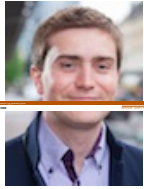# EU citizens in Britain are already being stigmatised – and it's likely to get worse

*After the Brexit vote, a 'silent majority' was revealed, whereby those prejudiced against EU immigrants now felt they could express those views freely. But discrimination is not only the result of bigotry, writes **Thomas Roulet**. He explains the many ways EU citizens are already being stigmatised in Britain, and how such treatment may progressively lead to an erosion of their rights.*

How is Brexit affecting EU citizens? While most of the public debate has revolved around EU citizens' right to stay, their 'settled status', and 'permanent residence', less attention has been given to the general hostility towards migrants that fuelled the vote, and the change in attitudes since.

As a social scientist studying stigmatisation, the case of EU citizens in the UK is particularly telling. Sociologists and social psychologists broadly agree on a definition of stigma as a negative label that links an individual to a socially devalued characteristic. Stigmatisation is often considered as a dichotomous categorisation process – individuals either belong to the stigmatised category or they are out of it. This process emerges when a critical mass of stakeholders and social actors start to consider a characteristic as devalued. Can we say that in today's Britain, being an EU citizen is socially devalued?

Until the vote, being publicly hostile to migration was socially frowned upon. People holding a negative prejudice against EU immigrants thought they belonged to a minority, until the Brexit result made them feel like they were part of a majority that shared their point of view. Yet the fear of immigration was not evenly shared among all Brexit voters. In fact, in some case it was not even a motivation. But it did not prevent those who were indeed motivated by hostility to immigration to believe that the 52% who voted in favour of the UK leaving the EU shared the same views. By, in appearance, revealing a majority hostile to EU immigrants, Brexit legitimised this antagonism. People holding such political positions felt safer to express them in public. But when does hostility result in stigma?

From cues to prejudice, from prejudice to apathy, and from apathy to discrimination

In the aftermath of Brexit, I sat on a train back from the countryside next to an older British lady and a Romanian man. The lady spotted the accent of the man, and asked him, with no malice intended, when he was planning to "return home" as a consequence of Brexit. With the same ingenuity, he answered that he was studying in the UK and did not feel the need to leave. She had made a shortcut linking the accent of her fellow traveller to his origins and formulated expectations with regards to his behaviour. He was subject to a prejudice due to the category he was associated with. That's precisely how stigmatisation processes start to unfold.

Reports of individuals speaking a foreign language or English with a foreign accent being told to 'speak English' are becoming more common. Any visible attribute that can link individuals to their status as EU citizens is now potentially a source of prejudice. Banks, potential employers and landlords are demanding proofs of residence (even though no such proof is currently required). During the Conservative Party conference in 2016, cabinet members even suggested that companies should be forced to report a list of their foreign employees.

Laure Ollivier-Minns, a French campaigner for EU citizens' rights summarised it in one sentence: "Brexit has created this 'us versus them". Because most of those EU citizens have lived in the UK for years, this situation is even more of a heartache because they feel conflicted between their identity of origin, and the efforts they have made to adopt a social identity that makes them belong to a British society that now seems to reject them.

EU citizens increasingly seem to be considered undesirable or suspicious parties to trade with – not necessarily because of negative stereotypes regarding who they are (i.e. the erroneous idea that they take jobs from British citizens), but because of prejudices and preconceptions regarding their ability to stay and live a normal life in the UK. Those banks, landlords, potential employers, are not interested in knowing the future of EU citizens in the UK, so they come to avoid them to spare themselves any possible complications. This mechanism shows that it is not only bigotry that leads to discrimination against EU citizens but also laziness, nonchalance, and uncertainty.

On the plus side, EU citizens now have a social movement defending their rights, 'The 3 million'. Those elements, negative or positive, contribute to creating stable boundaries around EU citizens, demarcating them as a distinct category of individuals whose rights need to be protected. The existence of discrimination and of stable boundaries around a devalued category of individuals are the two elements of the stigma cocktail. This climate of hostility has led to a falling level of net migration, and reports of an increasing number of EU citizens 'Brexiting' universities and the NHS.

Is Theresa May's 'Settled status' any likely to stop EU citizens feeling unwelcomed or discriminated against? In fact, just the idea that EU citizens will have to carry additional documentation might lead them to be and feel even more ostracised. If banks, employers, and landlords already ask unlawfully for proof of permanent residence, will they accept 'settled' citizens as equal parties to trade with once the UK is no longer subjected to the case law of the European Court of Justice? How will they be treating EU citizens who have not yet accumulated the five years needed to acquire settled status?

The current treatment of EU citizens, unfortunately, suggests we might observe a progressive and subtle erosion of their rights, as with the settled status. Such a drift will require acute vigilance to ensure they do not progressively become second-class citizens.

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About the Author

Thomas Roulet is a Senior Lecturer in International Management at King's Business School, King's College London. Thomas's work is rooted in economic sociology, organisation theory and ethics, and focuses on negative social evaluations (stigma and disapproval) and ethics in the context of professional service firms (investment banking, audit firms) and cultural industries.

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