Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast
Episode 22: Talking with government officials and agencies in EU member states about what Brexit means for UK citizens living in the EU27

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About the episode

In this episode, Michaela is joined by Aliyyah Ahad, Associate Policy Analyst at Migration Policy Institute Europe, to reflect on the report Next Steps: implementing a Brexit deal for UK citizens living in the EU-27, co-authored by the project team and colleagues at Migration Policy Institute. Talking through the findings of the report, they highlight the diverse lives of these UK citizens, but also the concerns that government official and agencies—at both national and local levels—have about what Brexit means for these populations, and what still needs to be done in order to provide some certainty about the future for these UK citizens who have made their homes and lives elsewhere in the EU27. You can download and read the report here.

You can download this episode of the podcast at http://traffic.libsyn.com/brexitbritsabroad/EP022_Talking_with_government_officials_and_agencies_in_EU_member_states_about_what_Brexit_means_for_UK_citizens_living_in_the_EU27.mp3

Transcript

MB: Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. I am Doctor Michaela Benson, a reader in sociology at Goldsmiths University of London, and the research lead for a UK and a changing Europe funded research project all about what Brexit means for UK citizens who have made their homes and lives in the EU27. I’ve just come back to the UK after five weeks in Toulouse where I’ve been talking with UK citizens who live and work in the city, about their lives there, and about how they feel about Brexit and the negotiations, and in a future episode I will talk a little bit about that. While I was there we had some problems with recording the podcasts not helped by the fact that I also lost my voice, hence the little break that we’ve had in bringing this episode to you. I also wanted to tell you about some really exciting news which relates to this week’s episode, which is that last week after months and months of work we released our report co-authored with Migration Policy Institute Europe, that brings together the research that they have been doing for us with UE member state officials and agencies at a national and
local level about what Brexit means for UK citizens living in the EU27, and the work that we have been doing with UK citizen populations across the EU27 about how they feel about current agreements about citizens’ rights. That came out last Thursday and there have been several newspaper articles about the report since then. It’s a whopping 55 pages so you would have to settle in for a while to read it, but anyone who is interested can download the report from our website, if you go to brexitbritsabroad.com, click on our findings, and then reports, it’s the first report that comes up on the list, it’s under the title Policy Interventions, and the report is called Next Steps, just for those of you who are really keen to get your hands on it. In light of the release of that report I thought it would be a good idea to dedicate an episode of the podcast to talking a little about the research that fed into that report, and in today’s episode I am talking with Aliyyah Ahad who is one of the co-authors of the report, she is an associate policy analyst at MPI Europe, and conducted some of those interviews with EU member state officials and agencies that have fed into the report. In the episode we talk through some of the things that have particularly stood out to her from the research and analysis that they have been conducting. I started by asking her what she thought was particularly striking from those interviews.

AA: Some of the most striking things that came out of the research that we did was just about finding out more about who the UK population is that’s living in the EU27. A few of the things we found were that it was largely a very settled population, for example in Germany 37%, nearly 40% of UK nationals had been living there for more than 25 years, and while that’s not true in every member state it was definitely clear to us from the interviews that a lot of policymakers didn’t necessarily view UK nationals as being a challenging population after Brexit, largely because they would have these different routes in order to secure legal status such as through permanent residency or through naturalisation. But this picture is very diverse across Europe and we have other countries such as in the Netherlands where there is quite a young working population which is transient and mobile, and even within those who maybe spend long periods of time living in EU member states, they could do so also with hypermobility, referred to as so called swallows, and not necessarily registering within countries where technically they would be considered a resident if you look at how long they stayed there in the course of a year, or how many years they have been staying there off and on. So this was all very interesting to us.

MB: So that’s really useful in terms of the broader ambition that we have at the project about changing the conversation about UK citizen populations who live abroad, and demonstrating their diversity, but I think it also additionally reveals some of the local peculiarities of particular types of population, you’ve described there quite different characteristics of the population as you say in Germany perhaps to what you might find in the Netherlands, and you’ve also referred there in talking through this idea of swallows those people are not necessarily following the formal routes that there are to
establish residency in those places, through registration systems that are in place in some EU countries, that’s right isn’t it?

