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EU FAMILIES IN SCOTLAND AFTER THE BREXIT REFERENDUM FEARS, HOPES AND BELONGING

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Despite sharing the uncertainty over the outcome of the Brexit process, EU families in Scotland feel more welcome and safer than south of the border.
- The research points to three main factors that have contributed to this: a) The words of reassurance that came after the referendum from the Scottish government *directly* addressed to EU nationals; b) The victory of Remain which was taken as evidence of the majority of the population in Scotland being pro-European; and c) The positive messages on migration and the EU coming from the Scottish government.
- Feeling welcome and safe also contributes to some EU nationals' perception of the Scottish identity as more inclusive and open to others than the English one.
- The 2014 Scottish Independence referendum stimulated a wide conversation around identity and belonging that involved also the EU nationals, who had the right the vote.
- Frustration, anxiety, and disappointment are shared for Brexit by all participants. However, not everyone is being and will be equally affected. Attention to class, ethnicity, age, life stage, and gender are essential for a more nuanced understanding not only of the impact of Brexit, but also of the resources and options available to families for mitigating this impact.

INTRODUCTION¹

Indeed, I want to take the opportunity this morning to speak directly to citizens of other EU countries living here in Scotland - you remain welcome here, Scotland is your home and your contribution is valued"² (Nicola Sturgeon, 24 June 2016)

Since the EU referendum, over three million EU citizens living in the UK have lived in legal limbo. The protracted uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the Brexit process has further exacerbated a widespread sense of frustration, disillusionment, and anxiety among them. Growing hostility, hate crimes against EU citizens, anti-immigration rhetoric from mainstream media and some national politicians, and the UK government's 'hostile environment' policy have further reinforced these sentiments.

Even the reassurance that was meant to come with the introduction of the Settled Status Scheme last March was short lived, as the impact of a possible - even likely at this stage - 'no deal' Brexit on the rights of EU residents is difficult to anticipate³. One of the aims of the Eurochildren study is to examine how EU families are experiencing the protracted Brexit negotiations and what kind of mitigating strategies they are considering and putting in place. Our study offers insights into what factors intervene in shaping how EU citizens feel about Brexit and how they respond to it. To this end we carried out research with a wide range of EU citizens (in terms of country of origin, social class, gender, and migration history) and in all UK nations. In this brief we will focus on our findings from data collected in Scotland. One of the aspects we will consider is if and how the Scottish government's more positive narrative both on the EU and migration impacts on how EU citizens experience the Brexit process.

Eurochildren is a mixed method study which combines quantitative and qualitative research methods. A key part of this research is gaining the perspectives and understanding the experiences of EU families and their children in light of the vote to leave the European Union. Overall, the study seeks to

enhance understanding of: a) the profile and distribution of the population of EU nationals in the UK; b) the experiences and responses of EU families in the aftermath of the vote to leave the EU; c) the impact of political and legal uncertainty that followed the referendum on EU nationals and their children; and d) the impact of Brexit on the sense of belonging and integration of EU nationals and their children.

Methodological note

The research draws from a range of sources. It included a statistical analysis of the population of EU nationals at local level and its change over forty years drawing on existing national datasets, and qualitative data collection through interviews, focus groups, a follow-up survey and a participatory photo project.

For the qualitative analysis, the research team conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with EU families currently (N=132) and formerly (N=40) residing in the UK. The sampling was informed by the profile of the populations of non-UK EU nationals in the UK, both in terms of its distribution in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland⁴ and composition with regard to countries of origin.

This brief is focused on the qualitative data we collected in Scotland (see Table 1), which includes 12 in-depth qualitative interviews with EU families living in Scotland; an interview with a family that has since left Scotland and moved to the Netherlands, and a focus group with five EU parents. In terms of geographical provenance of participants, our sample includes: participants from 13 EU countries, namely Spain, Italy, Greece, Denmark, Bulgaria, Romania, Germany, Poland, Portugal, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK.

In recruiting families, we ensured that we covered different family configurations, based on the country of origin of parents. Our family typology includes five types (see Table 1). The country of origin of parents is relevant both legally, affecting the capacity of members to secure their legal status, and in terms of remigration and settlement options available to the family.

¹ This research is funded by the ESRC (Grant reference: ES/R001510/1- ES/R001510/2) and it is part of The UK in a changing Europe initiative. We wish to thank Dr Rachel Humphris and Anne-Laure Donskoy for their contribution to data collection, and Julia Bell for editorial assistance.

