

“In London, I Am a European Citizen”

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DOI:

[10.1007/978-3-031-25726-1_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25726-1_8)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Sigona, N & Godin, M 2023, “In London, I Am a European Citizen”: Brexit, Emotions, and the Politics of Belonging. in R Barbulescu, SW Goodman & L Pedroza (eds), *Revising the Integration-Citizenship Nexus in Europe: Sites, Policies, and Bureaucracies of Belonging*. 1 edn, IMISCOE Research Series, Springer, Cham, pp. 129-144. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25726-1_8

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Chapter 8

“In London, I Am a European Citizen”: Brexit, Emotions, and the Politics of Belonging



Nando Sigona  and Marie Godin 

8.1 Introduction

London hosts by far the largest population of non-national EU citizens in Europe. It is also home to roughly one-third of the entire EU citizen population living in the UK. London’s population changed rapidly following EU enlargement in the 2000s in terms of its size, the variety and number of nationalities it hosts, and its socio-demographic profile (Lessard-Phillips & Sigona, 2018). These changes have intensified and shaped the process of ‘diversification of diversity’ captured in the late 2000s by anthropologist Steve Vertovec in his seminal work on superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007). Despite Britain’s exit from the EU, its new geopolitical orientation (towards a more ‘Global Britain’) and the new immigration regime that has come to replace the EU’s freedom of movement, this diversification process has continued. For example, between 2016 and 2020, live births among EU mothers in London have roughly stayed the same - only marginally declined from 17.52 to 17.18 per cent of the total number of live births in London, with Poland, Romania, Germany and Lithuania among the top 10 countries of birth for non-UK mothers in the city (ONS, 2021; see also Lessard-Phillips & Sigona, 2019).

Despite vague reassurances from politicians during the referendum campaign, the outcome of the 2016 EU referendum – which saw the ‘Leave’ campaign winning popular support across every region in England and Wales with the exception

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of Greater London – led to an extended period of uncertainty for over three million EU citizens living in the UK concerning their legal status and rights after Brexit. Over several months of bilateral negotiations that followed the vote, EU citizens made their concerns, anxieties and frustrations heard through social media and political activism, lobbying their MPs, joining existing civil society organisations, and creating new ones. In the months leading to the referendum and during the negotiations that followed, anti-EU and anti-immigration sentiments were evident across the British mainstream media. This along with an increase in hate crime, and the fear of becoming a target of the UK's hostile environment policy contributed to heightened concerns among EU citizens. The reassurance that came with the introduction of the EU Settled Status (EUSS) programme for EU citizens in June 2018 was short-lived; the prospect of a 'no deal' Brexit seemed highly probable until the end of negotiations in early 2020. Uncertainty continues to the present day around the Northern Ireland protocol and its implications for the implementation of the Trade Agreement.

Examining the geographical distribution of the Brexit vote, Johnston et al. (2018: 162) showed that, 'of the fifty local jurisdictions where the vote to remain in the EU was strongest, only eleven were not in London or Scotland, and most of these were areas with large universities', with London standing out 'from the rest of England, even when its population composition had been taken into account' (p.180).

Acknowledging London's substantial support for remaining in the EU, one month after the referendum the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, launched the campaign #LondonisOpen¹ to reassure all EU citizens in London and EU institutions and businesses abroad that 'London is united and open for business, and to the world, following the EU referendum.' In the months that followed, Sadiq Khan embarked on a tour of European capitals to strengthen the economic and social ties between London and EU cities. He then intensively lobbied for continued visa-free travel to the UK for European citizens trying to ensure that London remains 'a leading global business capital'. The EU Londoners Hub was created to provide EU citizens and their families with information about life in London and advice on how to apply for the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS).

The EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement was signed on 17 October 2019 and entered into force on 1 February 2020. It set the terms for the UK's departure from the EU, including the rights for EU citizens living in the UK and British citizens living in the EU. Between March 2019 and 30 June 2021, EU, EEA and Swiss citizens and their families who had resided in the UK as of 31 December 2020 – the date which marks the end of freedom of movement – could secure their residency rights through the EUSS. Soon after the implementation of the EUSS, concerns were raised about the vulnerability of groups who were at greater risk of being excluded from the scheme and the risk of inequality in the future (see Godin & Bica, 2019; Sumption & Fernández-Reino, 2020; Jablonowski & Pinkowska, 2021). While not an exhaustive list, among those who were deemed more vulnerable to fall through the cracks of

¹ <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/arts-and-culture/london-open>

EUSS were victims of exploitation or trafficking, people with mental health problems, children in care and care leavers, victims of domestic violence, homeless people, older people, people with significant language barriers, people who are digitally excluded, unpaid carers and people working cash in hand. Romani communities were also singled out as particularly vulnerable. The transition from pre-settled to settled status presents additional challenges for these communities, with IT digital literacy constituting an important divide up to now (Doležalová et al., 2021).

This chapter portrays the emergence of a new politics of belonging following the 2016 EU Referendum that reconfigures discursively and legally who belongs to, and who is excluded from the post-EU ‘Global Britain’ from the unique standpoint of London, the city with the largest and most diverse population of EU citizens in Europe. Firstly, through an intersectional lens, we examine how EU families living in London experienced the prolonged Brexit negotiations and what mitigation strategies they were able to put in place to cope with it, according to their resources, circumstances and social status. EU nationals have not only been impacted differently by the uncertainties surrounding the Brexit referendum; but their perceptions and responses to Brexit are very much shaped by their social locations both in the UK and at home as well as sense of entitlement and self-worth. Secondly, the analysis of the responses of EU citizens to Brexit provides the conceptual underpinning to investigate the nexus between integration, citizenship and belonging in a highly diverse and stratified migrant population. We will highlight the significance of positionality, scale and place-based attachments in people’s perception and understanding of belonging, and the uniqueness of London’s superdiversity in enabling a multi-scalar articulation of citizenship decoupled from nationality.

8.1.1 Belonging and the New Politics of Belonging as EU Citizens in Post-Brexit Britain

As far as EU citizens are concerned, Brexit involved a legal transition from being *EU mobile citizens living* in another EU member state with rights and protections enshrined in the EU law, to being *EU immigrants* living in the UK under the UK’s immigration regime (D’Angelo & Kofman, 2018). This legal transition was managed through the EUSS for those already living in the UK or via the mainstream immigration system for newcomers. This change of legal status, which applies also to British citizens living in the EU (Benson, 2020), also change people’s claims to belonging and access to rights (Erel & Ryan, 2019; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). To mitigate the consequences of Brexit, some have chosen to apply for naturalisation (see for example Sigona & Godin, 2019a; Godin & Sigona, 2022).

Nira Yuval Davis’ three-pronged analytical framework for the study of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011) – in terms of social locations, people’s identifications and emotional attachments to various collectivities and groupings, and the ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others’ belonging – offers

a useful conceptual framework for the analysis of the impact of Brexit on EU mobile citizens in London. Yuval-Davis points out, that while belonging as emotional attachment tends to be naturalised, ‘particular political projects of belonging select specific signifiers of belonging from different analytical levels in order to construct their projects’ (2006: 199). The analytical distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging is particularly relevant we argue, in the context of Brexit which marked a major geopolitical shift for the UK that carried with it a new political project of belonging. This project has reshaped the boundaries of belonging for UK residents, British citizens and non-citizens alike. In that sense, the politics of belonging is not only about ‘the dirty work of boundary maintenance’ (Favell, 1999), creating both a symbolic and physical separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’, but also about the reshaping of these boundaries, and new contestations, challenges as well as resistance by those who are ‘newly’ excluded. In the chapter we will show how the outcome of the EU referendum generated a range of emotional responses among EU citizens, emotions which reflect situated and intersectional politics of belonging (see Anthias, 2002; Mc Ghee et al., 2017; Botterill et al., 2019; Lulle et al., 2019; Guma & Dafydd Jones, 2019; Sotkasiira & Gawlewicz, 2021).

