

Polish migrants' experiences of Brexit: anticipating new social divides

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POLICY BRIEFING

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EU migrants have, so far, been most affected by the Brexit process. Polish nationals are the largest single EU nationality group in the UK, and their ongoing experiences and expectations will shape their social attitudes post-Brexit. These attitudes can signal the emergence of new social divisions.

New data collected by us in an online survey suggests that Poles are most worried about their future financial situation. These fears are expressed in two distinct ways: one showing migrants and their concerns as separate from the British population; and one showing that their concerns are the same as British citizens', highlighting a sense of shared community.

Our findings identify some policy measures to strengthen social cohesion by reinforcing a sense of community, rather than division.

Key Points:

- *Polish migrants were mostly concerned about the economic and financial aspects of Brexit.*
- *Economic and financial concerns over Brexit can lead to new social divides, but can also be the basis for a strengthened sense of community.*
- *There is a risk that these feelings of 'separation' will become more deeply ingrained and will continue after Brexit.*
- *Clearer government information on economic rights (e.g. to healthcare and work), and some financial concessions (e.g. reducing naturalisation costs), could strengthen the feeling of community.*

Introduction

While British society remains divided on the consequences of Brexit, EU migrants have already had to take steps to protect their legal rights. Brexit has disrupted the sense of civic equality provided by European citizenship rights. It has created new divisions through people's fears and concerns about Brexit. To explore this, we have analysed survey responses from Polish nationals living in the UK on their hopes and fears about Brexit. Poles represent the largest population of migrants in the UK. Understanding their Brexit experiences and concerns is key to understanding newly emerging social divisions.

The study

We collected the data discussed here between December 2017 and October 2018 through an online survey aimed at Polish EU nationals living in the UK. The questionnaire was translated into the Polish language. Participants were invited via social media groups and through the mailing list of a major UK-based Polish-language online newspaper. The main body of the survey consisted of 167 questionnaire items grouped in seven thematic blocs. The bloc on Brexit had 31 items, including a 12-item battery asking respondents about their level of agreement with twelve statements on seven-point scales, as summarised in Figure 1. A total of 702 participants responded to these questions.

The bloc also included an open-answer question: "Please tell us, in your own words, about your experiences, fears or hopes concerning any aspect of the Brexit process". This question received 668 qualitative responses, and this data forms the basis of our present analysis. To analyse this, we used data-driven open thematic coding using the NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software.

Main findings

The 12-item survey battery included statements about concerns over economic wellbeing, self-ownership, social integration and discrimination, as well as national identity. The questions were designed to cover various areas of social life and individual wellbeing which, based on previous research findings, appeared to be the most worrying aspects of the Brexit process.

Among our respondents, the main concern was financial. The statement that they 'expect to lose money as a consequence of Brexit' saw 63% agreeing above average (scoring above 4 on the 7-point scale). However, only 40% felt they had already lost out financially.

The second most common issue was having 'had to rethink one's future' (56% agreed), and a third of respondents felt less in control of their lives (34%). Over half (52%) of the respondents thought that there has been increased discrimination against EU nationals. This may have translated into a personal sense of being less welcome in the country (49%), however, only 35% had personally experienced discrimination (Figure 1).

The qualitative thematic analysis of the 668 answers to the follow-up open question provides depth to these results. It reveals that the most common area of concern was the economic effect of Brexit.

A total of 162 comments revolved around economic concerns, followed by fears over discrimination (143), the future of free movement rights for travel and residence (136), employment (45) and family life (27).

The dominance of economic concerns is interesting for two reasons:

