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# THE FUTURE OF EASTERN EUROPEANS IN POST-BREXIT UNITED KINGDOM



**THE FUTURE OF EASTERN EUROPEANS  
IN POST-BREXIT UNITED KINGDOM**

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**Abstract:** The United Kingdom's relationship with the European Community has been a rather strained and inconsistent one ever since the latter's initial conception and birth against the backdrop of the World War II. Nevertheless, starting out as risky political bet by former Prime Minister David Cameron, very few actually expected the EU referendum in Britain to end as it did, the vote to leave with 52% versus 48% sending shockwaves throughout Europe and the whole world. In the immediate aftermath, the value of the pound plummeted, Scottish politicians once again raised the prospect of Scottish independence from the UK and discussions about the 'Good Friday Agreement' re-emerged, threatening to break up the nation, and deep fractures in British society were brought to the surface of political and social commentary. At the moment of writing, there are approximately six months to go until the official withdrawal date – set on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2019, and the prospects of 'no deal Brexit' are looming large.

The purpose of this working paper is to highlight British attitudes to immigration and critically assess the situation facing a group of so-called 'migrants' that was heavily implicated throughout the EU referendum: Eastern Europeans, in particular Polish and Romanian citizens residing and working in the UK. The paper will examine EU mobility in the UK and how the issue has featured in media and political discourse. Then, it will discuss how immigration featured in the campaign to leave the European Union and the impact of *Brexit* on hate crime in the UK, before moving on to shed some light on how Eastern Europeans are and are not being protected in *Brexit* discussions.

*Keywords: United Kingdom, European Union, Eastern Europe, migration, Brexit.*

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# Eastern Europeans in post-*Brexit* United Kingdom

## I. A general look at migration in the United Kingdom

Immigration was always one of the most controversial and divisive topics in post-war UK. Politicians, tabloid newspapers and average citizens alike frequently blame immigration for crime, school waiting lists, problems in the health service, unemployment and so on. There have been different waves of migration to the United Kingdom throughout history, and modern-day migration in the UK is not EU specific, with all groups experiencing unique situations and challenges. Nonetheless, this working paper is going to focus specifically on intra-EU migration, given the magnitude, present and future relevance of the topic.

### *i) European Citizenship and Eastern European migration*

The freedom of movement and residence for persons in the European Union is both one of the most inherent and one of the most controversial aspects of EU membership. The concept first appeared in the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, in essence stating that all EU member nation citizens are also considered citizens of the EU (Carey, 2002, p388). Over time, the concept has evolved and the rights accorded to EU citizens have been increasingly broadened and defined. The Lisbon Treaty officially confirmed that EU citizens have the right to travel and live freely in other European Member States (European Parliament, 2018, p1). As EU integration has increased however, so has the opposition to it, particularly after the ‘big bang’ expansion. In 2004, ten new Member States (most of them with a Communist legacy) joined the EU, including the EU-8 (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), which had a dramatic effect on intra-EU labour mobility (Portes, 2016, p15). To some in the EU-15 (the EU members prior to 2004, including the UK, France, Germany, Spain etc.), the expansion represented a concerning change in national societies, which were now open to higher levels of migration from the Eastern bloc in particular. At first many EU countries imposed temporary restrictions on freedom of movement of workers from these states in order to control the flow of migration in the short term and make it more orderly and controlled – interestingly enough, the UK did not (Portes, 2016, p16). In 2007, two new states from the East, Romania and Bulgaria, joined the EU. However, they had restrictions placed on worker mobility until 2014, meaning that citizens of these two countries were not able to travel and work freely for the first seven years of their membership (Portes, 2016, p16). Following the removal of

restrictions, there was a lot of movement from these two countries to EU-15, primarily driven by socioeconomic factors in their home countries (Portes, 2016, p16). This proved to be a trigger point for a great deal of opposition to the EU, and the last 14 years have seen some of the biggest challenges to the European project since it was established.