After the Brexit vote, our research (Sigona & Godin, 2019b) shows that while in England many EU families felt rejected and unwelcome, in Scotland they were more willing to say that they felt at home. A number of people pointed to the exclusion from the EU referendum franchise and inclusion in the Scottish independence referendum as further evidence of how much more valued they feel themselves to be in Scotland. To explain the different treatment EU citizens were experiencing in England, EU citizens in Scotland often referred to the political trope of Scotland as a ‘nation of immigrants’. This echoes 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’ (Meer, 2015: 2). While public opinion surveys have consistently shown that this more positive narrative on immigration does not necessarily translate into a more positive public attitude towards migrants, they also show that EU migrants are perceived more positively overall in Scotland as they also benefit from the pro-EU message coming from the political leadership. In this political context, EU citizens consider Scottish identity as being more inclusive than English identity, allowing EU citizens to feel both Scottish and European, while simultaneously embracing their own national identity (Sigona & Godin, 2019b). Building on Berg and Sigona’s work on the ‘diversity turn’ in migration studies (Berg & Sigona, 2013), we argue that public narratives about Scotland being a ‘multicultural nation’ (El Fekih Said, 2018) have been re-appropriated by EU citizens to re-legitimize their presence in the UK. As we will discuss shortly, the possibility of feeling comfortable carrying multiple identities, without being forced into binary dilemmas also surfaces frequently among our London-based participants. In London, however, diversity is not only celebrated as a narrative or as a policy but is also a ‘fact of life’, as one of our interviewees stated. The global city, a node in the neoliberal global economic system produces unprecedented degrees of socio-demographic and cultural diversification; it is a ‘living multi-culture’ (Neal, 2015; Back & Sinha, 2018) in which diversity is

‘commonplace’ (Wessendorf, 2013) shaping, we argue, the unique ways in which EU families are able to articulate their situated sense of belonging to the city, as well as embodying possibilities for articulating more open, supra- and post-national politics of belonging, such as EU citizenship.

Drawing on the interviews with London-based EU citizens, we will examine the Brexit politics of belonging in London, emplacing Brexit in the London milieu. By doing so, this chapter aims to provide a better understanding of the significance of London as a place of urban *citizenship* as well as a place where different notions of ‘European citizenship’ are produced. It shows how different projects of belonging as ‘Europeans’ as well as ‘Londoners’ not only can coexist confirming the importance of adopting a multi-scalar approach to belonging (Erdal, 2020), but are also enabled by the local condition of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007). To achieve this, we take into consideration what happened before reaching the city of London, adopting a transnational lens (looking at the experiences prior to migration to the UK) in combination with an intersectional lens (capturing the influence of power, privilege, and social status).

8.1.2 Methodology

This chapter draws on sixty in-depth semi-structured interviews that were collected after the EU referendum from families living in London with members from over fourteen EU member states.² It includes families of mixed nationality and mixed ethnicity, those long-established and those more recently settled in the UK, and a variety of family configurations. Our typology of EU families includes five types (see Table 8.1). In order to be included in the study, a family had to include at least one child and one EU-born parent. To capture variations in family responses to the opportunities and challenges presented by Brexit, both from a legal and a personal perspective, we have included a range of family configurations. Parents’ country of

Table 8.1 Five types of EU families

	Type of family	Count
Type 1	EU same	24
Type 2	EU-UK	20
Type 3	EU different	8
Type 4	EU single	2
Type 5	EU-TCN	6
	Total	60

²Born in France (8); Italy (9); UK (7); Romania (5); Germany (4), Slovakia (2), Greece (1), Ghana (1), Bulgaria (1); Hungary (1); Denmark (1); Belgium (1); Sweden (1), Slovenia (1), US (1) and Poland (1) (N = 45) (Eurochildren database).

origin is relevant in this regard since it affects the capacity of members to secure their legal status, and in terms of remigration and settlement options available.

The typology of family configurations aims to capture diversity in the nationality and country of birth of each parent in the families selected for interview. Type 1 refers to families in which both parents were born in the same EU country (EU-same), Type 2 refers to families where one parent is EU-born and the other is UK-born (EU-UK). These are the most prevalent groups in our sample. We then have 'EU families' composed of two parents born in different EU countries (EU-different, type 3). Type 4 refers to EU-born single parent families (EU-single, type 4). Type 5 consists of families with one EU-born parent and one third-country-national parent (EU-TCN) (see Table 8.1).

