Brexit and the emergence of a transnational European community of practice: from grassroots mobilisations to supranational political opportunity structures in the struggle for citizens' rights

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Abstract

Brexit ignited an unprecedented sense of shared European identity and belonging, catalysing pro-EU social movements within the UK and among British citizens residing in the EU and leading to the formation of a transnational European community of practice. This mobilisation coalesced around grassroots organisations whose claim-making strategy was rooted in the institution of EU citizenship, which also grounded their legitimacy. Drawing on a relational approach to diasporic and transnational social movements, mixed methods empirical research including the findings of an online survey of mobile citizens (n=1919), archival and documentary analysis, expert interviews and policy analysis, the paper analyses the significance of supranational political opportunity structures to the emergence of a transnational European community of practice during Brexit and the formation of an alliance between two of the primary grassroots organisations advocating for citizens' rights—the3million and British in Europe.

Introduction

Brexit, and the end of Free Movement between the United Kingdom (UK) and European Union (EU), has had significant consequences for those directly affected—the estimated 1.2 million British citizens resident in the EU, and the more than 3 million EU nationals living in the UK before Brexit—in respect to residence rights. It also generated a seeming groundswell, where European belongings and identities came sharply into view on both sides of the Channel (see for example Godin and Sigona 2022; Benson 2020; O'Reilly 2020; Sigona and Godin 2023). This paper documents the collective mobilisation of such mobile citizens following the 2016 Brexit Referendum, when a small majority in support of the Leave campaign set the UK on track to withdraw from the EU. Such mobilisations rapidly gave rise to the formation and development of a number of grassroots organisations, including the3million and British in Europe representing mobile citizens impacted by Brexit, in the UK and EU respectively.[1] The paper focuses on how they worked hand in glove to secure the best outcomes in respect citizens' rights, sharing a platform organised around European citizenship and identity, professionalising in ways that allowed them to make the most of Brexit-induced political opportunities.

In this paper, we draw on a rich collage of empirical material comprising quantitative and qualitative data from an online survey (n=1919) of formerly mobile citizens—EU citizens in the UK and British citizens in the EU—firstly, to document how the grassroots emergence of European identities in the wake of Brexit became a site for collective action and political mobilisation. Secondly, bringing this into conversation with our archival and documentary analysis, and expert interviews we show how the3million and British in Europe: (a) mobilised the Brexit-induced upswell in European belongings among these populations; (b) responded to the bilateral framing of the negotiations that sought to pit these populations

against one another; (c) were shaped by the transnational political opportunity structures that materialised through the negotiations; and (d) contested the limits of European citizenship in the context of Brexit.

Drawing on relational approaches to diasporic and transnational social movements, we argue that the organic mobilisation of those who had moved freely between the UK and EU, developed into a transnational European community of practice, able to avail itself of the structures through which they might have access to power, and influence the progress of the citizens' rights negotiations.

This paper begins by situating Brexit-induced mobilizations within existing scholarship on diaspora and transnational political activism, with a focus on the interplay between supranational political opportunity structures and grassroots organizing. It then traces the development of the3million and British in Europe, analyzing their emergence, collaboration, and evolution during and after the Brexit negotiations. Following this, the paper explores our survey findings, which reveal changes in European identities, political participation, and attachments among mobile citizens affected by Brexit. Finally, the paper considers the broader implications of these mobilizations for European citizenship and the potential for sustaining transnational communities of practice in a context of diminishing political opportunities.

From grassroots political mobilisations to a cross-Channel European community of practice

> Although citizenship confers protections and rights without precedent in human history, those entitled to them seem little interested in becoming active and engaged citizens …

> EU citizenship looks ‘sterile’ in its capacity to generate stronger democratic participation (Recchi 2015, p. 121-2).

> [I]t’s perhaps ironic that it took Brexit to trigger signs of the kind of bottom-up legitimacy that the EU has long struggled to generate. There are potentially lessons from Brexit about the future development of European identities and attachments to the EU. (Sigona et al. 2022a).

The pro-European protests and marches on the streets of London and other major UK cities that were sparked by the 2016 Brexit referendum, attracted almost immediate attention from scholars across the social sciences. They quickly became understood—publicly and among academic commentators—as sites for the grassroots expression of European identities and citizenship. As Brändle, Galpin and Trenz (2018) argue, one outcome of the referendum was the activation of EU citizenship and the (collective) surfacing of European identities. Among those protesting were many people who had exercised the right to freedom of movement between the UK and EU.

