturalization since the EU referendum. While a significant increase, many more EU citizens residing in the UK are still uncertain as to their legal status after Brexit and are considering their options.
- Decisions to apply for naturalization have increased more markedly among EU nationals from 'old' EU member states (EU14) who, until the EU referendum, had felt their position in Britain as fully secure.
- Among EU nationals from Central and Eastern Europe (EU8 + EU2), application rates for naturalization have increased but less steeply, as they were applying for naturalization already before the EU referendum.
- Decisions concerning naturalization are often family-minded and future-oriented. A range of economic, social and cultural considerations intervene, including application fees, eligibility restrictions, and the right to dual nationality. Family composition, in terms of country of birth of parents and children also play a role in the decision-making process.
- In mixed nationality families, including in those with a UK-born partner, 'going home' is not an easy option to consider and securing status is the option that is easier to pursue.
- Attitudes towards naturalization vary significantly among EU nationals, with more well off and educated EU nationals and EU14 citizens displaying more resistance to applying to become British, on moral and political grounds. Others, instead, take a more pragmatic approach to acquiring a British passport.

INTRODUCTION: NATURALISATION APPLICATIONS BY EU CITIZENS BEFORE AND AFTER THE REFERENDUM

The latest Home Office data concerning permanent residence, settled status and naturalisation show a significant increase in applications from EU citizens. Newspaper reports often take this as evidence of EU nationals racing to secure status in order to stay in the UK. While there is an element of truth in this interpretation of the trend, it is also a partial and selective view of what is going on. In fact, while there is an increase in applications for naturalisation, these are overall low if one takes into account the number of EU nationals residing in the UK¹. In earlier Eurochildren Briefs² we have highlighted how some EU citizens risk falling through the cracks of the Settled Status registration process and may encounter unsurmountable obstacles to access citizenship.

This Eurochildren Brief focuses on decision making surrounding the acquisition of British citizenship. There are different migrant narratives of naturalisation, and these reflect the social hierarchies and diversity existing within EU citizens in the UK. Not only EU nationals have been differently impacted by certainties and uncertainties surrounding the Brexit referendum³, but their perception and response to Brexit are very much shaped by their social status and sense of entitlement and self-worth. Furthermore, they also have, in terms of legal status, different options available to them as a result of different ages, genders, occupational trajectories, incomes, and norms on dual citizenship in their countries of origin. This Eurochildren Brief examines aspirations and motivations behind choosing to become British (naturalisation) or choosing not to, among our participants following the Brexit referendum.

Firstly, we focus on the range of motivations informing decisions to apply for naturalisation,

secondly on the reasons why some EU nationals are not considering applying.

We draw on qualitative data based on in-depth interviews conducted with EU families as part of the ESRC-funded 'EU families and Eurochildren in Brexiting Britain' project, whose overall aim is to capture the impact of political and legal uncertainty on EU families and the strategies they have put in place to mitigate it since the referendum occurred.

Naturalisation data and trend

ONS data⁴ show that the share of citizenship applications by EU nationals has increased from 5% in 2007 to 29% in June 2018. Data from June 2016 show that at the time of the referendum, applications from EU citizens accounted for 11% of the total.

The EU referendum for some EU citizens meant a sudden and shocking realisation of the fragility of their legal position in the UK⁵. Others, instead, had already encountered the UK government's "hostile environment" and experienced being at the receiving end of the virulent anti-immigration rhetoric of some British newspapers. Research shows that Polish nationals in Britain have felt negatively targeted by British populist media since much before June 2016, which might explain why they have felt more insecure about their migration status in the UK than any other EU citizens⁶. In addition, with freedom of movement still a fairly recent reality for Poles, many remembered the time when visas were needed to be allowed to enter the UK.

It is not surprising therefore, that within the overall increase in applications from EU nationals, the curve among EU14 citizens is steeper since 2016, while EU8 and EU2 citizens had peaks in applications already in the previous years. In 2013, 40.4% of all applications by EU citizens came from EU8 nationals (10,234 out of 25,308 EU applications), 37% from EU2 and 21% from EU14 citizens. By contrast, in 2017, EU14 citizens accounted for 48.83% of all EU applications (18,884 out of 38,666) with EU8 accounting for 28.9% and EU2 for 15.56%.

