Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast
Episode 7: ABOUT EU NATIONALS IN THE UK AND BREXIT

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About the episode

In this episode, Michaela invites Dr. Nando Sigona, the project lead for EU families and Eurochildren in Brexiting Britain, onto the podcast to talk about the issues that Brexit raises for EU27 citizens and their families living in the United Kingdom. As he highlights, beyond the headlines about citizens’ rights and the legal status of these families, Brexit marks changes to the politics of belonging that are deeply felt. Just as for the British nationals living and working in the EU27, the loss of European identity is a source of grief and bereavement, and the uncertainties about what Brexit will mean for their futures.


Transcript

MB Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. My name is Michaela Benson. Today I’m going to be talking to Nando Sigona from the University of Birmingham about his research on EU families and Euro children in the UK. So Nando I first wanted to talk about the way in which the EU nationals seem to be featuring in the discussions around Brexit in the media but also in politics, and I think that it’s fair to say that this idea that there are three million EU nationals living in the UK is quite prominent, and one of the big disputes has been around the idea of them being used as bargaining chips. But these are just the headlines aren’t they?

NS Yes certainly. The status of the EU nationals in UK is one of the three priorities set by the European commissions at the start of the Brexit talks. This means that in order for the talks to move on, the negotiation to move on the status of the European citizen, both in the UK and the Brits in Europe has to be solved. This is why we have heard quite a lot about the status, their status in the last few days. The problem is that the starting point of
the European Union and the British government are quite significantly different, and at the moment we still try to find out if they are reconcilable. What happened in all this is that the legal status, the uncertainty of legal status also become an uncertainty about everyday life, and [substantial – 1.33] uncertainty, and it’s very much felt by the EU nationals in Britain at the moment, you just need to look through the debate and discussion, and the online forums to really see how much this precariousness and uncertainty about their future and their children’s future is causing distress, anxieties and also pushing some people to actually leave the UK.

MB So that’s the starting point for your project isn’t it, looking at these families, at the children of these families as well?

NS The starting point for us was very much the idea of looking at people not as individuals but within their family units, also because very often migration decision making is not an individual decision, but is made in the broader network of families, close families and large families, and very often people refer to the future of the children as the motivation for taking or not take a specific option about the future. So what we are trying to do is really to explore the extent and the impacts of Brexit on these European families. But another point of departure for the research is not to assume that the European nationals and European families are something other from us, in a sense it’s not something necessarily or easily that we can easily disentangle from the British population which is one of the assumptions in the current public debate.

MB Do you mean the British population in Europe or just the British population more generally?

NS We seem to be talking about us and them, the Brits versus the European national in Britain has necessarily two separate and bounded entities. There’s two groups that are clearly marked and separate. If you start to do the work the way we are doing it is working on family connection, on the legacy of 40 years of new membership, things get much more complicated. The families are mixed, you have plenty of mixed status families in the UK with the people with British nationality, with other European nationality, with dual nationality, and so for them, and this is one of the key things we are trying to find out, is how within the families distension in the broader political context is reverberate and is experience and people what they do to cope with it.

MB This is a similar thing to what we’re finding with the case of the British people living in the rest of Europe, which is that actually quite often as soon as you get past that one person or that couple that they’re in relationships with all sorts of other EU nationals from the point of view of their son married this person from Italy, or all of those types of things, and so it gets very complicated doesn’t it, this entanglement of what it means to be a European national versus what it means to be a British national?
Yeah. We should also not forget that until 2019 actually being British is also being a European national in a sense, a citizen of the European Union. So it’s actually this further complicate issues in very often talks about how the EU nationals are feeling about this [deprivational – 4.44] rights, the [deprivational – 4.45] status, paying very little attention about the sense of [deprivational – 4.50] rights of the British nationals in UK for example. If you think for example a mix nationality couple with a British national with a French national for example, the sense of being separated by the French family, so having to go through the Home Office in order to get visas for your mother in law to come to visit, if it comes to that, is actually extremely distressing and is also very much reshaping how people feel about themselves, the sense of belonging to Europe, but also to Britain.

Maybe you could lay out a little bit for us the stakes that we’re talking about when we’re talking about EU nationals in the UK, and the issue around citizens’ rights and Brexit?

