

Brexit uncertainty: different groups of migrants had similar experiences of and responses to uncertainty



Kelly Hall and Jenny Phillimore draw on 55 qualitative interviews to explore how three groups of EU migrants, entrepreneurs, Somali onward migrants and British retirees in Spain, respond to Brexit-related uncertainty.

Brexit has undoubtedly created a huge amount of anxiety and uncertainty for EU migrants, with their rights to reside, run a business or access welfare placed under threat. Brexit uncertainty effects approximately three million EU nationals living in the UK and a million British nationals permanently residing in other [EU countries](#). After a series of delays, the UK formally left the EU on 31 January 2020, entering a new 'transition' phase where negotiations are ongoing and issues are left unresolved. During this period, little has changed in relation to the rights of EU migrants and the [Withdrawal Agreement](#) that came into force on 1 February 2020 has now set out EU citizen's rights once the transition period ends. However, the future for EU migrants remains uncertain as they are forced to contemplate everyday activities and rights formerly taken for granted, creating new vulnerabilities and social risks as individuals and families experience a sense of life suspended. Living within a 'new normal of uncertainty' has generated long-term physical and psychological consequences, made all the more difficult with the COVID-19 pandemic that hit just weeks after the UK's departure from the EU.

Our [recently published research](#) explores how Brexit uncertainty has impacted on the lives of three different groups of migrants: EU entrepreneurs from Poland, Latvia and Lithuania who were living and running businesses in the UK; Somali EU migrants who had resettled in the UK after obtaining refugee status in mainland Europe; and British retirees living in Spain. We found that despite their different migration journeys and socio-cultural backgrounds, their experiences of and responses to uncertainty were similar in many ways.

Brexit stress and anxiety

EU migrants spoke of their personal anxiety about Brexit, which was often connected to a loss of control and changing sense of identity. This was particularly prominent amongst the British in Spain, who felt an immense loss of their identity as EU citizens. For the EU migrants living in the UK, Brexit created a sense of rejection and a loss of familiarity with, and trust in, the communities within which they had previously felt fully embedded. Migrants used a variety of tactics to try to regain some control and (re)instil some certainty in their lives that included turning to local friends, neighbours and associations for emotional support and reassurance but also to develop contingency plans involving friends and family in mainland Europe. Collective responses to Brexit also included the organising of anti-Brexit campaigns and marches.

Financial security and welfare

Uncertainty also centred on concerns around the potential for more tangible losses, including the loss of legal rights to reside and to access welfare. The British retirees in Spain were concerned about their ongoing access to health services and the EU Somali migrants about their loss of housing benefits and rights to access university as domestic students. A drop in the value of the pound since the referendum left the British retirees, most of whom depended on a British pension, with a lower income. Similarly, the entrepreneurs worried about the future sustainability of their businesses, with some experiencing losses due to exchange rate fluctuations and lost trade and fearing an exacerbation of these losses as Brexit proceeded. Those with access to financial resources were better able to cope with uncertainty, whilst individuals reliant on welfare were most likely to feel the negative effects of uncertainty, as they often lacked the economic resources to return or onward migrate if they could no longer access vital services like healthcare.

To stay or go?

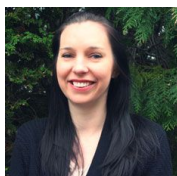
The vast majority of migrants intended to remain where they were living and few spoke about returning to their home country or moving elsewhere. Most adopted a 'wait and see' approach and would only return or relocate if their Brexit fears were realised and they were no longer able to access the services they needed. The entrepreneurs with successful businesses were the most likely to speak about relocating their business to another EU country after Brexit, especially where that business was online, and some even saw Brexit as an opportunity to 'try something new' through expansion or relocation. Others viewed Brexit as a positive opportunity to enact permanent residency or citizenship and cement their sense of home. The Withdrawal Agreement instilled at least some sense of certainty going forward and is forcing many to make a decision about where they want to live on a permanent basis. The more mobile EU migrants who used their EU citizenship to move between countries such as the British retirees living between the UK and Spain and the EU business owners who operate their businesses across the EU, now need to decide where they want to remain in the long term.

What happens now?

As we end near the end of the transition period, EU migrants should at least have a greater sense of what comes next than they did when we undertook our research. EU Somali migrants may be able to remain in the UK and retain access welfare, but their family members living in other EU countries may not be able to join them at a later date. British retirees already resident in Spain or other EU countries can continue to access healthcare and other welfare provision for as long as they remain resident in that country, but those not formally resident are likely to face difficulties. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of state safety nets and the need for everyone to access healthcare, welfare and business support during times of crisis. Lockdowns and travel bans have further illustrated how the loss of mobility could separate families and negatively impact on businesses. Thus, pandemic conditions may further exacerbate Brexit uncertainty for EU migrants leaving them worried about their future and unable to get on with their lives.

Note: the above draws on the [authors' published work](#) (with Aleksandra Grzymala-Kazlowska, Natalia Vershinina, Özlem Ögtem-Young & Catherine Harris) in the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.

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