European Belongings and Political Participation beyond Brexit

Key Findings

European Belongings and Political Participation beyond Brexit draws on 1,919 responses to the survey 'Migration and Citizenship after Brexit', to report on the strength of attachment to and identification with European values after Brexit, among those who before the end of the transition period exercised free movement between the UK and EU—EU/EEA citizens settled in the UK and British citizens living in the EU/EEA.

Brexit has had a lasting impact not only on how people perceive their countries of origin and residence, but also the European Union. Three quarters of the respondents report they are either extremely (36%) or very (39%) attached to the EU, with small variation in responses between British citizens and EU nationals. Sentiments are less intense when it comes to their countries of origin and residence, with the 'moderate' attachment prevailing. Indeed, among EU/EEA citizens resident in the UK and British citizens living in the EU/EEA, identification with Europe has not waned since the UK formally left the EU. Most respondents remained strongly attached to Europe. Such attachments were often accompanied by a positive identification with the 'core values' of the European project (such as freedom, peace and unity). Among the minority who expressed views that were more critical of the EU, the point of contention was the institutional machinery rather than its perceived values.

While there was an initial increase in formal political participation at national and EU levels following the referendum and throughout the Brexit negotiations, this had notably declined. The findings show this was partly because there were now fewer opportunities to act on the basis of a European identity as a result of the redefinition of the political agenda and priorities, as well as changes to formal routes to political participation, with British citizens losing their right to vote in European Parliament elections and UK-resident EU citizens no longer able to vote in European Parliament elections in the UK.

For more than 50% of respondents, Brexit had brought changes in their informal political participation beyond the ballot box. The vast majority of those reporting changes in their level of political engagement stressed that this had increased, a shift that they attributed to their concerns about what Brexit would mean for their lives and rights.

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Introduction

This report considers the strength of attachment to and identification with European values, following Brexit, for those who had exercised free movement between the UK and EU before the end of the transition period, both EU/EEA citizens settled in the UK and British citizens living in the EU/EEA. It draws on 1,919 responses to the survey 'Migration and Citizenship after Brexit', and, in particular, questions relating to social, political and community participation. Conducted a year after the end of the Brexit transition period, the survey asked those participating to reflect on their emotional attachment to their country of origin (CoO), country of residence (CoR) and the European Union (EU), and on how Brexit had intervened in their feelings towards each of these. At first glance, the findings of the survey appear to confirm that Brexit has had a lasting impact on how people perceive their countries of origin and residence as well as on how they feel about the European Union.

EU citizenship had become a shared value and identity around which grassroots organisations mobilised. This included groups such as the3million and British in Europe which lobbied for the rights of populations directly impacted by the curtailment of free movement.[1] For some political and academic observers, Brexit had brought into being a distinctly EU diaspora.[2] Such EU based identifications, belongings and attachments originally emerged in response to concerns around citizens' rights. However, questions remain, now that the implementation of citizens' rights provisions has formally concluded (notwithstanding the ongoing issues for both EU/EEA citizens in the UK and British citizens in the EU/EEA)[3] about whether such attachments and belongings will be sustained, as well as whether and how they might translate into a new non citizens' rights-based platform for mobilisation.

This report provides some initial analysis of the shape of these EU belongings and related political participation and active citizenship in the post-Brexit period. It first identifies the sample before discussing some of the major findings relating to the increase in European identification, attachment and belonging; feelings about the EU; and shifts in formal and informal political participation.

About the sample

In this report we draw on 1,919 survey responses, of which 81% came from British nationals who indicated that they were living or had lived in the EU, and 19% were from EU/EEA nationals who were living or had lived in the UK.

Slightly more than half the sample stated that they had been assigned the female sex at birth (56%), while 43% said they had been assigned the male sex, and 1% stated that they did not know. Overall, the majority of our sample identified as either female (50%) or male (40%), with a further 5% identifying as cisgender. People who identified as nonbinary, trans, queer or agender made up less than 2% of the sample. 31% of respondents were under 40 years of age, with a median age of 57. Respondents in the sample overwhelmingly identified as ethnically/racially white (95%), while a significant proportion (12%) identified by their nationality or continent of origin. 3% reported being of mixed-ethnic background, 1% of Asian/South Asian background, while less than 1% were of Black, Middle Eastern/Arab and Other background, respectively. Some people offered answers that reflected their discomfort with, or objection to, the question itself (5%).

