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Intergenerational narratives of citizenship among EU citizens in the UK after the Brexit referendum

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ABSTRACT



The share of British naturalization applications by EU citizens increased in the aftermath of the 2016 EU referendum. This article offers unique insights into the range of motivations informing decisions to become British or not among EU families from new and old EU member states. It contributes to scholarship on migrants' lived experiences of naturalization by adopting a family-centred approach to explore intergenerational and intersectional dynamics in citizenship decision making. Naturalization involves personal and collective reckoning with a sense of loss of status and imagined future. We argue that rather than a “premium”, naturalization is framed by many EU citizens as a response to a perceived loss of status (defensive narrative) and threat (protective narrative). This process is mediated and negotiated within the household, and the narratives of naturalization are embedded in participants' social positioning and shaped by their social statuses and senses of entitlement.

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Introduction: citizenship narratives from below

Thomas and Sonia live in London with their two children, Zoe and Leo. Zoe is 12 years old. She was born in the UK and has held both French and British citizenship since birth. Leo is six years old. He was born in France, because Sonia wanted to ensure she had some childcare support while looking after the new-born, and Leo only has French citizenship. They are a mixed-race family. Thomas is French Cameroonian, and when asked about applying for British citizenship is open to becoming British. Sonia is less so.

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Acknowledging her husband's opposing view on the matter of naturalization, she offers the following as an explanation:

I don't want to be British! I don't see the point of being British. I'm French, so I don't see the point of having nationality just for ... for what? To vote? Yeah, to vote would be a good idea, but I don't feel there's any need to be British. [...] Because he's Black, and because I'm White, so our perception [of Brexit] would be different.

Thomas interjects the conversation and adds that his reason for considering British naturalization extends beyond Brexit and relates to the legal status of their children and his experience as a Black person in the UK who has experienced racism and anti-immigration hostility since well before Brexit.

I want to apply for British citizenship and it is not because of Brexit, it is because I want them to be equal.

This article examines narratives of citizenship among and within EU families in the UK in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum. To apply for citizenship via naturalization is expensive and bureaucratically demanding, the route to British citizenship is scattered with conditions which produce and reproduce societal hierarchies of deservingness, echoing the notion of "conditional citizenship" discussed in Hackl's introduction to this special issue. Since the early-2000s in Europe access to citizenship for foreign-born residents has become more selective, with citizenship increasingly constructed as an "investment" (Džankić 2019) or something to be "deserved" and "earned" (Kostakopoulou 2010; Monforte, Bassel, and Khan 2019; Bauböck 2018; Kochenov 2019), granting states more freedom to cherry-pick their new citizens, for example through the introduction of what Goodman (2010) calls "new civic integration policies". This process has also been accompanied by a process of precarisation of citizenship and membership more broadly, affecting migrants and citizens alike (Gonzales and Sigona 2017; Gonzales et al. 2019). This signals a move away from long-established post-WW2 sociological narratives of citizenship, marked by a belief in the progressive expansion of rights as well as of the population of those entitled to them (Marshall 1950).

This article contributes to a growing body of literature in citizenship studies that examines citizenship as a set of routine experiential and negotiated social processes (Leitner and Ehrkamp 2006; Nyers 2007; Ho 2009) that co-produce the lived experience of becoming a citizen, and define the agency of individuals in the process. Scholars have highlighted the complex entanglements between citizenship, identity and sense of belonging, and have captured the gendered, racialised and intersectional experiences of naturalization for non-citizens (see Miller-Idriss 2006; Fassin and Mazouz 2007; Bassel, Monforte, and Khan 2018; Zambelli 2020).

Building on these insights, our article addresses four aspects that have received limited attention to date. First, we argue for decision-making and experiences of naturalization to be investigated at the household level rather than at the individual level, to avoid “methodological individualism” (Street 2014). Recent work on naturalization (see Street 2014; Soehl, Waldinger, and Luthra 2020; Labussière and Vink 2020) has called for greater attention to intergenerational motivations. Here we put intra-family dynamics and citizenship narratives at the centre, capturing the intergenerational and intragenerational negotiations that surround naturalization decision-making.

Second, we embed the narrative of naturalization into participants’ social positioning, showing how social positioning shaped their experiences of and responses to Brexit. In addition to being differently affected by the certainties and uncertainties that surrounded the protracted Brexit negotiations, the perceptions and responses of EU nationals to Brexit have been substantially shaped by their social statuses and senses of entitlement and self-worth (Sigona and Godin 2019). Furthermore, their legal statuses also determined the different options available to them based on age, gender, occupational and family trajectories, income and dual citizenship norms in their country of origin. Considering “Brexit as a bordering process”, we not only ask “who is bordered, where and with what impacts” (Benson and Lewis 2019; Benson 2020), but also how this process informs families’ decision-making process towards naturalization.