European citizenship goes hand in hand with the EU project, and has increasingly been in conflict with national identities, becoming rather antithetical instead of complementary. Understanding attitudes to national identity versus European identity is complex and is affected by numerous factors, including education (Carey, 2002, p405), and the fear of other nationalities encroaching on national identity can act as a powerful driver of opposition to EU integration as a whole (Carey, 2002, p387). In extremely simplistic terms, the more intra-EU migration increases, the more nationals in different EU countries worry that their nation has been transformed and ‘taken over’ by foreigners. This is a trend that has been observed in the UK, although it is not just in the UK that migration is a big topic. The rise of populist right-wing movements across Europe that have blamed foreigners for various domestic plights are indicative that *Brexit* is more the symptom of a trend sweeping Europe than a standalone issue, albeit arguably one of the most dramatic. Although a lot of these movements have found their support base in opposing migration from outside of Europe, in particular refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants originating from the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, intra-EU mobility has been a factor leading to rising levels of Euroscepticism as an increasing number of politicians and pressure groups have stressed that it threatens their national identity. As a result, different Eurosceptic grassroots movements have started to surface across Europe with an emphasis on immigration at their core (Barnes, 2018), and the *Brexit* vote has led to copycat campaigns in other European countries such as France. However, as the last couple of years have showed, other than a few grassroots groups slightly increasing their membership there was no ‘domino effect’ of *Brexit*. On the contrary, the envisioned ‘divorce’ with the UK has rekindled the discussion about EU Enlargement, especially toward the Western Balkans.

The UK, along with Germany, is one of the Member States that receives the most amount of people leaving other EU countries, and this is particularly true as Enlargement progressed. In 2016, figures showed that the number of EU nationals living in Britain stood at 3.3m, with a 700,000 increase in the five years prior (Harris, 2016). One of the roots of the associated controversies has been noted by one commentator: “while the UK ranks fourth out of EU countries which host the largest number of EU migrants, the countries that rank above it (Germany, Spain and France) are larger geographically therefore spreading the impact of migration” (Harris, 2016). Further, of the 700,000 increase, 49% were estimated

to be from Poland and Romania according to a report from the Migration Observatory at Oxford, which is of course a noteworthy number coming from just two countries (Harris, 2016). Indeed, among the most common non-British nationalities in the UK are Polish and Romanian (ONS, 2017), and it is for this reason that nationals of these two countries in particular are the focus of this paper. The Polish in particular are regularly singled out in UK discussions on immigration, in part as a result of the number of Poles in Britain which has triggered public concern that there are too many Polish nationals in the UK. In 2015, estimates put Polish as the biggest nationality in the UK after British (Rzepnikowska, 2018, p2), and in 2015 Poles accounted for 29% of EU citizens in the UK (Wadsworth et al, 2016, p2).

There is a long history of migration to Britain from Eastern Europe, dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when forced migration of Ashkenazi Jews from Russia triggered large scale Eastern European migration (Ciupijus, 2011, p540), but it has not been seen on this scale. On the surface, it is perhaps understandable that some people may be afraid about a potential uncontrolled increase in foreigners and as a result of the numbers many people within Britain associate the EU with Eastern European migration (Economist, 2012). However, it is not just Poles and Romanians (or other Eastern Europeans) that account for the number of EU nationals in Britain – Poland, Romania, Spain, Italy, Hungary and Portugal account for almost half of all EU citizens based in the UK (Harris, 2016). Yet, the Spanish, Italians and Portuguese nationals do not appear to have been scapegoated in the same way as those from Eastern European states. Eastern European workers have not always been treated with scepticism, and, for a time, the skills that Polish workers in particular were bringing to the UK were seen as desirable. Hostility to Polish workers – the phrase *Polish plumber* for example obsessively used a symbol of cheap labour coming from Central and Eastern Europe –, as well as Romanians has grown over time, and has been fuelled in part by the consequences of the economic crisis that rocked the Eurozone, as well as the United Kingdom.