Among the families that participated in our study, there were families with children only born in the UK, only born elsewhere in the EU, and families with children born in both. Paying attention to the country of birth of children is relevant, not only because it has implications on their legal status and access to citizenship (Yeo, 2018a, b) but also because it affects family strategies for Brexit mitigation (Sigona & Godin, 2019a). Many of the children from the EU families we interviewed have dual citizenship (a British and an EU passport) which they either acquired through their parents' residency rights in the UK as EU citizens or because one parent is British by birth or was naturalised at the time of birth. To capture children's voices, we also interviewed EU citizens who were over 18 years old and living with their parents. This included those that were born in the UK or who had been born outside the UK but brought over by their parents as younger children. Lastly, to capture the voices of younger children, we put in place a participatory photo and audio project entitled 'In the Shadow of Brexit'³ offering a space for participants to articulate their voice and agency on this subject. The participatory photo project aimed to capture the diversity of the EU population in the city and to explore whether the way these people feel about the protracted uncertainty of the Brexit process depends upon where they live. Overall, 15 family-portraits were taken and audio-recordings were made at the beginning of the photo-shoot as well as during the session and were used as tools to elicit meanings and understandings of belonging. These short narratives mixing both children's and parents' voices explore the family's everyday life and plans for the future.

All interviews were conducted in English by researchers involved in the 'EU families and Eurochildren in Brexiting Britain' project. The recruitment process took place with the assistance of three grassroots organisations (i.e. The 3Millions,⁴ Migrant Voice⁵ and the Roma Support Group⁶). All the interviews were transcribed,

³The team for this participatory photo research project includes Crispin Hughes and Francesca Moore (photographers), Marie Godin (researcher) and Nando Sigona (PI Eurochildren project). More information can be found at: <https://eurochildren.info/2019/11/05/in-the-shadow-of-brexite-launch-and-debate/>

⁴<https://www.the3million.org.uk/>

⁵<https://www.migrantvoice.org/>

⁶<https://www.romasupportgroup.org.uk/>

and analysed using NVivo software with thematic coding applied across the entire dataset.

In the following section, we will discuss the empirical data, focusing on three articulations of the new politics of belonging stemming from the Brexit referendum. Firstly, we will examine the range of emotional responses to Brexit among EU citizens in London highlighting the role of social hierarchies and positionality in defining our participants’ emotions, feelings and affects about Brexit. We then move the focus to the role of London as a city in our participants’ narrative of Brexit and how the city offers opportunities and spaces for articulating ideas of new forms of belonging and citizenship. Finally, our attention moves to focus on the meaning of EU citizenship and its availability for EU citizens to make sense of their emotions.

8.1.3 Brexit, Emotions and the Intersectional Politics of Belonging

A sense of betrayal was one of the primary feelings expressed by EU mobile citizens living in London at the time of Brexit. Albert is in his fifties and identifies with three nationalities – French by his mother, Italian by his father and British because he was raised in the country. To him, London is the ‘offshore capital of Europe, really multinational, really cosmopolitan, multicultural, multi- whatever you want’, which has suddenly fallen apart. He feels very much like a Londoner and does not necessarily ‘feel typically English, whatever that might mean’. He also acknowledges that, to his surprise, these nationalistic ways of identifying oneself are relevant to a lot of people, including those living in London, ‘now even more than in the past’, he adds. Apart from the practical effect that Brexit will have on his life and his children, the main change for him is the feeling he carries with him that the country and city he lives in are regressing. Since the referendum, his daily social interactions are defined by the Remain/Leave divide. However, while being critical about London, he also acknowledges that London as a city has not fallen enough in his esteem and other cities and countries in Europe have not risen enough for him to decide, ‘Right, time to go’. Brexit has shaken but not destroyed Albert’s attachment to the city.

For other EU families, the feeling of being betrayed led them to consider leaving the city. As this extract from an Italian-Venezuelan couple with one EU-born child indicates, Brexit produces inter- and intra- generational tensions that reverberate within the family.

We woke up in a different country and it was a different situation. Even though London is different from the rest of the UK, but still. Within the couple, I’m the one for whom is easier to leave ... Brexit only accelerated the desire to go and live somewhere else, but the rest are happy where they are.