¹ Lessard-Phillips, L, Sigona, N. (2018) Mapping EU citizens in the UK: A changing profile? From 1980s to the EU referendum, Eurochildren Research Brief Series, no.3

² Yeo, C (2018) The impact of the UK-EU agreement on residence rights for EU families, Eurochildren Research Brief Series, no. 1 (Available at: <https://eurochildren.info/publications/>)

Yeo, C (2018) The impact of the UK-EU agreement on citizenship rights for EU families, Eurochildren Research Brief Series, no. 2 (Available at: <https://eurochildren.info/publications/>)

³ For example, Godin and Bica have examined the challenges that Roma people face in applying for Settled Status: Godin, M. and

M.C. Bica (2019), "It took 2 hours and one third didn't get through": Piloting the settled status application with Roma migrants", Eurochildren blog (<https://eurochildren.info>)

⁴ <https://data.gov.uk/dataset/01da355f-f491-4760-9bbe-8807c8087e37/immigration-statistics-citizenship>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/14/sharp-rise-in-number-of-eu-nationals-applying-for-uk-citizenship>

⁶ Rzepnikowska, A. 2019. "Racism and xenophobia experienced by Polish migrants in the UK before and after Brexit vote". Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 45(1):61-77.

With the prospect of the imminent exit of the UK from the EU, new uncertainties have arisen and one of the responses to this legal uncertainty has been for EU citizens to apply for British citizenship. As we will see below, this decision has rarely been straightforward, often perceived as forced upon them by the circumstances, and, where positive, motivated as an attempt to 'take back control' of one's life in the chaos of Brexit negotiations. In the following sections we will unpack motivations and attitudes to naturalisation, paying attention to the position of interviewees and their framing of their decisions.

METHODOLOGY

The UK has been a member of the European Union for 40 years. Throughout that time there has been an intermingling of people and institutions which can be most clearly seen in the growing number of bi- and mixed-nationality EU families in the UK and their children, many of whom were born in the UK and hold a British passport⁷. To be considered an EU family for the purpose of our study, the families had to include at least a child and a EU27-born parent.

We built a family typology including five combinations based on the country of birth of parents (see Table 1) and ensured they were all represented in our sample. The country of origin of parents is relevant both legally, affecting the capacity of members to secure their legal status, and, we hypothesised, to understand the coping strategies and aspirations they resort to. Overall, we interviewed 103 EU families, including 202 children. While most families had UK-born children, 20 families included both UK- and EU- born children.

Table 1 Family typology and sample

PARTNER 1	PARTNER 2	Sample
UK	EU27	44
EU27	EU27 (same)	30
EU27	EU27 (different)	10
EU27	Non-EU	12
EU27		7

⁷ Lessard-Phillips, L and Sigona, N (2019) UK-born children of EU nationals in the UK, Eurochildren Brief Series, no. 5, Birmingham: IRIS.

REASONS TO BECOME BRITISH

Among those who were eligible and could afford to apply for naturalisation, the decision to apply was primarily presented as motivated by family considerations and concerns.

Other motivations also intervened, in particular the conviction that British citizenship is the only way to preserve the same rights and protections as before the referendum and the closest one can get to retaining the right to freedom of movement in and out of the UK.

Family-framed reasons

In 2017, out of 28,502 applications by EU citizens, half were made on residency grounds and almost one quarter (6,839 applications) were made on behalf of minors⁸. Many children have lived in the UK either since birth or from a very early age having migrated with their parents. Because of Brexit, parents fear their children will no longer enjoy the same rights as before and will be considered foreigners or second-class citizens. Mitigating this risk is a primary concern for which parents are prepared to take actions that they would not otherwise have considered and for which they will incur high cost, as explained by a Portuguese mother of two teenagers in a low-income household:

I applied for permanent residence card for myself and for the rest of the family. We got it. We can apply for British citizenship – we could have applied already for British citizenship in 2016. But because of the money (laughs), it's too expensive, I didn't apply for British citizenship. To be honest, I didn't want to. I don't want to apply, I will only apply if I see that my sons are going to be – are not going to be better off. That's the only thing. Because I'm worried about if they want to go to university for instance, what's going to happen with the fees. Because right now, UK and EU they pay the same, it's the same. But later on how it's going to be, we don't know that [...] And depending on the question marks I will apply or not to British citizenship. But it's not something that I would apply because I want to, just for me.

