EU Nationals in the UK after BREXIT: Political Engagement through Discursive Awareness, Reflexivity and (In)Action

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Abstract

The United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union has triggered a variety of forms of political engagement among EU nationals living in the UK. Our research, carried out in the North West of England, an area that has received little attention so far, demonstrates that the result of the 2016 Referendum sparked a new awareness of public discourse, has led to the emergence of new political and discursive attitudes and strategies, as well as persuasive reflexivity and incipient activism on the part of EU nationals. This article thus contributes to the existing literature on political engagement by analysing EU nationals' cognitive, discursive and pro/re-active engagements with Brexit.

Key words: Brexit, political engagement, EU nationals, civic participation, UK, referendum

Introduction

Several Brexit-related research clusters have emerged in the wake of the United Kingdom (UK) referendum for the membership of the European Union (EU). Many authors have been preoccupied with the reasons for which the UK voted to end its membership of the EU, such as Euroscepticism or immigration (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017, Dennison and Geddes 2018). Some have attempted to predict what the future might look like in the aftermath of Brexit, focussing on economic and legal aspects, but also on social divisions (Ford and Goodwin 2017, Evans and Menon 2017). There have been comprehensive analyses of the media coverage of the referendum campaign (Seaton 2016, Jackson, Thorsen and Wring 2016, Moore and Ramsey 2017). A supranational approach is also taking shape, looking at the effect of Brexit on the world order, the economic system, and globalization more generally, while also comparing the UK with other countries affected by populism (Inglehart and Norris 2016, Colantone and Stanig 2018).

Within this emerging framework most ethnographic accounts of EU nationals in the UK precede the Referendum, many going back to the aftermath of the 2004 EU enlargement, and most focus on just one migrant group, particularly migrants from Poland (Garapich 2016). More importantly, even fewer tackle political discursive engagement and reflexivity; Bell and Domecka's 2018 work, for example, precedes Brexit and only documents Polish engagements. This article is part of a number that are beginning to emerge in relation to this topic, although the majority still only charter one community (McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017, Botterill 2018, Fleming 2018, Duda-Mikulin 2019, Rzepnikowska 2019). An exception is Lulle, Moroşanu and King's (2018) research, which included Irish, Italian and Romanian young

people in London looking at their tactics of belonging before and after the referendum. A special issue of the *Population, Space and Place* journal dedicated to the 'experiences and impacts of Brexit from two perspectives: EU citizens in Britain and British citizens currently residing in Europe' (Botterill, McCollum and Tyrrell 2019) also lacked a political engagement focus. Our article aims to complement the existing academic landscape, by capturing the voices of EU nationals living in the North West of England (an area that has received less attention, apart from Rzepnikowska's study of Polish migrant women in Manchester) and, through them, to demonstrate that the result of the referendum sparked a renewed awareness of public discourse, the emergence of new political and discursive attitudes and strategies, persuasive reflexivity and incipient activism on the part of EU nationals.

Fifty in-depth interviews (one hour on average) with EU nationals and key informants and two focus groups were conducted between October 2017 and September 2018 in Liverpool and Southport. The two locations were chosen with the aim of providing a diverse sample of participants, who were recruited via the snow-balling technique. Nationals of eighteen EU countries were included in the project. Liverpool has a long history of migration, diversity and political engagement (Foos and Bischof 2019). As a large city, it hosts many businesses and three universities, so it provided access to EU migrants (from countries such as Cyprus, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Romania and Spain) with a professional status and higher education levels (among them a psychotherapist, a university lecturer, an IT specialist, an AirBnB host, an NGO worker, students). At the time of the interviews they had resided in the UK for between two to eighteen years.

Southport, on the other hand, is a much smaller coastal town, which has seen many EU arrivals after the EU enlargement in 2004. At the time of the interviews the participants had been UK residents for between one to fourteen years. Many still had limited English language skills. EU nationals in Southport tended to be mainly from Southern and Eastern Europe (Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal) and, as Southport borders the agricultural lands of Lancashire, many worked in nearby farms and packing factories. Some participants in Southport were recruited with the help of the Migrant Workers Sefton Community charity, who also provided translators. Liverpool voted against the UK leaving the EU in the referendum, while Southport was split in half (Bona-Sou 2016). Subsequently, in the general election of 2017, Southport changed from a Liberal Democrat to a Conservative parliamentary representation, signalling a change in political attitudes during the Referendum campaign and its aftermath, while Liverpool remained a Labour stronghold.