AA: Yes, that’s precisely correct.

MB: I think for example I think the Netherlands is quite a different example to France in terms of the types of registration systems that are in place and are not in place. I think that you also, I know that you’re doing some other research at the moment on UK citizen populations, I think you’re working with children or trying to do a little bit of research about children, and when we were talking about it earlier you said that there were some really interesting things coming out of that about in some places their levels of dual national relations for example?

AA: Yes, so the case study that I’m working which will come out in a few months’ time it isn’t on children per se but on families in general, and yeah we found some really interesting data on couples in the EU, and in fact in some member states there are quite high proportions of UK nationals who are in relationships with persons who have the host country citizenship. So in Germany and I think in France as well it’s over 30% of those... of UK nationals who are in relationships are in relationships or living in partnerships with persons in the host country citizenship. So this could also be a potential route to naturalisation, as there are usually fewer restrictions on naturalising through marriage than there are based on residency.

MB: So by naturalisation there you’re talking about how the different routes that people might take to become citizens in the country that they are currently living for example?

AA: Yes, precisely. So we have the bare bones of a deal, or perhaps more than the bare bones of a deal at this point, but there’s always this lingering risk or fear that perhaps the deal will completely fall through and resort back to this nothing is agreed until everything is agreed mantra. But for... basically what I’m trying to say is that even if that were the case, which could be a worst case scenario for many people there’s still potentially lots of routes available for UK citizens to acquire a secure legal status in the countries that they are currently living in.

MB: And citizenship is one of those routes that we know that lots of people are actually taking. We’ve seen even in the last few weeks the latest statistics on in the countries where it’s possible and we should stress that, with elevated numbers of UK citizens applying for citizenship in other EU countries, but I have also noticed it... I was actually quite surprised by the extent to which British populations in France, the people that I have been speaking to when I’ve been over there interviewing were considering applying for French citizenship and starting to go through that process of putting together their dossier and taking it to the prefecture and starting that long process of becoming French essentially. So I think that’s a really important... it’s an important part of the story about what
people are doing to secure their status, even if it isn’t the only way of people securing some status given the uncertainties that abound at the moment. I think that gives a little bit of flavour to some of the things that are actually already happening as people try to find their own ways through what is I would say some kind of quagmire I think of possibilities given there’s absolutely no certainty at all. But what are some of the other things that have stood out to you in having those conversations with local officials with government officials, national level officials in the countries that you have been working in? Because I think that’s another side of the story that doesn’t often get told?

AA: Yeah, so in addition to the diversity among the UK population in the EU I think one of the things that came out of our interviews with this tension between concern over UK nationals living within member states as well as at times a much larger concern for EU nationals living in the UK, and how to balance those things. So given that the concentration of EU nationals in the UK is so much larger and as I said earlier that many UK nationals who live in the EU27 will likely be able to acquire a settle status due to the long duration of their residency in the EU. I think for some member state policymakers there was a sense that the UK population just wasn’t such a large concern, and that they could delay planning for Brexit until there was a deal.

MB: That goes back to an earlier point you made about how they understand the British population who live there as quite settled, and I think that’s it’s an important takeaway point, but perhaps one that we need to unpack a little bit, this idea of... this idea about this British population being settled, is they don’t perceive British populations living within those nation states to be a problematic migration... migrant group as they might do some others, and I’m not saying that it’s right or wrong that they see them in those terms, but they’re relatively quite often less concerned about British populations than they are about other migrant populations?

AA: Yeah, I think that came across quite strongly in the interviews we had in France. There was this sense that UK nationals were quite low on the list of immigrant populations of concern to the French authorities, and not to say that they didn’t care about them, but just because they didn’t have necessarily the same kind of interactions with law enforcement or perceived challenges of integration regarding employment and other things. And so there was a sense that it wasn’t such a priority to start planning for Brexit right away.