Respondents were resident in 40 different countries at the time of the survey. A total of 75% resided in an EU/EEA country, with significant numbers living in France (16%) and Germany (9%), followed by Spain (8%) and Portugal (7%). Approximately a quarter (24%) were resident in the UK and its overseas

territories, with very few (less than 1%) residing outside the EU/EEA and UK. The vast majority of respondents were British nationals (79%), while most of the rest held European nationalities (20%, including Andorran and Belarusian). A few (1%) were nationals from outside Europe or the UK. Most respondents still held the same nationality that they had had at birth (92%), although a small proportion (8%) had changed their nationality. Although 75% of the sample had only one nationality, almost a quarter of respondents held two or more (24%). Most dual nationals held British combined with either German, Irish or French nationality. More than half the sample (57%) had changed their legal status in their CoR since 2016. Nevertheless, the sample contained a largely settled population, with the majority having lived in their CoR for more than 5 years (62%) or for between 3 and 5 years (18%). Only 5% reported moving to their CoR within the last year.

What are the contours and limits of European identity among these populations?

Responses to the survey made clear that people can maintain strong attachments to their countries of origin and residence, while also feeling strongly about the EU. As Figure 2 shows, EU/EEA citizens resident in the UK and British citizens living in the EU/EEA stressed that their strong attachments to the EU were similar or greater in intensity to these other attachments. In this respect, the findings demonstrate that, for these individuals, identification with the EU has not waned since Brexit but has been sustained.
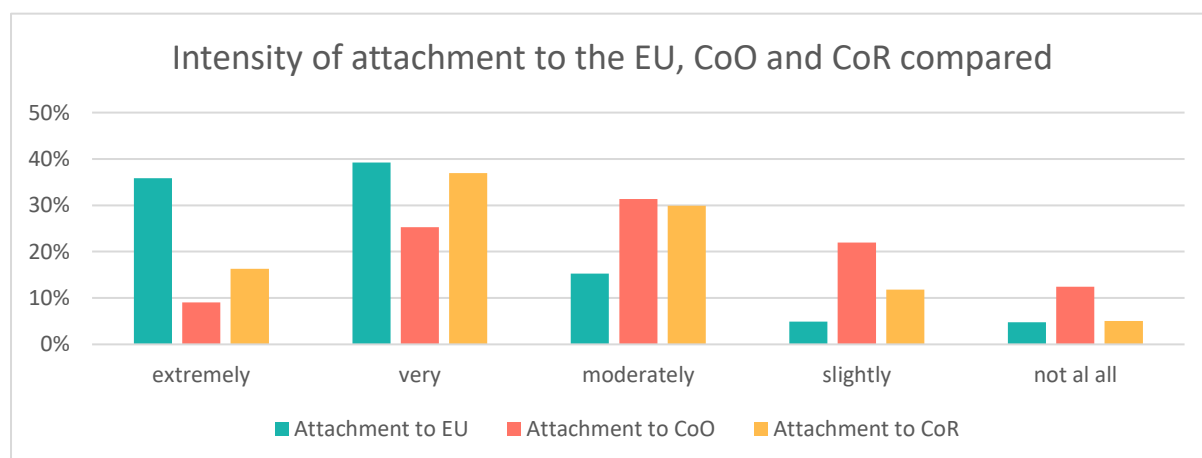

Figure 1: Intensity of attachment to the EU, CoO and CoR compared

Prior research, including such large-scale surveys as Eurobarometer, has regularly found that the EU has struggled to generate a strong sense of bottom-up legitimacy, with weak or ambivalent attachments to the EU. With a focus on differences in how constituent national populations relate to the EU, such research has highlighted the emergence of very few signs of either a shared sense of belonging organised around the idea of being European, or that European identification is valued by individuals above their national identities.[7] However, successive studies have also demonstrated that among mobile EU citizens—those exercising freedom of movement as per EU directives—a sense of attachment to and identification with Europe is notably stronger than EU citizens with no experience of free movement.[8] As Ettore Recchi points out in his analysis of large-scale survey data, EU citizens who now express feelings of strong attachment to Europe are 'more numerous among those living in another member state than in the rest of the population' (2015: 130) irrespective of nationality. Here, our findings that attachment to Europe is strong among those who before Brexit had engaged in free

movement further supports the argument that those who move about within the EU are more strongly attached, in relative terms, to the idea of being European. However, earlier research found that while British citizens who had exercised free movement showed higher levels of attachment to the EU than their compatriots in the UK (see Recchi 2015: 130), these attachments remained considerably weaker than those of other mobile Europeans.