The present paper looks more specifically at how EU nationals began to cultivate pro/re-active, cognitive and discursive engagements, leading to increased political activism at a micro-political level. After June 2016 they problematized the issues at stake and fostered an emerging sense of collectiveness, mostly symbolic, but occasionally radicalized to the level of actively seeking critical reflexivity and even action. Through critical language, as well as displays of rationalized political choices, EU nationals began to forge a common purpose, express political attitudes, and elaborate new strategies of engagement.

In charting these political engagements, this research differs from studies that focus either on migrants' involvement in homeland politics (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2003, Ragazzi 2014), usually in relation to homeland development (Kleist 2008, Ostergaard-Nilsen 2009) or conflict

resolution (Koinova 2018), or on migrants' transnational engagement in both homeland and host country politics (Escobar 2006, Bermudez 2010, Tintori 2011), which might have a negative impact on migrants' integration into the host country (Guarnizo et al. 2003). This article looks specifically at EU nationals' engagement in the UK, during certain political events, which will affect them in a variety of ways, but with little opportunity on their part to impact and influence. In contrast to research that argues that usually migrants become activists at specific times, such as contested national elections or natural disasters (Guarnizo et al. 2003, 1238), this article problematizes this assumption by charting migrants' political engagement as a continuum of various and fluctuating expressions.

Some researchers report on the role of immigrant organizations in civic engagement (Horta and Malheiros 2006, Pilati 2011) and some emphasise the importance of ethnic associations in building social capital for migrant communities (Fennema and Tillie 1999). Fennema and Tillie's now classic study looked at four migrant groups in Amsterdam and their political participation (voting, lobbying, attending association and neighbourhood meetings), but also their cultivation of civic engagement, through mainly consuming media (Fennema and Tillie 1999, 720). Although Fennema and Tillie's study is enlightening from the point of view of what constitutes engagement and participation for migrant groups, few of our participants were part of community-based organizations and these were usually baby/toddler or church groups, with no political remit. This may have to do with the more scattered distribution of EU nationals outside of London, smaller ethnic groups of European origin in the North West of England and the fact that much of the activity of consuming news and expressing political views has now moved online. In this context, it was important to capture individuals' political engagements, in the absence of an ethnic organizational structure and coherent activist campaigns. Whether they defined themselves as primarily nationals or Europeans, whether they self-identified as diasporans, expats, migrants or labourers, or a mix of the above, whether they were divided by levels of political knowledge and education, different professional or family circumstances, the practices they engaged in had an agency seeking quality.

Our analysis focuses on EU nationals' 'practical reasoning' (Fairclough and Fairclough 2011, 244), on the way persuasive reasoning or arguments are constructed in discourse and become evidence of critical and political thinking. As Fairclough and Fairclough argue (2011), reasoning and argumentation sit at the foundation of a deliberative democracy. Their approach erodes the dichotomy between reason and emotion to reiterate that desires, passion and values are 'necessary premises in practical arguments: without this motivational and emotional investment, no belief could prompt us to act one way or another' (Fairclough and Fairclough 2011, 245). This approach helps us demonstrate that EU nationals in the North West of England began to engage politically in the aftermath of the 2016 Referendum and thus contribute to the rather limited literature in migration studies on migrants' political engagement. We also argue that this engagement was mainly pro/re-active, cognitive and discursive, which allows us to expand the existing literature on political engagement and in particular the work of Ekman and Amnå 2012, Zani and Barrett 2012 and Barrett and Zani 2015.

