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How Brexit impacts EU citizens' mental health and wellbeing: research findings

TEODOROWSKI, P., WOODS, R., CZARNECKA, M. and KENNEDY, C.

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How Brexit Impacts EU Citizens' Mental Health And Wellbeing Research Findings

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Foreword



PROFESSOR IAN MURRAY

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RGU was pleased to fund this piece of research and believes it will lead to further work that helps to illuminate the current Brexit situation and its impact on EU citizens. The study analyses how this seismic change in British politics is shaping the lives of the communities most affected.

RGU is an institution with a global outlook and reach which values the diversity of its community and its engagement with Europe. The outcome of the EU referendum in 2016 led to an increased level of uncertainty for all citizens, but in particular EU citizens.

This study identifies how this uncertainty is impacting on the mental wellbeing of EU citizens living in Scotland and raises an important question; are we fully aware of the impact of Brexit on the wellbeing of EU citizens?



Executive Summary

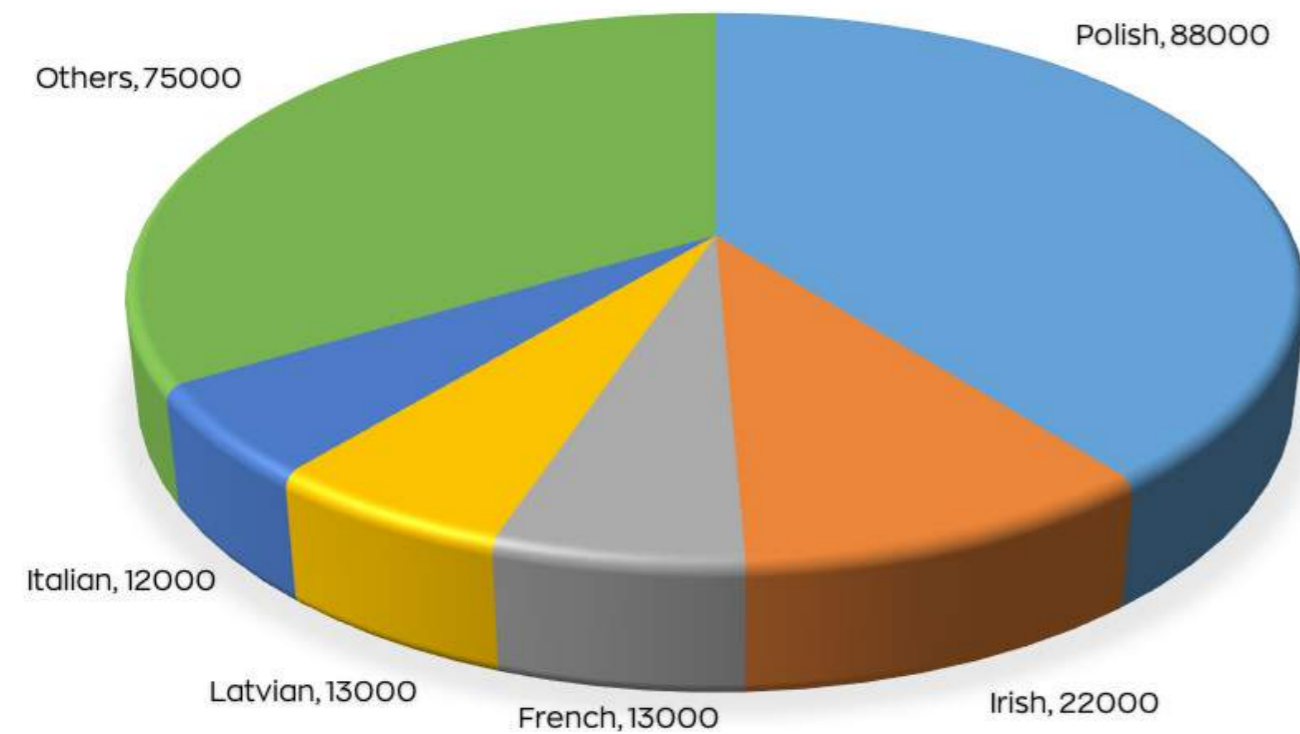
Our study shows that the Brexit campaign, referendum, and subsequent political discourse have damaged EU citizens' wellbeing primarily through **undermining their integration into Scottish society**. They have been left feeling unwanted, unwelcome, marked out as different and treated as inferior. They are concerned with the uncertainty around Brexit, reducing their ability to visualise their future in Scotland. Most saw Scotland and the UK as open, welcoming countries before the 2016 referendum, increasing their sense of shock and loss.