When asked to offer three words that described their feelings towards the EU, the responses conveyed often identified core values of the European project, ranging from freedom, peace and unity to belonging and hope. Notably, there was very little variation in how British citizens and EU citizens described their feelings towards the EU.[9]

Figure 2: Word cloud of feelings towards the EU

However, as the inclusion of words such as 'imperfect', 'frustrating' and 'bureaucratic' indicates, this is not a wholly positive picture. Open-text responses to the question on how Brexit had changed people's feelings towards the EU also drew out a more nuanced and varied picture, with a small number of responses focusing not just on transformations of citizens' rights but also rather on some 'big picture' concerns about the EU as an institution.

> *If that is even possible, I now appreciate even more the endless opportunities the EU provides for its citizens. But it would be better if the EU was more united in the treatment of refugees and the sharing of financial burdens.* (German-British woman, 50s)

> *The European Union is rotten, corrupt … It is impossible to make laws which fit for each country. It is in itself a very good idea but needs many changes.* (German woman living in the UK, 70s)

> *Overly bureaucratic club, not really in touch with the people, intransigent self-serving and myopic - that's the executive and minions not the concept.* (British man living in Denmark, 50s)

In many cases, these issues were not explicitly linked to Brexit, but were a reflection on the perceived 'state' of the European Union. It is important to remember that such responses are not unique to those taking part in the survey. A series of 'crises' at the heart of Europe – including the European Sovereign Debt crisis and the Mediterranean migrant crisis – has produced similar responses among EU citizens. Even when they associate with the idea of being European, a civic identification, they may be critical of how the European Union as an institution approaches a range of issues, just as they might of their CoO.

What difference does Brexit make to feelings about the EU?

From the 2016 Referendum onwards, social science researchers have documented the unsettling impact of this political transformation and its implications for British citizens living in the EU/EEA and EU/EEA citizens in the UK population.[4] Brexit has had a lasting negative impact on how both EU citizens in the UK and British citizens in the EU relate to the UK. As our earlier reports document, it remains an open wound for EU citizens in the UK, while it has left British citizens in the EU with a pervasive sense of embarrassment about being British and a reinvigoration of their sense of being European.[5] It is to this sense of European belonging and identities that we now turn.

One of the key themes in recent literature on Brexit and migration has been that Brexit created European identifications and attachments among EU citizens in the UK and British citizens in the EU.[6] Yet, when asked about such a change in the survey, most responses to the question about whether Brexit had affected people's sense of attachment to the EU showed a much more complex picture, with 36% stressing that there had been no change at all. Yet a significant number did identify changes in their sense of attachment, with a quarter (25%) indicating that this had changed 'a lot' or a 'great deal'. Strikingly, here the data on EU citizens in the UK maps almost exactly on to the data on the British in the EU.
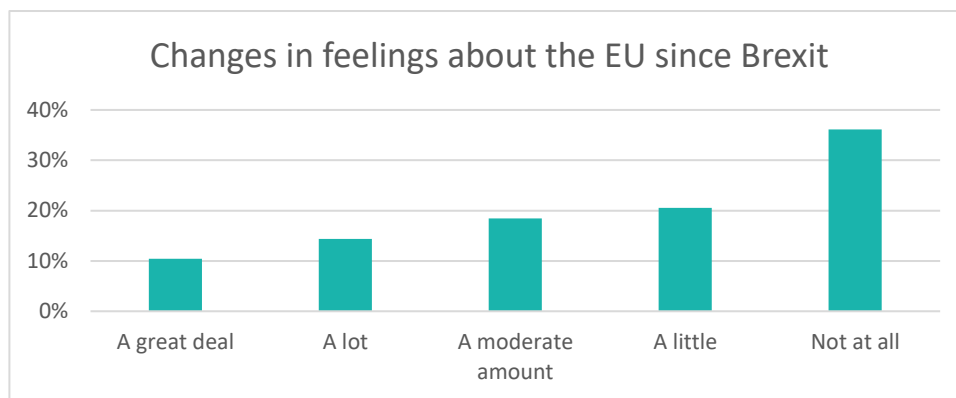

Figure 3: Intensity of changes in feelings towards the EU since Brexit

More than 730 open-text responses from respondents who reported at least some change in their feelings of attachment to the EU offered further insights. Many clearly identified how Brexit had heightened their sense of themselves as European, explaining that this had been accompanied by a shift in their involvement and engagement with issues relating to the EU and a better understanding of its values. The quotations below offer some illustrative examples.