## *ii) Media and Political Discourse*

Labelling EU immigration is somewhat of a grey area. Intra-EU migration in the post-2004 era in particular could easily be seen as labour migration as well as exercising the right of free movement (Ciupijus, 2011, p540). In accordance with EU laws and principles, after becoming European citizens, people moving around the EU are not immigrants per say, rather they are community citizens exercising their right of free movement. However, this is not the way that Eurosceptic UK politicians and tabloids have publicly discussed the issue, consistently referring to an influx of migrants from the EU. Even those who are pro-labour mobility and immigration have not really spoken about it in these terms, indicative



perhaps of the difficulty in establishing the concept of European Union citizenship in practice. The way that it is labelled has had a powerful effect on perceptions in wider society, and in the UK a great deal of opposition to Eastern Europeans has been fuelled by harmful discourse both in the media and from politicians. Eastern Europeans are consistently blamed for a myriad of issues, which range from ‘stealing’ jobs, to crime, to, bizarrely, eating British swans (Dowling, 2007). Tabloids such as the *Daily Mail* in particular have enjoyed printing inflammatory articles fuelling some of the negative perceptions.

Evidence consistently rebukes these claims. In general, “EU immigrants pay more in taxes than they take out in welfare and the use of public services. They therefore help reduce the budget deficit. Immigrants do not have a negative effect on local services such as crime, education, health, or social housing” (Wadsworth et al, 2016, p2). A government commissioned report in 2013 further suggested that, as a group, Eastern Europeans are far less likely to claim benefits than other migrant groups (Pasic, 2013). Furthermore, recent analysis demonstrated that, in general, workers from the EU contribute £2,300 more in tax than the average native British worker, and has suggested that as a result of this taxes may have to be raised to make up the difference if those workers are to leave following Brexit (Merrick, 2018). More broadly, arguments that migration reduces jobs are flawed, as research suggests that migration does not increase competition for jobs. This is because there is not a fixed number of jobs available in a given country, and by entering the country and becoming consumers, demand rises for a variety of goods and services which consequently increases the need for workers to provide (Wadsworth et al, 2016, p5). Researchers at the London School of Economics further uncovered that EU migration does not harm any groups of UK native workers (harm meaning reducing job opportunities etc.), the only group suffering in reality are other EU workers who have recently arrived in Britain (Wadsworth et al, 2016, p12).

Despite this type of evidence pointing to the positives, or simply the lack of harm caused by migration, from the East of Europe included, discourse in the media and politics continues to disproportionately focus on perceived threats. As populists have the tendency to provide simple and straightforward solutions to complex problems, during the *Brexit* campaign it was frequently said that people in the UK had grown tired of experts. But evidence presented by experts was disregarded long before 2016 as the discussions surrounding immigration demonstrate. Eastern Europeans have frequently been singled out as a specific group of migrants, and are discussed as distinctly different from other groups of European incomers. This really solidifies that Eastern European migration is far more contentious and controversial than that from Western Europe, and it has also received more attention from policy makers (Ford, 2011, p1022), suggesting that numerous levels of British society have specific concerns regarding

it. Another argument may be that the issue is less the nationality of those emigrating to Britain, and rather the fact that seemingly overnight the borders had been opened to a great number of potential immigrants which concerned people in Britain. The fact that Eastern Europeans are monitored differently to Western Europeans further reinforces that the group are being specifically scrutinised; however, once again this could be due to the large inflow in a short period of time as opposed to as a result of negative views (Ford, 2011, p1022). Nonetheless, at a societal level this type of action contributes to the sense that these groups are an ‘other’, fuelling an US vs. THEM dichotomy, and the attention they have been given does suggest that they are viewed more critically than other groups (Ford, 2011, p1023). Another hypothesis raised is that the reason Eastern Europeans are so often blamed and feature disproportionately in discussions of inter-EU migration is simply that as they are newer to the EU it is easier to portray them as responsible for Britain’s issues (Harris, 2016). They have become unfortunate scapegoats for essentially being in the wrong place at the wrong time as opposed to anything they have done themselves, becoming the focus of political discourse in a nation already divided on the topic of immigration.