² Full statement is available here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-36620375>

³ Sigona, N and Godin, M (2019) 'Naturalisation and (dis)integration', *Eurochildren Brief Series*, no. 6.

⁴ 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; Lessard-Phillips, L, Sigona, N (2019) 'UK-born children of EU nationals in the UK', *Eurochildren Research Brief Series*, no.5.

Among the families that participated in our studies, we had families with a) all children born in the UK, b) all children born elsewhere in the EU, and c) children born in the UK and abroad. Paying attention to the country of birth of children is relevant, not only because it has implications on their legal status and access to citizenship (Yeo 2018a, 2018b), but also affects family strategies of Brexit mitigation (Sigona and Godin 2019). Many children in our sample have dual citizenship (British and EU passport) which they have either acquired through their parents' residency rights in the UK as EU citizens; one of their parents being British by birth, or through naturalisation.

Table 1 Family typology and sample in Scotland

PARTNER 1	PARTNER 2	Sample
UK	EU27	8
EU27	EU27 (same)	4
EU27	EU27 (different)	0
EU27	Non-EU	2
EU27 (single)		3

REMEMBERING THE BREXIT REFERENDUM

Interviewees in Scotland shared the sense of shock and disappointment about the outcome of the EU referendum with their fellow EU nationals in the rest of the UK. The memory of the referendum is still very vivid in our interviewees' minds months after the event. The fear of being separated from one's partner permeate the words of a British mother worried that the Home Office may force her French husband out of the country.

We were devastated. So I was nine months pregnant when the vote happened and we stayed up all night and watched it and we were both just crying when it came through and then the next day I was exhausted and I just couldn't - I just couldn't work out what was going to happen to us. We were kind of terrified, wondering if he was going to get sent away and if we would have to be separated.

For most of our interviewees, the result came as a surprise. From their vantage point in Scotland, they hardly could detect signs of a Leave victory coming, as a Danish interviewee explains:

In Scotland there was no sign at all; everybody seemed to be voting Remain. But people who

had travelled in small town England said something was changing down there.

Silver lining

Despite the shock for the referendum result, EU nationals found some comfort in the victory of Remain in Scotland. It made them feel less isolated and part of a wider, if grieving, community. Despite there being over a year between the referendum and the interviews for this study, Nicola Sturgeon's speech the day after the Referendum and the letter the Scottish government had sent to registered EU residents after the vote had left a positive and lasting mark on many of them.

[...]I was feeling really depressed but then I remember how Nicola Sturgeon went on telly the next morning and spoke directly to EU citizens in Scotland and it's your home and so on, and that was really reassuring [Danish man, Glasgow]

A Romanian couple living in the UK since 2008 and with a UK-born child explains how the reassurance came not only from politicians but also ordinary people.

The Scottish people were very very willing to make their opinion on Brexit clear to us. They said, 'Oh I am so sorry about what happened' and they were really wanting to try to convince us of the fact that they want us here and they don't want us feel unwanted just because of how the vote went. That was on a personal level, on a political level we did get letters from the Scottish government with our names on them, so I thought that was quite good saying that just after the Brexit [...] They said that - it was quite long - but the gist of it was that they still want us here and they see us an asset and not a liability. And I think was it also mentioned that maybe the Scotland is trying to make their own arrangements or something like that. I don't know if it was explicitly said but I sensed that it was suggested maybe.

A Brazilian woman married to a Portuguese Brazilian remembers fondly the letters her and her husband received soon after the referendum:

I don't remember what the letter said but I remember that we got that, me and Fernando and it was so nice to receive this.

Not only did EU nationals feel that they were not alone, but they felt valued for their contribution to the country.

They – the Scottish - do really realise that they need people from other countries to move in to keep the economy going, because it's only a population of five million people here. [Dutch family who moved back to the Netherlands]

This sentiment was further reinforced by the national government's emphasis on Scotland's Europeaness and commitment to retaining the closest possible relationship with the European Union.

IMPACT ON EU CITIZEN'S LIVES

'I want us to get out of this lunatic asylum'

Similar to what we found in the rest of the UK, the impact of the Brexit process on EU nationals in Scotland varies. There are important differences depending on class, gender, age and life stage, legal status and ethnic and national origin. Social hierarchies determine the extent to which someone can be part or not of the 'Scottish dream'⁵ and what resources they can mobilise to mitigate the impact of Brexit.