I didn't really think about it before. It was just there - benign, peaceful and optimistic, holding all the countries of Europe together and providing wonderful opportunities for travel and work. Since Britain left I feel bereft and also angry at having my EU citizenship removed. (British woman living in Ireland, 60s)

I feel more European than Italian. I have always believed in Europe, but after Brexit and all its consequences, my support and sense of belonging has grown a lot more. (Italian citizen living in the UK, non-binary, 40s)

I've come to appreciate a lot more what it stands for, its values & freedoms (Swiss-Belgian woman living in the UK, 40s)

I feel more strongly about the EU. It is not a perfect structure, but it has brought me close to fellow

Europeans from various countries. It has erased a lot of the cultural biases that existed between the countries, and I strongly believe it is important to preserve the unity to avoid conflicts such as those currently being cultivated by the UK. (French woman living in the UK, 30s)

It was notable that through Brexit, people highlighted how much they had learned about the European project, and what it did for its citizens, even though for British citizens in the EU this was bittersweet.

I have always been very pro-EU, but after seeing how easy it was for British citizens to lose their EU rights, I realise how important it is to safeguard all the positive things the EU stands for. (British woman living in Croatia, 50s)

I had a vague idea of how the EU worked and what it offered its citizens. I've learnt much more about the EU since 2016 and come to admire the project and its positive impact on EU citizens' lives. (Belgian-Brazilian-British woman living in Spain, 50s)

As the following quotations illustrate, for 1 in 6 open-text respondents Brexit had changed their feelings towards the EU rather more negatively. Such responses tended to highlight what they perceived as the EU's disregard for the real lives of EU citizens during the Brexit negotiations.

Sad/Angry with the EU's insistence not to make EU citizens rights a separate (and first) a negotiation to safeguard law-abiding EU-citizens in the UK and Brits in the EU, who are the embodiment of the EU, from the overall Withdrawal Agreement, causing years of worry and stress for law-abiding EU citizens. (Dutch man living in the UK, 50s)

Damned angry that the EU did not grant me all of my acquired rights and maintain my EU citizenship and FoM. Treaty rights were exercised pre-Brexit in good faith. We should have kept our EU citizenship and the EU could have quite easily granted this without the UK's permission! (British woman in Spain, 50s)

Across the sample, a minority of respondents communicated a strong sense of being let down, a perception that the EU has reneged on its social contract to its citizens. In this way, the responses not only communicated identification with the EU but also signalled their expectations of the obligations of this supranational institution. For British citizens in the EU, the strength of this negative feeling towards to the EU as an institution in consequence of Brexit was clearly linked to the outcome, which had left them with fewer rights than they had enjoyed as EU citizens—notably the loss of rights to onward free movement within the EU.

One third of those taking part expressed rather more mixed feelings towards the EU. As they described these feelings, it seemed that this ambivalence was neither a change of attitude nor attributable to Brexit. We discuss this ambivalence in more detail in the following section.

Overall, the impact of Brexit on feelings towards the EU is complex and diffuse. Brexit raised significant issues about the scope and extent of EU citizenship as a legal status. What is revealed in the responses of those taking part is the more social dimension of this citizenship. The transformations of citizens' rights brought about by Brexit are somewhat at odds with a process that—at least for some—provoked a more conscious attachment to the EU, both positive and negative.

Is it likely that political participation and active citizenship will be sustained after Brexit?

In this final section, we consider whether these attachments and identifications feed through into political participation and active citizenship after Brexit. This is set against the backdrop of a notable

increase in political participation—both formal and informal—triggered by the outcome of the Brexit referendum and further impacted by Brexit-related policy changes.

Changes to voting after Brexit

The landscape here is complex. One major consequence of Brexit is that British citizens in the EU are no longer EU citizens (unless they hold dual nationality) and, for the most part, no longer have rights to political participation in EU level initiatives (e.g. the Citizens' Initiative) or political processes such as the European Parliament Elections (EP Elections). For British citizens, the 2019 EP elections were the last such elections in which they were eligible to vote. It is clear that many of our respondents – 214 people, or approximately 60% of those who responded to questions on EP voting – had taken this opportunity, some of whom chose to vote in their country of residence, while others had cast their vote in the UK. In addition, while in some EU member states, under certain conditions, British citizens have retained their right to vote at municipal level as Third Country Nationals (TCN), these rights have not been extended, in a number of countries, to all (or in some cases, any) TCNs. In the latter cases, as a direct consequence of Brexit, resident Britons have lost the right to vote at this level. Furthermore, for British citizens who have lost the right to vote in the UK because they had been living abroad for fifteen years or more, these changes have brought complete disenfranchisement, with neither political representation nor routes to political participation.[10]