Romanians and Bulgarians became the targets of specific attention in the months before the removal of worker restrictions, back in 2014. Prior to the lifting of restrictions, Britain announced plans to reduce housing and health benefits, which was justified as steps to make the welfare state less attractive to migrants (Pasic, 2013). Once again, this action reinforced the idea that the reason the UK was attractive to Eastern Europeans in particular was because it had a welfare system that was easy to exploit. In 2015, David Cameron, Prime Minister at the time and leader of the Conservative party, stated in his manifesto that he would “regain control of EU migration by reforming welfare rules”, laying out new measures such as requiring EU citizens to live in the UK for 4 years before being able to claim child benefit for example in order to “reduce the financial incentive for lower-paid, lower-skilled workers to come to Britain (Conservative Party, 2015, p30). At a first glance this could to some see logical given that Britain is indeed a country seeing high numbers of immigration in general. It was a good politically tactic, touching upon a pertinent issue among the British electorate. However, the EU itself already has stipulations set out under Freedom of Movement agreements that help control intra-EU migration. Since 2004, the law in the EU has quite clearly stated that EU citizens may circulate freely for three months. Following this period, if they wish to remain they can be required to show that they are employed or in full time education, have enough funds to support themselves (so as not to become dependent on welfare systems), and that they have health insurance so as not to put pressure on the National Health Service for example (Whitker, 2017). Oddly for a nation seemingly so negatively impacted by immigration, the UK is among a handful

of EU Member States that has chosen not to implement this (Whitker, 2017). Perhaps there is an argument to be made that intra-EU migration is not actually seen as a genuine concern, rather, as stated earlier in the paper, is used as a political tool that allows Eastern Europeans in particular to become easy scapegoats that can detract attention from other causes of national issues and provide reassurances to the British electorate.

In the media in particular, suspicion towards Eastern Europeans is specific in that it is defined by crime and economic considerations whereas other groups facing discrimination in the UK are targeted for different reasons – Muslims, for example, are considered a security threat by those who oppose their presence in Britain (Hellwig and Sinno, 2017, p 352). At first, Eastern Europeans were considered an invisible group of immigrants due to their whiteness allowing them to blend in easily to British society, but public opinion (fuelled by at times hysteric media reports) has shifted to perceiving the group as individuals coming to ‘steal’ jobs and burden welfare services (Rzepnikowska, 2018, p1), partly as a result of the job sectors many occupy. Even though the individuals moving from Eastern Europe are not necessarily low-skilled, many with high level qualifications from their home countries, they have generally speaking occupied low-skilled jobs since arriving and congregated in certain sectors such as construction, retail and hospitality (Portes, 2016, p17). Eastern European migration to Britain was arguably never really understood as an expansion of national citizen rights, but rather about increasing numbers of individuals willing to work in low-skilled jobs for low wages (Ciupijus, 2011, p545). As a group, they are generally looked upon as lesser than British workers, expected to carry out roles many Brits feel are below them – and of course the reality is that as with any country, Eastern Europeans travelling come with a variety of backgrounds and experiences, all valuable. The consequence is that the group have been blamed for issues that stem from elsewhere in British politics they have been awarded few specific protections.

## ***II. Brexit***

The British have arguably been reluctant Europeans from the beginning, always approaching EU integration with caution. As a matter of fact, right after joining, the British public was asked whether the country should remain in the European Economic Community (as it was then known), in 1975. That nationwide referendum, Britain’s first, marked a great win for staying in. Four decades later, *Brexit* and immigration have soared to the forefront of British debate, both before and after the vote, with Eurosceptic movements pushing for a referendum long before one was announced.

i) *Immigration and the Leave Campaign*

As this working paper has already discussed, hostility towards Eastern Europeans, Polish and Romanians in particular, was present long before the *Brexit* campaign, however *Brexit* acted as a catalyst for hostility to immigration. Immigration became a major focus of the group campaigning to secure a British exit from the EU (the leave campaign). The official Vote Leave website and paraphernalia included statements such as “EU membership stops us controlling who comes into our country, on what terms, and who can be removed” and “we cannot stop criminals entering Britain from Europe while job creators from non-European countries are blocked” (Vote Leave, 2016). These evoked fears that evidently resonated with many British voters; the two most common reasons cited as the most important in determining individuals position on the EU were the economy (21%) and immigration (20%) (Swales, 2016, p13). Throughout the campaign season, the leave campaign presented a convincing case where they were able to provide assurances that a vote to leave would reduce the number of non-UK citizens in Britain (Swales, 2016, p17). The leave campaign did seem to forget however that British people too enjoy the rights and privileges associated with the freedom of movement, some estimates suggesting that just as many British people leave for other European countries as those that come to the UK (Rettman, 2013).

