

First bargaining chips, now stocktaking: the plan to register EU citizens

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*EU citizens living in the UK will reportedly be asked to register in ‘a first step towards regularising’ their legal status post-Brexit. But the purpose of this move is unclear, writes **Tanja Buelmann**. It comes after a year of uncertainty during which many EU citizens, concerned about their future in the UK, have decided to leave. And it offers no clarification on whether the rights they currently enjoy – such as pensions and access to the NHS – will continue after March 2019.*



EU nationals in the UK have been asking the government to take action to guarantee our status and rights for nearly a year. We want to resolve the (by now pretty unbearable) limbo we find ourselves in (as do Britons in other EU countries). So in that sense a movement forward is welcome. I also fully appreciate that there will have to be some process and documentation. However – and while we will need to wait for the government’s full proposal to establish what exactly the plan is – the [Guardian’s report](#) raises a number of very troubling questions.

First and foremost I am concerned about **the purpose of the registration process**. The Guardian report refers to this as a ‘stocktaking exercise’—an unfortunate and ill-judged choice of terminology and hopefully not one used in the actual government proposal. Reportedly, the idea is that all EU citizens would be invited to “register their interest” in acquiring documentation allowing them to live and work’ in the UK after Brexit in 2019. Is it not an established fact that we are, of course, all interested in this? Campaigns like [The Three Million](#) have made this abundantly clear for a long time, have been lobbying the government and set out ways forward. So of course the idea of registering is not to establish our interest, nor the potential volume of applications. The purpose of registration undoubtedly relates to one simple fact: that the UK government does not actually know who we are and cannot identify us. Admitting that fact, unsurprisingly, gave the anti-EU and anti-migrant press a [field day](#).



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So what we are looking at here, then, is a case of the UK government passing the buck and **putting the onus on EU nationals to identify ourselves**. As a German — Germany has ID cards — I have no general problem with

registering, but in the context of just registering EU nationals, and with a lack of clarity, this is much more problematic. In any case, surely a combination of records could achieve a form of automatic registration, certainly for the majority of EU nationals in the UK. But apparently not – so let's introduce yet another hoop for EU nationals to jump through instead.

What troubles me most in relation to this is that it is a **change in position**. In September 2016 the then immigration minister Robert Goodwill, answering questions by Labour's Chuka Umunna at a meeting of the Home Affairs Select Committee, confirmed that the government is 'not in a position [to identify every EU citizen]'. Critically, he also added that the government 'have made it clear also that there is no need for anyone to get additional documentation to prove that [the right to stay etc]', concluding that 'I find it difficult to see a circumstance in which we would want to be in that situation' (link to full [transcript](#)). Well, not all that difficult, apparently. Read within the context of these remarks, the registration proposal, if delivered as reported, is yet another punch in the face — yes, let's call it that as that is exactly what it feels like to me, and I am sure many other EU nationals in the UK, each time there is another twist in the tale – an assurance by a government minister broken within a few months. But I suppose I ought to appreciate what a problem this is for the UK, right? After all, what a real '[bureaucratic nightmare](#)' it is.

But the question of the true purpose of the move remains. Why would EU nationals wish to register for something if it is just to gauge our numbers, rather than as part of the actual process to secure status? The full proposal may yet offer more details, but I am not sure it will – after all, the government has already had nearly a year to establish this. We must not end up in a situation where a useless extra layer of bureaucracy complicates the situation even further. Additionally, many EU nationals in the UK – probably the majority – simply do not trust the government.

Let's not forget the critical problem: while the line since 24 June 2016 has been that the intention is to guarantee our rights, every single opportunity to do so before the triggering of article 50 was not taken. We were made bargaining chips instead, and the EU, Germany in particular, was blamed for failing to play ball. What is rarely reported in the UK press is that the issue was not citizens' rights, but the fact that Theresa May sought to tie them up with trade talks and other issues. So I want to be clear: **it has been the UK government, and the UK government only, that made citizens' rights an issue**. That fact alone would make any new proposal that is not a straightforward recognition of our rights another low point.

What is particularly irritating is that if the government really does need us to register, why was that not started last year? Why leave us in limbo for this length of time? Why create a situation in which we become bargaining chips? Why cause further anxiety for many by automated processes such as sending out letters [asking EU nationals to prepare to leave](#) the UK? It may be poor planning, it may be ineptitude. But it may also be quite deliberate. After all, thanks to all this uncertainty and the hostile climate, a significant number of EU nationals have already decided to [leave the UK](#) or are not coming anymore in the first place. That reduction may well be welcomed by the government, given it will go some way towards May's immigration target.

Finally, it is also a concern to see – at least in the Guardian article – only a reference to the right to live and work in the UK after 2019. Of course that is critically important, but **we now hold a range of other rights, from pensions to NHS access. What about those?** Furthermore, these rights are ones that Britons in the EU also enjoy reciprocally. So if the UK government were to go ahead and restrict the rights of EU nationals in the UK, there will be a wider implication. Given David Davis's recent comment that he considers EU proposals about citizen rights make '[ridiculously high](#)' demands, I won't hold my breath. What we are asking for is nothing more than the maintenance of the status quo. This is not 'ridiculously high' – nor is it, as I was told recently, 'claiming privilege'. I, like millions of EU nationals, came here because we were invited to come and work here. We made life choices and came in good faith. Surely that should long since have been recognised.

I would be delighted if my concerns prove unfounded. So far in Brexit Britain they never have been. In any case, the idea of selectively registering particular groups of people does not sit well with me as a German. Nor does the fact that the EU's position on the rights of EU citizens has been clear for a long time. On Monday, best duck and cover.

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

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| [*Abused in the street, invited to a Brexit BBQ: the limbo of being German in the UK*](#)

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