Migrants' (Political) Engagement

Engagement denotes an individual's interactions with 'political institutions, processes and decision-making' with, although not always, the 'intent' to influence them (Barrett and Zani 2015, 4). In this interpretation, engagement crosses over into the realm of participation, which nonetheless differs from engagement in its emphasis on action, influence and change, but could be conceived as being 'a manifest form of engagement' (Montgomery 2015, 74). Participation, in its turn, could mean a myriad of things, including loud-voiced (strikes, public protests, party membership) and low-voiced protest acts (donations, boycotts and petition support), according to Myrberg and Rogstad (2011). However, it is important, as Montgomery points out, to steer away from narrow conceptions of political participation, which emphasize activism and the exercise of political rights, as it could obscure 'unconventional forms of political participation, various sources of civil engagement and the recourse to utilise new technologies in participation and engagement.' (Montgomery 2015, 74)

As Barrett and Zani observe in a similar fashion, individuals consume media, discuss politics with friends and family and connect with like-minded individuals online, and thus can be 'cognitively or affectively engaged' without being 'behaviourally engaged' (Barrett and Zani 2015, 4). 'Psychological' engagement and participation would include, for example, being 'politically attentive and knowledgeable', being willing to engage in protest activities, have some identification with a group or cause and perhaps being able to perceive injustice (Barrett and Zani 2015, 10). Following the news or discussing politics with peers can also be considered forms of political engagement (Zani and Barrett 2012, 274). As Montgomery too observes, being engaged by political issues is 'beneficial and may be the precursor to participation' (Montgomery 2015, 75).

Research by Ekman and Amnå (2012) and Barrett and Zani (2015) also discusses non-participation and disengagement. Ekman and Amnå's engagement typology differentiates between passive non-engagement by citizens who do not find politics interesting and active non-participation on the part of citizens who are disillusioned with the political class (2012, 294). Barrett and Zani also make the point that some individuals are 'quietly apolitical while others may be actively and strongly antipolitical' (2015, 7).

In the case of EU nationals in the UK, we can trace all the above manifestations of political engagement and disengagement. Our study focuses more specifically on pro/re-active engagements with political events, which had underlying emotive reasons, cognitive engagement evident in increased news and legal information consumption, and discursive engagement, through openly criticizing politicians and media. However, our participants also chose to act by joining political organizations or applying for naturalization. EU nationals more widely have also responded to mobilization calls and have attended meetings organized by associations such as Another Europe, the3million or People's Vote and have participated in demonstrations and public protests. EU nationals in the North West have also voiced both apolitical and antipolitical attitudes, and some of these are also evident in the discussion to follow.

Other studies have also started to conceptualize EU nationals' political engagement in the UK around the time of the referendum and its aftermath. Garapich (2016) showed how Poles in London mobilized social and cultural capital (rich historical traditions in the UK, 'whiteness' and neoliberal work ethics) for meaning-making in the run-up to the Referendum. Bell and

Domecka's work with Poles in Belfast (2018) focused on the relationship between gender and place to prove that migration can be transformative and that reflexivity and adaptation to local circumstances was a way of obtaining agency and therefore the capacity and capability to act (Bell and Domecka 2018, 867).

McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni (2017) also focused on the Polish community, but their survey data looked at 'civic integration' via applications for residency status, motivated by migrants' assessment of their own rights (McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017, 2112). Kate Botterill's work with Polish nationals in Scotland (2018) detailed community engagement and the role of community organizations and events as well as online community spaces for Poles living in urban areas. This research was mostly inward looking and did not chart engagements outside the community. Rzepnikowska's research with Polish migrant women in Manchester before and after the referendum (2019), on the other hand, highlighted how the Polish experience of racism and hostility, which intensified in the context of Brexit, was seen as an outcome of deprivation within working class communities, but migrants also blamed the media and political discourse. Lulle, Moroşanu and King's research with Irish, Italians and Romanians in London discussed tactics as a form of resistance and agency in the aftermath of the referendum (2018, 2124) and captured migrants' reflections about adapting to new circumstances in the context of perceived loss of rights and status. Most of the above publications highlight the emotional impact of Brexit, as well as the adaptation strategies deployed by EU nationals, however there is limited focus on political reflexivity and engagement.