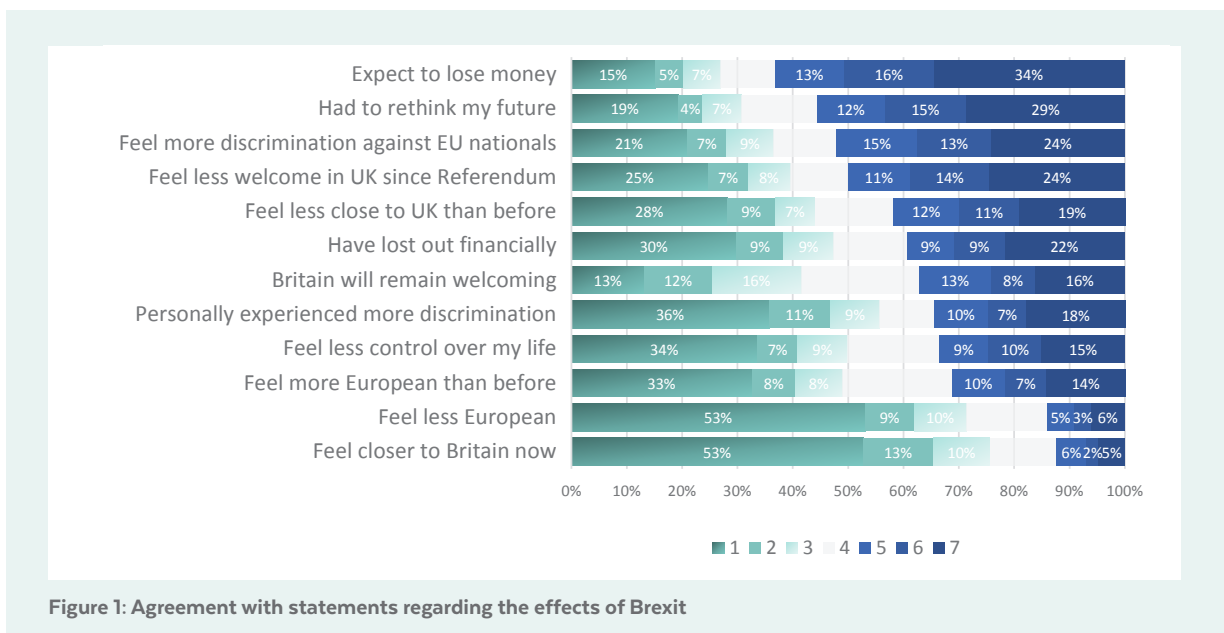


Figure 1: Agreement with statements regarding the effects of Brexit

1) Fears and hopes relating to the UK economy post-Brexit, and the personal financial implications of this, are concerns shared by all UK residents. They are not strictly shaped by being a migrant.

2) EU migrants' economic concerns can highlight the economic threats of Brexit that are specific to migrants. These may have already been an issue, for example, the financial burden of a naturalisation application which currently costs up to £1,330 per individual.

Economic concerns can provide a platform for a shared sense of a community between UK and EU citizens. Conversely, they can deepen the sense of social separation between the two, despite increasing levels of migrants becoming UK citizens through naturalisation.

To understand the emotions behind their economic fears, our analysis has looked more closely at how our respondents' expressed their concerns. We have found that, out of the 162 that voiced concerns over the economic effects of Brexit, 67 reflected a sense of separation and 96 reflected a sense of shared community.

Narratives of separation:

People's accounts of separation tied the potential negative consequences of Brexit more closely to being a migrant.

This was either by emphasising added financial strains on everyday life that only affect non-British citizens, or general economic pressures which, coupled with discriminatory treatment of non-British citizens, would result in new social divisions. Typical examples are:

"I am worried about ... the issue of health service provision for the EU citizens living in the UK. The budget deficit ... might mean that the government will seek to implement cuts in various aspects of life. [I wonder] if we're going to have the same right to treatment as the British."
(Male, 40, in the UK since 2010)

"The cost of applying for British citizenship is so high that for an average four-person family it is unachievable with today's level of pay and spending. I do hope ... that there will be an end to this sick smear campaign against the Polish whose only intent is to live peacefully in a place they have chosen as their home."
(Female, 43, in the UK since 2006)

"I'm worried about work, whether I will be allowed to work here legally and if my husband will be able to carry on working, and about everything that comes with it - if we'll be able to afford to rent a flat, if the rent will go up... although it's high already, and whether we are still allowed access to health service..."

(Female, 36, in the UK since 2015)

These, and similar accounts, provide clear examples of financial concerns that, despite migrants' long-term residence and economic contribution in the UK, reinforce perceptions of different rights and 'being separate'.

Narratives of community:

Respondents' accounts of community highlighted general economic and financial concerns that were the same for Polish migrants as for British citizens:

"Food prices are shooting through the roof. Trade, economy, politics are all crumbling down. A whole load of shops, including brand shops, that functioned absolutely fine before Brexit are being closed down now with people being laid off. It's easy to see this when you walk down the streets. I'm afraid that after Brexit the UK will have to work hard for many years to pick itself up. These are longterm processes: new companies, acts, paragraphs... It will most certainly affect everybody's life - immigrants or British people..."

(Female, 68, in the UK since 2006)

"I am not worried about any negative effects of Brexit on my family life. We've lived, worked and studied in the UK long enough to feel like legitimate residents. We have friends here and our home is here in the UK. One has to be prepared though that the UK economy will change and that it will be us, the ordinary citizens, who will feel the effects of it the most, particularly through the increase of the living costs."

(Male, 40, in the UK since 2010)

Accounts like this show how Brexit can strengthen a sense of community and shared fate across nationalities. This is regardless of one's assessment of the costs and benefits of leaving the EU.

Policy implications

The fact that economic concerns dominate the experiences of the Polish migrants in our sample raises important questions for public policy. Our findings show that there are two opposing sentiments: a sense of shared community with all UK residents regardless of civic status; and a sense of separation between migrants and non-migrants.

There is a risk that these feelings of 'separation' will become more deeply ingrained and will continue after Brexit. This can lead to new social divides and ethnic inequalities. Being aware of these emotional factors and devising policy mechanisms which reinforce community over separation will be key to achieving social cohesion post-Brexit.

A government determined to be proactive in preventing new social divides could consider several policy measures based on these findings:

- 1) Eliminating or reducing the cost of naturalisation for those who hold settled status. This would signal acceptance in financial terms;
- 2) Being clear on the continuation of healthcare rights to those settled and their families would signal stability;
- 3) A targeted public information campaign regarding the economic rights of settled EU nationals would also signal genuine determination towards community-building post-Brexit.

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