Many EU families with young children are questioning whether to stay in the UK, wondering if it is still a good place to bring up their children and worrying about their future opportunities in terms of education as well as work. In the case of mixed-parentage families, where one parent is British and the other has an EU citizenship, Brexit represents a threat to family unity. As this Scottish mother of five UK-born children explains what Brexit means to her and her family:

That's saying to me the way I live my life is no longer acceptable because I married a foreigner and I had foreign children and my kids can't do that if I stay here, so I need to get Danish citizenship, French, whatever. [...] That's how desperate I am. But, from day one I've said [to my husband]: "I don't want you to get Permanent Residence status. I don't want you to get citizenship. I want us to get out of this lunatic asylum."

At a different stage in his life, a young man originally from an old EU member state who works as a chef and has been living in Glasgow for ten years explains

the differences between him and his dad. His dad moved to Scotland a few years before him. He says:

I don't think he's planning to retire here so I don't think he's as shocked as me.

He had moved at the age of 16 in 2009, at the time of the economic crisis, and having spent almost a third of his life in Scotland, he says:

You always have a bit of concern as well, because you don't know if you're going to be able to stay in the country. You don't know what your situation or your rights are going to be whenever anything happens [...] So, it was a bit of a concern thinking, should I go back [home]? Should I stay here? What's going to happen?

For a Swedish woman in her sixties in the UK since the early 1990s Brexit poses a threat to her plan to divide herself between Sweden and Scotland after retirement, but also her more immediate plan to move back to Sweden to look after her elderly parents. In her words:

So I was thinking about exploring if I could take maybe a one-year contract in Gothenburg where my parents are so I could be with them. They're coming to the end of their life and I'm supporting them a wee bit. And I'm thinking I can't do that now because I could only be away, as far as I understood it, for a limited time.

The concern for not being able to look after one's elderly parents was shared with other participants who saw the end of freedom of movement as a threat to their right to family life:

Many people of your age who have come here and lived 20 or 40 years with a view to knowing that they could bring their parents in if they got frail, look after them, for a couple of years. [...] Now his parents are frail and we can't go to them because I might not be able to leave and he might not be able to stay more than six months, but we can't bring them here, so who looks after them?

Securing legal status is a priority for our participants. Lack of trust in the UK government and the Settled Status Scheme⁶, particularly after the Windrush scandal⁷, led many EU citizens to apply for British

⁵ See Davidson, N, Liinmaa, M, McBride, M, Virdee, Satnam (2018) No problem here: Understanding Racism in Scotland, Luath Press

⁶ Sigona and Godin (2019)

⁷ Yeo, C, Sigona, N and Godin, M (2019) 'Parallels and differences between ending Commonwealth and EU citizen free movement', *Eurochildren Research Brief Series*, no.4

citizenship. It is a decision that is not taken lightly. A Romanian interviewee explains:

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.

'A different cosmos': reality and limits of Scottish exceptionalism

Despite sharing the trauma of the EU referendum with fellow EU nationals elsewhere in the UK, it was noticeable how EU nationals in Scotland didn't feel as unsafe or at risk of racist and xenophobic abuse as many of our interviewees in England (particularly outside London) and Wales. All our EU14 interviewees said that in Scotland they didn't encounter the hostility that other EU citizens were reporting south of the border. This reflects data on reports of hate speech and xenophobic abuse at the time of referendum that show a 14% increase in England, but no variation in Scotland⁸.

Yes, we've heard loads of stories in England where people have felt rejected and Polish people being attacked. I've never felt this way here. It is a different cosmos. I mean, Scotland voted to stay in the EU. So, I don't feel that in my local community there has been any rejection of the EU. I haven't felt that personally." [French woman living in Edinburgh]

One of the justifications they offered for this difference was that Scotland is a "Nation of immigrants", which needs them to prosper demographically, culturally and economically. While researchers have pointed out that the difference in public attitude between UK nations is smaller than the political rhetoric of their government let us believe, they also agree that this variation may be

⁸ <https://www.commonspace.scot/articles/8731/police-scotland-no-rise-hate-crime-scotland-brexite> However, Davidson et al (2018) shows how some communities are less likely to report racist incidents to police and, as a result, police data offer a distorted picture on racism in Scotland.