Prior to Brexit, research with mobile citizens had turned rarely to the consideration of belongings and mobilisations oriented towards the EU and Europeanness (Vathi and Triandafoiu 2022). Yet, in its wake, scholarship has documented the ‘acts of European citizenship’ undertaken by British anti-Brexit campaigners living in the EU, in this way, signalling the renewed legitimacy of Europeanness (MacClancy 2019; Ferbrache 2019; Ferbrache and MacClancy 2020) and the emergence through grassroots mobilisation of an ‘EU diaspora’ among EU citizens living in the UK, brokered via the everyday bureaucracy and communications within the3million (Vathi and Trandafoiu 2022, 2023).

Such analyses suggest that the political mobilisation of these free movers at the Brexit conjuncture constituted a notable exception to the sterility of EU citizenship. What became clear is that for many within this population, identification with Europe became salient at precisely the point at which the rights accrued through membership were being withdrawn (see also Sigona et al. 2022a). Such understandings of the Brexit-related collective mobilisation of mobile citizens, with their focuses on European identities and belongings, offer significant evidence of both supranational political mobilisation and diaspora formation at grassroots level that had long been notable in its absence from the European project. Yet, we argue that in focussing on one or the other population—British citizens living in the EU and EU citizens in the UK—the significance of the transnational formation of these mobilisations has been overlooked.

This focus on the transnational nature of these mobilisations reveals the emergence of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991), with citizens' rights its common cause, European identities and belongings at its core. Applying this definition to our case, it describes a group of people brought together by a shared concern that those who had taken advantage of the free movement regime between the UK and EU were given voice and advocated for through the Brexit process. Coming together, they brought experiences, knowledge, tools and stories, which in time developed into a shared repository from which they could learn, and which became the basis of their advocacy practice.

The predominant narrative highlights the significance of the mobilisations and organisations themselves in fostering and sustaining this sense of European belonging, alongside reactionary claims to Europeanness instigated by the pending removal of rights. Yet, making

sense of such mobilisations requires consideration not only of how people self-identify and mobilise, but also of the structures that foster, facilitate and limit collective action. The consideration of the external structures, opportunities and affordances that were brought to the fore through Brexit has been less considered in the research to date on Brexit and European belongings.

In the following section we draw from the scholarship on diaspora politics and transnational political mobilisation, which offer tools for developing deeper understandings of the role and significance of these external structures. As we discuss, these offer new perspectives and conceptual tools for considering the formation of these Brexit-induced political mobilisations, the emergence and growth of the3million and British in Europe over the course of the citizens' rights negotiations, and their trajectories post-Brexit.

Situating transnational and diaspora mobilizations in context and practice

The important contribution offered by the interdisciplinary field of research concerned with diaspora politics and transnational political mobilisations is derived from rich, bottom-up accounts of diaspora mobilization. Such works are often underpinned by understandings that consider how diaspora engage in political transnationalism is shaped by their position towards the real or imagined homeland. As scholars have demonstrated, state interests, particularly in respect to security, economics and national identity (see for example Brand 2006; Kulakevich 2022; Délano Alonso and Mylonas 2019) are critical to the form taken by these mobilisations, manifesting via mechanisms such as diaspora engagement policies (Gamlen et al. 2013) or extraterritorial authoritarian practices (Glasius 2017)—e.g. policies that exclude those living abroad from participating as citizens with rights.

While these literatures vary considerably, scholarship in this area is notably state-centric, with diaspora politics often understood in methodologically nationalist terms. As such, analyses are all too often limited to the nation-state and its borders, rather than considering how these mobilisations are embedded in complex relationships that include not only other nations, but also many global institutions, organisations and actors. In other words, such accounts overlook these assemblages and how they shape and structure the practice of diaspora politics and transnational political mobilisations (Craven 2018).

Our approach draws from relational approaches that identify how transnational social movements and diaspora mobilizations are sustained through the interplay of political opportunity structures (POS)—the political contexts that shape the possibilities for and outcomes of collective action—and forms of power across different scales of action (see for example Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Goldstone 2004). It achieves this through a multi-dimensional relational approach, inspired by Chaudhary and Moss' (2016) call for a triadic political opportunity structure approach, that recognises also the POS offered by supranational organisations and institutions, in this way challenging the aforementioned methodological nationalism (see also Laffey and Nadarajah 2012; Demir 2022; Craven 2021). This recognises the assemblages of individuals, organisations, national and supranational institutions in generating collective identities, actions and practices. As we identify in greater detail below, the reconceptualization of diasporic and transnational politics to include supranational POS is particularly pertinent to understanding the European community of practice that developed through the Brexit negotiations and what has happened to political mobilisation and collective action since the end of the Brexit transition period.