While he had a strong desire to leave, he made it clear during the interview that the family will probably stay because of the strong sense of belonging to London that

his child has and also for his wife, who is not from Italy and could not consider Naples as a city to return to; it is too 'provincial', he says reporting his wife words. Aspirations to return and leave the city of London, as a result of the Brexit referendum, are not necessarily shared by every member of a family, particularly in the case of mixed-status EU families.

This Finnish mother, married to an Italian, explained to us how her UK-born daughter changed from identifying as a Londoner to reclaiming her Italianness:

Her identity changed very dramatically after Brexit. She is 14 now and since she was born she has been a London girl really through and through. I mean to the point that she misses London physically, she becomes physically sick for how much she misses London. After Brexit she has become Italian [...] She has changed her whole identity. She has felt so deeply rejected. Yes, she started to watch various BBC programmes about Italian food, Italian history, Italian art [...] she started to identify nationally as Italian for the first time ever [...] you know like previously she would be really insisting that she is not a foreigner and now she will say she is Italian.

In other EU families, men such as Thomas, who is a French Cameroonian father of two, are less enthusiastic about London and the UK more specifically. He says, 'if you are Black and immigrant, Brexit hasn't changed much [how you are treated]'. His wife, Sonia, echoed his point, explaining, 'Because he is Black, and I'm white, Brexit doesn't feel the same'. However, they both agree that, for their children, Zoe and Leo, London is a better place to grow up than most cities in France. Similarly, a mother of two who is French-Hungarian and married to a dual citizen with French and Vietnamese citizenship also believes London is the best place for their children: 'Yes, I have to say that my husband is half Vietnamese, half French. And he also has this mixed identity which my children also have. At the moment, I still feel that London is one of the most tolerant cities in Europe.'⁷ For all the mixed-race couples we interviewed, London is still a better and safer place for their children to grow up in. Its superdiversity offers a safer and more welcoming space than elsewhere in Europe for EU citizens from various social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds to meet, mobilise, and build relationships, including intimate ones.

8.1.4 Emplacing Brexit and Urban Citizenship

For many EU Londoners, the idea that everything has changed but at the same time nothing had changed was often mentioned:

I don't think much will change for us. We've been here for 15 years, always living here, paying the taxes. We've got all the evidence, all the proof, and I have nothing to fear, to be honest. I'm relaxed but still, I mean, the feeling of living here changed. I mean, the perception of the country, the perception of the people in this country, how you fit within the society. As I said, London is one thing, the rest of England is quite another [Louise, from France, 39 years old, in London since 2001, UK-EU].

⁷Ana, French-Hungarian, 43 years old, in London since 2010.

Many described London as a world apart from the rest of the country. Some, half-jokingly, even advocated for an independent London that leaves the UK and remains in the EU. Looking at the percentages of votes for remain/leave, they identified even more with London as a place for Remainers, with a general feeling that people living in London – with the right to vote – had predominantly voted to remain. Jeremy, 24 years old, born in London to French parents, explains:

we grew up with a lot of people that were European families – because we have the Eurostar and flying anywhere in Europe is so easy, we’re in constant contact with Europeans. So, the general opinion for everyone was remain.

London is often framed as a bubble, a place of refuge, a place outside England. Marie is French Beninese, but also identifies as French, Beninese, British, European; most of all, she feels like a Londoner, she says. Married to British-born Paddy, she says: ‘In London, diversity is a fact of life, and everyone can thrive to live comfortably in their own skin.’ In France, she felt that there was still a stigma attached to being different, and more specifically to being Black. After she felt discriminated against when looking for jobs as a young professional, she decided to go to the UK. She felt that London was a place where she could be herself, where she did not have to be ‘so self-conscious about being Black and where everyone seemed to be accepted for the way they were’. Friends at home kept asking her when she would return but, so far, she sees no reason for doing so, ‘I love the open-mindedness that England had and I still feel like we are a long way from that in France, especially open-mindedness in terms of origin’. Regarding Brexit, she admits that it felt like ‘a slap in the face’. She also realised that the open-mindedness that she loved so much about England was actually more of ‘a London way of looking at things’. However, both she and her husband are still very confident that London is the best place to continue raising their mixed-race children. They agree that, in the city, ‘the population is what it is, unless all the multicultural people disappear ... London is such a mixed place’. As Marie says of her children’s classes, ‘everyone is so different, they don’t know any other way’, while her husband adds, ‘it is amazing to see so much diversity in the next generation’.