Discussions did not solely focus Eastern Europeans, with many prominent leave campaigners such as Nigel Farage (leader of the UK Independence Party and one of the key *Brexit* figureheads) seemingly conflating EU and none EU migration. The issue that came to boiling point when Mr Farage unveiled an anti-migrant poster displaying non-white migrants and asylum seekers reading “the EU has failed us all”. The poster sparked widespread anger from all sides of the political spectrum and the *Brexit* debate, and was even reported to the police for ‘inciting racial hatred’ (Stewart and Mason, 2016). Even high-profile leavers such as historian and former secretary of state for foreign affairs Boris Johnson, who had raised concern about immigration, immediately separated themselves from the actions of Farage, claiming to be pro-immigration (Stewart and Mason, 2016), demonstrating how contentious immigration was even between different individuals and groups calling for control. At times, the debate was conflated, discussing refugees for example which seemed irrelevant – they are a separate immigration discussion and the idea raised that Britain would be compelled to accept refugees settling in Germany was erroneous, even if they were to be granted EU travel documents that would not guarantee them the right to reside in the UK. Further, the campaign ignored the fact that Britain maintained far more control than other EU countries during events such as the refugee crisis, so the over emphasis on immigration was inherently problematic

(Leonard, 2015). Britain is also not part of Schengen, so its border procedures are stricter, limiting the opportunity for people to enter the country undetected (Wadsworth et al, 2016, p2).

Nonetheless, all of the focus on immigration contributed to a wider context of intolerance towards foreigners being in the UK, and other groups suffered the consequences. While attention was often paid to non-white groups of migrants specifically, Eastern Europeans received specific attention and suffered backlash. In particular, some leavers played to fears about migrants from the East increasing competition for jobs, consistently blaming them for stagnating wages and poor job opportunities (Powers, 2016). Understanding *Brexit* cannot rely on demographics alone, but this approach helps paint a general picture in order to understand some of the key issues at stake here. Those most likely to vote leave were those without a formal education, on low incomes and living in social housing (Swales, 2016, p7). Wider research has demonstrated on numerous occasions that, in general, less-educated and less skilled citizens are more likely to be sceptical of immigrants as they perceive their presence as increased competition for jobs (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007, p399). Given that Eastern Europeans were, and are painted to be an economic threat occupying the same roles that many working-class British workers occupy, it is unsurprising that they became a scapegoated group throughout the referendum. Ill feelings towards immigrants was a key feature of the *Brexit* campaign, and, to many, hostility to immigrants in the UK has become synonymous with *Brexit*, ignoring the complex systemic effects that actually leaving the European Union would have on the country politically and economically.

## ii) *Legitimising Hate Crime*

The anti-immigration focus of *Brexit* has further brought to the surface deep divisions in British society and a generation gap that cannot remain unaddressed. One of the most concerning trends observed post-*Brexit* is the upward trends of hate crime, racism and discrimination suffered by immigrants, as well as ethnic minorities regardless of nationality. Eastern Europeans, in particular the Polish, once again found themselves in the firing line. Following the EU referendum vote, postcards were discovered in a town near Cambridge calling for “Polish vermin to go home”, a concerning dehumanising message that sent alarm bells ringing around the Polish community (Fox, 2016). The incident was investigated by police, but more focus should have been placed upon the language used. Dehumanising was a common practice for the fascist regimes of the inter-war period, thus making the act of mistreating and even exterminating the concerned populations somewhat more legally permissible and morally acceptable for the abusers. For

this reason, this incident should have been a catalyst for more action against discrimination towards Eastern Europeans, but once again it was not.