Researching political mobilisation after Brexit

The paper draws on data collected through the ESRC-funded research project *Rebordering Britain and Britons after Brexit (MIGZEN)*.[2] Beginning in January 2021, the timing of this project meant that it was uniquely positioned to attend to the longer tail of the implementation of citizens' rights for those who had exercised Free Movement between the UK and EU before the end of the Brexit transition period, and to trace in real time the post-Brexit reform of the UK's migration regime. MIGZEN adopted a multi-method research design intended to map and explore migration to and from the UK after Brexit, considering this at a variety of scales with those who had moved between the UK and EU before Brexit, and with those emigrating from and arriving in the UK after Brexit. This included (a) the examination of the micro-politics of migration through in-depth interviews, large-scale surveys, and internet-mediated research; (b) the observation of meso-level structures through close collaboration with citizens' and migrant rights organisations; and (c) changes to migration flows and governance through policy-mapping and analysis and desk-based research.

For the purposes of the current paper, and as we discuss in more detail below, we focus in particular on the research conducted via the *Migration and Citizenship after Brexit* survey, as well as our ongoing observation, dialogue and engagement with two of our project partners, the3million and British in Europe, two of the main grassroots organisations advocating for the future rights of those who had moved between the UK and EU and for whom Brexit and the end of Free Movement, would have implications for their residence rights (among other things). Bringing these aspects of the research together in this paper allows us to explore the significance of external structures and conditions in the fostering, development and maintenance of Brexit-induced political mobilisations.

Political participation and the Migration and Citizenship after Brexit survey

The *Migration and Citizenship after Brexit* survey was conducted with those who had moved between the UK and EU before the end of the Brexit transition period 31 December 2020, British citizens in the EU and EU nationals in the UK who were directly impacted by the implementation of the citizens' rights agreements. Rather than produce representative findings about the populations surveyed, it was designed to establish a baseline for understanding some of the key themes at the heart of the project, the findings of which could be inform the iterative development of the project going forward. The themes included whether Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic had affected respondents' perceptions, plans and decisions on whether to stay put, migrate or repatriate; how these events had changed, if at all, their attitudes towards the EU, and their countries of residence and origin, including questions of political participation and representation; and their understandings of citizenship, identity and belonging. It included a mix of open-ended and multiple-choice questions (the latter including open text options to maximise inclusiveness and context-specificity).[3]

The survey was administered through Qualtrics, with participants recruited via an anonymous link shared on the project and project partners' websites, social media (Facebook and Twitter) and emails to relevant migrant and diaspora organisations and networks at local, national and European levels, with participation by self-selection. The survey was open for five weeks from December 2021 to January 2022. It attracted 2024 valid responses. The majority (n=1919) of those completing the survey had moved between the UK and EU via Free Movement. The quantitative data produced by the survey was analysed via Stata, while we developed a thematic coding framework for open-text responses and used NVivo to administer this.[4]

In this paper, we draw specifically on the quantitative and qualitative data derived from the survey modules on identities and belonging and social, political and community participation. Where we use quantitative analysis, this is intended to indicate the strength of feeling around

particular issues among those completing the survey rather than to make any claims to representativeness. We elaborate on this strength of feeling drawing from relevant open text responses. As we stress, the findings from the survey offer evidence that supports otherwise anecdotal accounts of the significance of European identities and belongings to the political participation and mobilisations arising through Brexit. As we discuss further below, such belongings were significant to the emergence of grassroots organisations and the development of European communities of practice.

Thinking with and through citizens' rights organisations

The3million and British in Europe were written into the project as partners from the outset. Beyond their support with recruitment, over the course of the project we regularly consulted representatives of these organisations on the research design—including the survey design for the Migration and Citizenship after Brexit survey. We also solicited their feedback on our analysis and findings (including in the development of this paper); and sought their advice on the delivery of engagement and impact based on the research. This relationship was one that centred dialogue with these organisations as stakeholders in the research and its findings.

Over time, this dialogue resulted in us being able to observe the ebbs and flows of these organisations, how they mediated changes in the political opportunity structures over the course of the negotiations and beyond, and with what impacts for their priorities. As the project developed, so did our relationship with the organisations, as new research questions opened up (through the survey and otherwise) motivating us to shift our research focus directly onto the work of the organisations and the broader context in which they were operating. This paper is the result of an iterative move between the analysis of our survey findings and the process of thinking with and through our project's partner organisations.