Third, in the European context, the instrumental attitude to nationality – also referred to as “strategic citizenship” (Mau 2010; Della Puppa and Sredanovic 2017; de Hoon, Vink, and Schmeets 2020; Barbulescu 2018) – has mostly been associated with refugees and non-EU immigrants who acquire EU citizenship to access new forms of mobility (e.g. for the purpose of onward European mobility; see Ahrens, Kelly, and Van Liempt 2016). There is a dearth of knowledge concerning the experiences of citizenship acquisition among EU-born nationals in other European states. A study of EU nationals in the UK, a former EU member state, could complement the existing literature by providing insight into naturalization decision-making among Western citizens for whom it may be less evident what constitutes “premium” citizenship (Fernandez-Reino and Sumption 2020). Our article also builds on recent studies on Brexit and EU/UK citizens that have examined citizenship strategies both in the UK context for EU citizens (Moreh, McGhee, and Vlachantoni 2020; Sredanovic 2020) and in the EU context for British citizens (Benson and Lewis 2019; Benson 2020).

Fourth, the literature often focuses on those who have applied for citizenship or are in the process of applying rather than on those who have purposefully chosen not to apply despite having the right to do so. While applications for UK citizenship from EU nationals have increased since the

Brexit referendum, the overall increase is low considering the number of EU nationals with the potential right to apply (Lessard-Phillips and Sigona 2018). Our contribution offers insight into why for some EU citizens, despite Brexit, British naturalization is not a viable or attractive option.

In this article, we aim to provide a complex and nuanced understanding of situated citizenship narratives for EU families following the Brexit referendum. This article examines how potential and actual applicants frame the choice of whether or not to become British, offering insights into the reconfiguration of the politics of belonging in post-Brexit Britain through the experiences of EU families living in the UK.

Methodology

This article draws on qualitative semi-structured interviews that were collected as part of the project which aims to understand the impact of political and legal uncertainty on EU families, and to identify the mitigating strategies these families employ to address uncertainty during the post-EU referendum period. For the purposes of our study, families had to include at least one child and one EU27-born parent to be considered an EU family.

The family typology presented in Table 1 informed our sampling. It includes five combinations based on parents' country of birth. Including a range of family configurations enabled us to examine variations in responses since different opportunities and challenges are attached to these configurations from both legal and personal perspectives. Country of origin may affect the capacity to secure legal status, which in turn shapes aspirations, opportunities and coping strategies. Overall, we interviewed 108 EU families, which included 208 children (142 UK-born children and 66 EU-born children). Nineteen families had both UK and non-UK born children. Our sample included EU nationals from 23 EU member states, including both old and new member states (EU8 and EU2), with household income ranging from 10,000 to 200,000 GBP per year.

This article focuses on parents in the process of deciding whether they, their children or both would become British or not. Debate on EU migrants in the context of Brexit often focus on the first generation of non-UK EU

Table 1. Five types of EU families.

	Type of family	Count
Type 1	EU same	29
Type 2	EU-UK	51
Type 3	EU different	7
Type 4	EU single	10
Type 5	EU-TCN	11
	Total	108

nationals living in the UK. However, the change of legal framework following the UK's withdrawal from the EU affects both adult and child EU nationals.

To date, little is known about the UK-born children of EU nationals residing in the UK, who represented just over 12 per cent of all births in England and Wales, 13 per cent in Northern Ireland, and 10 per cent in Scotland in the year of the EU referendum. These rates have been increasing, especially since the mid-2000s (Lessard-Phillips and Sigona 2019). Many more children were born abroad and migrated to the UK with their parents at an early age. Considering the country of birth of these children is relevant due to its implications on legal status and access to citizenship (Yeo 2018a, 2018b) and because it affects familial Brexit-mitigation strategies (Sigona and Godin 2019).

Many children in our sample gained dual citizenship (UK and EU) through either or both parents having residency rights in the UK as an EU citizen or because one parent was British by birth or naturalization at the time of the child's birth.

Brexit and the rebordering of membership

Following the 2016 referendum, EU citizens and their family members living in the UK under EU law have been concerned for the nature and quality of their rights to future residence in the UK, particularly following the announced end to the right of freedom of movement for EU nationals in the UK and UK nationals in the EU.

In the aftermath of the referendum, many EU nationals initially applied for the certification of permanent residence (PR), which confirms the right to PR of an EU citizen in any EU member state after five years of "qualified residence" under EU law. While not a permanent solution in itself, since the legal protection provided by the PR only existed as long as the UK remained a member of the EU, the PR offered an important route to British citizenship. In fact, due to an amendment to the British Nationality Act championed by the then Home Secretary Theresa May and introduced on 12 November 2015, if a person with at least 12 months of PR wishes to apply for British citizenship, he or she must first apply for a PR certificate. Home Office data reveal a rapid increase in PR applications between 2016 and 2018. In 2018, there were 95,945 PR cards issued, which represents a 43 per cent increase on the previous year (UK Home Office 2021).