High application fees force parents to take difficult decisions regarding, for example, who to prioritise

⁸ Figures provided by the Home Office under the Freedom of Information Act and published in the Guardian, 14 March 2018

when they cannot afford to pay for everyone's application. Families with children born outside the UK soon came to realise, often after having spent large amount of money for legal advice, that even if they were to become British, this may not help to secure their children's status (see Eurochildren Briefs no. 1 and 2), as this French mother, resident in the UK since the early 2000s, explains:

We started to look into legal advice about what to do in terms of making my situation safe and the kids situation safe so we consulted with a lawyer, who indicated because it was such a minefield, we looked into it ourselves and thought 'Oh my goodness'. It looks so complicated, we didn't know how to apply for the kids, one being born in the UK, one in France, it was really so unclear. The Home Office makes it really difficult I find to understand which way to go.

Families with children born or who grew up in Britain see their children often as more 'anchored' in the country than them. This can be described as the 'anchor baby' trope reversal where parents feel they are being forced to become British and to settle down in the country because of their children's attachment to the country and lack of connection or language and cultural skills in their country of origin⁹. The way we use it here highlights the reverse nature of the process where within a family, the children become more settled than the parents. The option 'to go back home' is therefore often not desirable as there is a fear of uprooting the children.

Parents sometimes express a feeling of being forced to become British not only to facilitate access to British citizenship for their children but also to be able to return if they choose to leave the country after Brexit and the end of free movement. There is also a sense of guilt shared among parents to have raised children in a society where they might not feel as welcome as before. Parents construct making legal arrangements to secure the status of their children as a form of parental duty. This sacrifice they make for their children in becoming British is sometimes described as being heart-breaking, as a French mother explains:

I am really angry, I feel like it is the wrong reason to get the British Citizenship because in

an emotional way it feels terribly wrong now. But from a pragmatic point of view for us we can put aside all this, what we want is to stay together and ideally not to have to move away in an emergency situation. So that is the route to follow. I will go for citizenship.

Some parents are more pragmatic towards getting British citizenship for themselves and their children, such as in the case of this Bulgarian mother who had lived in France before moving to the UK with her French husband and their two children:

It was completely different than applying for the French citizenship where it was just natural. And I had no afterthoughts. Applying for British citizenship would be just an act of - well just a pragmatic step to be safe if we decide to stay here so that we can be sure that there is nothing happening to us and also for the children so that they can then - if they decide to go to university - if we moved out of the UK then they could still have that advantage. So it is more an opportunistic approach and not because I am convinced.

The decision to become British is often made among EU families where dual citizenship is possible so that the children can have both a European citizenship and British citizenship. Different configurations of EU families also shape the options available to family members.

Status-quo framed reasons

For many EU citizens we interviewed, becoming British is often perceived as the only way to preserve the status quo, keeping the same rights as before such as having the same right to work, enjoying full freedom of movement, the right to education and overall rights to social protection. In other words, by becoming British, they assure themselves that they will be treated equally to British citizens. Interviewees reported a general loss of trust in the UK state. In particular, the Home Office's hostile environment policy, until recently not something that more privileged EU citizens had to worry about, is perceived as a growing threat to them too. The "Windrush Scandal" has left a strong impression on our interviewees, who frequently expressed a fear of becoming the new Windrush generation¹⁰.

⁹ The term 'anchor baby' was coined in the US referring to immigrants who would 'purposefully' give birth within the U.S. borders for their children to claim citizenship. Its use in the media often tends to reinforce negative stereotypes.

¹⁰ For a discussion of parallels and divergences between the legal position of the Windrush generation and the potential risk faced by EU nationals failing to register for the Settled Status see

A Romanian father of three UK-born children who came to the UK in 1999 and acquired British citizenship before the referendum explained to us his concerns about his wife from Romania, who came to join him in 2007. They haven't done anything yet in terms of securing her legal status but as a family they are planning to do so, as he wonders:

How will it change about the whole process of travelling to different country, and that's what I want – not for me, but for my partner because she's not a UK citizen yet. That's the concern for me. And the other concern is how will it impact on the whole benefits and stuff, if the housing association will be more complicated or not, if it will be easier or not. But, you know, being detained or taken away, it's not really my concern at this point, because I think there's going to be no real complication for citizenships being confiscated. Plus I have established work here, I'm working, I pay taxes. I'm a bus driver. So it's established, employed work.