Despite shared concerns surrounding the disruptive impact of Brexit and the uncertainty surrounding the future, for mixed-race families there is also an awareness that life may not be easy for them elsewhere in Europe, where immigrants, and ethnic and religious minorities, experience frequent discrimination and are the target of xenophobic and racist political movements. This shows the importance of considering the social location of EU families and the ways in which they have experienced Brexit as an ‘unsettling event’ (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021) but also in terms of the impact it has had on their lives and the ways in which they had to re-articulate their sense of belonging (or non-belonging) to the city, to the UK and in regard to the European project (as described hereafter).

For Mihai, a Roma activist from Romania, this is clear: ‘Despite things getting worse in the UK as a result of Brexit, London is still one of the best places in Europe for a Roma to live.’ Considering the wave of anti-immigration politics spreading across Europe (Godin & Sigona, 2022) and the discrimination that Roma people

still suffer in Romania, raising his children in the city of London is still the most secure place for them to grow up. All these narratives about London reveal how EU citizens have developed a strong sense of “city-senship” to the city of London. Describing her idea of what a *true* Londoner is, Martine – who has lived in London for over twenty years – explains:

I think it is someone who is quite open, someone mobile, someone happy to meet people from any kind of other horizons, any religions, any backgrounds. And I think London has shown that it is like the mayor would say it is an open place [...] the diversity makes it so interesting. It is very cosmopolitan and the arts, I mean there are so many things [...] So for me London is everything. But I don't feel English, I don't feel British. I feel like a Londoner. [Martine, from France, 42 years old, in London since 2000].

The sense of disconnect from the rest of the country is produced also from the realisation that most neighbours are likely to be originally from somewhere else in the world and therefore not responsible for the Brexit vote.

Where I live in London and especially in our block of flats it is like 70 different flats and most of us are foreigners to be honest, both from EU countries and from outside of Europe so I don't feel the immediate impact on my life. Which would certainly be different if I moved somewhere to a British community.' [Yvonne, from Germany, 39 years old, in London since 2007].

London is often not only constructed in juxtaposition to the rest of England, but also to some extent to Europe. It is its unique position as global, open and superdiverse city that makes it a point of reference for European youth.

I've never been anywhere else outside of London, I always live in London. You will feel a massive difference between London and the rest of the UK. Philip and I always say, if we come out of London, we wouldn't be able to live on the other side [...] London is not England'. (Isabel, born in the UK, French citizen, 40 years old).

Comparing her sense of belonging to London to how it feels to go back to France, she continues, saying:

There is a sense of in common there, I don't know what it is, it's a shared history or.... feel like a younger generation in Europe is quite similar in the way that they think, they come to London because London is so different, they come to London because London is original. London is...the island here in the UK.

8.1.5 'In London, I am a European Citizen': EU Citizenship and the Nested Politics of Belonging

Among the EU citizens that we interviewed, many from 'old' member states described themselves as Europeans first and foremost, before defining themselves as a national of an EU member state. The following extract from a French woman in her fifties living in London is particularly evocative of this approach:

Yeah, in London I'm a European citizen. Yes, I am French, but I'm here, and I've been allowed to live in this country because of the European Union. So, I feel like, yeah, we are

European, it’s what we’ve got in common, all of us in London – most of us I mean. Got a large number of Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Belgian – we know people of every single nationality. [Anne-Laure, from France, 50 years old, in London since 2004, Type 2, EU-UK, one child born in the EU, one in the UK].