As shocking as this particular incident was to the UK public, making headline news temporarily in almost all mainstream newspapers, it did not come as a great surprise to many who have been used to suffering discrimination for years. In work interviewing Polish residents in the UK, Rzepnikowska confirmed that anti-Eastern European attitudes and attacks were well-established before the vote (2018, p14), claims which can be backed up using a myriad of evidence. In 2007, over 100 Romanian citizens had to be placed under armed police protection in Belfast after they were threatened by a loyalist group threatening them with violence if they did not leave the UK, on the sole basis of their nationality (McDonald, 2009). In 2011, Scotland noted an increase in racist incidents, an increase largely attributed to the rise in anti-polish hate crime, and in Northern Ireland police statistics showed that there had been an 162% increase in crimes directed at Eastern Europeans (Fox, 2016). Following the *Brexit* vote this has been becoming more explicit in many cases, and has even spilled into classrooms. A recent survey got responses from 1100 young Central and Eastern Europeans between the ages of 12-18 who had been in the UK for a minimum of 3 years. Results showed that 49% reported an increase of racism since *Brexit*, reporting elevated levels of bullying which ranged from name calling to physical attacks (Sime et al, 2017, p4). Adults too have reported that following the vote they have faced issues that they didn't before, for example having insults directed at them in the street or drinks thrown in their faces by people hearing them speak in their native Eastern European languages (BBC Newsnight, 2016). Despite high instances of violence towards Eastern Europeans, it had not been given a great deal of national (or international) attention (Rzepnikowska, 2018, p2). Failure to do so has enabled the situation to deteriorate, putting the safety and wellbeing of Eastern European citizens in the UK at risk.

It is of course important to stress that it is a minority of people who commit hate crimes against Romanians and Poles or any other group. The vast majority of those who voted to leave the EU, inclusive of those who did so citing immigration as their primary concern, do not carry out physical attacks against these groups. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the *Brexit* vote has exacerbated pre-existing tensions, a trend that is likely to continue as it remains unaddressed. It has contributed to a pre-existing climate of intolerance, characterised by years of subtle attacks in discourse towards Eastern Europeans, as was previously discussed in this paper. Most concerning of all, the vote appears to have legitimised to the views of a small yet vocal sector of British society who feel maligned enough by Eastern European

presence in the UK to abuse people from the region. Failure to address this critical issue risks making communities increasingly vulnerable.

### **III. *Brexit* discussions and policy implications**

Paul Drechsler, former president of the Confederation of British Industry recently stated that: “It’s an absolute scandal, two-and-a-half years in, that citizens of Europe in the UK and UK citizens in Europe still do not have an unambiguous, unconditional guarantee they will be OK no matter what. Leaving people hanging by a thread of uncertainty is totally against British values, totally against European values” (O’Carroll, 2018).

#### *i) Impact of the current negotiations*

The *Brexit* negotiations are incredibly complex, and at the time of writing there is in reality little known about the future of Britain and the EU. The negotiation process has been highly criticised by actors from all sides of the debate – although given the numerous opinions, actors and issues involved it is perhaps a little unfair to expect consensus even at this late stage. Nonetheless, a key debate has been around the fact that EU citizens in the UK and vice versa have been treated as bargaining chips with little respect for the fact that *Brexit* could uproot and disrupt lives. Both UK residents in the EU and EU citizens in the UK alike have raised frustrations that they are being abandoned by the British government. The main focus of discussions has been on topics such as security or the Northern Irish border for example, both deemed to be more important. In response, grassroots campaigns such as ‘The 3 Million’ have been set up to lobby for the rights of EU nationals, stressing the enormity of the impact of *Brexit* on the day to day lives of European citizens.

The EU has stressed that citizen rights should be at the core of the Withdrawal Agreement, both EU-27 members in Britain and British citizens residing in other EU countries, and that both UK and EU citizens should be treated equally (European Commission, 2017, p2). In reality, this has not been a great focus in the post vote period, and in a statement, which led to concerns about UK-EU relations in the future Theresa May, current UK Prime Minister, said that under a new post-*Brexit* immigration policy, EU citizens will not be prioritised. Instead, she has explained that the policy will focus on bringing ‘high-skilled’ migrants to the UK, which of course has an impact on future Eastern European migration, given the industries many work in (BBC, 2018). In terms of addressing the needs of current residents in Britain, the UK government has, to its credit, begun to address some of the concerns that have been raised. At the situation currently stands, some EU citizens will be able to apply for ‘settled status’ in the UK, namely

those who have been living in the UK for five years or more, can prove their identity, evidence the fact that they reside in the UK and don't have criminal convictions. For many, this is a promising scheme that helps ease some of the anxiety associated with *Brexit*, and the government has said that the emphasis will be on approving applications as opposed to rejecting them (O'Carroll and Grierson, 2018).

