

Where guidance by the government and the EU was missing, grassroots organisations like the3million and British in Europe led many people through the Brexit swamp

Following the Brexit referendum, a number of organisations were set up to support the rights of EU citizens in the UK and British citizens in the EU. [Catherine Craven](#), [Michaela Benson](#) and [Nando Sigona](#) reflect on the work of these organisations and ask what their legacy will be.

Earlier this year, British in Europe – the largest coalition group of British citizens living in the EU – [closed their doors](#). This group was founded following the 2016 Brexit referendum. Over their six-year history, they campaigned to protect the rights of the estimated [1.2 million British citizens living in the EU](#) and were at the forefront of advocacy around citizens' rights during the Brexit negotiations and transition period.

From the referendum until their closure, they worked hand in hand with the main advocacy group for EU citizens in the UK, [the3million](#), also founded at the time of the referendum. These new political formations, mobilised in response to Brexit, were built around a shared EU citizenship and identity. But as their work winds down, it is worth exploring what their legacy will be.

Europeans made by Brexit

Immediately after the referendum, [crowds gathered for protests in the streets of London](#), Manchester and in several European cities. Meanwhile, the number of Brexit-related Facebook groups and other online communities grew rapidly. Many British citizens living in Europe and European nationals in the UK joined these in search of information and legal support specific to their host country, but also to seek solace and a safe space to air grievances.

Spontaneous actions and social networks soon turned into more organised political formations on both sides of the Channel, with some becoming professionalised (civil society) organisations. As the negotiations for the Withdrawal Agreement got underway, some of these groups further tightened their cooperation and scaled up their focus to the EU level, advocating around Brexit's [legal implications for the rights and status](#) of already settled populations.

What started out as spontaneous resistance to the referendum campaign and outcome quickly transformed into a transnational movement. Where leadership or guidance by the British government and the EU was missing, these organisations led many people through the [Brexit swamp](#), and have played a huge role in fostering a sense of shared interest and community among their followers from the EU and Britain.

By advancing a narrative of shared 'EU citizenship', the3million and British in Europe established themselves as the voices of otherwise disenfranchised communities and as legitimate interlocutors in the eyes of EU actors and national governments, while creating the communities they wanted to represent. The3million is arguably the first mass movement of citizens of EU member states mobilised under a [pan-European identity](#) rather than national identities. Similarly, [British in Europe](#) was the first political mobilisation of [British citizens living and working across the EU](#).

From grassroots resistance to an 'imagined community' of EU citizens?

The formation of 'new' transnational communities is neither an apolitical nor linear process. While they may start as grassroots resistance, the legitimacy granted to nascent formations by states and their political actors enables them to grow and consolidate their positions vis-a-vis different audiences, nationally and internationally. How and why a new political formation is caught up in and navigates this process of legitimation offers useful insight into the wider political projects in which it aims to intervene.

The advocacy and campaigning strategies of British in Europe and the3million transformed over time, from resisting to influencing the Brexit process. These groups were keen to uphold their common identity and rights as Europeans and rejected the idea they were somehow different from one another – with some activists embracing the [‘5 million’ hashtag](#) on social media. Interviewed in [Europe Street News](#) in February 2022, co-chair of British in Europe Jane Golding stressed this point:

I think what we have done has also made a significant contribution to the debate on EU citizenship and third country nationals’ rights in the EU generally. What really would be needed is some sort of organisation to represent the rights of all ‘mobile citizens’ in the EU because that’s the only way to have the high-level overview and compare and contrast national situations across the EU. That’s the advantage that we had.

Yet, the political legitimacy of their shared European citizenship waxed and waned. It was evident throughout the negotiations, and especially towards the end, that this understanding of a shared European citizen community/identity did not fully extend to how political actors in either the UK or EU saw them.

Most obviously, this resulted in differentiated access to funding opportunities for both organisations. The3million managed to secure core funding that means they continue to have paid staff and they have been accredited to offer legal advice on the EU Settlement Scheme through their charity, Settled. In contrast, the funding raised by British in Europe through donations from members [was insufficient to allow them to continue to operate](#). Nor were they able to access the UK Government’s [UK Nationals Support Fund](#), which might have allowed them to offer legal advice to British citizens in the EU.

But to make sense of the recent break up of British in Europe, other contextual factors must also be considered. For example, claims to Europeanness made by British citizens living in the EU during the Brexit negotiations were increasingly more tenuous and more easily dismissed than those of EU citizens living in the UK. Such disparities in legitimacy also aligned with a broader pattern of opacity around which political actors, if any, were acting in the [interests of British citizens in the EU](#). Evidently, as the borders of the European Union and its ‘imagined community’ were actively being reworked, the legal status and political capital of British citizens within the EU’s borders changed. Reflecting on the changes that Brexit had meant for British citizens wanting to live and work in the EU, [Jane Golding noted](#):

[a] British person who wanted to work in another European country probably might have been more valuable just by virtue of being able to speak English. These days, everybody can speak English... really, really talented graduates from all over Europe who speak English. If a British person does not have the same rights and it is not so easy to employ them, then they won’t get employed. It’s as simple as that.

But it is not only what this mobilisation around European identity means for individuals and communities, it is also what it might mean for the EU project. Simply, what does the EU stand to gain from a political mobilisation organised around European identity and citizenship? Before Brexit, there had not been any substantive political mobilisation that took as its frame of reference the European Union. The broader context to this are initiatives within the EU (e.g. the European Citizens’ Initiative and the recently launched EU Citizens’ Assemblies) aimed at developing a more clearly defined EU citizenry in response to its perceived [‘democratic deficit’](#).

What next for EU citizenship?

The closure of British in Europe has provided an opportunity to reflect on what the future might be for Brexit-driven pan-European political mobilisations and the communities they have given rise to. Has the EU citizenship label fulfilled its promise of offering community (and community-based resistance and solidarity) beyond the nation? Or have we reached the limit of political resistance based on a foundation of EU citizenship claims? In other words, were the Brexit-driven mobilisations around European identities a flash in the pan or is there potential for them to feed into something more permanent?

Further research is needed to fully understand the membership of these political movements and their outreach. It is an open question as to how ‘post-national’ this imagined community of EU citizens really is, and how inclusive and available this identity is to [members of racialised communities](#), citizens of new member states, or people with lower levels of education or social status.

Similarly, it remains to be seen what will happen now that the Brexit negotiation processes are complete and the agenda and priorities of national and EU actors may be moving elsewhere. In the wake of Brexit, might we see the re-nationalisation of the voices of EU citizens in the UK and British citizens in the EU?

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