This paper sees political engagement as a composite of various stances and actions that fall within the realm of micropolitics, understood as informal power used by individuals and groups to attempt to influence change, resulting from perceived differences between individuals or groups, coupled with the conscious or unconscious motivation to protect themselves and others (Blase 1991, 11). Consequently, we deploy the term 'political engagement' to discuss a range of attitudes and behaviours displayed by EU nationals as a reaction to Brexit. We categorize these engagements as pro/re-active, cognitive and discursive. In so doing, we expand on Barrett and Zani's work (2015), which focuses on cognitive, affective and behavioural engagement, and also Ekman and Amnå's typology (2012), neither of which mention discursive engagement. Our research sees discursive engagement as the ability of EU nationals to use language strategically, to display emotions, reflexivity and criticism, and signal their intention to participate symbolically or actively in political acts. We also consider the decision to not engage a political act and the ability to voice this as a form of discursive disengagement. These forms of engagements are discussed and illustrated in more detail in the following two sections.

Emotion, Awareness, Critical Reflexivity, Activism

In the aftermath of the EU referendum result, EU nationals became pro-active in finding political information because of the absence in public discourse of any legal and practical certainties and the lack of trust in public officials. 'What [are] they going to do? There is no

plan. There's no plan', complained Agnieszka, while Faith simply conceded: 'we're still nowhere in terms of negotiations.' Rhetorical questions and negativity ('nowhere', 'no plan') show an emotional response to uncertainty, which led to the quest for certainty via information about legal options in order to better plan for the future. There is clear evidence of emotional engagement, practical reasoning and argumentation resulting from an awareness of the renewed attention EU nationals received in political discourse. Some participants observed that they were being made an object of negotiations, without being given a voice and they used the metaphor of the 'bargaining chip' to express their criticism: 'I feel that the UK is using the EU nationals here and the UK nationals abroad as a bargaining chip', commented Jelena; 'I have to be prepared for the eventualities and talking about the tactics of politics seems to be from the British side to keep us in uncertainty because we are bargaining chips,' declared Dagmar. The metaphor of the 'bargaining chip' effectively described the objectification of EU nationals during the negotiations but was also used as proof of the government's tactics by both Jelena and Dagmar.

Hypothetical questions were often used to show an emotional investment in political events, a way of highlighting the contradictions apparent in government policy and an ability to project persuasive reasoning. Katarzyna expressed her frustration at the psychological makeup of a country that had, over the years, provided support to migrants and designed integration policies, only to then reject migration altogether: 'after all those years of changing the rules and making this society easier for foreigners […] why would you go through all these efforts if actually you don't want those people here? It doesn't make any sense, you know?'

The participants showed a developed critical reflexivity, evident in observations about political and legal positions, the comparing and contrasting of options and the calculation of outcomes. Such instances show proactive, cognitive and discursive engagements. Political events triggered emotional reactions that were followed by active attempts to become informed and knowledgeable about the ensuing process, followed by rationalization through discourse. Another example of this process is blame assignation, which indicated the ability to identify media and politicians as facilitators of Brexit. Aleksi commented: 'it's all about Tory Party internal politics, really,' while Federico noted: 'It was more the Tories needing to solve this internal issue.' Such views also displayed practical reasoning, because they pinpointed the cause of the perceived problem, while implicitly looking for a solution.

The media was assessed as being 'very politicised. It's even not pretending to be neutral, and there's so much of just junk newspapers', explained Aleksi. 'It's due to *Daily Mail* headlines […] I feel like they've been kind of fooled into it,' said Agnieszka, who also used the deictic 'they' to subsume the English under one banner and provide evidence of polarization. Lina summed up the feelings of many EU nationals: 'English people do not know what this means. Why they need to go out or [stay] in. They do not have a lot of information. If they had more information, maybe they would not have voted for Brexit. […] It's a mess!' Lina summed up the feelings of many EU nationals: 'English people do not know what this means. Why they need to go out or [stay] in. They do not have a lot of information. If they had more information, maybe they would not have voted for Brexit. […] It's a mess!' We see again here

the strategy of labelling 'the English' and separating them from an assumed 'us' or 'not English, therefore European'.

