

WHAT DOES BREXIT

MEAN FOR UK CITIZENS LIVING IN THE EU27?



Talking citizens' rights with UK citizens across the EU27

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Headline Statements

Those responding to our short survey predominantly responded that they did not feel reassured by the current agreement on citizens' rights;

Responses communicated:

- A lack of confidence that the United Kingdom would act in the interests of its overseas citizen population;
- Considerable mistrust directed at the UK Government, particularly around whether the agreement would be honoured beyond the date of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union;
- A high degree of misinformation and misunderstanding.

Context

On 8th December 2017, the UK government and European Union negotiators announced that they had reached an agreement over citizens' rights. This agreement contributed to the sense that sufficient progress on Phase 1 of the negotiations had been achieved, with the result that discussions have now moved towards trade. This has since been translated into the draft withdrawal agreement published 19th March 2018. In light of this agreement, we asked those participating in our research to register their thoughts on this progress through a short survey, asking them to rate the extent to which they felt that this agreement left them reassured.

Citizens' Panel Poll

We asked our respondents if the Government's announcement about the Phase 1 agreement reassured them. 131 responded, 88 from our Citizens' Panel and 43 interviewees from France and Spain: Over 70% were not reassured (ranking how reassured they feel at 4 or less on a sliding scale of 1 to 10) (*Chart 1*).

Poll: Are you reassured by current agreements about citizens' rights?

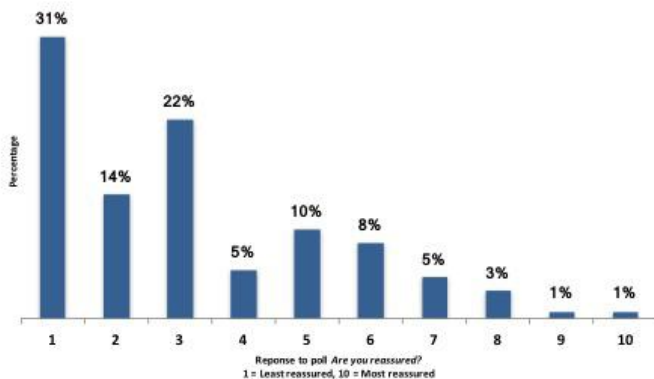


Chart 1

On the question of Citizens' Rights

The recent agreement between the EU and UK negotiators about citizens' rights elicited strong feelings, with respondents often replying to our poll within minutes or hours. This is a strength of feeling we have become accustomed to through our ongoing research with UK citizens living in the EU27. There are several dimensions to this as we outline below.

Who cares about UK citizens living in the EU27?

One main concern is what our respondents see as the neglect of the implications of Brexit for the lives of UK citizens who have settled in the EU27. The agreements between the UK and EU negotiators about citizens' rights appear to have exacerbated rather than curtailed this impression and was accompanied by a fear that UK citizens living in the EU27 would be disregarded in the continuing negotiations. Trade was seen as being taken more seriously by the negotiators than citizens' rights.

Even among those who felt somewhat reassured by the content of the agreements, there was concern about whether these would be honoured. Several of our respondents articulated this concern by echoing the caveat laid out in the original European Council Article 50 Guidelines that 'Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed'. Others made explicit their lack of

faith in the UK government, both in terms of safeguarding their rights and entitlements—despite placatory statements from the UK Prime Minister and others—and also in honouring the terms of the agreement once the United Kingdom had exited the European Union. What was to stop the UK renegeing on the agreements after withdrawal and transition? And with what consequences for their lives?

Quotations such as those reproduced below are representative of a broad range of responses.

‘The UK government’s statements mean nothing to us. They have proved time and again that they will say one thing and do another. They have proved that they have zero interest or concern for their citizens abroad so, in the words of David Davis (sic) ‘Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.’

‘... my expectation is that this and future UK governments will dismantle whatever is agreed on pensions and healthcare and benefits because there is no political cost ...’

These responses communicate a sense of powerlessness over what happens in the UK. Without dedicated representation for overseas voters or, for those who have been living outside of the UK for fifteen years or more, in the absence of the right to vote in UK parliamentary elections, they felt that the UK government had nothing to gain in safeguarding the rights of their overseas citizens. Further, as one of our panelists astutely stated, unlike EU citizens living in the UK, ‘we are sparsely sown through Europe and do not have public opinion to support us. It is a matter of indifference to most Europeans’.

Responses make clear that they hold the UK government to account for their fate; in contrast, they have somewhat more faith in the EU to support them.

Specific concerns and fears

Anxieties and concerns that people held before the agreements were reached have persisted, including:

- The terms and conditions of their continued right to residency and / or migration status in their current country of residence;
- Whether their personal circumstances would be sufficient to meet the requirements of legal residency or citizenship in their country of residence;
- Concerns that they might have to return to the UK, and what this would mean for their lives (with particular questions raised by those in relationships with EU or third country nationals over the right to family reunion in the UK).

While our respondents recognize that the agreements outline some general principles, they are keen to understand what this means for their lives specifically. Concerns persist about what Brexit will mean for their tax status, pensions, working rights and exportable benefits among others. It was also the case that they expressed concern about those rights not yet agreed—including their continued freedom of movement within the EU27 (a concern that includes those of no fixed abode, or who are only temporarily resident before moving on within the EU)—and their concerns about what Brexit would mean for the mobility of dependents such as adult children and elderly parents.

How to make sense of this?

We want to make clear here that many of those taking part in the research are well-informed and politically sophisticated in their analysis of what is going on. However, we are concerned by the high level of misinformation and misunderstanding that are in circulation among those we have been speaking to. The fact that this is the case even for people who are relatively well-educated and informed sounds a note of alarm. The mistrust identified above might provide one explanation for this. However, there is clearly a continuing lack of credible and understandable information about what the agreements mean in practice for the lives of UK citizens living in the EU27. The technical documents outlining what their rights will be following Brexit are difficult to navigate for a lay reader and are pitched at a broad level that fails to account for the specificities of individual lives.

This seems to have been compounded by the lack of dedicated political representation for UK citizens living overseas. Our respondents' sense of being unrepresented is matched by a concern that it is unclear who has been and will be responsible politically for the lives and futures of these UK citizens?

Next steps?

To be clear, there are a number of outstanding issues in respect to rights of UK citizens who have made their homes and lives in the EU27. These need to be resolved as a matter of urgency because there are many people who will fall through the gaps of legal and practical clarity if the current agreements are taken as the last word on citizens' rights. While there may be some reassurance derived from these agreements, until the terms of legal residence in each member state are clearly spelled out, uncertainty will continue to circulate among those who have exercised their treaty rights.

Our interpretation highlights the need to consider on what level such communication and clarity should be undertaken and by whom. Some issues will be better considered at a local level with a view to considering the pre-existent networks through which knowledge circulates among UK citizens. Our research also points to an urgent need for work to be done in better communicating what the current agreements mean within the context of individual's lives. This requires the development and communication of route maps that guide people through the changing legal landscape, terms and conditions of their residence in each of the EU27 countries.

For further information about this report, please contact the project lead, Dr Michaela Benson
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