Thus, we argue that the **mental health of the EU citizens is important not only in its own right, but also as a barometer of integration and cohesion in Scotland**. To heal EU citizens is to go some way in healing Scotland as a whole. **Scotland has a critical advantage over the rest of the UK** given its 'Remain' majority, but still faces challenges, which need to be tackled on national and local levels.

Key messages

- * EU citizens' mental health and wellbeing is being impacted by Brexit
- * Their mental health and wellbeing provides a window into the health of our nation in relation to integration and cohesion
- * Scotland holds a critical advantage over the rest of UK in this regard but still faces challenges

Context: EU Citizens in Scotland and the UK



Most Numerous EU Nationalities in Scotland Credit: National Records of Scotland, 2018.

Following a long period of net emigration in Scotland, the number of EU citizens living here has climbed steadily since the early 2000s¹

An estimated **3.7 million EU citizens live in the UK** (5.7% of the population), of whom about **223,000 live in Scotland**, making up 4.2% of the Scottish population³. Roughly half of all EU citizens in Scotland are Polish or Irish²

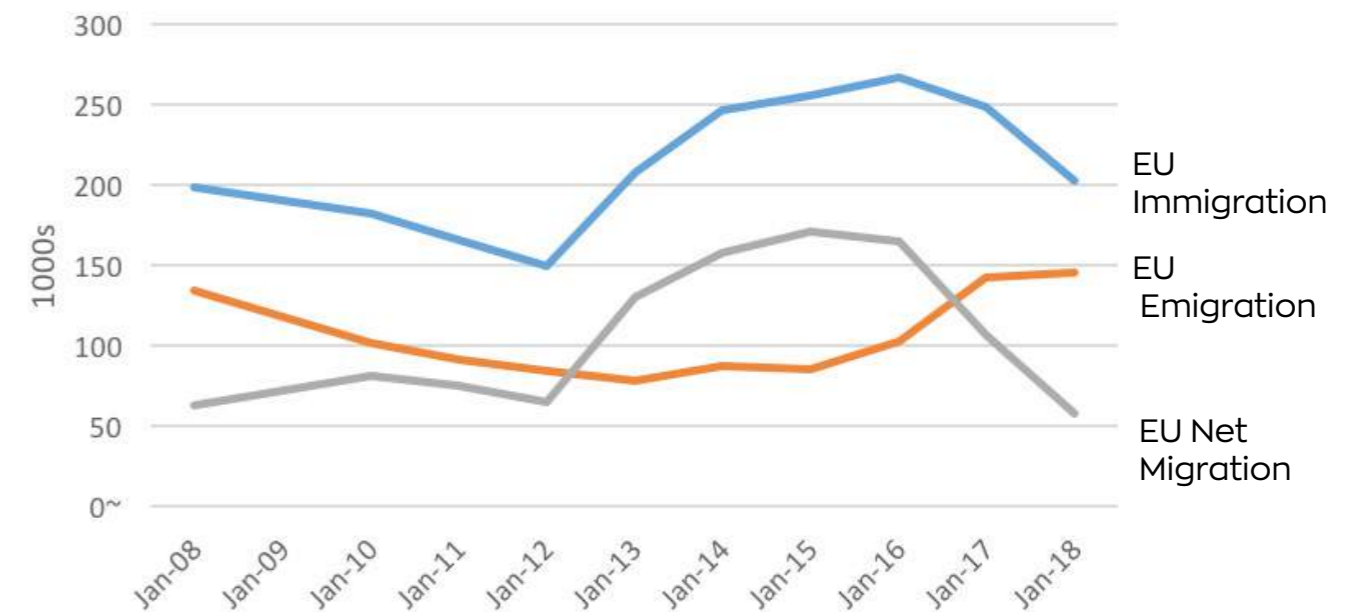
The employment rate for EU nationals in 2015 was 78.9%, higher than Scotland's overall employment