Data from the UK Home Office (2021) show that the share of naturalization applications by EU citizens increased from 4 per cent in 2007 to 35 per cent at the end of 2020. At the time of the referendum, applications from EU citizens accounted for 11 per cent of the total (Figure 1).

Overall, 158,000 EU citizens applied for naturalization between 2016 and the end of 2020. While Polish and Romanian citizens comprise the largest groups over this period, the sharpest application rise since the referendum

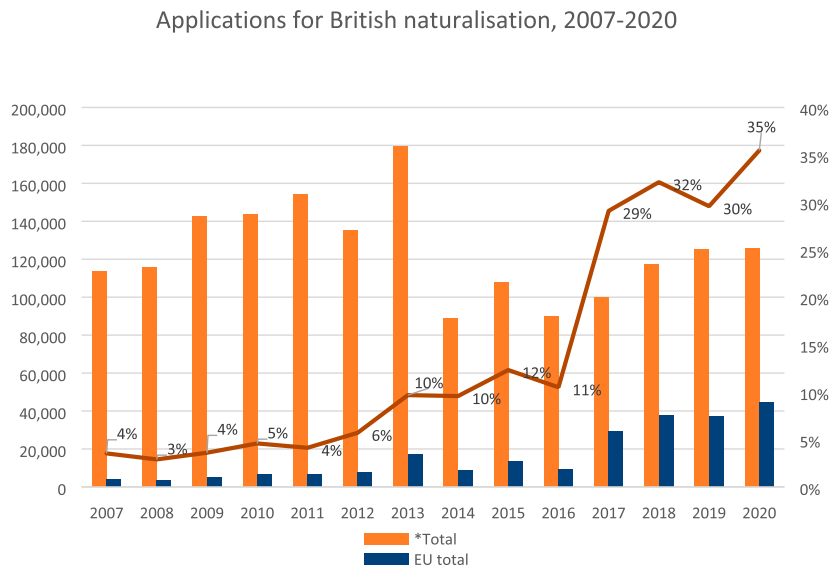


Figure 1. Applications for British naturalization, 2007–2020. Source: Home Office, our elaboration.

occurred among EU14 nationals, in particular Italians, Spaniards, Germans and French. Up until 2016, the citizens of “old” member states with a long established and stable presence, who accounted for roughly one third of the overall EU population in the UK at the time of the referendum, rarely applied for British citizenship. This is especially striking since, according to UK censuses, Germans have been one of the largest groups of EU nationals

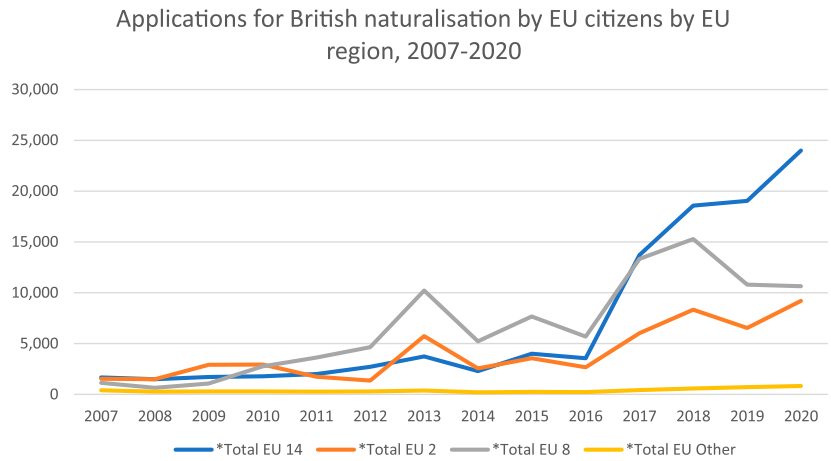


Figure 2. Applications for British naturalization by EU citizens by EU region, 2007–2020. Source: Home Office, our elaboration.

in Britain since the 1980s (Lessard-Phillips and Sigona 2018). This is not the case for EU8 and EU2 citizens who have been applying for naturalization in larger numbers since before the referendum as shown in Figure 2. The analysis of “citizenship narratives” in the next sections offers insights into motivations behind different attitudes to naturalisations among EU citizens.