Caitlin, an Irish national, criticized her English mother-in-law in similarly uncompromising terms: 'they are *Daily Mail* readers, so they are brainwashed basically […] they don't want to see the bigger picture of things and they don't obviously care about whether my husband will stay in employment or where the heck my son's going to work.' These comments show persuasive reasoning because they do not only identify causes and express opposing arguments, but also because there is emotional depth in the use of strong language: 'fooled', 'brainwashed' and 'where the heck'. Similar rhetorical argumentation and discursive engagement also characterized Katarzyna's use of repetitions: 'I don't think media is representing the situation well; I don't think it's helping people understand what's going on; I don't think it teaches people to think straight.'

The feelings expressed alongside practical reasoning displayed frustration due to lack of information and action, loss of faith in the political class leading to bitterness and disappointment, betrayal leading to isolation. Johanna echoed some of these feelings in her assessment: 'I think that I take issue with how the campaign was fought; I think it wasn't very honest. I feel frustrated with the Remain campaign; I think they […] could've phrased it much more positively, they could've done a better job. I also feel that it was a mistake—a political mistake—to not set a different threshold [for the referendum results].' Johanna showed practical political knowledge of UK and German referenda and used a blend of reasoned argumentation and emotional language for persuasive impact. Chiara took a similar stance: 'I would have accepted if the result of the referendum was the result of a real and a normal discussion […] it was really more of a rage, big rage coming out of people.' These views implicitly stated the solutions: more honest media, less selfish politicians, a choice based on correct information.

Many participants conducted a surprisingly correct political analysis. In view of how crucial the Irish border issue had become during the Brexit negotiations, Doreen and Caitlin's anticipation was prescient. Doreen thought that 'Mrs May did really wrong when she said she would leave the single market because it will cost, I think it will cause, many troubles with Ireland and Northern Ireland.' Caitlin also commented: 'going into bed with the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party], that was an interesting one. If she [Theresa May] thought she was going to have trouble negotiating with 27 European countries, hmm […] I don't honestly know what goes through these people's heads.' The use of 'wrong', 'trouble/s', 'going into bed' and the ironic 'interesting' show the peppering of reasoned political assessment with rhetorical pathos, in particular words ('troubles') that have ideological and historical baggage. In a similar vein, John, who has lived in the UK for twenty years but identified as 'first and foremost Irish', commended the peace process by saying 'I've seen the peace process change things for Irish people – you don't hear IRA jokes anymore – almost never […] we've sort of moved down the scale of people that the English don't like.' He thought that a possible border between Ireland and Northern Ireland was 'going to come back to bite the UK government in the ass, because nobody in the North wants a hard border […] I can't see them going to war over it. I can't see that, but I think, reading correctly, they could kibosh the whole Brexit…the

fact that people in Northern Ireland voted 56 per cent Remain.' Strong, albeit colloquial language, helped outline the political implications of Brexit from an Irish perspective, while also operating a polarisation of political stances. Reactive and cognitive engagement supported John's subsequent discursive engagement with Brexit.

Some of these strategies resounded online. Most diasporic groups online are usually organized around ethnic lines, and many serve a cultural role. However, after the referendum, they became politicized and civic in nature. Martha explained that '…because I've got many Greek friends here, and we have a WhatsApp group, so the day that they announced it, it was chaos. Like, we had something like nine hundred text messages on WhatsApp, because everyone was sending things or articles and, "Oh my god, what will we have to do?"' In this case nationals of Greece and Cyprus bounded together to assess and find tailored solutions to an emerging political crisis. However, sometimes this led to a confused cacophony of voices: 'a lot of these discussions, especially after the referendum and in the run up to the general election, seemed to have been done on Facebook. So, I've got people from all sorts of political backgrounds there and people posting this and people posting that, and of course, I get a very distorted view of the news and the media in that way,' explained Johanna. Johanna confirmed nevertheless the political turn taken by diasporic groups on social media: 'we're quite a political group, we're quite vocal, you know, talk about opinions and stuff.'