⁹ Pillai, R. (2007). *The Reception and Integration of New Migrant Communities*. London: Institute for Public Policy research; Hussain, A., and Miller, W. (2006). *Multicultural Nationalism: Islamophobia, Anglophobia and Devolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; McCollum, D, Nowok, B

linked to the issue of immigration not being politicised in Scotland to the same extent as it has in the rest of the UK. Instead, a broad political consensus holds that Scotland 'needs' and 'welcomes' immigration⁹ and that it has learned from its own history of emigration¹⁰. In the words of one of our interviewees: 'Everyone in Scotland has at least a relative abroad'.

According to the Migration Observatory¹¹ (2014), although attitudes to immigration in Scotland are less negative than in the rest of Britain, they fall short of majority support for increasing or even keeping the same level of immigration. Moreover, the survey also show that there exist markedly different attitudes toward various sub-groups. While not surprising, it is a useful reminder that not all migrant groups are equally welcomed and this, in turn, may affect their sense of safety and security.

SCOTTISH, BRITISH, EUROPEAN: PLURAL IDENTITIES WELCOME

The Scottish referendum held on 18 September 2014 stimulated a wide conversation around identity and belonging that also involved the EU nationals, who were given the right to vote. Not only were EU citizens included in the referendum franchise, but also they were glad to observe the campaign for Scottish independence conveying a strong pro-EU message, with the case made by the SNP that voting "Yes" would increase the chances for Scotland to be part of the EU in the event of Brexit. In contrast, the fact that EU citizens were disenfranchised of their political rights in the EU referendum fostered a sense of exclusion and alienation. This further reinforced the belief in EU citizens that Scottish identity is more inclusive than the English one, and allows EU citizens to simultaneously feel Scottish and European as well as embracing their own national identity, as illustrated in the following words of a Danish father:

Slightly Scottish, Danish, European and so on. But not British, I don't feel British in the

& Tindal, S (2014), 'Public attitudes towards migration in Scotland: Exceptionality and possible policy implications', *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 79-102. Curtis, J, Montagu, I (2018) 'Do Scotland and England & Wales Have Different Views About Immigration?', *ScotCen & NatCen*.

¹⁰ See McCollum et al 2014.

¹¹

<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/reports/scottish-public-opinion/>

slightest [...] in England it's like British is the nationality and English is the ethnic origin, so you can be English and British, but if you're not of English ethnicity, you're British and something else, you can be black British or Pakistani British, but you cannot be Pakistani English, whereas in Scotland it's different. I'm Danish Scottish. You can be Pakistani Scottish.

Multiple identities allowed

For our participants, particularly among those from EU14, Scotland is an easier place to fit into, being a place that allows and even values multiple identities. This impression is often presented in interviews in juxtaposition to England and the rest of the UK. As discussed earlier, this more open and welcoming vision of Scotland is more a political aspiration than necessarily a reality. It serves the agenda of an independent Scotland and contributes to address the demographic and skill deficit of the nation.

It's so easy to fit into because there's so many ways to be Scottish. You don't need to tick all the boxes, but you know you can put on the kilt or you can appreciate bagpipes or drink IRN-BRU or whatever, there are many things [...] you don't need to do it all, but it's like it's absolutely fine. You can easily do something that helps you fit in and you feel Scottish. [Danish father in Glasgow].

I now identify as Scottish. That has changed. Before I would have said I am German but my home is Scotland. But the Scots say that the only requirement to be Scottish is that you want to be Scottish. So I am Scottish [...] And that is because of solidarity with the Scots. [German citizen in the UK since 1994]

The possibility of feeling comfortable carrying multiple identities, without being forced into binary dilemmas is especially important for children who had no role in the Brexit referendum but will have to endure its consequences for years to come. Talking of her daughter born in Scotland, a Brazilian mother married to a Portuguese Brazilian man explains:

She is very funny the way she presents herself when we ask her. She says, 'I am Brazilian, Portuguese and Scottish'. She says, 'I have three flags, Brazilian, Portugal and Scotland'.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The study investigates the impact of the EU referendum on the EU families living in the UK. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of *The UK in Changing Europe*.

ABOUT IRIS

Established in 2012, the Institute for Research into Superdiversity at the University of Birmingham has rapidly become one of the world's leading research institutes dedicated to advancing knowledge and expertise in the field of superdiversity.

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