

Eastern European Young People's Feelings of Belonging: Any place in Brexit Britain?

Research and Policy Briefing No.2

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What this Briefing is about and why we have produced it

Here to Stay? is a research project which explores the lives of young people who arrived in the UK as migrant children from Eastern Europe (EE). It focuses on young people (aged 12-18) who migrated after EU enlargement in 2004 and have lived in the UK for at least 3 years.

The project explores how migration and current immigration policies are impacting their lives, how satisfied they are with local services, the quality of their relationships, and their feelings of identity and belonging in the UK.

The project is important because it presents the first analysis since the Brexit Referendum of how current plans for Britain to leave the European Union are impacting on young Eastern Europeans' lives.

We have gathered the opinions and experiences of over 1,100 young people on a range of issues: their feelings of national and local belonging, their participation in communities, their access to services, their experiences of racism and exclusion, their experiences of education, their relationships, well-being and plans for future now that the UK is planning to leave the EU.

These Briefings aim to inform a wide range of audiences on the experiences of young Eastern Europeans living in contemporary Britain.

The Briefings should also help local authorities and other organisations develop policies and improve services for young people, taking into account their needs and experiences.

Introducing the authors and how we produced the evidence for this Briefing

Here to Stay? is a project carried out by researchers from the Universities of Strathclyde, Plymouth and Durham. The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

We consulted Eastern European young people living across the UK, in urban and rural areas, using a range of research methods. We also work with a group of Young Advisors who give us their thoughts on how best to carry out the study.

To get a UK-wide picture, we asked young Eastern Europeans (who had lived in the UK for 3+ years) to complete an online survey. This was advertised through schools, youth clubs and social media, and over 1100 young people took the survey.

We then talked to 20 groups of young people in schools and youth clubs across Scotland and England. We asked them about their everyday lives, places they go to, things they do and can't do, and how they feel about living in the UK.

We also talked to people who work in organisations that engage with Eastern European young people living in the UK, such as schools, youth clubs and health centres.

Our next step is to speak to some more young people and their families about their life in the UK to allow them to share their individual experiences in more depth.

Findings in this Briefing are mainly based on the analysis of the survey data. More Briefings will be released as the research develops.

Many young Eastern Europeans feel that they belong in the UK

Young Europeans living in the UK are likely to be impacted considerably by the decision for Britain to leave the European Union. Some of these impacts are already manifest, such as the rise in applications for British citizenship from EU citizens and the recorded increase in out-migration of EU citizens since the Brexit Referendum¹. However, the majority of young people in our survey (62.6%) felt that they belonged in the UK, and this feeling of belonging appeared to become stronger the longer young people had lived here.

29.4% of young people who participated in our survey said they 'definitely' felt that they belonged in the UK, and 33.2% said that they felt they belonged 'most of the time'. Only 3.9% of survey respondents said that they 'definitely did not' feel that they belonged in the UK. Slightly more males felt that they 'definitely' belonged to the UK (31.5%) compared to females (28%), but these results were not statistically significant.

¹See ONS (2017) Migration since the Brexit vote: what's changed in six charts. Available at: <https://visual.ons.gov.uk/migration-since-the-brexit-vote-whats-changed-in-six-charts/>

Box 1. Profile of survey respondents

- The survey took place between October 2016 and April 2017. In total, 1120 young people completed the survey, with 806 full completions.
- Overall, the survey attracted mainly young people aged 16-18 (67.7%), while 32.3% of respondents were aged 12-15. There were more female respondents (60.1%) than male (37.5%). The vast majority of respondents identified as White (96.7%). The majority said they were Christian (58.9%), while over a third (36.8%) identified as non-religious/atheist.
- Over half of the respondents were Polish (56%), followed by Romanian (10.4%) and Lithuanian (9.1%) nationals. The other 25% of our respondents were originally born in other EU and non-EU countries to Eastern European parents.
- Most respondents lived in England (71.4%) and some in Scotland (18.6%), while 10% did not give their location.
- Over a third said they had lived in the UK for 10 or more years.
- Sample criteria: Please note that this was a convenience sample, recruited through schools, youth clubs and social media. Our data is not generalisable to the whole population. The data could not be weighted due to the absence of existing reliable data on young EU nationals in the UK.