I guess the main issue that are currently being discussed is what happens in terms of the rights to stay in settlement once the UK is no longer a member of the European Union. The British government came up with what they call the generous proposal, generous offer of a new status called settled status which is in a way acknowledge many of the rights the current people have but with some significant difference in terms for example of the reassurance that this settled status is not going to change in the future. In our project we look at this these European families and we divide them in five groups according to the nationalities of the main partners. So for example we are looking at couples of both Polish or both French nationals, we are looking at couples with which one partner is Polish and the other one is French for example, or cases in which one of the partners is from Germany and the other one is from India, and finally the case in which you have a British national married with a German or Italian or Spanish. Each of these different what we call types of couples will be affected differently by Brexit, and what are the worries for the future are slightly different. So for example especially for couples in which the legal status of one of the partners depends on their EU national partner, so for example the German Indian couples their situation is extremely precarious because the moment that the German partner is no longer allowed to stay in the UK or is no longer allowed to families reunion according to the European Union rules, this may for example make the India partner because undocumented from the moment that the UK is outside the European Union. This is partly because the rules about family reunions are different between European Union and Britain, with the British rules much more severe or much more demanding in terms for example of income thresholds and other requirements. The other big uncertainty is for example related to the possibility of families members to come to visit or stay for a longer period, for example older parents that need support and you want to invite them to come and join you in the UK for two or three months while they get better. That maybe no longer possible, as is no longer possible now for example for non-EU migrants in the UK. There is issue also, and this is particularly important of the transferability of pensions and other welfare
entitlements, if you decide for example to go back to your country of origin to another country in Europe, and this is particularly important in relation to the current regulation on your permanent residency. So an EU national will lose the right to permanent residency in the UK if they are absent from the country for more than two years. So assume that for example you are an academic, you want to go on a visiting fellowship in US for two years, by the time you come back you may no longer be allowed to come back to the UK, even if you have a house here for example. So people have a lot of uncertainty about what to do about their future, and this also forces them to rethink some of their plans.

**MB** Of course. What you’re describing is a situation where there’s the potential that these EU citizens, well citizens of other European Union member states find themselves on a similar footing to third country nationals, is that how you see this proposal for settled status or is there something else going on there?

**NS** From the point of view of the British government they really take as a starting point the fact… well we go to really a system that we apply to non-EU migrants, why shall we not use this one also for them? Problem with this, and what’s actually is often also a reason for discussion and very heated conversation among EU nationals and non-EU nationals living in Britain is that the starting point is different. So if I was coming to live in the UK from India, I knew since the beginning what were the rules for my stay in a sense, I applied for a visa, I went through one of the [inaudible – 9.59] routes and in a sense that was the parameters of my stay in the UK were very much set from the start. What the European nationals complain about is the fact that here while they have been here maybe even for 20/30 years the world around them has been changed and now there are different rules are going to be applied to them and they are really… no consideration is taken for all the fact that they have built their own life according to the previous set of rules. So there is this different starting point which I think is really important if you think in terms of the loss of status and the sense of loss and belonging that is very much challenged among EU nationals at the moment. So the fact they really are forced to rethink about who they are and what they actually are doing in Britain.

**MB** I think you are referring here to the human and emotional costs of Brexit for those populations in a way that actually I can see a lot of resemblance in the lives of the British people in the European... who are living in other European Union member states as well, it’s really marked this sense of being in limbo, of finding themselves and finding all the rules being rewritten at a time... sometimes at a time in their life which makes it also particularly problematic. So I guess that you’ve come across situations where there are people who are in even more precarious positions than others, there’s going to be no unilateral effect of Brexit on these populations is there, it’s going to be quite diverse?
NS There is a huge diversity among them in terms of socioeconomic background, education, occupation, position with their life stage for example. What is interesting in the conversation that is now ongoing between the British government and you is this emphasis on the people that are now legally resident in the UK, so as part of their permanent residency and according to the EU rule they can also continue to stay around. However some of the criteria for establishing this right to permanent residency has been very much called into question. So for example the one relating to the health insurance that many people have never heard before the referendum and then they become so important when they applied for the permanent residence, now we know that the British government is reconsidering this health insurance requirement. But there are those other issues in order to stay you have for example to have a specific income, that is actually problematic for people that have already reach retirement age, for stay at home parents or for people with... that are unable to work for whatever reason or for young people that are just leaving university and they have not yet entered the labour market. The point is that while if you are an international migrant, a non-EU migrant in Britain, when you apply to come to the UK you have to fulfil specific criteria the most obvious is to be somehow useful to the economy of the country, let’s put it this way in inverted commas. Up until now if you were an EU national [inaudible – 13.04] in Britain this criteria of economic contribution were much more... much less dominant in a sense because the idea was we are all EU citizens and actually the movement, the freedom of movement is a funding principle of what we consider to be the European identity. So it was not only about money, it was not only about freedom of circulation of goods and services, it was very much about creating a sense of shared belonging to the European project. So mobility has always been announced and promoted as part of this broader political and social project, although within the UK and [congress – 13.43] you rarely had talking about this, especially during the referendum campaign. So in a sense if applying a more economical lens to this form of... to the mobility of EU nationals then it means also groups are excluded. Another group that is particularly vulnerable for example is the European homeless or for example the Romanian Roma that live in the UK. Very few of them will comply with any income criteria or with having a well-established job, or the permanent residency or in the UK they will find much more difficult to comply to the criteria for becoming permanent residents, and so they are much more vulnerable in any transition deal after Brexit happened.

