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Moreh, Chris, McGhee, Derek and Vlachantoni, Athina (2016) Should I stay or should I go? Strategies of EU citizens living in the UK in the context of the EU referendum. ESRC Centre for Population Change Briefing Paper 35. Discussion Paper. ESRC Centre for Population Change.

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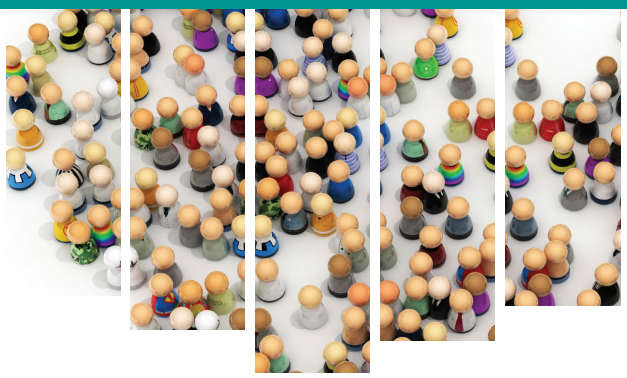

Should I stay or should I go? Strategies of EU citizens living in the UK in the context of the EU referendum

What might EU migrants in the UK do in order to cope with the UK's departure from the EU? Might they stay or leave? Using data from a pre-EU Referendum online survey we examine how Portuguese, Polish and Romanian nationals in the UK intended to respond to the EU Referendum. Excluding the Irish, these groups are the three largest EU nationality groups in the UK.

Key Points

- The majority of the Polish, Romanian and Portuguese respondents in the survey reported their intentions to stay in the UK, regardless of the outcome of the EU Referendum.
- Such intentions may mean that applications for British citizenship will increase over the next 5 years.
- There are considerable differences in attitudes between different EU nationality groups, with those from countries that have more recently become part of the EU being most inclined to say that they plan to apply for British citizenship.

Introduction

In the debates leading up to the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, and since the country's vote for 'Brexit', the topic of migration has been high on the political agenda. According to the latest estimates from the Office for National Statistics, there are around 2.8 million non-British EU citizens living in the UK, constituting 6% of the total UK population. These EU migrants are arguably among the most immediately and directly affected by the Brexit process. Here we present findings from a pre-Referendum online survey focusing on the 'coping strategies' that different EU migrant groups living in the UK might adopt in response to potential changes in their legal and social status as consequence of Britain's exit from the European Union. We asked whether they would (1) consider leaving the United Kingdom; (2) consider applying for permanent residence or British citizenship, or (3) take no action. Such decisions facing approximately 6% of the UK's resident population could have considerable social and economic consequences for the United Kingdom.

		Poland		Portugal		Romania	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Sex	Female	583	66%	76	55%	67	50%
	Male	303	34%	63	45%	66	50%
Age	Mean (min-max)	38 (19-65)		35.6 (19 to 64)		34.5 (20 to 59)	
Years in UK	Mean (min-max)	7y2m (1m to 18y3m)		4y2m (1m to 20y10m)		3y10m (<1m to 17y7m)	
Years in UK (groups)	Less than 5	267	30%	101	74%	90	68%
	5 - 10	417	47%	17	12%	35	27%
	More than 10	203	23%	19	14%	7	5%
UK Country	England	715	80%	121	87%	124	93%
	Wales	36	4%	6	4%	2	1%
	Scotland	122	14%	11	8%	6	4%
	Northern Ireland	18	2%	1	1%	2	1%
Marital status	Married or in civil partnership	450	52%	40	30%	49	38%
Children	Yes	524	59%	46	33%	48	36%
Economic activity status	Employed (full-time)	512	61%	78	58%	69	56%
	Employed (part-time)	139	17%	14	10%	15	12%
	Self-employed	79	9%	10	7%	20	16%
	Economically inactive	110	13%	32	24%	20	16%
Education level	Post-secondary higher	377	44%	104	78%	86	66%
	Secondary	353	41%	25	19%	39	30%
	Vocational	130	15%	4	3%	5	4%

Table 1: Main characteristics of the sample
Notes: The table excludes missing data (non-response, 'other' or 'does not apply' answers).
Column percentages are based on non-missing data.