London’s diversity and its connections with the rest of Europe are often referred to as what makes the city unique. This quote and the next show that being European is not just about making use of the right to freedom of movement; it is also about how this right translates pragmatically in real life, creating a strong sense of European belongingness through the city of London especially after the referendum:

So far I kept a very good balance because I was able to spend part of the time in France, part of the time in Italy and part of the time in England so I never really felt I missed anything. And I do feel very good in London because it is very multicultural so probably out of everything, London I feel like is more like home. [Susanna, Italian, single mum, mother of two London-born children and one born in Italy].

Local urban embeddedness can be combined with a solid sense of transnational belonging, making the city of London a ‘European anchor’ that has allowed EU citizens to conduct a transnational life and maintain over time a sense of multi-embeddedness in different places and across generations. London, as a city, took an active role in welcoming European citizens from diverse transnational contexts. Transnational practices across the continent and the UK have, in many ways, contributed to a growing sense of what it is to be European and transnational, while at the same developing a strong attachment to the city where you live. As an example, a Polish family with both parents born in Poland and with their two UK-born children explained to us what it means to be European in a city like London:

If you meet other parents, there are French parents, Bulgarian parents, Romanian parents or German or Spanish parents, it brings us closer together because when you do talk about Britain *versus* the rest of the Europe, we are all in the pot of sort of [we are all unwanted here]...in a sense it creates a bond, a stronger bond with them, because we have this subject to talk about... they are like us, they want to stop Brexit, they want to remain as well and it would be sort of hypocrite if I thought otherwise. So that is what is happening so in a sense, it is bringing us together, yes, and this why we believe we made a home here in London in Great Britain because of those friendships, the bonds that we have with all the Europeans with European nationalities basically including Great Britain. It is only when Brexit come on the table, then when the referendum started and after, that I think we felt a little bit sad and less welcome. [Polish dad, from Poland, in London since 2004, type 1, EU-same, two UK-born children].

Sharing with us how they are raising their kids, they explain how they are preparing them for the eventuality that they will one day move out of the UK. To be ‘European’ is to be mobile and to achieve this; to master more than one European language is an asset. Teaching French as well as Polish to their children, this is what they tell us about the future of their kids:

It will give them more opportunities for their future wherever they decide to be. They are citizens of Europe so to speak. I think it is great that we can move without frontiers and limits, it is a great thing, we feel like European... free movement we really embraced it.

This extract reveals the importance of ‘mobility capital’ to EU parents. Mobility capital as put forward by Moret (2020) is a factor for social differentiation. Acquired via socialisation and experiences, it ‘can be transmitted from generation to generation and necessitates investment in terms of time and economic capital’.

The outcome of the Brexit referendum in some cases has made attachment to the European identity stronger, sometimes alongside a rejection of Britishness including London as a city. The story of this Italian mother recalling how it felt after the referendum exemplifies this point:

...that morning I was taking the kids to school and being consoled by all the well-meaning British middle class parents and I remember thinking, do you realise what it means for you? You are no longer Europeans? but yes actually that reaction and that dilemma, this gut feeling that although the fact that I was getting a lot of sympathy was not making it any better because the same people that were giving me sympathy were the same people that had not been able to not let this happen. Including Londoners and London as a whole. I don't take much solace in the fact that London is different.[...] because London first of all is where Britishness is born and is bred in some ways' [Clara, from Italy, 47 years old, in London since 1997, EU same].

For others, their country of origin was not even part of the EU when they migrated to the UK. Having lived in London led to progressively developing a sense of European identity, which was not necessarily present before leaving their country of origin. This shows how Europeanness as an identity can also emerge over time. This is the case of many interviews we conducted with Roma people in London. This Roma father arrived with his parents in 1994 at the age of three from Romania. When asked whether he feels European, he replied, ‘Sometimes when I go to work and people think, oh, you are South American most likely or Mexican or whatever, and I say, no, I'm European. When I say that, I say it like I'm proud of it for some reason, I'm not saying South American – it's not a bad place, but I'm happier about it saying that I'm European for some reason.’

He recalls saying it before the referendum, and this was mainly due to the fact that England was part of the EU. However, if the question comes up again, he does not know yet what he will say:

I wouldn't know what it's going to be like saying it, you know. Depends on the circumstances I suppose, if England has a thing against it or not, because they were part of it (Mirku, from Romania, 27 years old, lived in London since 1994).