Freedom of movement

To become British does not necessarily mean that people are always considering staying in the country, rather it is a way of keeping all options open for themselves and their children. Neither Permanent Residence nor Settled Status guarantee the right to return to the UK if the family moves to another country for a protracted period. Therefore, becoming British is the only way to keep this freedom of movement in the long term. Moreover, informed by their own loss of status as EU citizens, they consider ILR not sufficiently secure.

A Roma mother from Poland with a British-born daughter who came in 2002 shared her memory of when she came to the UK - before Poland was a member of the EU. She remembered how all the community felt as if they were 'locked in a room where you cannot open the door and go nowhere'. With their passports confiscated by the Home Office for a very long period of time, she shared her painful encounter with the UK government's hostile environment: being unable to travel back home, with borders closed for her and her family. She is currently gathering all the documents to acquire British citizenship mainly to preserve this right of freedom of movement she was once deprived of:

It's only just freedom of movement. It's very difficult – if you have these feelings before, you have in your mind that you're not able to go

nowhere, you just have to be in this country for all— I'm not saying just to go back to Poland for one or two years and then come back. Just if something happened and you have to go in Poland and you have in your mind that you're not able to come back, that is something that we had before and we know how hard it is for us to do it. I know that with the settled status, it's going to be – I think they have to let us travel because of the settled status, but if you have a British passport, it's easier.

The following quote from a German couple illustrates how becoming British is part of a strategy to enable the family to always be together no matter what happens, such as if the parents decide to leave the UK while the children stay put:

My husband wants to apply for a British passport, [...] just because if Brexit is going ahead then our kids have both identities and we would love for them to have the choice wherever they want to live we will support them, but in case they ever choose Great Britain to be the place they want to live my husband claims that he would also have the choice to live where his children live .

Avoiding becoming an "immigrant"

Some EU citizens have decided to apply for British citizenship due to a fear that the hostile environment is soon to ensnare them as it has recently done with the Windrush generation. The fear of having their rights taken away from them has pushed many respondents to consider applying for British citizenship. The Windrush scandal was often cited as a proof that rights to stay in the country can easily be taken away. The sense of anxiety for the loss of protection is captured by this German father:

Because I do not trust the UK government not to deport us. Deportation of EU citizens are now above 5,000 per year from a few hundred. They are locking EU citizens up in detention for stupid things like not carrying ID, having a party in the park, minor traffic violations and you when you hear things like that you know on one level because all of these people are Eastern Europeans, you know on one level that they don't mean you, but I'm German and the Nazis they went for people one after the other, not all

at the same time. So once they got rid of one group of people they went for the next one.

Lack of trust in the British government and its reassurances to protect the rights of EU residents is also given as a reason for becoming British.

A mother from Romania of a UK-born British daughter who came to the UK in 2008 told us why she has now decided to apply for British citizenship, especially as everyone was telling her to do so to secure her stay in the country:

Frankly before Brexit I don't think I would have gone for something like this. I would have been just happy as I am. I am a Romanian citizen exercising their treaty rights and I am perfectly happy, I don't need to be a British citizen I don't feel I want to be a British citizen. Now I feel I should be - everybody is saying to me 'Oh but maybe you should apply to be a British citizen even though it might not be valid after 2019 at least you have something for them to recognise.

FEELING BRITISH?

Based on the interviews we conducted, very few EU citizens have justified the reason to become British because they would indeed 'feel British'. In fact, the narrative is more about deservingness after so many years of contribution to the country. European citizens sometimes perceived themselves as being 'heroic citizens'¹¹, having never taken anything from the system but having only given to the British society over the years. In that sense, to become British is almost perceived as a normal recognition by the UK of EU citizens' contributions and rather than a privilege, they view it as a right that people should have after so many years of contributing into the system. In becoming British, EU citizens adopt what can be described as a form of defensive citizenship, a phenomenon observed also in other contexts of political climates hostile to foreigners.

Reason for not becoming British

Cost, eligibility criteria and bureaucratic complexity are major constraints to accessing the naturalisation process. A Polish father who came to the UK in 1998 and who, along with his wife and their 5 children, has indefinite leave to remain, explained to us why it is

extremely hard for them to apply for British citizenship:

You have to pay for that and it's a lot of money. So, when can you get such a lot of money? But for us, the worst thing is the historic test. I'm taking medication for sleep so my memory is really bad. If not that, then I would have applied in the past, but it's one thing I am scared the most.

