GRAND CHALLENGE OF JUSTICE AND EQUALITY &
MIGRANTS’ RIGHTS NETWORK MOBILE EU CITIZENS PROJECT

EU CITIZENS IN THE UK: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION
IN LIGHT OF BREXIT - REPORT

The Brexit negotiations have raised a series of questions about the political and social rights of EU citizens in the UK.

This round table, which took place on Tuesday 21 November 2017 at UCL, was organised by the UCL Grand Challenge of Justice and Equality in collaboration with the Migrants' Rights Network Mobile EU Citizens Project

Introduction and background
The UCL Grand Challenge of Justice and Equality (GCJE), in collaboration with Migrants’ Rights Network Mobile EU Citizens Project, organised a roundtable on Tuesday 21 November 2017 to discuss key issues related to the political participation of EU nationals in the post-Brexit context.

The roundtable was chaired by Professor Colm O’Cinneide, Co-Chair of GCJE. Dr Mette Berg from UCL’s Thomas Coram Research Unit and Mr Alan Anstead, UKREN Project Coordinator at the Migrants’ Rights Network provided an introduction and welcome to the event.

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Speakers were:

1. **Ms Fizza Qureshi**, Director of the Migrants’ Rights Network, who spoke about EU nationals’ role in the wider migrants’ rights movement in the UK;
2. **Dr Nando Sigona**, Deputy Director of the Institute of Research into Superdiversity at the University of Birmingham, who spoke about his academic research into European families and children living in the UK;
3. **Ms Inga Lockington**, Liberal Democrat Councillor on Ipswich Borough Council and Suffolk County Council, who spoke about her personal experiences as an EU national living in the UK and her political participation as a local councillor and mayor;
4. **Mr Niccolò Milanese**, Director of European Alternatives, who spoke about his personal experiences as an Italian/British national and the imperative need for further political engagement by EU nationals.

The discussion focused on the contribution of EU citizens to politics and civil society in the UK, and methods for EU citizens to retain their political, social, and economic rights after the UK exits the European Union.

In his introductory remarks, Alan Anstead of MRN noted that the Mobile EU Citizens Project runs a website with information for EU nationals, including a self-assessment tool on possible avenues to remain in the UK.

**Presentations**

**Fizza Qureshi, Migrants’ Rights Network**

Ms. Qureshi spoke on the need to contextualize EU nationals’ fears about their immigration options post-Brexit with the general anti-migrant environment in the UK. She discussed how the anti-migrant environment fuelled by tabloid media rhetoric has racialized EU nationals in the UK, but social institutions are not taking these issues seriously because EU nationals who are white are perceived to have more privilege.

Ms. Qureshi also discussed the relatively low levels of political engagement among EU nationals in the past, and noted that this has often been due to language barriers or unfamiliarity with the complex UK political system. She noted that the current proposal for settled status for EU nationals in the Brexit negotiations involves a significant loss of rights including family reunification rights.

There are also several important issues with regards to EU nationals’ participation in the UK labour market. Important sectors in the UK such as agriculture, hospitality & healthcare depend on EU national workers. There are already staffing concerns within the NHS as EU nationals are leaving their jobs over uncertainty about whether they will be able to remain in the UK. In terms of EU nationals who want to enter the UK in the future, they will likely be treated the same as third country nationals, which means scrutiny under the points system

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including meeting financial thresholds. Many EU nationals are currently working in so-called ‘low-skilled’ jobs – which Ms. Qureshi noted are not actually low-skilled but more aptly described as low-wage – and this conception of ‘low-skilled’ undermines the skills required in those sectors, e.g. the care sector, and insults the people performing that work.

Ms. Qureshi mentioned that there was a recent parliamentary group on Brexit & Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) where care workers spoke about how describing their jobs as ‘low-skilled’ was insulting because care work is incredibly skilled and requires lots of training, but this is not recognised by the current immigration system which categorizes them as ‘low-skilled’ or ‘unskilled.’ Assessment of EU nationals for labour purposes going forward will likely be on a points-based system which will assess English level and income threshold and not much beyond that – so this will significantly affect who can enter the care sector in the UK.

Of course, the future of EU nationals will depend on the rights secured in the Brexit negotiations. If they are permitted to remain under a special treaty Britain negotiates with the EU, then we can assume that hopefully the same rights will still apply, or perhaps even better rights can be achieved, for example voting rights. But, if EU nationals are treated like third country nationals, they will be exposed to the government’s ‘hostile environment’ policy. They’ll be subjected to the same dysfunctional system that operates for other migrants in the Home Office, which makes mistakes, changes immigration laws at whim, and has significant impact on people’s lives in the UK.

The government’s ‘hostile environment’ policy has existed for many years for third country nationals and is already affecting EU nationals. The Home Office statistics for the year ending in June 2017 show that the countries with most forced returns are Romania, Albania, and Poland, and other third countries are further down the list.