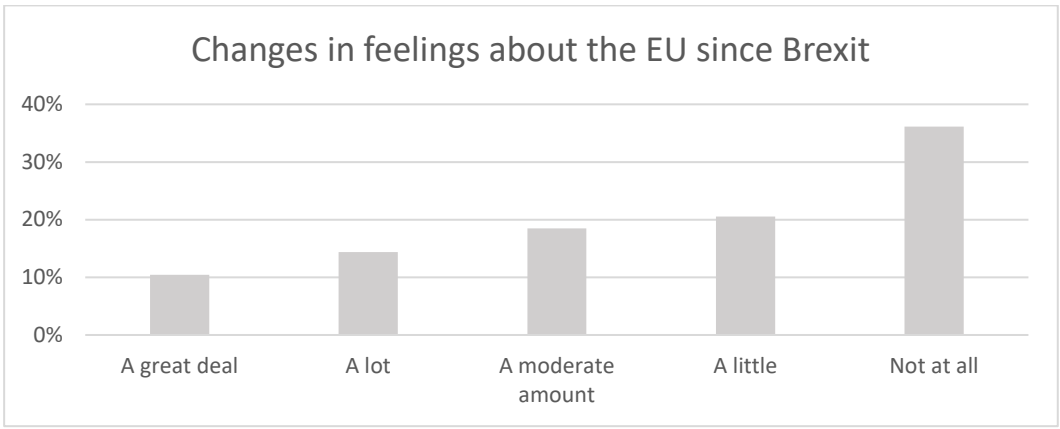
In what follows, we bring the survey findings together with observations and interviews

given by key organisational representatives to print and broadcast media outlets, publicly available organisational records, personal communications between the organisations and members of the MIGZEN project team. This mosaic of data offers unique insights into how such organisations channelled and mediated the political mobilisation of these populations in the UK and EU revealed by our survey.

European before *and* after Brexit

A key theme in recent literature on Brexit and migration is that one response to the outcome of the referendum was a surfacing of European identifications, belongings and attachments among EU citizens in the UK and British citizens in the EU (see for example, Barwick 2021; Ferbrache 2019; Vathi and Trandafoiu 2020, 2022). Exploring this with those taking part in the *Migration and Citizenship after Brexit* survey revealed a complex picture of their attachment to the EU. It highlighted their longstanding attachment to European values and belongings— the political expression of these brought to the fore by Brexit—that had sustained beyond Britain's exit from the EU.

Figure 1: Changes in Feelings about the EU since Brexit



As Figure 1 highlights, 36% of responses stressed that there had been no change in their sense of attachment, while taken together 25% of responses documented that Brexit had changed their feelings ‘a lot’ or a ‘great deal’.

Among the 730 open text responses from those who reported at least some change in their feelings of attachment towards the EU, a common theme was that Brexit had led to them having better knowledge and understanding of the EU and its values, including in respect to EU citizenship, and a heightened sense of themselves as European, as the following statements communicate:

> I feel more European now. Before Brexit I did not much think about my European identity at all. (Juhani, male EU national in the UK, 70s)

> I feel more European than Italian. I have always believed in Europe, but after Brexit and all its consequences, my support and sense of belonging has grown a lot more. (Carla, female EU national in the UK, 40s)

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

While there is a sense that these attachments pre-existed Brexit, what comes across in these responses is a reinvigorated significance of being European. For many of those responding, Free Movement and the opportunities it presented were prominent, demonstrating that the value that these mobile citizens placed value on their mobility rights, as this quotation from a British resident in the EU illustrates:

> Brexit has made me realise that I have lost something that I never realised I actually had: Freedom of Movement. (Steve, male British citizen, 70s)

When talking about how their feelings towards the EU had changed since Brexit, a sense of ambivalence emerged among some respondents. They explained that while they were supportive of the EU, they understood that it was imperfect, stressing that it would benefit from reform. Among the issues they highlighted were its handling of the European Sovereign Debt, the rise of populism across the bloc, and its management of so-called 'refugee crisis'. For many of those taking part in the research, such responses were tempered by their acknowledgement of the limits of the EU as an institution. The overly bureaucratic nature of the EU and responses critical of the EU as a political project and geopolitical power were also well-represented.