The study

The findings presented here are based on a sample of 1168 responses to an online survey of EU migrants currently living in the UK. The survey was conducted between March 2016 and the EU Referendum day 23rd June 2016. It was made available in seven languages. While the survey had a wider focus, here we restrict the sample to the three largest EU national groups living in the UK (excluding Irish citizens, who had a broader set of political rights in respect to the Referendum): Portuguese, Polish and Romanian nationals. The three groups represent three different EU enlargement waves, with Portugal joining the EU in 1986, Poland in 2004 and Romania in 2007.

Of the 1168 cases included in the analysis, Poles make up over three quarters (76%), while Portuguese and Romanians account for 12% each. This distribution is broadly representative of the target population. In our sample, 63% of the respondents are female; 45% are in their thirties, 19% are younger than thirty, 26% are in their forties, and 11% are in the over-fifty age group; the average time spent in the UK is 6 years and 5 months, and 83% live in England; 48% are married, and 53% have children. In terms of economic status, 60% are in full-time employment, 15% are employed part-time, 10% are self-employed, and 15% are inactive (4% of these are in full-time education and 8% 'looking after family'). Regarding their highest educational qualification, 51% of the sample is educated to post-secondary (further- and higher education) level, 37% to secondary level, and 12% possess a vocational qualification. Table 1 shows there are considerable differences in the characteristics of our sample across the three nationality groups.

Main findings

EU citizens living in the UK have two possible strategies in the event of a change in their legal status as a consequence of Brexit: staying or leaving. Staying can be broken down into staying but taking 'no action' or staying and adopting 'civic integration' strategies, that is either obtaining permanent resident status in the UK and/or British citizenship.

The survey attempted to understand the degree to which each of these strategies would be adopted while acknowledging that intentions are volatile. To evaluate 'Brexit effects' on future plans, the respondents were asked what their 'most likely' action would be in two different contexts: one in the case of Brexit, and one over the next 5 years regardless of the outcome of the Referendum.

Around 11% of the overall sample declared that they held or had applied for a permanent residence certificate, with some notable differences between the three groups: 11% of Romanians, 13% of Poles, and only 2% of the Portuguese respondents. The results below exclude participants who already possess or have applied for permanent residence and were not planning on taking any action both in case of a Brexit and in the next five years regardless of the referendum result.

Brexit Effects

Looking at the three nationality groups combined, 10% of the respondents in our sample were planning to leave the UK in the next five years irrespective of the outcome of the EU referendum, 17% were planning to stay in the UK without applying for permanent residence or British citizenship, while the vast majority (73%) had plans to stay and adopt one of the mentioned civic integration strategies.

However, there are noticeable differences in the 5-year plans of the three nationality groups (Figure 1, left panel), with fewer Poles planning to leave than Portuguese or Romanians (blue bars), and fewer Portuguese nationals planning to undergo civic integration (red bars).

Exit from the EU also affects the intentions of the three nationality groups differently (Figure 1, right panel). Brexit has a 'mobilising' influence on Poles and Portuguese citizens, inciting them into greater action and reducing the number who intend to 'stay and take no action' (green bars); with Brexit more Portuguese say they will opt for a civic integration plan (up 8%), while Polish nationals are more likely to say they will leave (up 4%).The opposite effect is true of Romanians who become more likely to say they would stay in the UK and take no action (up 10% in case of a Brexit compared to their five-year plans).

One explanation for this difference could be the later joining of Romania to the EU (in 2007 with full access to the UK labour market in 2014). We might be seeing an effect of this whereby Romanians may be less likely to have the immediate option of civic integration (for instance, due to arriving more recently and not satisfying the required residency requirements), yet desire to stay in the UK even after a vote to leave the EU. Portuguese citizens, on the other hand, possibly feeling more certain in their EU citizenship rights, are less inclined to undergo civic integration unless their EU rights are undermined by Brexit.