rate of 73.1%⁴. One in ten small to medium businesses in Scotland is immigrant led—and more than a third of these are led by EU citizens.⁵

Since the referendum, EU net migration to the UK remains positive, but is decreasing rapidly.⁶

A recent survey found that 77% of over 1000 young Eastern Europeans in the UK had experienced racism⁷, while there were over 3,000 reports of race-based hate crime in Scotland in 2017-18.⁸

EU Citizens' Migration to and from the UK ⁹



Overview of Research

This qualitative study conducted semi-structured focus group interviews (n=7) with EU citizens in Scotland examining how they are experiencing Brexit and whether there is any impact on their mental health and wellbeing. These discussions took place in Edinburgh (n=6) and Aberdeen (n=1). Focus groups were conducted in English or Polish and with the support of interpreters (Spanish, Russian) to facilitate participants with limited knowledge of English. When necessary, interpreters stayed after the session for debriefing to discuss any cross-cultural differences which may have appeared during the focus group.

Participation was open to any EU citizen, who was at least 18 years old and who moved to the UK before the 2016 referendum took place, so all participants had an experience of living in pre-Brexit Britain. Recruitment was through social media with potential participants getting in touch directly with the research team to register for the study. The team conducted the thematic analysis of transcribed interviews jointly. This allowed us to generate findings which may not be generalizable but which reveal insights into how Brexit is affecting EU citizens' mental health and wellbeing.

Ethical consent was granted by the RGU School of Nursing and Midwifery Ethics Review Panel.

Our main themes: future unravelled, belonging and rejection, and loss through change are reported here.

WHO ARE OUR PARTICIPANTS?

13 NATIONALITIES TOOK PART IN SEVEN FOCUS GROUPS

RESIDENCE
Average length of residence in the UK: 10.5 years
Shortest residence: 3 years
Longest residence: 37 years
One participant was born in the UK.

EMPLOYMENT
Professionals: 14
Students: 5
Administrative and secretarial occupations: 3
Caring and leisure: 3
Elementary occupations: 2
Job seeker: 1
Pensioner: 1
Self-employed: 1

AGE
YOUNGEST PARTICIPANT: 18YO
OLDEST PARTICIPANT: 61YO

Future Unravalled

Uncertainty of the future relationship between the EU and the UK, and the legal status of EU citizens causes anxiety. Many participants feel unable to make informed decisions about their future. This includes starting studies or buying a house. Participants considered moving outside the UK but were concerned that they might not be allowed to return.

“On the other side (...) I feel like if I leave the UK now, it will be like a final decision and it’s a huge responsibility because I’m not sure if I would be allowed to move back because there was no clear information on that”

Irish participants refer to uncertainty around the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. If the closed crossings returned, they are worried about a repeat of the Troubles.

Some participants, who work for large employers such as multinational companies or universities, received support and reassurance from management on their future right to remain.

An additional layer of uncertainty exists among EU citizens whose partners are British or have families in the UK as they are concerned that they may be separated especially in the case of a no- deal Brexit.

EU citizens searched for assistance around future arrangements and their settled status. For example, they attended local events with politicians or lawyers on how to apply for settled status. However, often, many practical questions could not be answered as the stance of the UK government is not clear. Provision of interpreters is seen as essential to allow everyone to understand legal terms.

The lack of one place to seek advice is seen as an obstacle. One participant suggested the creation of an online chat or a website where EU citizens could ask all their questions.