With the publication of details on the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) in June 2018 also came the recommendation from the Home Office to EU citizens residing in the UK to refrain from applying for PR and to wait for the EUSS to be implemented. All EU citizens wishing to reside in the UK after 30 June 2021 are required to apply for EUSS, including former PR holders who had not applied for British citizenship by that date. Despite the reassurance provided by the EUSS, the number of applications for British naturalization from EU citizens in 2019 continued to increase, although at a slower pace, partly due also to the transition from PR to “settled status” certification. Since the introduction of the settlement status scheme, there has been some uncertainty and confusion regarding whether the EUSS could be considered sufficient to prove lawful residency for a sufficient number of years in order to apply for British citizenship. In fact, access to British citizenship is not an easy road for many EU citizens, even if they have gained settled or pre-settled status (Fernandez-Reino and Sumption 2020; Vassiliou 2020).

This article will shed light on how EU nationals frame their decision about whether or not to apply for naturalization. The concept of citizenship narratives allows us to examine citizenship as a “source of meaning and site of practical deliberation” (Fein and Straughn 2014, 692), in which citizenship policies or naturalization laws are “interpreted, reacted to, and acted upon by ordinary citizens in everyday life” (Miller-Idriss 2006, 591). Our study contributes to the growing literature on “citizenship from below”, exploring EU migrants’ narratives to become or not to become citizens of the country they have moved to.

Why to become British: intergenerational family-framed narratives

It was completely different than applying for the French citizenship where it was just *natural*. And I had no afterthoughts. Applying for British citizenship would be just an act of – well just a pragmatic step to be safe if we decide to stay here so that we can be sure that there is nothing happening to us and also for the children so that they can then – if they decide to go to university – if we moved out of the UK then they could still have that advantage. So it is more an opportunistic approach and not because I am convinced. [Hungarian-born parent from France, in the UK since 2010, one UK-born child and one EU born child]

British naturalization in the context of Brexit was not *natural* for this Hungarian parent who had lived in France before relocating to the UK with her

French partner and two children. Rather, it was a future-oriented pragmatic decision taken for the benefit of all members of the family, to maintain family unity and with an eye to the future ahead. Parents with children who were either born or raised in Britain often perceive themselves as “socially anchored” (Grzymala-Kazłowska 2016) to the country. They feel their children’s attachment to the country has “forced [them] to become British” and settle down, with the alternative of “going back home” appearing as an unviable option. Among mixed-nationality families, this feeling was particularly prominent, with the anchoring effect of children augmented by parents using English as their family language and lacking a shared country of origin to which to attach ideas of “return”. Many parents expressed at least some degree of negative feelings towards becoming British, often constructed as a form of betrayal towards their national and European identities. In our sample, these feelings were most frequently experienced by EU14 citizens. As argued by Harpaz and Mateos (2019), the basic principle of state membership is currently being redefined from “exclusive and territorial” to “overlapping and portable”. However, Brexit has had the effect of resolidifying national borders between the UK and the EU. Among white EU14 participants, becoming British is largely constructed as a defensive mechanism to preserve their current status and rights. As several interviewees pointed out, confirming data in Figure 2, they had never seriously considered applying for British citizenship until the Brexit referendum, because there was no need to.

In “My child will be a citizen,” Street (2014) argues that scholarship on citizenships has overlooked the family as a key site of decision-making. Looking at the case of Germany, he examined the links between changes in national citizenship laws and incentives to naturalize. Combining both quantitative and qualitative data, he argues that migrant parents – until the introduction of *jus soli* citizenship – have been naturalizing for the sake of their children’s upward mobility, demonstrating the importance of capturing inter-generational motives. Similarly, Soehl, Waldinger, and Luthra (2020) rely on an “altruistic model” to explain why parents decide to naturalize for their children in a specific national context characterized by tightening citizenship legislation.

In a similar vein as these studies, our research moves away from the dominant perspective that considers citizenship acquisition mainly through an individualistic lens, and instead takes into consideration different types of EU families. In doing so, we examine the intergenerational deliberations that go into decision-making. We identify two different but not mutually exclusive articulations of the strategic citizenship narrative often used as an umbrella term in the literature: one which is about preserving the status quo, and which can be defined as “defensive” due to the prevailing emphasis on naturalization as a way of mitigating the loss of privileges and sense of entitlement directly produced by the Brexit referendum, and one that we

identify as a “protective” which takes into consideration migratory experiences rooted in short- as well as long-term histories of racism and inequalities, in both country of origin and in the UK context, beyond the event of the referendum.

Defensive citizenship narrative

In 2020, of 40,637 grants of British citizenship to former EU citizens, three quarters were via naturalization based on marriage (6,767) or residence (23,081). Registration of minor children (9,488) account for the bulk of remaining grants of citizenship (UK Home Office 2021). Due to the impact of Brexit, parents fear their children will no longer possess the same rights as previous generations of EU citizens and will be considered foreigners or second-class residents. Mitigating this risk is a primary concern for them. For many EU families, the Brexit referendum has been experienced as a rupture in their lives and plans for the future (Lulle, Morosanu, and King 2018). In deciding to become British, EU families renew the sense of safety and security that has been compromised since the referendum. Becoming British is often perceived as the only way of preserving the status quo for parents and their children. Parents can retain their previous rights to work, education, and social protection. By becoming British, parents want to make sure that they retain equal treatment vis-à-vis British nationals in the short and long term, “just as it used to be before Brexit”, one explains. They also want their children to have the same opportunities. The naturalization process is also constructed as an equalizer between different family members who do not necessarily share the same legal status (e.g. UK-born versus non-UK born children).