The online discussions that took a political turn and invited a variety of opinions, also show the emergence of pro/re-active, cognitive and discursive engagement. This is evident in Johanna's comments: 'I wouldn't describe myself as politically on the left or on the right; I'm a very pragmatic centralist—in the German sense, liberal, not in the British sense, but in the German sense […] in this country, the social cohesion has been broken, and I cannot really see any attempts at mending that. And it has to do with the political system of this major two-party system and the lack of compromising and the lack of coalition. While, in Germany, we always have coalitions, we always somehow find a middle way.' Johanna's comparison between the German and British political systems reconfirms the EU nationals' ability to conduct sophisticated political assessments and position themselves ideologically in opposition to the English majority. Johanna added: 'So I thought, well, you know, you complain about an elite in Brussels that might not be democratic, but actually you're being ruled by a very small elite from specific schools, specific universities, and there isn't that much, you know, openness in that.' The use of words such as 'social cohesion', 'lack of compromising', 'broken', '[lack of] openness', are part of liberal rhetorics used to express oppositional attitudes via an indictment of right-wing politics and the British class system. It consists of a perfect example of political engagement through argumentation.

A highly developed political attitude was also evidenced by Martha – one of the few EU nationals who could vote in the EU referendum due to her Cypriot nationality[1] - who explained how she instrumentalized her political beliefs during the referendum: 'So an

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[1]Until 2019, Commonwealth and EU citizens living in the UK could vote in the UK local elections. Irish and Commonwealth citizens have also been entitled to vote in referenda.
(https://www.gov.uk/browse/citizenship/voting, last accessed 20 November 2018)

immigrant here would vote for Remain, and that's why I did it. But on the other hand, I was feeling that maybe it's a bit of a selfish way to see it, because I don't really believe in the EU as it is today. […] most of the people that I know, that are left-wing, they voted for remain because, you know, for them, Brexit means racism…'

Although instances of political action and active engagement were rare among our sample, Dagmar joined the Liberal Democrat Party, who was in her view 'for Europe and in the face of uncertainty and horror', and even ran as a candidate in the local elections. In Dagmar's case, political attitudes became political action and micropolitics crossed into macropolitics, in a clear case of agency seeking, of finding solutions. This was mainly motivated by the 'uncertainty' shared by most EU nationals post-Referendum. However, the use of the word 'horror' is telling, because it reiterates the blending of reasoned arguments and logic, with emotional investment. As Fairclough and Fairclough (2011) point out, emotions are motivational. EU nationals engaged with the media and political agenda post-referendum and used a variety of discursive strategies, such as blaming, labelling and separation/polarization, because they were emotionally invested in the outcome of the Referendum. Pathos helped construct a persuasive rhetoric that supported an otherwise logical and reflexive political analysis. As a result, apart from reactive and cognitive engagements, EU nationals in the North West of England demonstrate discursive engagement, which is an aspect not yet explored by research on migrants' political engagement.

However, the reaction to the referendum result and the period after also led to alternative forms of engagement, which are discussed in the next section.

Alternative Forms of Reaction: Mainstreaming and (Dis)engaging

Some EU nationals in the North West cognitively and discursively engaged with mainstream attitudes with regards to migration. This reaction was motivated by the need to respond in some way to mainstream anti-immigration discourses that played a key role during the referendum campaign and its aftermath. Mainstream discourse on migration affected the way EU nationals perceived others, assessed their relationship with other minority groups and judged their own place in a hierarchy that included both the English majority and other non-EU minorities. Some EU nationals criticized the way British citizens racialize and discriminate against others. Other EU nationals adopted the position of insiders who tried to fit in by disapproving of the bad behaviour displayed by other migrant groups. In both cases, the majority of the voices were Eastern European. As more recent arrivals who carried a clear immigrant label assigned by both political and media discourses, they would have been more sensitive to hierarchies.