Among those completing the survey, a minority of respondents communicated a strong sense of being let down, a perception that the EU had reneged on its social contract with its citizens. In this way, the responses communicated identification with the EU—even if this was negative—but also signalled their expectations of the obligations of this supranational institution towards them.

Beyond these expectations, however, the responses of those taking part in the survey were notable for conveying a greater appreciation for the civic dimensions of EU citizenship:

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

> I had a vague idea of how the EU worked and what it offered its citizens. I've learnt much

more about the EU since 2016 and come to admire the project and its positive impact on EU citizens' lives. (Gerdie, female British, EU and non-EU citizen living in Spain, 50s)

This enhanced awareness offers an initial indicator that Brexit had set the stage for greater appreciation of EU citizenship than they had previously held. While perhaps unsurprising in the context of Brexit and the citizens' rights negotiations, the increased awareness of the civic dimensions of citizenship among these formerly mobile citizens contrasts to Recchi's (2014) characterisation of EU citizenship as sterile.

Such individual awareness also set the stage for increased civic activity and engagement. It was particularly notable that those taking part in the survey identified that their level of political participation and engagement had changed since the Brexit referendum, with 52% of British citizen respondents and 58% of EU citizen respondents saying that this was the case. Further, among those who identified this change, the overwhelming majority reported that it had led to an increase in their political participation, with 78% of British citizens and 81% of EU citizens reporting this. Significantly, when given the option to explain what had driven this change in their level of participation, Brexit and its consequences for citizens' rights were a frequent response as in the following quotation,

I became engaged in action groups because of the threat to citizens' rights as a result of Brexit (Peter, British citizen in the EU, 70s).

Of the activities that they highlighted, most frequently they mentioned lobbying politicians in the UK and EU; attending marches and protests for a second referendum and citizens' rights, whether in the UK or EU; becoming members of national and EU political parties that they felt represented their interests as Europeans; and setting up and joining grassroots organisations—naming most frequently the3million and coalition members of British in Europe, an indicator of the ground-up legitimacy of these organisations.

What this shows is that for these mobile citizens, the Brexit referendum had instigated a shift from identifying with the civic dimensions of their European identities, towards greater civic engagement oriented towards the EU (cf. Bruter 2005; Recchi 2014). From the referendum onwards, Brexit became a site for European identities to gain more legitimacy. As we discuss in further detail below, the grassroots emergence of civic engagement evolved into a transnational community of practice that was able to tap into and benefit from the POS emerging through the Brexit negotiations and reflected both the new European consciousness instigated by Brexit but also the limitations emerging from the new post-referendum reality.

Brexit, citizens' rights and grassroots organising

To get a sense of how Europeanness became the shared identity at the heart of political mobilisation around citizens' rights, we now turn to consideration of the role played by the organisations that came to represent the rights of British citizens in the EU/EEA and EU nationals in the UK through the Brexit negotiations and the implementation of citizens' rights.

By the onset of Brexit negotiations, political and legal organising around Brexit had scaled up beyond local and regional initiatives, with two organisations leading the charge: the3million and British in Europe, acting on behalf of EU nationals in the UK and British citizens in the EU respectively.

For the former, this was the first mobilisation of mobile citizens of EU member states organised around a pan-European identity (Vathi and Triandafoiu 2022, 2023), manifesting not just in the streets of European cities, but also largely online. The emergence of a

transnational grassroots organisation lobbying for the rights of British citizens living in the EU was similarly unprecedented. Informal networks of British citizens living across Europe first established as nationally-oriented groups of British citizens in member states (such as British in Germany—whose work preceded the referendum, with a focus on campaigning for British citizens living overseas to have a right to vote, as well as on lobbying and raising awareness about political rights in relation to the referendum), or cross-border organisations such as Brexpats Hear our Voice (BHOV). These groups came together as part of British in Europe.

On 18 October 2016, the3million and civil society organisation New Europeans, told a House of Commons Committee that it was within the UK Government's power to guarantee unilaterally the rights of EU citizens in the UK, and therefore exclude these from the negotiations. The expectation from campaigners was that this would then be reciprocated by the EU for the 1.2 million British citizens living in the EU-27.