For French-Cameroonian Thomas, it also ensures that all members of the family are treated equally. This perspective on citizenship acquisition is closer to what Labussière and Vink (2020) – building on Street’s theoretical approach – describes as a complementary good within the family that stresses the idea of interdependence between family members (2020, 2747). However, it goes beyond the “mobility paradigm” (Harpaz and Mateos 2019, 851) often mentioned in the literature on instrumental and strategic citizenship which focuses predominantly on individual decision making.

For many EU families, particularly those from “old” member states, EU citizenship meant more than a guarantee of equal status and treatment with British citizens. “I came here to be truly European”, an Italian NGO worker based in London explains. They felt fully integrated and welcomed into British society, with no recollection of any significant experience of verbal abuse or discrimination. While that remained the case for the majority of EU14 participants after the referendum, stories of physical and verbal abuses at school gates and in shops reported by the media or by friends and acquaintances are cited in our interviews. Participants mobilize these

stories to explain why they have felt unwelcome since the referendum, and why they fear becoming “victims of the hostile environment”. These sentiments became even more prevalent during the “Windrush scandal” which brought to the fore the mistreatment of hundreds of people who came to Britain as British subjects after WW2 and were targeted decades later by the Home Office as “irregular migrants”, wrongly detained, deported and denied legal rights (Yeo, Sigona, and Godin 2019). Brexit can be understood as a process of “unmaking” citizens, turning European nationals from “mobile citizens” into “worthless migrants” in the eyes of the public (D’Angelo and Kofman 2018), and of rebordering membership in British society (Gonzales and Sigona 2017). The struggle to become British is not one homogeneously shared by EU citizens. Brexit as a bordering process (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018; Benson 2020) redefines who belongs to the nation and who does not.

To counter the new politics of inclusion and exclusion produced by the Brexit referendum, EU parents have come to consider British citizenship as a tool with which they can reposition themselves in British society. However, this decision is rarely straightforward and is often perceived as the forcible result of circumstances, motivated by a desire to “take back control” over one’s family life in the protracted uncertainty of Brexit negotiations and a post-Brexit future.

Becoming British however does not mean committing to permanent settlement in the UK; instead, especially among EU nationals from EU14 member states, it can also be understood as means of maximizing mobility opportunities for themselves and their children. Neither PR nor settled status guarantees, for example, the unqualified right to return to the UK should the family relocate to another country for a prolonged period of time. EU citizens with settled status are permitted to spend up to five consecutive years outside the UK without losing their status; for those with pre-settled status, this is limited to two consecutive years (Hickman 2021). One of the consequences of Brexit is the end of freedom of movement between the UK and the EU. In considering their options, families framed their naturalization decision as a strategy to mitigate the impact of Brexit on their trans-European connections. The following quote from a German couple illustrates how becoming British forms part of a strategy that enables the family to remain together indefinitely should the parents decide to leave the UK while the children remain in the country:

My husband wants to apply for a British passport, [...] just because if Brexit is going ahead then our kids have both identities and we would love for them to have the choice wherever they want to live we will support them, but in case they ever choose Great Britain to be the place they want to live my husband claims that he would also have the choice to live where his children live. [EU same family, from Germany, in the UK since 2007, two UK-born children]

With a few exceptions (Reynolds and Zontini 2014; Zontini and Però 2019; Zambelli 2020), the transnationalisation of European families has often been overlooked both in academia and the media. Our interviews suggest that some EU families believe that becoming British is the only way to preserve transnational family life in the context of short- and long-term life planning.

Protective citizenship narrative

Among EU8 and EU2 nationals we encountered acute awareness of the UK's hostile environment policy for migrants and anti-immigration sentiments in British society often predating the Brexit referendum (Ryan 2010; Rzepniowska 2019; Allen and Ogtem-Young 2020). This translated into a pronounced lack of trust in the British government's reassurance that it would protect the rights of EU residents. Migrant narratives surrounding naturalization differ among EU families as well as between EU parents, as argued by Benson and Lewis (2019, 2212) who observe the "longer European histories of racism and racialization and the routine racial exclusion at the core of collective imaginings of who is British and who is European". Among mixed-race families, and particularly those based in London, the UK is often perceived as a better and safer place to raise their children than elsewhere in Europe. To return to the story of Thomas and Sonia mentioned at the beginning of this article, the couple explain the decision to stay in the UK for their children: "If you compare London to Paris, there are more obvious discriminations in Paris [...] For the kids it is definitely easier to be Black in London than it is in Paris, it is a reality". However, distinct citizenship narratives can also take place within the same family unit. Thomas, who is French Cameroonian, was in the process of becoming British at the time of the interview, while Sonia, did not see the point. "Because he's black, and I'm white, Brexit doesn't feel the same", she explains. However, both parents agreed that for their children, one born in London and one born in France, London constituted a better place to grow up than most cities in France.