Ms. Qureshi expressed concern about marginalized EU nationals who will fall outside of whatever proposal the UK government puts forward, especially carers, the disabled, Roma, and people possibly forced into an undocumented position. Right now the government’s plan is to only offer settled status for those deemed to be lawfully resident for the last five years. There is a big concern over what ‘lawful’ means – at the moment it means that if you are unemployed or sleeping rough you do not have lawful status because you are seen as ‘abusing treaty rights’ and are therefore deportable. So it is unclear how people who work in sectors where they don’t have contracts to prove employment or don’t work enough hours to meet a minimum threshold will prove that they are working.
Ms. Qureshi concluded by urging a ‘levelling up’ of everyone’s rights, including EU nationals, and condemned the current two-tiered system where one group’s rights are held above another’s.

**Nando Sigona, University of Birmingham**

Dr Sigona presented on his research project, which aims to map the impact of Brexit on European families and their children. His project attempts to track the effects of 44 years of the UK’s EU membership in terms of the demographics of society in the UK, and the complex disentangling involved in withdrawing from the EU. The project seeks to understand the practical and emotional significance of Brexit, and the politics of belonging in the context of Brexit, where someone who has perhaps considered themselves both British and European now has to renegotiate their identity. The project’s goals include providing a profile of where EU nationals in the UK live, and how this population has changed over time according to census data. The project specifically addresses so-called ‘Eurochildren’ – children who have at least one EU national parent but who have grown up primarily in the UK.

Dr Sigona further addressed several areas of interest in his research. One area of interest are UK-born EU nationals who do not have a British passport but who are often not counted in censuses in their home countries. Another area of interest is the geographic distribution within the UK of different EU nationals – e.g. EU14 (Western European) nationals, EU8 (Eastern European) nationals, and EU2 (Romanian and Bulgarian nationals). For example, Dr Sigona displayed a chart showing how the EU14 population is much higher in places like Manchester, whereas the EU8 population is higher in Leeds and Birmingham.

The project also examines distribution within London boroughs, where there are considerable differences between different boroughs. An additional area of interest is the different configurations of European couples – whether they be European and British, European and European, or European and third-country national. Dr Sigona’s data showed that couples with two European partners are the most common, but there are also sizeable numbers of mixed European-non-European couples. This research is important because it demonstrates the different options people face to respond to Brexit: for example, a couple where both partners are Polish could return to Poland, but if the couple is Spanish and Romanian and their common language is English, returning to a European country presents unique challenges.

Unsurprisingly, Home Office data on applications for permanent residency show huge recent increases. Data disaggregated into fiscal quarters shows that applications dropped after there was media coverage that permanent residency would not have any value after Brexit. Subsequently, applications for citizenship increased. In terms of naturalisation, since

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2007 the number of naturalisation applications coming from EU nationals jumped from 5% to 30% of the total. As Dr Sigona noted, the ones who felt most secure and almost untouchable, i.e. citizens from EU14 countries, in the UK are now the people most seriously considering naturalisation.

Dr Sigona concluded by reiterating that his project is meant to address the legacy of 44 years of UK membership in the EU and how that has changed and affected families living here. He remarked that it was important to talk about ‘hybridity’ in the context of EU nationals, e.g. mixed couples, in order to challenge the assumption that EU nationals are unsettled or do not have close ties to the UK. In particular, the work on UK-born children helps expose the legacy of the UK’s time of Europeanness and how the changing political environment is already impacting children.

**Inga Lockington, Liberal Democrat councillor**
Ms. Lockington spoke about her personal history at length, detailing her immigration to the UK from Denmark to marry her English husband and her history of political engagement as a local councillor and former mayor of Ipswich.

Ms. Lockington discussed how she became involved in local politics because she was eager to integrate into life in the UK. She was a school governor and sat on the community health council in Sutton. When her family moved to Ipswich in 1995 she joined a local housing co-op, and then in 1997 when EU nationals gained permission to stand in local elections she stood and was elected as a local councillor for the first time in 1999. Ms. Lockington described how she defeated the sitting Conservative councillor in an election for the local county council in 2001 and how she negotiated working with different political parties at the local level.

Ms. Lockington concluded her remarks by emphasising how close the issue of EU nationals in the UK remains to her family, referring to her grown sons’ relationships with EU nationals. She described having an indefinite leave to remain stamp put in to her Danish passport many decades ago, and recently being told that it was now worthless. She noted how the NHS and the care sector rely heavily on EU nationals and lamented Brexit.

**Nicolò Milanese, European Alternatives**
Like Ms. Lockington, Mr. Milanese began by relating his personal history as the child of British and Italian parents, whose Italian grandparents migrated in the aftermath of the Second World War to work and help rebuild Europe.