“ My fiancée is not from Scotland, and we have to postpone some life decisions to see what is going to happen after Brexit, what kind of requirements we will have to meet. What is going to be (...) our legal situation regarding our right to remain or may be if we should... somewhere else to live but we are in this age it influences our feeling of security and not only political security of the country.”

Belonging and Rejection

Many participants commented on how Brexit had altered their feelings of belonging in Scotland and the UK. Most found Scotland welcoming and friendly when they arrived here, and they quickly felt integrated and at home.

'I've been here 15 years now, in Edinburgh, and that's straight from Poland. I felt very, very welcome, it, and it was, it immediately was a home and I felt embraced'

However, this feeling of integration and belonging was seriously damaged by the referendum result, which was understood by many EU citizens in Scotland as a clear message of rejection.

'People don't want you here. So, it's like, great. I don't feel very welcome. I know not everyone is like that, obviously [...]but is true, that there is like an underlining message of, we're sick and tired of foreigners.'

For some, this rejection materialised as an increase in discrimination, while others felt marked out as different.

'Recently, so, I work in a company where I'm the only foreigner, all my colleagues are Scottish, and I think recently, there are funny comments like 'soon you will be out' and they try to make it 'oh, I'm just joking' but I don't feel comfortable and I really feel, I don't know, attacked in way.'

'We had to do the settled status, I failed and [...] straight away I felt, I thought of Germany, you know, when they had to wear yellow star, Jewish people, I felt different, I was a different citizen, I was the other one.'

Many participants commented on their own lack of say and control over these life-changing events, for instance due to not being eligible to vote in the referendum. This left many feeling disenfranchised and disempowered.

'I've lived here long enough to feel some sort of sense of belonging here but, I don't feel that I'm involved in the debate so, I get this constant feeling with the Brexit debate that I don't have a say in'

The WHO definition of mental health includes the ability to contribute to one's community. **By sending out a message of rejection, Brexit has seriously impaired this aspect of wellbeing for our EU citizens.** This is however softened by the fact that in Scotland, the majority of people voted to remain in the EU.

Loss Through Change

The referendum results were unexpected and came as a shock to EU citizens. Many of them could not believe that the UK decided to leave and felt that they are not welcome anymore in the country. Thus, they started to judge their place and future in Scotland, which before the referendum was described as a 'home'. This initial shock was met with the emotional response: sadness and anger.

Brexit is a traumatic experience for some and participants compared it to mourning. EU citizens can be at different stages of mourning: denial, sadness and acceptance of results. However, it is not possible to get over this loss as Brexit, and its uncertainty remains a vital part of political discourse in Britain. Consequently, one participant stopped watching TV in the evening and changed the way to travel to work to avoid exhibited front pages of tabloids in shops.

"It's trauma, for me, it's like a trauma, you know, it's like a traumatic experience and just how do you, maybe time but, if I get more time to heal them, but, yeah, I re-experience it every time I'm on the bus as well."

To EU citizens, the perception of the UK as a welcoming country has shifted. Participants spoke of how the British are more confident to express their negative views about migration and other cultures. Consequently, some participants do not feel comfortable to speak their mother tongue in public places such as buses.

The change has negative effects on the mental health of EU citizens, and has exacerbated existing mental health problems for some.

"I was diagnosed with depression in 2017, and, erm, of course, it's not only because of Brexit but, I think Brexit was one of the impact, one of the factors."

"I have physical pain as well, that's new, since Brexit. I have a lot of pain in my neck which turns into headaches and that's all pressure pain, it's all tension and I've gotten, one time I had such bad pain in my shoulder or, so much tension in shoulder that I actually had nerve pain going down my arm, and things like that, and it's to do with stress cause it's tension in your body and, if it's there all the time don't relax enough, it just happens. So, emotionally, physically and mentally, Brexit has definitely had an impact on me."

Support structure for EU citizens provides reassurance and assists them in coping with their emotions. Participants felt most comfortable to discuss their feelings with other EU citizens as they felt that even welcoming Scottish people do not fully understand their experience.

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