However, there are issues raised with the scheme, concerns which will disproportionately affect Poles and Romanians, as well as other groups of Eastern Europeans. The scheme itself is a positive step forwards, but news of it may not be reaching the right people, and Eastern Europeans are among those that may miss out. If news of the scheme isn't reaching people, they risk not applying on time and missing out on receiving citizenship rights – and those who haven't been in the UK for five years' risk being rejected. Language barriers are a big factor, charities worrying that the 'shocking' process of applying for a visa will be exacerbated for those with low English language and literacy skills. In addition, many job sectors that attract Poles and Romanians involve 'cash in hand' jobs, which, combined with a high instance of individuals subletting flats as opposed to owning property for example, means that many do not have tax records or contracts with landlords, increasing the chance of them slipping through the net (O'Carroll, 2018a). The potential consequences of this are huge, and in the long term could exacerbate the chance of workers becoming vulnerable and at risk of exploitation (O'Carroll, 2018a). Attention needs to focus on the groups that may miss out on registering for the 'settled status' plan, who are at risk of becoming unlawful migrants which could lead to them being in breach of immigration laws in the future (Travis, 2018).

Further, an accumulation of different experiences and stressors associated with *Brexit* can have a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing on EU citizens, especially Eastern Europeans. The lack of certainty in the Brexit negotiations is having a detrimental effect to EU citizens in the UK as a whole. Following the vote, online advocacy forums noted high levels of reported distress among residents (Existential academy, 2017). What policy makers have perhaps overlooked is that ignoring the issues of citizen rights, or raising them as negotiation strategies, contributes to the huge emotional upheaval and stress the *Brexit* negotiations are having on people's lives. These are people who have jobs, families, social circles and established lives in the UK who do not know what is going to happen to them, rates of anxiety and depression among these groups now so great that a dedicated mental health initiative has been created to try and support people through the process (Existential Academy, 2017). To a certain extent, the British government has recognised that this is the case, and after coming under fire for not prioritising the rights of citizens they have promised to offer 'human contact' to anyone needing support with the settled status



scheme (O'Carroll and Grierson, 2018). This will not necessarily ease the anxieties of affected individuals however, particularly those accustomed to seeing and hearing anti-immigrant rhetoric from all levels of British society, and may not be convinced that they truly will receive government support.

Young people in particular are being impacted by the *Brexit* vote. Discussions with young Eastern Europeans have been marked by feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about the future, a lack of sense of belonging, and many are worried about their future rights and treatment in the UK (Sime et al, 2017, p4) and are being constantly told that they do not belong in a country that they consider their home. One young person from Poland in an interview with BBC said that following the referendum, his friends do not even want to play football with him because they're worried something might happen to them (BBC Newsnight, 2016). Furthermore, many young people are now questioning their European identity, highlighting that the very concept of European citizenship and identity is at risk. One research participant stated that: "I feel European more than anything. The *Brexit* Referendum has me severely worried for the future of this country, its people and foreigners living here.", another that "I don't want to stay in the country in which I need to hide my nationality to be treated equally" (Sime et al, 2017, p5). These are big emotions and worries for young people at an age where there are already numerous pressures placed upon them. For some the vote could see a potential break up of their family, with concerns that parents may be faced with no choice but to return to their countries of origin. Young Eastern Europeans need to receive more emotional support during the *Brexit* transition, they also need to be consulted and provided with up to date information (Sime et al, 2017, p6).