MB I wondered if you could reflect a little bit more on this question of identity and belonging on the basis of I know the project is in its very early stages, but one of the things that become very apparent to me when I was in France recently doing research with British people there was exactly how disturbed people have found their identify as a consequence of this ultimate shift, and it turns out that actually that citizenship meant a lot more to them than perhaps people might have thought, that ability to move, that ability to travel around, to live where they wanted to live, to work where they wanted to work. So I wondered if you could tease out some of the way in which they
might be coming across in the work that you’re doing, I know that you’re doing a blog as well, an autobiographical blog about your own experiences, so I wondered if there was some space to pull that out a little bit for us?

NS One of the groups we are planning to work with it’s UK born children to these European families. We think they are particularly interesting because they may not have necessarily the problem with the legal status, a lot of them have already British passport for example, and we are not only looking at people that just they were born five years ago or six years ago, ten years ago, we want to interview people that were born to European families also 20 years ago, 30 years ago, so people that grew up at British and EU citizens at the same time, and try to talk with them about how do they feel about this change of the politics of belonging or the politic context. So it’s not only about the coping strategies or what actually people are going to do in terms of stay or leaving, applying for passport or naturalisation, there is something more existential, something more profound that Brexit has generated and mobilised inside people in terms of emotions and sentiments. I remember many people talking about sense of less and the mourning for the loss of these European when the referendum result came out, so this sense of complete I see the world around me profoundly shake, that people had to go through all the stages of the mourning and the [bewilderment – 16.41] in a sense, and they are now starting to organise and thinking about how to respond to the changing circumstances. The problem is that the day that the referendum result came out obviously there was this moment of almost shared or common sufferings, especially if you were living in an area where you had a very strong remain vote, like I live in [inaudible – 17.04] for example, people were on the streets trying to talk to each other and try to reassure each other, and there was people hugging and some people were emotional etc. The problem is that since then, and this is very much something that happened for example when there is a natural disaster or whether someone has lost a dear person and so they start the process of having to come to terms with the loss, the problem is that since then there has been this uncertainty, this continuous almost emotional rollercoaster that is following the Brexit negotiations. So it’s like as if people cannot really plan the future because it’s still very uncertain what to do. People are keeping their options open, and some people have applied for permanent residency. But then it turns out to be not very useful because then the government wants them to apply again for this... potentially for this settled status, other people are thinking of applying for naturalisation, and you can see interestingly you can see quite significant increase among old member state nationals, for example German, Italian, French, Spaniards, for example they are applying in quite significant numbers for naturalisation while other groups like the Polish they were already applying before for status, perhaps because they know that their position was much less permanent than the other people thought.

MB So I think that you’re highlighting some really familiar themes to me from the work that I’ve been picking up too, the sense of I think it’s
become very clear that this has been a major political moment, problem the most major political moment in most people’s lives I think, and actually that’s very deeply and viscerally felt, there is this emotional cost to it, and I think that the way that you talked about grief and bereavement is particularly a good way of thinking about actually how do we think into these questions about identity and belonging as a consequence of Brexit among these particular populations. So moving beyond as you said the economic, the strategizing, all of those types of things, and actually asking those questions about the depth with which people feel this, and what this means for people who have grown up as you say, been 20/30 years had European Union citizens with the European citizenship of another nation state living in Britain. So okay just to close then I think that it’s really clear that what you’re trying to draw out is how this population is a very diverse population and within that there are people who are more precariously positioned than others, the people at the margins that we know as you said, the Roma for example or people who are homeless, but also some of these people in what we think of as ordinary family situations perhaps, where perhaps for a short period of time one of the partners has stayed at home to look after the children, what’s that actually going to mean with it comes to being evaluated, in terms of your right to continue living in the United Kingdom should a deal over citizens’ rights not work in their favour. So I would just like to thank you very much Nando for drawing out those themes which are so close to the work that Karen and I are doing about British people in the other EU nation states at this point in time, and yeah so thank you very much.

NS You’re welcome nice to speak to you.

MB Nice to speak to you too. Thank you for listening to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. If you have enjoyed what we’ve been talking about today and want to find out more check out our website www.brexitbritsabroad.com, or you can follow us on social media via Twitter @brexpatseu and on Facebook, and don’t forget to subscribe to our podcast on iTunes, and I’ll speak to you again soon.