

# 'What have I done to deserve this?' The aftershocks of Brexit for London's EU migrants

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*For many young Europeans living and working in London, Brexit came as a huge surprise. Interviewing EU migrants before and after the referendum, **Russell King** discusses the 'affect' experienced by a generation that grew up with the promise of free movement of people in Europe and of better lives and careers in 'Euro-city' London. And in the aftershocks, European migrant hierarchies are being reconfigured.*



## 'And Then Came Brexit': reactions and experiences of young Europeans in London

Brexit was a moment of 'surprise' to many. It has now become a part of an 'affective' small-talk and conference introductions to share stories of where we were, what we were doing, and how we felt when the result of the EU referendum became clear. To those who were at the centre of the debate – EU migrants – the result was also a moment of 'rupture', with profoundly uncertain futures.

Although statistical evidence is patchy and inconsistent, all the evidence suggests that intra-European migration and mobility increased steadily and rapidly in recent years – particularly since 2004, the year of the first 'eastern' enlargement, and 2008, the year of the economic crisis. And most of the Europeans who have arrived in the UK during the last decade or more are young. Since I have been studying young European migrants for the past two years under a large-scale EU project on youth mobilities called [YMOBILITY](#), the 'young' and 'aspiring' are especially in my thoughts. As part of this project, a research team at the University of Sussex interviewed 127 young (aged 18-35) EU migrants from six countries (Irish, Italians, Spaniards, Latvians, Slovaks, Romanians) in the London area during September 2015 to May 2016, pre-Brexit. Interviews covered a wide range of themes relating to motivations, experiences and future plans. We then re-interviewed 8-10 of each of these groups in the months after the referendum.



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Our sample of interviewees was stratified in three groups: students, higher-skilled workers (university graduates) and the less-skilled (non-graduates). We interviewed a wide range of individuals – Erasmus students, PhD and postdoc researchers, City whizz-kids, 'middle-range' employees working in offices or as teachers and nurses, and

low-status manual and service personnel who are part of London's 'working poor'. They are all part of the 3.2 million EU migrants living in the UK, of whom roughly half are from the post-2004 accession countries.

## A punch in the stomach

The intra-EU and especially post-accession East-West migrations seem to be predominantly temporary and open-ended, 'legal', spontaneously generated and dominated by young adults. Despite the fact that many have had to face major challenges making ends meet in London with its high travel and accommodation costs, these young Europeans came to the UK because of the country's values and ethos of diversity, openness to various cultures, and meritocracy. The UK, in essence, was perceived as a beginning to a better life and better selves. Brexit is a major political rupture to these positive views of the UK. Hence, we wanted to know, how have these young migrants reacted to and experienced Brexit? How does it feel to be the Brexit 'target'?

When we asked our research participants, 'Did you expect the Brexit result?' most said 'No', often emphatically so – 'Absolutely not'. A very few said that they 'saw it coming' but hoped that they are wrong and that the British voters would not choose something so harmful for both 'them' – the Brits – and the immigrants. Our participants, most of whom had no voting rights (the exception were the Irish), were highly reflective and insightful about British politics, especially in the contexts of globalisation and the EU. The vote was translated very personally. The immediate reactions when the result was announced were '...shock and horror!...', like an 'earthquake', anger and profound sadness.

As one of the Italian participants put it – 'the feeling was that "You don't want us anymore"... what have I done to deserve this?' Although the Irish were able to vote, they too felt rejected and disdained by the Brexiteers:

*'I was really surprised by my response actually, by my kind of emotional response which seemed very involuntary. I was really taken aback... I kind of felt it was a victory for disconnection between people...a terrible thing. But I also felt myself kind of personally offended. I thought, "... there are actually people who don't want me to be here!"'* (Daniel, 27 years old, Irish).

## Shockwaves in migrant hierarchies

The shock of the results was deepest for the European migrants from the so-called 'old' EU countries. Eastern Europeans, like Latvians or Romanians, said they had already adjusted to the experience of unjust and unequal treatment: 'You are good as long as you work hard and cheap and you are welcome to leave and cannot equally qualify for welfare if you have problems in life'. Although most experienced very supportive, even apologetic attitudes from their British colleagues, some interviewees reported negative comments experienced by co-national friends working in other parts of the country, and one of the Italian student interviewees described being beaten up by a group of local teenagers late one night when they heard his foreign accent.

Among a few of the Italian interviewees, we saw signs of an emerging distinction between themselves as 'old EU' immigrants, and therefore 'A-class', and the 'new EU' immigrants as 'B-class' (lower-skilled Eastern Europeans) who were somehow 'responsible' for the tide of anti-EU immigrant rhetoric and political feelings around Brexit. Interestingly, it was the Irish who seemed most angry and outspoken about the implications of Brexit. At least among our interviewees, there was no sense of shared victory with the British, even though the Irish will probably have the 'privilege' of continued free mobility. Rather, they were upset by the exclusionary nature of the 'affective nationalism' atmosphere (the flags, posters, 'control our border' slogans etc); and emphasised instead their affectively 'shared migrant identity' with Europeans and other non-European immigrants increasingly seen as 'others'.

## Future plans and uncertainties

In response to the question 'Has Brexit changed your plans for the future?' most respondents said either 'No' or 'Not yet – it depends how Brexit works out'. Hence there was a lot of 'Let's wait and see' discussion around this question.

Three options, in terms of geographical strategy, are apparent in these times of uncertainty: stay put, return 'home', or move to somewhere else (either within or outside the EU). For those planning to return anyway, Brexit is largely irrelevant, except perhaps to reinforce or accelerate that decision. For those planning and/or wanting to stay, the future is rather uncertain: quite apart from the longer-term right to stay (still under discussion by the UK government), travel back home for visits is likely to be subject to more border controls. Particular challenges and uncertainties are faced by those who have spouses or partners in the UK, and even more so if they have children.

For those who are less-educated and less well-off, who are often struggling with different low-paid jobs and finding accommodation, the challenges of navigating the bureaucratic mill of proving their residence rights might be too much. Indeed, we heard reactions like this too: 'If they kick me out of England, it's not the worst thing ever, because I can go to Spain, somewhere warmer and sunnier' (Dorina, 24 years old, Romanian). But let us not be blinded by cynicism that these young EU migrants will find their way somewhere 'out of our sight'. They are an irreducible part of the UK's and Europe's history and future, and their motivations to move to a meritocratic, diverse and energetic Britain will be tainted by the 'bad atmosphere' and uncertainties of the Brexit 'rupture.'

On the other hand, there is also a strong ethos of solidarity amongst most of our interviewees, as well as a pragmatic grasp of the reality of a post-Brexit Britain that will still be, they hope, 'open for business' and will need and appreciate their work and contribution. This is precisely where our future studies need to be directed.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*

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