## ii) *Looking to the future*

Looking to the both the immediate and long-term future, there are several considerations that the British government should bear in mind in relation to immigration specifically. In August, official figures showed that the number of EU citizens migrating to the UK was falling, and in particular more Eastern Europeans, particularly from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary and Latvia, left the nation than entered, sparking concerns in the business community that there would be a shortage of skills (Nicholls, 2018). There is a general concern that businesses are going to struggle without EU labour, regardless of what skill level that labour is (O'Carroll, 2018), universities too have raised fears of a brain drain as EU academics leave (Savage, 2017). The government is under pressure to reduce immigration, but this brings significant risks, to the economy in particular. If they impose the same restrictions on EU and non-EU citizens, net migration could be cut by about 100,000 which could

have serious negative ramifications on the UK economy (Portes, 2016, p20). Researchers at the London School of Economics warn that with reducing the number of migrants from the EU there is a greater chance of austerity, as people from the EU contribute to increased funds being available for health and education by bringing in resources (Wadsworth et al, 2016, p13). If this is to happen it is not unfair to hypothesise that remaining non-UK citizens risk being scapegoated as they have been for years, addressing hostilities towards foreigners should therefore be a possibility. The future also brings opportunities to address issues that have either not been addressed, or not been fully understood. In the post-*Brexit* period, questions have been raised about how to ‘replace’ jobs currently occupied by Eastern European workers such as fruit picking as many of the jobs are unattractive to British workers (Portes, 2016, p20). Discussions in the UK have begun to focus on replacing ‘cheap labour’, however this should also be an opportunity to address the arguably exploitative nature of labour distribution among Eastern and Western Europeans.

Away from the UK, this could also serve as a chance to pay closer attention to Eastern European countries themselves and the impact that post-communist emigration has had. Romania, in particular, has been hit hard, poor economic conditions and opportunities in the nation pushing young people to look for new opportunities abroad. As a result, Romania faces concerns with demographics; low fertility rate and an aging population, and many are concerned about consequences of a brain drain (The Economist, 2016). Issues like these disproportionately affect poorer EU countries, many of which are in the Eastern region and show a darker side of free movement. This is the time to look closer at the extent to which Eastern European states such as Romania are reforming and ways to accelerate that.

### **Concluding remarks**

All in all, this paper has highlighted some of the British attitudes to immigration and assessed the situation facing a group that were heavily implicated and used as ‘cannon fodder’ throughout the EU referendum: Eastern Europeans, in particular Polish and Romanian citizens residing and working in the UK. The paper has pointed to some of the main tensions in Britain surrounding migration both before and following the *Brexit* vote, with a particular focus on Eastern European citizens. It has provided a background for the issues at hand, while showing how *Brexit* has fuelled divisions, legitimised hate crime and fundamentally exposed failures on intra-EU integration as a whole. It has presented some of the day to day concerns of Eastern Europeans living in the UK, and has highlighted areas of interest that need to be prioritised as negotiations move forward. Ultimately, discussions on the topic cannot solely be

restricted to the official *Brexit* negotiations. The main limitation of the paper derives from the fact that *Brexit* is an ongoing and rather unpredictable process, still hard to effectively assess.

Arguably, the UK needs to begin tackling more seriously its domestic social attitudes towards Eastern Europe, and there should be more tangible methods to enable safe reporting of hate crimes and support provided to victims of it. On the other hand, it may be high time for the EU to (re)consider the very concept of European identity and how to better make it complementary to that of national identity. Regardless of one's stance on the UK's decision in that long summer of 2016, the vote has outlined significant problems of internal coherence and solidarity among EU Member States, mirrored in other EU countries as well. As such, even though an initial 'domino effect' was avoided in countries like Germany or France, failure to address the underlying causes leading to that referendum could, on the longer term, make for troubling similar scenarios in other countries with disillusioned citizens – like Italy, Poland or Hungary. Furthermore, the general treatment in the UK of our target groups suggests that integration of different EU Member States nationals has yet to overcome the idea that Eastern Europeans are perceived as second-class citizens, an issue which needs to be further explored and addressed in other researches focused on social European cohesion. Also, a big focus needs to be placed on improving education, on all levels, about the role of the EU, and also countering misinformation in the age of renewed 'hybrid war'.

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