> *I can't vote in any elections now. It used to be I could at least vote in EU and local council elections, but all that has gone. It feels like I am taxed without any form of representation.* (British-Australian man in Austria, 40s)

> *I am no longer entitled to vote in my country of residence, thanks to Brexit. I am no longer able to exercise my right to vote in the UK - I am no longer on the electoral roll. Before Brexit I had the right to vote in both countries - now I have none!* (British woman in France, 60s)

> *Thanks to Brexit and the 15-year rule I have lost all rights to vote.* (British man in Germany, 40s)

Particularly represented among those who have been completely disenfranchised by Brexit are British citizens living in Germany, France, Italy and Austria, none of which grant local/municipal voting rights to non-citizens.

Importantly, many of the British participants who had naturalised in their country of residence, and in this way regained their EU citizenship, explained that retaining their right to vote in the EU parliament elections was a factor in this decision.

EU citizens living in the UK have retained their rights to vote in these elections, but Brexit has changed how they will be able to participate. We draw attention here to the significant number of EU citizens who cast their vote in the UK in the 2019 EP elections: 62% percent of those who responded to a question on whether they had voted in the last European parliament elections via the UK, said that they had done so. In future, however, those resident in the UK and wishing to cast their vote in future European parliament elections will need to vote via their country of origin. Nevertheless, variation in the terms on which different member states permit their non-resident citizens to vote—with some permitting in-person remote voting (for example, in diplomatic missions) and postal votes, and others allowing only in-country voting—may introduce new constraints on people's access to political participation at EU level. In contrast to British citizens living in the EU, they maintain the right to vote at local level in the UK—where the right to vote at this level is based on residence rather than citizenship— with 83% reporting that they had voted in the last local elections. This reveals a strong level of political participation by EU citizens in the UK, as well in the EU.

Routes to a more active citizenship

Political activity is not limited to formal participation in political processes, but also extends to engagement beyond the ballot box – what we refer to here as active citizenship. This includes activities such as joining, setting up or leading organisations, campaigning and lobbying, donating money and attending protests. Active citizenship in each of these areas may involve a combination of both in-person and online activities.

The survey revealed that many of those taking part in the research considered that their level of political participation and engagement had changed since Brexit, with 52% of British citizen respondents and 58% of EU citizen respondents saying that this was the case. Among those who identified this change in their own behaviour, the overwhelming majority reported that it had led to an *increase* in political participation (78% of British citizens and 81% of EU citizens respectively). Significantly, when they were given the option to explain this change in their level of participation, Brexit and the changes it has brought to their lives and rights, was commonly emphasised. At one extreme, this change was explained as a political awakening:

Brexit has completely changed my life - I went from zero political engagement to becoming a political activist and campaigner for citizens' rights - both as a private individual and volunteer and also professionally by working full time for EU citizen's rights in the UK (German woman in the UK, 50s)

I knew nothing about politics before Brexit. I read a lot around the time of the vote and sought to understand all the British and EU legal systems, trade deals etc. I now realise that politics impacts our lives in a way I hadn't realised before. I feel more aware of the people around me, the need to inform communities and to protect them. I have been to protests and rallies for the first time in my life. (British-Cypriot woman in France, 30s)

For others, who stated that they had previously been politically active, in areas including local politics, environmental activism and party politics, Brexit marked a change of focus, with their activities shifting towards Brexit and related issues (notably, citizens' rights).

I've always been politically active on a low level - lobbying MPs, signing petitions, voting - that's why I got my UK passport in 2014. If I was to stay here, I wanted to have full rights and vote. Brexit was a reminder how much we stand to lose from irresponsible government. I'd like to do other things, but it feels even more that if citizens don't keep on reminding government that someone is watching, things will get even worse. (British-German woman in the UK, 40s)

Before Brexit I was engaged in local community activities and ecological activism. From 2016-2020 I was heavily involved in citizens' rights work with British in Europe and founded a local group called [name of group]. Now that the campaign is over, I am back to environmental issues. (British-Spanish man in Spain, 60s)

Importantly, even among those who stated that their political engagement had decreased or stopped altogether this was often linked to changes in their access to formal participation (e.g. removal of a right to vote); a sense that despite their strong feelings about Brexit, their actions had affected very little change; or changes in their personal circumstances.