This quote indicates a shift in the politics of belonging in the context of the Brexit referendum and post-Brexit Britain and how some of the discourses about who belongs and who does not belong to the nation have situated people differently. It also shows, as argued by Tuuli Lähdesmäki et al. (2021), how the ‘notions of “Europe” and what it is to be and feel “European” is fluid, changing and contextual.

The change in the politics of belonging in the UK and in the city of London, of who belongs and who does not, and the dialectics of “us” versus “them” have created different kinds of uncertainties for EU citizens as well as different ways to reposition oneself and the “EU family” in terms of their sense of belonging to the city and/or a nation. It also reveals something about the borders of Europe and its polity as, for a long time, citizens of old member states were offered as an example of the

Europeanness of the city. As a result, for some EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe, the label “European” was not available to them for a long time and did not resonate entirely with their own experience, leading to a volatile sense of belonging to a European imagined community. Therefore, the experience of Brexit for EU families has not been a homogeneous one, with some having been more affected than others by the uncertainties that surrounded the protracted negotiations. Their sense of belonging and their responses have been substantially shaped by social status, sense of entitlement and self-worth, as well as for many their long-lasting experiences of EU citizens that were already ‘migrantized’ before the event of Brexit (see Anderson, 2019). In other cases, as the story of Marie illustrates, living in the UK – in particular, London – has been the only way for her to become truly ‘European’ leading to a more grounded sense of belonging to an imagined EU community.

At the end of our interview, Marie, a black EU citizen, reflects on the reactions of ‘Europeans’ – referring to white EU citizens from Western EU countries – to being rejected, as it is something that “they” have been doing to so many countries that are not part of Europe, and African countries in particular. Selective immigration is not something that has ever been imposed upon these Europeans. For the first time in their lives, “they” (as she recalls) are being rejected, being told that they are not so welcome anymore and experiencing what migrants from poorer countries have been experiencing for so long. As Marie says, ‘they are now living what it feels – a little bit though – to being rejected just because you are now someone else’s “other”’. This also indicates that Marie has experienced racism in her life, especially as living in France as a Black woman has forced her to move to the UK, and London in particular, to finally be herself: a French Beninese, a Londoner and a European. It is through her experience of moving from London to France that she could finally experience her ‘Europeanness’ in addition, and not in opposition, to her African/Beninese identity. As she says,

I feel like a citizen of the world and this all idea is to me thanks to the EU having taken off barriers, making it possible to decide wherever I want to live in Europe, and this is almost magical, this is amazing [...] what we eat, the all diversity is very much influenced by that, we don’t realise it because it has become an everyday thing.

8.1.6 Conclusion: London’s Unique Position as the Hub of the Largest EU ‘Diaspora’ Outside the EU

Through an intersectional and situated perspective, this chapter captures the emergence of a new politics of belonging, which reconfigures discursively and legally who belongs to a post-EU Britain from the perspective of EU families living in the city of London. The geopolitical earthquake produced by Brexit and its aftershocks shook the foundations on which generations of EU citizens have built their lives and their sense of belonging in the UK and London, forcing them to reconsider their migration projects and how they present themselves to others. London’s unique

position as a global hub of neoliberal globalisation and a former Empire capital produced the conditions for unparalleled socio-demographic diversification that enabled the formation of a more open, progressive and liberal idea of “Europe”, yet we have revealed how this very identity has been denied to some, particularly racialised communities and Central and Eastern Europeans (Zorko & Debnár, 2021). London is a unique, yet fragile, laboratory of a possible “Europolitanism”, a pan-European and post-national sense of belonging including different diaspora points nested in the formation of an ‘imagined EU diaspora’ (Vathi & Trandafoiu, 2022). Our analysis casts light on the significance of positionality, scale and place-based attachments in people’s perceptions and understanding of the new politics of belonging at a time of rapid and turbulent political transformation. It shows how London in acting as an enabler of a multi-scalar and more open articulation of both a different sense of belonging (and non-belonging) to the city and to Europe.

Acknowledgments Authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on the manuscript and Dr Laurence Lessard-Phillips, and Dr Rachel Humphris, Migrant Voice and The 3 Million for their contribution to data collection.

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