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EU families feel more welcome in Scotland than they do in the rest of the UK



In the 2016 EU referendum, 62% of Scottish voters backed Remain, but do the experiences of EU families living there differ from those living elsewhere in the UK? Drawing on new research, [Marie Godin](#) and [Nando Sigona](#) find that this is indeed the case.

'I want to get out of this lunatic asylum', says Sarah*, a Scottish mother of five married to a Danish citizen. To her, the Brexit vote felt like a personal rejection and a threat for her mixed-nationality family. Since the referendum, she has been longing for 'one place in the world that would just say: "You can definitely stay here, all of you. There won't be any problem". That would really help', she adds. This is not the message she is getting from the British government, but also the EU hasn't done enough to protect families like hers.

All five of her children have dual citizenship, two are French and British, and three are Danish and British. Sarah and her husband only have one passport, British and Danish respectively. But the problem, she explains, is not the passport, but what the Brexit vote means to someone like her: 'it says that the way I live my life is no longer acceptable because I married foreign people and I had foreign children'. We collected Sarah's story at one of the focus groups we carried out as part of a recent [study](#) of EU families in Britain following the Brexit referendum.

As a result of the Brexit vote, many EU families with young children are reconsidering their plans for the future and are questioning whether the UK is still a good and safe place to bring up their children. However, the impact of the referendum on EU families is far from homogenous. There are important differences depending on class, gender, age and life stage and ethnic and national origin. The legal status of each family member is also relevant because it defines the options available to a family to mitigate the impact of Brexit.

A less hostile environment

While frustration, anxiety and disillusionment were shared by all EU families (but one), we also found some considerable differences in how EU nationals experienced the pre and post-referendum Britain whether they live in Scotland, Wales or England. Our [research](#) shows that despite the uncertainty of Brexit EU families feel more welcome and safer in Scotland than south of the border. The letter sent by the Scottish Government to registered EU residents after the vote, and in particular Nicola Sturgeon's [words of reassurance towards EU citizens living in Scotland](#) just after the result of the referendum, have left a positive and lasting mark on our interviewees. But the reassurance didn't come only from the Scottish Government and main parties, a Romanian couple explains how they felt reassured by the positive response they received from 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.'

The clear victory for Remain in Scotland (62%) was also interpreted as a sign that the population is more pro-European than in England and Wales (with respectively 53.4% in favour of Leave and 52.5%) making EU citizens feel less isolated and part of a wider, if grieving, community.

Since then, Scotland's Europeanness has also been emphasised to a greater degree by the SNP and its leaders, making EU citizens feel they belong to the national community more than in any other part of the UK [expect London](#). This sentiment was further reinforced by the Scottish Government's commitment to retaining the closest possible relationship with Europe, with a case being made for a second independence referendum that would enable Scotland to remain part of the EU. After the Brexit vote, while in England many EU families felt rejected and unwelcome, in Scotland they were more willing to say that they felt at home, as expressed by a Swedish women in Glasgow:

'So I feel Scotland is home. Scotland is home [...] I feel terrified for Scotland at the moment because I feel if we don't escape Brexit and we don't get independence, we will be crushed and Scotland will never escape'.

A number of people pointed to the exclusion from the EU referendum franchise and the inclusion in the Scottish independence one as further evidence of how much more valued they are in Scotland.

Scotland as a 'nation of immigrants'

To explain the different treatment fellow EU nationals were experiencing in England, EU nationals in Scotland often referred to the idea of Scotland as a 'nation of immigrants', [echoing a narrative](#) which has been pushed strongly by the Scottish Government in the last decade aimed at 'ensuring that appeals to nationhood in Scotland can be meaningfully calibrated to include minorities too'.

While public opinion surveys have consistently shown that this more positive narrative on immigration doesn't necessarily translate into more positive public attitude towards migrants, they also show that EU migrants are overall perceived more positively in Scotland as they benefit also from the pro-EU message coming from the political leadership. More recently, with the end of freedom of movement, discussion about implementing a devolved immigration regime has taken place with Scotland demanding more powers to manage migration by itself in order to bring in more migrants.

In this political context, EU citizens consider Scottish identity as being more inclusive than the English one, allowing 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 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'.

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. However, [social hierarchies](#) determine the extent to which someone can be part or not of the 'Scottish dream' and what resources they can mobilise to mitigate the impact of Brexit.

* Names in the text have been altered to protect the respondents' anonymity.

Note: This article was [first published](#) on LSE EUROPP. It draws on findings from the '[EU families and Eurochildren in Brexiting Britain](#)' project, which is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and is affiliated to [The UK in a Changing Europe](#) programme. Featured image credit: [Pixabay](#) (Public Domain).

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