For some countries, dual citizenship is not an option and interviewees are not prepared to renounce their own citizenship for the British one, particularly following Brexit. Access to British citizenship is also subject to further constraints for children born to EU parents in specific circumstances (see Eurochildren Research Brief no. 2), as described by a Dutch mum who came to the UK in 1989 to join her British husband:

So there is a question mark over their ultimate British citizenship that remains unanswered for me at the moment. They [the 3 children born in Bristol] haven't wanted to test it at the moment, and so we're not sure whether, in law, they would be regarded as Brits because their father is British and they were born in Britain, or whether this very ambiguous law about whether or not we were married at the time means that they don't automatically qualify to being British. So I've told the children about this and they're a little bit concerned. But they've decided to play it cool at the moment and to not react, and to just pretend that they're automatically Brits because they were born here.

Neither 'becoming British' nor 'not becoming British': the wait and see approach

During the Brexit negotiation period, a majority of the families we spoke to had done little about their legal status, especially among those interviewed earlier in the Brexit negotiation period when there was still hope that the 'madness' surrounding Brexit would somehow go away. We observed nonetheless that the 'wait and see' approach was experienced differently by different participants. Some parents felt paralysed as they could not do anything other than wait. They often had a strong emotional response to Brexit which led to some form of

¹¹ Bassel, L., Monforte, P. and Khan, K. (2018), "Making political citizens? Migrants' narratives of naturalization in the United Kingdom", *Citizenship Studies*, 22(3): 225-242

inaction. This may be due to temporary lack of resources or waiting for eligibility criteria to be met. In other cases, the lack of action resulted from the perception that they were going to be worse off whatever happened, this was for example the response of some of the Roma families we spoke to. At the other end of the social class spectrum we also encountered a wait and see approach, this time informed by a conviction that wealth and privilege would shield the family. A Swedish mother in a senior management role explains her response to the Brexit uncertainty:

I can't imagine someone like me, being deported. And if something like this was to happen, well, I wouldn't want to live in a country like this anyway.

As this French citizen explains to us, she considers herself a global citizen with no borders, so ultimately unaffected by Brexit.

Personally, as I said to you, I am very lucky that we are part of, you know, some would call us the elite I guess, but we are part of this, you know, global citizens if you like that have benefitted from the international economy. And my husband is in the financial services, so you know, we are okay financially even if we are worse off afterwards, touch wood, we will be fine. I have never really been personally worried about what happens to me, I mean at the end of the day, I have a French passport, I can go back home. If this country goes in a way that I do not like, I will do just that, so I am not personally concerned.

CONCLUSION

Over 40 years of EU membership means people have fallen in love, got married/divorced, and had children, and so talking of a clear-cut separation from the EU is not simply difficult, but for millions of people it risks unsettling their families and who they are. The route from Permanent Residency to now Settled or pre-Settled Status to Citizenship is far from being an easy one.

Based on the interviews we conducted in the framework of the Eurochildren project, it is in fact mainly perceived as a highly unequal process from which many people are and will be excluded from. In that sense, 'naturalisation' is not the culmination of a path to integration but rather in the aftermath of the European referendum, the opposite is taking place, with feelings of un-belonging and of disintegration

widespread among EU citizens. Brexit as a process can be understood as a fabric that 'unmakes' citizens, turning Europeans citizens from mobile citizens into mainly undeserving migrants.

One way to escape this category of undeserving migrants is to become British. Therefore, EU citizens who are opting for this route aim to escape the negative stigma they perceive associated to being labelled 'immigrant' and change their status from EU citizens to British citizens. In doing so, they are also in many ways preserving the same rights as they are used to having as EU citizens. However, EU citizens often feel quite hurt being 'forced' to do it. This is especially the case for German citizens who feel like they somehow betray the European ideal in doing so. In adopting British citizenship, most EU citizens are becoming dual nationals and British citizenship is often considered as a secondary form of citizenship, especially after Brexit.

For many EU citizens, the prospect of becoming British is not as straightforward, as not all EU countries allow dual citizenship. Therefore, EU citizens from these countries have two options: either to renounce their European citizenship and become British-only or to keep their European citizenship with a risk that their rights in the UK will not be guaranteed in the future.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

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