MB: So they’re more relaxed about the British populations, which I suppose I think that’s to do with the perception of who the British population are, but also to do with a sense that well I suppose what I am moving towards is that there might be a mismatch there between this okay we will sort it out but we will sort it out closer to the time, versus populations who are quite... who feel very uncertain. It does seem I think that’s a really important tension to
recognise is the difference between the challenges that those officials might have in managing all sorts of population issues within their countries, and a group of people who have suddenly found themselves in this uncertainty and I think that’s... for me that’s a really interesting thing that comes out of the report, is the difference between those two things, and it’s not that officials are neglectful, that’s not it at all, it’s something else, it’s to do with the broader context of their roles, their jobs, the constituents that they are having to work with, so I think that’s quite interesting.

AA: Yeah, and perhaps that’s a good Segway to one of the other interesting aspects that came out of the report which was I don’t at all mean to present the policymakers we interviewed as being uncaring about the UK population, a lot of them or most of them were deeply interested and had Brexit on the back of their minds, but their hands were largely tied in terms of what they can do right now at the time of the interviews, and they were stuck in this as you describe double bind where they want to press forward and do something but they also have to adhere to the process of the Brexit negotiations which were quite secretive at least prior to the December joint report. And yeah there was a sense among some of our interviewees that they really wanted to have and wanted to provide advice, but at the same time didn’t want to risk presenting information that was incorrect or would be soon outdated, or just to act in misstep with their national governments or with the EU’s official line.

MB: I think that discussion of secrecy is really interesting because I think that the way that you’ve described it it’s very clear that at the moment there has been no formal direction provided from national governments to local government officials. So the face of the state for British nationals and for other people actually who might be concerned about their rights to reside in a country, and that lack of transfer of knowledge which well I say it’s a transfer of knowledge but the knowledge might not be there yet, must be very frustrating for them, and certainly I have seen very clearly this might be another interpretation for why people feel they are being given contradictory and conflicting advice when they go to talk to people, because one person can go and they might be told one thing, another person might go to the municipality and be told quite a different thing. So I think that’s quite... I think that’s a more nuanced understanding of what might be happening there, than we might imagine at first sight?

AA: Yeah, I agree and maybe that would be the final consideration that... or one of the key considerations that came out of the report which was about communication and the lack of communication between the EU level and national level and the local level. But also communication with British nationals themselves, and this is one of the recommendations that we make in the report is to improve these advice systems and to put them in place now so that they can be activated once there is a final deal, or even to update citizens on what’s been agreed so far. If you go to most websites
they will say nothing has changed in quite bold letter or with a red background and such, but the truth of the matter is that for many people that’s not reassuring when they know that changes are coming or they’re waiting for changes imminently. So this communication I think will be key and beyond as I said just communication with UK nationals it’s really an issue of communicating with the local level more broadly, particularly in countries such as Cyprus where we did interviews with you have municipalities like [inaudible – 16.51] where 40% of the local population are foreign nationals, and 90% of those foreign nationals are UK citizens, it’s obviously a much larger concern for certain municipalities over others, and I think this is true not only in Cyprus but there are lots of pockets of large British national populations across Europe, and improving communication between the local level, the national level and the EU it will be key not only to reassuring the British populations who live there, but also to ensuring that no one falls through the cracks.

**MB:** And I also think it’s also about providing support to those local level administrators who are very keen to provide people with advice that will help them to secure their lives and their futures, they certainly don’t want local populations who are unsettled, so I think that there is that side of things too. That’s been really interesting Aliyyah and I think that it’s really added as I said another dimension to our understandings about what’s happening in respect to UK national populations living in the EU27, and some of the challenges that might be anticipated I suppose in terms of what Brexit means for their lives, and how that’s managed and navigated on a local level would support an advice from local administrators in that respect. So thank you very much.

**AA:** Thanks you for having me.

**MB:** Thank you for listening to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. If you have enjoyed what we’ve been talking about today and want to find out more check out our website www.brexitbritsabroad.com, or you can follow us on social media via Twitter @brexpatseu, and on Facebook, and don’t forget to subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, and I will speak to you again soon.

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