A day later the UK made clear that it intended to argue for a bilateral agreement in respect to citizens' rights. Presenting the Government's rationale for a bilateral agreement in a debate in the House of Commons on the Rights of EU nationals six months before Article 50 was triggered, on 19 October 2016, Robin Walker, parliamentary under-secretary of state for exiting the EU explained:

> The Government understand the importance of giving certainty to EU citizens who have moved to build a life in the UK, *but we are not able to set out a unilateral position* now*, ahead of negotiations*; that must be done following negotiation and agreement with the EU. *Doing otherwise would risk adversely affecting our negotiating position*, and hence the position of British citizens who have chosen to build a life, with their families, in other

countries. (HC Deb 2016; emphasis added)

On 28 March 2017—the day before the UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, wrote to the President of the European Council to trigger Article 50—representatives of British in Europe and the3million met with Michel Barnier, the EU's Brexit Chief Negotiator (CN) (Golding and Benson 2020). By this stage, these two organisations had come together in coalition. They put forward their case for having their acquired rights upheld through the negotiations. What is clear is that the organisations had already professionalised in ways that meant they could respond to emerging opportunities and invitations to input into Brexit-specific governance processes, first at the national and later at the supranational level.

Despite their calls for citizens' rights to be excluded from the negotiations and dealt with domestically instead, this meeting was important. It shows how the groups were able to take into the EU's POS, notably the inclusion of stakeholder engagement in the EU's democratic processes (Coen and Katsaitis 2021). Further, it signals a turning point where they gained political legitimacy in the EU and in the Brexit negotiations at large which meant that by the end of the negotiations and beyond, they had gained significant political capital.

By 31 March 2017, and despite the statement in November 2016 from European Council President Donald Tusk that he would like 'to avoid a situation where citizens become 'bargaining chips' in the negotiation process' (European Council 2016), proposals on the guidelines for the Brexit negotiations made clear that citizens' rights would be decided by bilateral agreement, to be dealt with in the first phase of the negotiations (European Council 2017).

Testament to the solidarity established between British in Europe and the3million was their

persistent refusal to accept the divisive terms of this framing. In their letter to the Editor of the Financial Times in December 2017, the Chairs of British in Europe and the3million condemned the negotiations as a form of 'horse trading' (Golding and Hatton 2017) and demonstrating their solidarity with one another that would continue to characterise their engagements with the EC, UK Government and political representatives throughout the negotiations.

To our mind, the decision that the negotiations over citizens' rights would be conducted bilaterally and the actions taken towards this by both the UK and EU set the stage for British in Europe and the3million to come together under the shared banner of being European, to campaign for citizens' rights.

A transnational European community of practice

The partnership between the3million and British in Europe became a site for the development of a supranational EU-centred community of practice. This is evident in their sustained support for one another, publicly and politically from the negotiations onwards. It was, for example, visible as they marched together in protests and advocated for one another wherever possible. European identity became the organising principle around which they rallied. The context of grassroots European identifications post-Brexit and readiness for greater civic engagement oriented towards the EU as found in our survey, proved fertile ground for this organising.

Indeed, this sense of their shared plight through Brexit was regularly communicated by the email newsletters penned by the3million, where they regularly stressed 'the five million' impacted by Brexit (Vathi and Trandafoiu 2023), aggregating the estimated numbers of

British citizens living in the EU and EU citizens living in the UK who were impacted by Brexit. Indeed, this clearly resonated with members of these populations, who started to adopt the hashtag #the5million in their Twitter profiles and posts. Such a nomination offered a shorthand that emphasised the indivisibility of the rights of these populations, foregrounding their shared attachment to European citizenship. In other words, it signalled the grassroots mobilisation of a transnational European community of practice brought into being through the Brexit conjuncture.

The impacts of situated learning and the emergence of the shared practice are evident in the rapid professionalisation of these organisations in the early days of the Brexit negotiations. For example, as the citizens' rights negotiations unfolded, their conjoint actions became increasingly organised around the development of critical and timely knowledge and understanding. They were particularly adept at responding—often overnight, and certainly within days—to the proposed legal changes to their rights brought about by Brexit. Observing these organisations over the course of the negotiations revealed how their representatives engaged in the social process of demonstrating their competence, in this way claiming legitimacy for their actions in the domain of citizens' rights in ways that, first and foremost, emphasised their shared identity as EU citizens who had exercised Free Movement. From the acts of resistance that characterised their early activities onwards, these organisations became key players influencing the Brexit process.

As we signalled above, the formal mechanisms created specifically for the Brexit negotiations structured the legitimacy and political capital that these organisations were able to claim. For example, examining the significance of interest groups lobbying the EU in relation to the Brexit negotiations, Coen and Katsaitis (2021) stress that stakeholders who

met three or more times with the EU's Chief Negotiator (CN), Michel Barnier—what they refer to as 'the elite circle of insiders' (ibid 2021, p. 42), among them both British in Europe and the3million—represented not only the key policy issues at the heart of the negotiations, but were also notable precisely for their EU-level associations. Such stakeholder engagement in the context of Brexit was strategic on the part of the EU, orchestrated to bolster the legitimacy of the CN's negotiating position.