Mihai, a London-based Roma activist, is happy that his child will not have to experience the same barriers and discrimination he met back in Romania. For him, despite Brexit, the UK is "still one of the best countries in the world to live". Mihai's assessment, he explains, is informed not only by his past experience and knowledge of the situation in Romania, but also by a consideration of the wave of anti-immigration politics spreading across Europe.

Similarly, Mirela and Frank, a mixed nationality couple with two UK-born daughters, draws from their personal histories to explain their view on naturalization. Mirela left Croatia the year her country was born from the dissolution of Yugoslavia. She came to Britain as a refugee and later gained Croatian citizenship, seeing her status in the UK changing when Croatia

became an EU member in 2013. Her husband Frank grew up in the Republic of Ireland during the Troubles (1960s–1990s). Drawing on their pre-migration experience, both are worried that Brexit has left a deep scar through British society, “which will take years to heal”. Mirela, who has experienced how quickly a country like Yugoslavia can disintegrate and how rapidly the value of a passport can change, has a recipe to mitigate the fragility of citizenship and protect her family: “It is a smart option to get as many passports as you can”. For Frank, his Republic of Ireland passport is the best to have under current circumstances due to the particular arrangements between the Republic of Ireland and the UK regarding the status of their citizens. But Mirela who holds the passport of a country that did not even exist when she left her home and it is now the newest member of the EU, is not persuaded. “Things can change quickly”, she replies.

Finally, more than the experience in the country of origin, it is also the memory of life as “immigrants” that has motivated some participants to apply for British citizenship. A Roma mother from Poland whose daughter was born in Britain shared her memory of arriving in the UK in 2002 (before Poland had become a member of the EU). She recalled members of the Roma community feeling as if they had been “locked in a room where you cannot open the door and can go nowhere”, and having their passports held by the Home Office for a prolonged period. This mother described the hostility of the UK government in preventing her travelling home due to the borders being closed to her and her family. As a result, she is currently gathering the documents necessary for her to acquire British citizenship, primarily to preserve her right to freedom of movement as well as to prevent her and her family from re-experiencing hostile policies that “had impacted us before becoming Europeans”.

if you have these feelings before, you have in your mind that you’re not able to go nowhere, you just have to be in this country for all—I’m not saying just to go back to Poland for one or two years and then come back. Just if something happened and you have to go in Poland and you have in your mind that you’re not able to come back, that is something that we had before and we know how hard it is for us to do it. I know that with the settled status, it’s going to be – I think they have to let us travel because of the settled status, but if you have a British passport, it’s easier. [EU same family, from Poland, in the UK since 2002, one UK-born child].

For many, Brexit unsettles a recently-achieved stability that as EU citizens feel they had to work hard to achieve. Narratives of deservingness and undeservingness often construct EU citizens as “good citizens”, who contribute to British society as hard-working taxpayers (Anderson 2013; Brubaker 1992). The interviewees often present themselves as “heroic citizens” (Bassel, Monforte, and Khan 2018) in the sense that they have not taken advantage of the system but have only contributed to British

society. From this perspective, EU citizens reinforce the narrative that access to citizenship must be “deserved” (Monforte, Bassel, and Khan 2019). Many have internalized this discourse regarding immigrants who ostensibly abuse the welfare system, and are eager to distance themselves from this category.

“Not becoming a British citizen”: absence of choice, non-citizenship narratives, and a wait-and-see approach

There are several reasons why EU citizens and their families do not apply for British citizenship, yet or at all. High application fees, demanding eligibility criteria and bureaucratic complexity pose significant barriers to access to naturalization. A Polish father who arrived in the UK in 1998 with his wife and their five children with indefinite leave to remain explains the difficulties they face:

You have to pay for that and it's a lot of money. So, when can you get such a lot of money? But for us, the worst thing is the historic test. I'm taking medication for sleep so my memory is really bad. If not that, then I would have applied in the past, but it's the one thing I am scared the most. [EU same family, from Poland, in the UK since 1998, five EU-born children]

Many EU citizens cannot afford the application fees for themselves and/or their children. This means that they are unable to use settled status as a springboard to a more secure legal status, and they will remain subject to immigration law irrespective of how long they have lived in the country for (Monforte, Bassel, and Khan 2019). A single mother from Italy, who used to be married to a Polish citizen, explains her concerns about Brexit, the citizenship process and the future of her children who arrived in the UK at a very young age:

Because this is another thing that many people don't know, it's very expensive. For an average-size family we talk about thousands of pounds. For me, this is another inequality, you see that it is not something that should depend on how much you can afford. For a household like mine, I am a single parent, that means three-thousand pounds, with the risk that it can be rejected. At the moment I can't afford that, I would do it right now, and I'm sure that if it was a matter of test, about British culture we would pass that, you know. [EU single family, from Italy, in the UK since 2011, two EU-born children]

Others struggle to fit the eligibility criteria or to provide the various documentary evidence required for the application. “I didn't come to the UK as an ‘immigrant’ but as an EU citizen. I never thought I would be asked to keep evidence of all my journeys abroad or not to leave the country for more than x number of days”, says another Italian parent.

High application fees pressure parents to make difficult decisions such as choosing which family members to prioritize when they cannot afford to

cover the cost applications for all members. After spending significant quantities of money on legal advice, families with children born outside of the UK have come to realize that becoming British citizens may not be enough to secure the status of their children (Yeo 2018a, 2018b). A French mother that has resided in the UK since the early 2000s explains this further:

We started to look into legal advice about what to do in terms of making my situation safe and the kids' situation safe so we consulted with a lawyer, it was such a minefield, we looked into it ourselves and thought 'Oh my goodness'. It looks so complicated, we didn't know how to apply for the kids, one being born in the UK, one in France, it was really so unclear. The Home Office makes it really difficult I find to understand which way to go [EU-UK family, mum from France, in the UK since 2002, one UK-born child and one EU-born child]

Due to restrictions concerning holding dual citizenship, some EU citizens feel unable to pursue the naturalization route as they do not want to be forced to renounce to their citizenship of birth. Citizenship decisions are often embedded in family dynamics with both the costs and the administrative burden being exacerbated when migrant families decide whether or not to apply for British citizenship for all family members (see also Soehl, Waldinger, and Luthra 2020).

Among some interviewees who have, to date, resisted the push towards naturalization, a counter-narrative of deservingness is expressed, in which the decision to not apply is framed as a response to a perceived unfairness for being asked to prove one's right to stay despite having contributed to British society for many years. This counter-narrative rejects a key feature of the political rhetoric around "earned citizenship" and citizenship as a "privilege", casting the refusal to apply as an objection for not seeing one's contribution to society and perceived social status acknowledged. Unsurprisingly, we encountered this narrative among EU citizens from a more privileged social status, most frequently white western Europeans. A corollary of the counter-narrative of deservingness is also to paint the UK as an "undeserving nation", one that has rejected EU citizens by voting for Brexit. Here the narrative binary of "good citizen" versus "bad citizen" becomes into one in which the "good nation", often an idealized version of the EU project, is juxtaposed with the "bad nation", one that it is unwilling to pay its debts and has no hesitation to infringe international law.

Under different political circumstances, some EU citizens may have considered applying for British citizenship since they felt they did "belong enough", but have since resisted becoming British out of a sense of defiance. This reversal of the deservingness narrative applied by EU migrants towards the UK underlines the relatively strong position that some EU citizens, particularly EU14 citizens and/or those from high income households, feel like they are in – one in which they choose between different kinds of citizenship rather than the country choosing between them. As argued by

Pan (2020), non-citizenship can also be “a strategic self-chosen way of being – and of claims-making”. This idea of the “underserving nation” was also vocalized by a Black British citizen who had formed an EU family with his Greek partner and their two mixed-raced children. During the interview, he expressed his desire to apply for EU citizenship as a way to “Un-British himself”:

Recently I have been thinking with the Brexit issue maybe we should get married and then I can get a Greek passport. I don't want to be British because of this Brexit [...] It is more an ideological and intellectual thing for me. I do not want to be associated with this Brexit identity. I do not want to be associated with a culture that is not inclusive and diverse you know in representation and in outlook and in action. [EU-UK family, British citizen, two UK-born children]

During the Brexit negotiations, many families we interviewed had chosen a “wait and see” approach as far as their legal status was concerned, especially those interviewed during the earlier periods of negotiation during which there had been remaining hope that the “madness” surrounding Brexit would somehow dissipate. Nonetheless, we observed that the “wait and see” approach was experienced differently by different participants. Some parents expressed a feeling of paralysis, for there was little they could do other than wait.

In other cases, this lack of action was justified by the perception that, irrespective of the outcomes of the Brexit negotiations, they would fare worse. This is the case for some of the Roma families we interviewed (Godin and Bica 2019).