Figure 1. Young people's feelings of belonging in the UK (n=947)



Our survey found that many young people who moved to Britain from EE countries during childhood developed a feeling of national belonging to the UK that may be disrupted by Brexit. Young people are unsure whether they will be able to continue living in Britain and 84.2% did not feel hopeful about the Britain's decision to leave the EU.

Young people who said that their school was supportive of EE-born young people were more likely to feel a sense of belonging to the UK. We also found that those who said that their school was supportive were more likely to want to be living in the UK in 2020. Overall, a stronger feeling of belonging to the UK was associated with young people having higher levels of satisfaction with their lives in the UK.

Eastern Europeans living in Britain have a strong sense of European identity

92.4% of the young people who answered the question on European identity stated that they felt European. They felt a strong sense of connection and belonging to Europe, with many saying that a European identity will always be part of who they are and how they see their place in the world.

64.9% of young people said that they felt European and also had a sense of belonging to the UK. This shows that it is possible for young people to develop feelings of belonging to the UK at the same time as having a sense of European identity.

Many of the young people travel frequently to their birth countries to see relatives and friends. For example, in the year prior to taking the survey, 77.9% of young people had visited their country of birth at least once, while 36.7% having visited a few times. However, 1 in 5 said that they had not visited their country of birth in the year prior to the survey.

'I was once talking about Brexit with my lecturer. He said I was lucky because you can't tell I'm Polish by the way I speak. I don't want to stay in the country in which I need to hide my nationality to be treated equally.' (Kolin, male, 17, Poland)

'I feel very connected to Europe and European culture. There has been some concern regarding whether I want to stay in this country in the future due to the political changes happening in the UK. I am considering moving to the EU after finishing university, despite the fact I enjoy living in this country.' (Marco, male, 18, Latvia)

'I feel like I belong in the UK, however I am fearful of what will happen now. I'm scared for my future and how the referendum will affect me.' (Rosa, female, 17, Poland)

'I feel like a European more than anything. The Brexit referendum has me severely worried for the future of this country, its people and foreigners living here.' (Janek, male, 16, Czech Republic)

'I don't feel as much as a part of England after Brexit as I'm uncertain of the future. However, I don't feel as a part of Lithuania and I couldn't go back there.' (Anka, female, 14, Lithuania)

'I feel like England is a country I belong in, the identity I created here is something I don't want to change.' (Rachel*, female, 15, Lithuania)

'Although the EU referendum has made the futures of many European migrants uncertain, I love this country and will do anything in my power to stay here as it is my home.' (Kasia, female, 15, Poland)

'I very much feel like a part of the UK, which is why Brexit makes me sad. They're cutting away from the EU, so people who move here after Brexit will feel like they don't belong or are intruding, and no one should feel that way.' (Lucie, female, 16, Poland)

Eastern European young people's feelings of local and national belonging have been impacted by Brexit

When asked about a sense of belonging to their local neighbourhood, 43% said that they 'always' or 'mostly' feel that they belonged in the neighbourhood where they lived. At the same time, 27.2% said that they 'sometimes feel like they belong and sometimes feel that they don't belong', while 22% said that they not have a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood.

This suggests that developing a sense of local belonging has been challenging for some of the young people, perhaps more so than developing a feeling of national belonging to Britain. However, some of the young people commented that they had experienced increased racism in their neighbourhoods since the Brexit Referendum and this had changed the way they felt about their neighbourhood.

Eastern European young people who experience racism are less likely to feel a sense of belonging to Britain and their neighbourhoods

The majority of young people who participated in our survey said they had experienced racism because of their nationality, accent, colour of their skin or appearance (77.8%). Almost 1 in 5 (18.7%) said that they experience racism 'very often' or 'often'. Since the EU Referendum, 49.3% said that they had seen more racism, 23.6% said they had seen about the same amount of racism, 4.7% had seen less racism and 22.5% could not say or have seen less.

Young people who had experienced racism and xenophobia were less likely to feel a sense of belonging to the UK. Similarly, young people who had experienced racism were less likely to feel a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood. For some young people, this is because racist incidents have occurred in their schools and the neighbourhoods in which they live.