Agnieszka observed that anti-European attitudes in the UK may be caused by a lack of knowledge of other European cultures, in particular Eastern European: 'I think it would be nice to have a better understanding […] I don't think that there is that much about Eastern

European [cultures]. We kind of tend to concentrate on Asian people, the Muslim community.' Agnieszka noticed a certain discrimination against Eastern Europeans, who had not been made the subject of integration policies, because they had been seen as proximate culturally and religiously and were not expected to settle permanently. She perceived a certain inequality in knowledge, interest and treatment and she partly blamed the outcome of the referendum on this lack of understanding of specificities and differences. This alleged inability of the English to correctly perceive ethnic 'realities' was also echoed by other participants: 'maybe English guys think everybody is a terrorist,' observed Andris. Edyta noticed a similar lack of adequate knowledge: 'British people thought - if we vote yes, then after people won't come to this country for work and people will, [from] one day to another, leave […] they have no idea, for example, people from India and Pakistan that are not part of European Union, there's nothing to stop them coming over […] that's nothing to do with the European Union, so they don't kind of understand really what does it mean, why they voted [this way].' This view shows again an invested political assessment and use of logical reasoning. The reoccurrence of the word 'think' and its derivatives, assigned opinions judged to be erroneous to the British, in another instance of polarization.

Amalia, on the other hand, noted that 'all these refugees that came to Germany and France, they did some bad things. So, it [Brexit] is a good choice for the British people, because now it will be safer. The British chose to leave because of the refugee crisis. The crisis and the referendum happened at the same time.' Amalia identified correctly the link between the Syrian refugee crisis and the anti-immigrationist discourses used during the Brexit campaign. Her views could be read as an internalization of some of these discourses (she uses the same language that includes 'safe' and 'crisis'), but equally, they could be seen as an attempt to adopt majority views (mainstreaming) in a quest to belong. In a similar vein, Piroska said: 'In the UK we support wars - the Middle East and Syria - so, if they do that, obviously you have to give something back. These people left their homes because of wars…' Piroska used the deictic 'we' as a way of signaling her belonging to the majority group, coupled, in her case, with a tolerant attitude. Katarzyna, on the other hand, commented: 'I think they should have done what Australia did and just be tough with it and not let anyone, like, not let everybody in; only let people in who can prove, you know, that they have—that they will improve the state of the county and not destroy it, you know?' Katarzyna adopted, in this instance, the majority view, which called for tougher immigration controls to protect the UK from migrants who wanted to 'destroy' it. It is a case of adopting both the views and the discourse of the majority in a quest to belong, which displayed a different type of cognitive, psychologically motivated, engagement.

Various forms of disengagement or emotional withdrawal were also revealed in the course of the project. They came in a variety of attitudes, from withdrawing from the conversation and refusing to commit views, to actively seeking not to stand out in the post-referendum environment or using distantiation strategies. These strategies were deployed by either highly integrated professionals, who had made a firm choice for the UK, or newer arrivals who felt too insecure to offer a political assessment. Disengagement and withdrawal have been observed in the literature before and are usually interpreted as a sign of insecurity or simply

an outcome of a previously disappointing political experience. As Jacobs and Tillie observed in relation to migrants, 'psychological insecurity leads to *personal disengagement*, passivity, a defensive attitude and evasion of social contacts' (Jacobs and Tillie 2011, 310, emphasis in the original). Bermudez (2010, 82), in her study of Colombians in London, found examples of migrants who refused to engage politically (through voting), with either the Colombian or the UK political systems, because of a 'dislike' of politics in general. Some participants in our project chose to overcompensate feelings of insecurity or disillusionment vis-à-vis politics with a commitment to fully integrate by applying for British citizenship or trying hard not to stand out.

Although the data set is too small to make big generalizations, it appears that the more people felt British (and Eurosceptic) and the less they felt connected psychologically with their countries of origin, the more they were determined to blend in. Margot, for example, did not plan to return to France because her and her boyfriend loved British culture and they had succeeded professionally, so there was no economic incentive to return, while Stelian had ambivalent feelings towards his home country, Romania. In these cases, Brexit was just another hurdle to overcome and not a crisis, solved by applying for British citizenship. Yet these are also clear political choices and pro/re-active forms of engagement vis-à-vis the political situation.

Some EU nationals in the North West totalled their gains and losses in a calculating rational way. Aleksi, though disappointed by Brexit, claimed Brexit actually bid his family time to make arrangements to move away: 'Well, actually for us, in the short term, Brexit was the better choice. Because Cameron's renegotiation with the EU would have removed free-movement rights from non-EU spouses immediately, in all of EU. So basically, my wife would have had no right to come to the UK…' In this case, despondency was caused by the inability to influence or change the system. As many other EU nationals, Aleksi felt at the mercy of historical developments over which he had no control but made a cognitive, rational assessment of the situation and tried to focus on the positives. He moved to his wife's country of origin months after the interview with him took place. In this case, Brexit was a catalyst for action leading to complete disengagement from the situation.