We also encountered the “wait and see” approach at the more privileged end of the class spectrum. However, this time it was informed by the conviction that wealth and privilege would shield families from any negative political impacts. For example, a French mother with a career in senior management explains her response to the Brexit uncertainty: “I can't imagine someone like me, being deported. And if something like this was to happen, well, I wouldn't want to live in a country like this anyway”. As this French citizen explains to us, she considers herself a global citizen with no borders, so expected, ultimately, to be unaffected by Brexit.

Personally, as I said to you, I am very lucky that we are part of, you know, some would call us the elite I guess, but we are part of this, you know, global citizens if you like that have benefitted from the international economy. And my husband is in the financial services, so you know, we are okay financially even if we are worse off afterwards, touch wood, we will be fine. I have never really been personally worried about what happens to me, I mean at the end of the day, I have a French passport, I can go back home. [EU-UK family, from France, in the UK since 1986, two UK-born children]

Finally, a number of interviewees did not want to apply because they were actively planning their “exit strategy” from the UK. Since the EU referendum,

estimates of net-migration by the ONS show two parallel trends: declining new arrivals from the EU (EU immigration) and increasing departures of EU nationals living in the UK (EU emigration). Some interviewees returned to their country of birth, while others returned to their hometown. If some parents always had “aspirations to return”, others developed “aspirations to leave” the UK due to the increasing sense of un-belonging and disintegration stemming from the Brexit referendum.

Conclusion

Naturalization is an expensive and bureaucratically demanding process. The route to British citizenship is strewn with conditions and requirements that not all EU nationals can meet. Rather than the culmination of a normative path to integration for foreign residents that is often portrayed in the literature, naturalization in the narratives of EU citizens is a pragmatic, instrumental and defensive mechanism to mitigate and cope with the impact of Brexit on themselves and their families, and to preserve future options for their children. Naturalization involves personal and collective reckoning with a sense of loss of status and imagined future. Rather than a “premium”, as discussed in relation to the naturalization decision-making processes of refugees and less privileged migrants, naturalization is, for many EU citizens in the UK, a response to a perceived loss (defensive narratives) and threat (protective narratives). This process, we have argued in this article, is mediated and negotiated within the household, and the narratives of naturalization are embedded in participants’ social positioning and shaped by their social statuses and senses of entitlement and self-worth.

For EU citizens who were both eligible for and able to afford the application costs of the naturalization process, the application decision was primarily influenced by family considerations. Parental duty towards children is a central component of the citizenship narrative, naturalization being pursued as a last resort to prevent their children becoming second-class citizens or their family to be torn apart. Decisions about citizenship are often connected to pragmatic economic considerations, such as the fee regimes that govern access to higher education and the labour market. This defensive citizenship narrative is often attached to EU families for whom becoming British is perceived as the only way to preserve, at least to some extent, the status quo threatened by Brexit. Within this family narrative, sentiments of being forced to become British for the sake of children’s futures frequently arose.

Preserving family units and one’s trans-European connections is a primary concern for many applicants who express fears that Brexit may drive a wedge between themselves and close family members, limiting the horizon of their children’s possibilities and, over time, tearing apart the younger generations from parents, the extended family network and family heritage. Retaining

freedom of movement by acquiring an additional passport is considered an effective way to mitigate these risks.

For others, becoming British is motivated by the desire to avoid the negative stigma they perceive to be associated with the label “immigrant”, and to escape the reach of the “hostile environment” policy that some, particularly Central and Eastern, Europeans had already experienced before the Brexit referendum. This narrative also functions as a method of distancing oneself from “the Other” and retaining the social position of “good citizen” that they previously attached to being a European citizen in the UK. Naturalization becomes a route to “re-belong” to the dominant group. In cases such as these, becoming British often coincided with negative feelings, which could be described as a form of protective citizenship, a response that has been observed in other political climates that have become hostile to foreigners (see Chen 2020).

Finally, for many EU citizens, the prospect of becoming British is less straightforward, whether due to a lack of economic capital, bureaucratic requirements and complexities that purposely exclude a wide range of citizens or the limited options for dual citizenship in some EU countries. As highlighted by Yeo (2018a, 2018b), some EU citizens fall through the cracks of the processes involved in obtaining settled status and thus encounter insurmountable obstacles in their paths to citizenship. Whereas some EU nationals have decided to acquire British citizenship before exiting the country to guarantee a right to return not only to secure their children’s futures but also their right to family life across borders, some have decided to leave knowing that not applying for British citizenship will jeopardize their right to return in the future. Others have decided to stay in the UK while refusing to take the path to citizenship, and these people often describe the UK as an “undeserving nation”.

Considering the EU family as the unit of analysis, we argue that citizenship narratives do not only differ between migrant families but also within them, and especially between parents and children. To become or not becoming British does not necessarily mean the same for everyone in the household. The Brexit referendum and the uncertainties surrounding the rights of EU citizens in the UK have contributed to the increased complexity, fluidity and temporary nature of citizenship narratives among EU migrants.

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