Importantly, incorporating into the Brexit negotiations the mechanism—used elsewhere in EU business—of meeting with interest groups, provided an avenue for the British in Europe and the3million to mobilise around and influence Brexit, while also shaping and sustaining political mobilisation based on EU citizenship (Athanasiadou 2019). In other words, this EU mechanism lent significant legitimacy to these organisations and their mandate, while also bringing into view political imaginaries of EU citizenship. In the broader context of democratic deficit, meeting with these mobile citizens in the face of Brexit also gave legitimacy to the European project and the broader process of making Europeans. This is just one indicator of how political mobilisation based on shared EU citizenship was shaped by the formal institutional channels and mechanisms that existed for citizens and organisations to interact with, influence, and participate in the EU as a supranational organisation from the bottom up, as well as their professional and organisational capacity (beyond political capital) to engage with these mechanisms and opportunities.

Indeed, interviewed in Europe Street News in February 2022, Jane Golding stressed:

> I think what we have done has also made a significant contribution to the debate on EU citizenship and third country nationals' rights in the EU generally. What really would be needed is some sort of organisation to represent the rights of all 'mobile citizens' in the

> EU because that's the only way to have the high-level overview and compare and contrast national situations across the EU. That's the advantage that we had.

This quotation makes clear that these political mobilisations around citizens' rights in the context of Brexit were meaningful and purposeful acts that were sustained through a transnational community of practice, characterised by its professionalisation and ability to respond to Brexit-related POS in real time.

Such access to the EU made EU citizenship meaningful and with it opened the space for a transnational European community of practice to emerge. Yet, linked to a time-limited event, Brexit and the POS it opened up called into question the extent to which this could be sustained longer term. Indeed, such meetings with interest groups are part of the landscape of what Schmidt (2012) calls EU 'throughput legitimacy', where after the process at hand is complete, the function of the interest groups has been fulfilled. It is not a stretch to suggest that, in the absence of other channels emerging to take their place, that this political mobilisation around EU citizenship and identity might decline as formal institutional channels for political influence at a supranational level were closed down at the end of the Brexit transition period. This may also raise questions to the extent to which the mobilisations brought about by Brexit offer evidence of an emergent European diaspora.

Moving on from Brexit

During the negotiations between the UK and EU—and for a short while following the UK's exit from the EU—the campaigning and advocacy of these two organisations was able to foreground a transnational community of practice, with a distinctly European identity. Since the end of the Brexit transition period the political opportunities that these organisations were able to capitalise on have become more limited. In consequence, their activities have shifted,

shaped in part by the political opportunities now available to them as organisations to continue to advocate on behalf their constituent populations.

This shift is also reflected in a gradual decline in political participation by citizens themselves for reasons ranging from an inability to travel or to engage in street protest due to the Covid pandemic, and the loss of EU citizenship (and EU voting rights) for British people after the end of the transition period (Benson et al. 2022a, 2022b). These exemplify just some of the limitations for political mobilisation emerging from the new post-referendum reality.

On the flipside, what continues is the joint lobbying by the3million and British in Europe of British political parties on behalf of their constituent memberships. Opportunities in the EU have not completely subsided but are no longer centre stage. And when it comes to such opportunities in the UK two different trajectories for these organisations' continued activities emerged from the start of 2022.

For the3million, activities remain firmly focussed on those EU citizens who arrived in the UK before Brexit, holding the UK Government to account in the implementation of the withdrawal agreement, and at times partnering up with other migrant rights' organisations where their interests align (for example, they have been collaborating with Hongkongers in Britain to raise awareness of the pitfalls of digital, online-only immigration status—where online signals the lack of paper documentation—and with digital rights' campaigns). Their focus on EU citizens is confined to those who arrived in the UK as mobile citizens, exempt from immigration controls, rather than those arriving today as migrants from the EU. This means that their activities remain constrained by the legacies of Free Movement but are directed towards UK-based ministries and government departments.