Olivier's anger was palpable in his comments: 'People get the Government they deserve – it's like the US has with Trump. People are uneducated, racist idiots, they don't know what they're doing. Their fear and fear-mongers like Nigel Farage that tells them all sorts of bull shit and they believe that so … I think they got what they deserved.' In this case, Olivier's heightened emotions motivated a different form of disengagement. He strategically distantiated himself from the collective body. This separation allowed him to position himself outside the system, and his French passport offered him a possible exit option, which he was planning to eventually take. Despite a clear polarization of views, Olivier's choices also show political engagement through a discourse of blame.

The variety of disengagement strategies reveals the diversity of the project's demographics, but also the distinct experiences of migration and adaptation. For low skilled recently arrived and lacking good English Eastern Europeans, lack of engagement was a consequence of their immediate circumstances. Their lack of trust was due to unfortunate previous political experiences. For those already settled here, disengagement was more of a cognitive choice, often determined by rational 'best scenario for me' calculations. Consequently, these attitudes echo Ekman and Amnå's (2012) active non-participation type.

Both mainstreaming and (dis)engagement can be read within the same framework of practical cognitive reasoning - a political response that blends emotional reactions with reasoned calculations. Both strategies show reactive engagement with an emerging situation that affected people both emotionally and practically, inducing them to make choices and take stances. The resulting discourse became political when expressed but also when withheld. However, in contrast to the engagement observed in the preceding section, those EU nationals who reacted via mainstreaming or disengagement displayed more emotional, reactive and impulsive attitudes. This type of reactive engagement is evidenced by less informed political analysis, as well as offensive and aggressive language, showing a lot of insecurity. Although cognitive and proactive engagements can be found, the majority are reactive and reveal a preoccupation with individual circumstances at the expense of political solutions or group interests, thus lacking the practical reasoning and argumentation (Fairclough and Fairclough 2011) required for goal oriented political engagement.

Conclusions

This article has focused on the pro/re-active, cognitive and discursive engagements of EU nationals in the North West of England in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum. The clear polarization of British society (Curtice 2018), also evident in EU nationals' language and discursive strategies, offered them the opportunity to sharpen their political knowledge, display critical reflexivity, political attitudes and ideological positions, and actively engage with the political process in search of agency.

We have predominantly explored EU nationals' discursive engagement, because this is an aspect not yet fully explored by research on migrants' political engagement. Motivated by the Referendum outcome, EU nationals in the North-West used a variety of discursive strategies to make sense of the media and political agendas and engaged in a logical and reflexive political analysis, as well as more emotionally and psychologically prompted reactions. Our analysis of migrants' mainstreaming and (dis)engagement also showed a more reactive political response that blended emotional reactions with personal calculations, at the expense of group political solutions. These (dis)engagements show a degree of diversity in the way EU nationals engaged politically, which we have labelled pro/re-active, cognitive and discursive, but which warrant further attention and conceptualization.

Future research needs to investigate how this agency seeking political engagement is operationalised long-term, as a consequence of Brexit. In particular, how a diverse group with various interests will be able to cultivate constitutional patriotism (see Habermas 1992, 1994 and Müller 2007, in the context of post-national politics), based on rights, education and information, rather than on ethnic affiliation. So far, our own research has been able to establish that the ground has been laid for such developments, evident in EU nationals' critical reflexivity, practical reasoning and persuasive rhetorics. Being critical of the media and political class, offering informed opinions or strategically choosing to withhold them, seeing events in a larger historical context and from the point of view of consequences, applying for British citizenship, choosing to leave the UK or becoming members of political parties, are all political acts that display a range of pro/re-active, cognitive and discursive engagements and active disengagements. We argue that it is important to chart these developing phenomena, as emerging political engagements can become a precursor to stronger political attitudes and potential action in post-Brexit Britain.

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