Mr. Milanese pointed to the autobiography of Jean Monnet as an important reference point for the discussion of EU nationals and Brexit, as Monnet wrote about his attempts to form a

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Franco-British union in 1940 as a precursor to the EU. Mr. Milanese remarked that the current situation and support for Brexit was a reworking of historical memory that must be combated. Mr. Milanese suggested that discussing and reading alternative histories is one of the best ways to combat anti-migrant sentiment.

Mr. Milanese also brought up the 1918 UK Representation of the Peoples Act which extended the voting franchise to almost all men over 21 and property-holding women. He said he hoped that the full franchise would one day be extended to EU nationals. Mr. Milanese also emphasised that the history of the Labour Party as well as local workingmen’s clubs in the UK indicated that there were previously efficient labour tools for political organising that should be revisited. He advised that the Labour Party should do more to re-establish similar spaces for political organisation and debate, as well as revive the tradition of labour internationalism across the EU. One potential positive aspect of Brexit may be increased solidarity between EU nationals and third country nationals around political and civic rights.

**Audience – panel discussions**

As there were many EU nationals in the audience, there were several comments that included details of personal and family immigration histories which do not seem appropriate to include in a public report.

A member of the audience commented that he wished there was a pro-Brexit representative on the panel and that it was unfortunate that nobody from the government could attend. He noted that the government often used a ‘divide and conquer’ approach, referring to people from the former Commonwealth voting for Brexit. Ms. Qureshi responded by noting that the political strategy of ‘divide and conquer’ is not unique to the UK and urged people to mobilize around a wider movement for migrants’ rights. There was a Promote the Migrant Vote campaign before the previous general election which simply encouraged people to register to vote. Ms. Qureshi also emphasised the value of local elections in making real changes in communities.

A member of the audience who identified herself as from the group New Europeans commented that there was a need for a strategic approach for critical engagement of European citizens. She urged European citizens to vote in the elections they were eligible for, since there are often small margins of victory in local races. She further noted that the small vote margin in the Scottish referendum could have been influenced by the fact that Europeans were allowed to vote in that election.

Mr. Milanese responded and noted that it was very important for EU nationals to vote in all elections they are eligible for up until Britain’s exit, and if their votes are taken away by the

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Brexit deal, they should challenge it at the European Court of Justice. A legal challenge may also have the effect of delaying the loss of franchise rights. Mr. Milanese also noted how taking away acquired rights is a very rare and possibly illegal practice in international law.

Several EU nationals brought up the issue of political participation through citizenship and several panellists responded. Dr Sigona addressed the practice of ‘defensive citizenship,’ i.e. EU nationals applying for citizenship after the Brexit referendum to protect their residency rights. He noted that ‘defensive citizenship’ challenges some of the assumptions society has about assuming that someone is integrated after they acquire citizenship, as there are people who are fully integrated who have previously had no need to apply for citizenship.

More severe issues arise when this affects children, and in the course of his research, mental health issues for children who have uncertain status had emerged. Ms. Qureshi further noted that citizenship is not always an assured status, as naturalised citizens can still have their citizenship taken away, an increasingly common practice in the UK. She urged EU nationals to engage politically to assure protection in addition to turning to citizenship applications for legal security.

Another question brought up the issue of British citizens applying for European passports. Dr Sigona replied that there were some academic researchers looking into this practice, but noted that many people assume that if you get the passport, you solve the issue of no longer being European. However, close family members may still only be able to have one passport, which will still have an impact on people who manage to get two passports. Many people have built their family lives around an assumption that Britain will stay European and now the ‘goal post’ has moved, which can’t be solved by getting another passport.

An audience member made a point about not demonizing people who voted for Brexit and that there were many different reasons why people voted to leave the EU. Several panellists responded by saying that people who voted for Brexit should not be attacked, but those who manipulated their votes should be called out and mobilized against.

Professor O’Cinneide closed by addressing several legal issues around Brexit. He emphasised that this is the beginning of the process for EU nationals living in the UK and there are likely going to be political and legal contestations of whatever deal the UK secures to exit the EU. Foreign governments like the Irish and French governments will also be involved because it affects so many of their citizens, and there are so many people who identify only as Irish citizens who live in Northern Ireland.

There will also be political opposition to including European nationals in referenda, despite the Scottish referendum’s extension of the franchise to that group. Professor O’Cinneide

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noted that politicians will always have a concern about European citizens’ partisan choices, as well as assumptions about where they lie, that will affect how they engage on EU nationals’ political participation.

**Useful links**
Migrants’ Rights Network: [https://migrantsrights.org.uk/](https://migrantsrights.org.uk/)


European Alternatives: [https://euroalter.com/](https://euroalter.com/)

Research project on ‘EU families and ‘Eurochildren’ in Brexiting Britain’: [https://eurochildren.info/](https://eurochildren.info/)

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