Young people also commented that the result of the Brexit Referendum had altered their feelings about their neighbourhoods because of hostility towards immigrants being expressed openly by people they knew.

About the Here to Stay? Project

Here to Stay? Identity, belonging and citizenship among Eastern European settled children and young people in the UK (a decade after EU enlargement) is a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/M011038/1, 2016-2018). You can read more about the project at: www.migrantyouth.org

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'School, streets, bars... incidents of being called a prostitute based on my background, being told to go back to my own country, a couple of more severe incidents included having rocks thrown at me and me being chased down the street by a group of teenage boys.' (Oksana, 18, female, Poland)

'I moved here when I was six years old, and even though I speak English with a British accent as a result of using it for over 11 years, when people find out I am Polish, I often face racism and discrimination. I find that I belong as long as no one finds out my nationality.' (Artur, male, 17, Poland)

Many young Eastern Europeans feel a strong sense of belonging to online networks

Our survey shows that online social networks are an important part of young Eastern Europeans' everyday lives in Britain. Out of 827 respondents, 43.2% said that they spent three hours or more each day using online social networks, 22.2% said they spent up to three hours, 21.0% said up to two hours, 9.7% said 30 minutes to an hour, 3.9% said less than 30 minutes. The most popular social networks were Facebook (71.5%), Messenger (66.8%), Instagram (60.7%) and SnapChat (60.4%).

When we asked young people how strongly they felt they belonged to their online social networks, 23.0% said that they felt that they belonged to them 'very much' or 'quite a bit' (34.0%), while 20.2% said they feel they belonged to online sites 'sometimes'. Only 1 in 5 young people said they did not feel they belonged to online networks. Despite a strong sense of belonging to online groups, young people expressed the strongest feelings of belonging to their families (62.6% felt very much part of their family) and their offline friends (47.2% felt very much part of their friendship group).

Key findings

The main issues to emerge from the research are:

- EE-born young people often feel a strong sense of belonging to the UK. This sense of national belonging appears to become stronger the longer young people have lived in the UK. However, many young people feel that their senses of belonging to Britain, and their future life plans, are more uncertain because of Brexit.
- Young Eastern Europeans are developing feelings of national belonging to the UK at the same time as having a strong sense of European identity. However, their feelings of local and national belonging have been impacted by Brexit and many have experienced increased levels of racism and xenophobia in their neighbourhoods.
- If a young person feels that their school is supportive of Eastern European pupils, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging to the UK and also feel that they have a higher likelihood of still living in the UK in 2020.
- Young Eastern Europeans who experience racism and xenophobia are less likely to feel a strong sense of belonging to Britain and their local neighbourhood. Experiencing racism also lowers young people's feelings of satisfaction with their life in the UK.
- Many young Eastern Europeans spend a lot of time on online social networks, which can be important sites of belonging. They also express strong feelings of belonging to their families and offline friendship groups.

Policy and service recommendations

Based on the survey findings, we are making the following recommendations to local authorities and organisations working with young people originally from Eastern Europe. We hope these recommendations will ensure that young people can benefit from services and policies which support them throughout the Brexit transition.

- Young Eastern Europeans are actively considering their future life plans because of the social, economic and legal uncertainties associated with Brexit. We believe they should be fully involved in any consultations at local, regional and national level, to ensure their experiences and needs shape policy and practice.
- Organisations working with Eastern European nationals should ensure that young people and their families can access up-to-date information on decisions made in relation to the post-Brexit situation and their status. Currently, young people are unsure of their rights and where to find information.
- All agencies who work with young people need to be aware of the increased levels of racism that many young Eastern Europeans are facing in their neighbourhoods and schools, and work together to combat the negative impacts of racism on young people's feelings of national and local belonging.
- Organisations working with Eastern European young people should consider providing young people and their families with emotional support during the Brexit transition. Young people will need support in making decisions about their future, which may include out-migration.
- Fostering supportive school environments is very important for EE young people's feelings of national and local belonging, and their overall wellbeing. Schools need to ensure that staff recognise the multiple uncertainties young people and their families are facing due to Brexit, and put measures in place to support them in their decision-making over their futures.
- Many young Eastern Europeans spend a lot of time using online social networks. Organisations and services should consider providing information and support relating to Brexit to young people through online social networks.