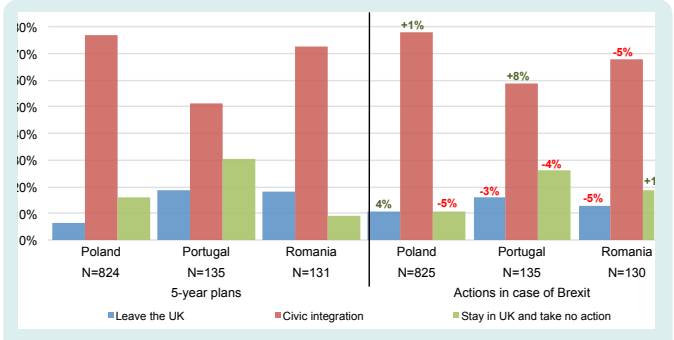

Figure 1: 5-year plans and actions in case of 'Brexit'

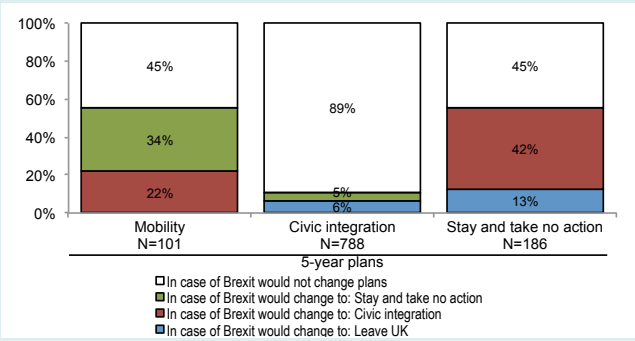

Figure 2: Individuals change of intentions in the case of Brexit, compared to their 5-year plan

Figure 2 looks at individual change of intention in the case of Brexit. Civic integration plans over the next five years are the least affected by Brexit, with 89% of the respondents who are planning civic integration in the next 5 years indicating they would not change their mind following a Brexit vote. On the other hand, 55% of those planning to leave to UK over the next five years or planning to stay without taking any further action, would change their plans in case of Brexit: of those with plans to leave within five years 22% would opt for civic integration instead, as would 42% of those who would otherwise remain in the UK without any action.

Longer term naturalisation plans

The above results indicate that most EU migrants plan to apply for British citizenship or permanent residence in the next 5 years irrespective of Brexit. But what about migrants' longer term plans? We asked our participants if they were planning to apply for British citizenship at any point in the future (Figure 3). As the results show, on average 65% of all respondents are planning to apply for British citizenship at some point in the future, again with significant differences between the three national groups (48% of Portuguese respondents; 66% of Poles; and 75% of Romanians).

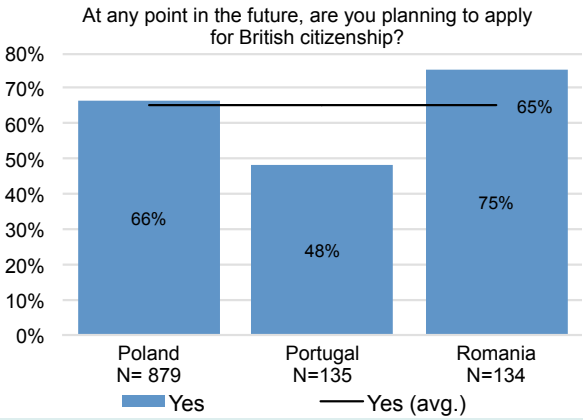

Figure 3: Future naturalisation plans

Conclusions and policy implications

Based on the high rate of future naturalisation intentions we conclude that the number of applications for British citizenship is highly likely to increase over the next five years. The vote to leave the European Union may encourage many eligible EU migrants to bring forward their plans to apply for naturalisation, and push many of those who would otherwise not opt for 'civic integration' to follow such strategies, even if they are eventually planning to leave. In our sample such an outcome was characteristic of Portuguese respondents, as we could see in Figure 1.

Although the survey sample of three EU nationality groups reported here may not represent the EU migrant population in the UK as a whole, our findings show that a large proportion of EU migrants are intending to stay in the UK, and this indicates a necessity for the British welfare state to take the needs of this population into account.

Note: This paper was updated in November 2016.

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