Overall, these findings further support the observations of other social science researchers working on these topics, who have identified that this rise in informal political participation signals the emergence of an 'EU diaspora' or, 'acts of European citizenship'.[11] However, an evaluation of the long-term prospects of political participation as Europeans means that we need to consider whether this has been

sustained beyond Brexit.

The survey data contains some evidence of this rise in informal political participation being sustained, but Brexit remains a central pillar within this. As the following quotations demonstrate, continued involvement in campaigning to reverse Brexit, or for the UK to rejoin the EU was prominent among the responses.

> *I became a campaigner. I joined pro-EU groups. I am Vice Chair of one group in my country of residence and am a National Council member of European Movement UK* (British woman in Spain, 50s)

> *I have become more vocal in supporting pro-EU candidates and have made monetary contributions to candidates which I believe represent my views* (British man in Denmark, 30s)

> *I have made donations to organisations in my country of origin supporting membership of the EU and also to organisations actively campaigning against the current government, but not political parties. I have switched from being against independence for Scotland to being pro-independence for Scotland, but only because it would enable Scotland to re-join the EU.* (British-German man in Germany, 50s)

Such responses came exclusively from British citizens living in the EU. While for the most part these people are no longer EU citizens and therefore without the political rights this bestows, their responses made clear that the idea of being European persists and shapes their actions in these areas.

Key findings and avenues for further research

Brexit has ignited sentiments of attachment to and identification with the EU project and its values, for both EU citizens in the UK and British citizens living in the EU. It has given them a shared cause to mobilise around and a focal point for identification, to an extent that had barely been seen in the British context— and arguably around Europe—up to that moment.

The findings make clear the lasting impact of Brexit, not only on how people perceive their countries of origin and residence, but also on how they see the European Union. As a result of the Brexit referendum and successive negotiations, citizens of EU member states in the UK who might previously have identified more strongly with their country of origin, found a common denominator in their shared EU citizenship and made this a core element of their campaigning for citizens' rights. Our survey found that six years on from the Brexit Referendum, and at a time when the issue of membership is no longer on the agenda, this strong attachment to European values and ideas has persisted to a large extent across both populations. Even when concerns were raised they tended to focus on the faults and limitations of the EU's bureaucratic machinery rather than on its values and ideals.

While it is clear that Brexit was the driver of changes in both formal political participation and active citizenship, there remain questions about how this might be sustained in the longer term. In particular, following the end of the two-year negotiation period and the formalisation of the UK's exit from the EU, the political discourse and agenda has moved on, which means that the terrain for political mobilisation for British citizens in the EU and EU citizens in the UK has shifted. This has not only occurred at a macro-level, but also at a more micro-level. Brexit has not only ended free movement between the UK and EU, it has also redefined the status and rights of those who had previously exercised these rights in their countries of residence. Alongside this, it has redefined the opportunities and modalities of citizens' political participation, both formally and informally.

Notes

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Methodology

The online survey on which this report is based was the first stage of the research in this mixed-methods project. The survey was directed at: (a) British citizens or nationals who were currently living/have lived in an EU/EEA country (excluding UK); (b) EU/EEA citizens or nationals who were currently living/have lived in the UK, and (c) Foreign-born, non-British and non-EU/EEA citizens or nationals who were currently living / have lived in the UK. More specifically, the survey aimed to understand whether and how Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic have affected respondents' perceptions, plans and decisions on whether to stay put, migrate, or repatriate, how these events have changed, if at all, attitudes towards the EU, country of residence and origin, understandings of citizenship, identity and belonging.

About MIGZEN

Rebordering Britain and Britons after Brexit (MIGZEN) explores the long-term impacts of Brexit and Britain's shifting position on the world stage on migration to and from the UK. It is funded the ESRC through the Governance after Brexit scheme [ES/V004530/1]. It is a collaborative research project involving academics at the Universities of Birmingham and Lancaster, and partners the3million, British in Europe and Migrant Voice. It aims to produce new and timely knowledge on how the changing legal and political relationship between the UK and EU in consequence of Brexit shapes migration and migrant experience - including settlement, questions of identity, citizenship and belonging. It adopts a unique approach to understanding Britain's migration story, that brings together emigration with immigration, and that considers British citizens, EU citizens and Third Country Nationals alongside one another.

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