British in Europe have re-oriented their activities—at least in part—towards the UK and the

state of being British abroad. Their activities over the course of the Brexit negotiations were marked by the award in 2021 of Orders of the British Empire (OBE) to co-chairs Fiona Godfrey and Jane Golding for their services to UK nationals in the Europe.[5] In early 2022, the organisation announced it was closing its doors because it could not secure sufficient funds to continue.[6] Despite this announcement, their work advocating for citizens' rights, and especially the continuing problems with the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement across the EU, continued voluntarily. More recently, British in Europe has become a contributor to Civil Society Europe, in this way feeding its experiences of working in the space of citizens' rights and democratic representation into ongoing conversations about the state of the Union and limits of Free Movement and EU citizenship.[7] They have also reopened their doors following the recent award of funding from the EU for Project ICE, which investigates the implementation of the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights through how the EU/UK Withdrawal Agreement is applied to British citizens living in the EU.[8]

In addition, Fiona Godfrey and Jane Golding with the support of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, turned their attention to securing the secondary legislation to support the vote for life for British citizens living overseas.[9] This focus on democratic participation marks a shift in strategy and practice that also corresponds to the political opportunities available to British citizens abroad in the light of electoral reform. The opportunities brought about by electoral reform tap into the campaign that preceded Brexit for the lifetime vote, which had taken on new impetus in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, a point at which many British citizens living in the EU realised they had lost their right or were no longer registered to vote (Benson 2019; Collard and Webb 2020).[10] However, we argue that such opportunities require a foregrounding by British in Europe of their sense of themselves as British citizens (rather than as former free movers).

Both their activities within Europe and relating to voting are facilitated by the political capital that British in Europe developed through Brexit. While these also set the stage for transnational communities of practice, this is a campaign that is no longer geographically circumscribed to Europe, appealing instead to a broader population of British citizens living overseas. It is undoubtedly the case that in this context, not all of those initially brought on board because of Brexit will continue to remain involved in the mobilisation, while this shift in focus may also attract newcomers to the organisation and its work.

We mention this here to highlight the significant shift in focus, from acts of European citizenship to acts of citizenship otherwise oriented. Both organisations engage for the most part with—albeit different—UK based ministries and government departments. For British in Europe, this is an engagement in which they foreground their British citizenship, while for the3million their access to power relies on their status as formerly mobile citizens resident in the EU. This shift in the POS brought about by the UK's exit from the EU is significant for understanding their change of activities.

At the same time, the often country-level organisations—such as British in Italy and Germany, Remain in France Together (RIFT), Eurocitizens, British in Greece—that came together as part of the British in Europe coalition, continue their operations. They have an important role in monitoring the ongoing implementation of citizens' rights at this local level, communicating with domestic authorities in their places of residence and with the British embassy and consular officials (although as Jane Golding revealed to us in a personal communication, this cannot be taken for granted as, 'It literally comes down to a relationship with individual ambassadors'). British in Europe escalate these concerns to FCDO and EC

where and when these emerge, building on the political legitimacy they developed during the Brexit negotiations. What is clear from personal communications with those leading these organisations is that since Brexit it has become significantly harder to make their voices heard, whether in Brussels, London or their countries of residence.

What these briefly stated examples demonstrate is that while the impetus and the structures for political mobilisation around EU citizenship that emerged during Brexit have now shifted, so too have the activities of these grassroots organisations.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the changing environment/context in which a transnational community of practice emerged and operated during the five-year long Brexit negotiations. This environment included changing attitudes towards the EU and enactment of EU citizenship following Brexit among EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU (as shown in the survey), as well as the shifting (supra/national) political opportunity structures that actors of this community of practice had to navigate.

The findings from our survey reveal the persistence five years after the Brexit referendum of strong European identities and attachments among formerly mobile citizens, even as political participation has fragmented post-Brexit. Many respondents reported heightened awareness of EU values and increased civic engagement during the negotiations, underscoring the centrality of Europeanness in their sense of belonging.

The paper has examined how such European belongings contributed to the emergence and evolution of grassroots mobilizations grounded in EU citizenship during the Brexit negotiations. It has highlighted on the role and significance of supranational and transnational

political opportunity structures in shaping these movements. Through the examples of the3million and British in Europe, we have illustrated how formerly mobile citizens leveraged these structures to professionalize their advocacy and secure political legitimacy within the EU and UK to give rise to a notably transnational European community of practice, organized around a shared sense of Europeanness and a collective commitment to citizens' rights.

By examining the role of supranational political opportunity structures, this paper has highlighted the importance of multi-scalar dynamics in fostering such transnational mobilizations. While much of the existing literature on diaspora politics emphasizes state-centric perspectives, our analysis has demonstrated how supranational contexts create critical spaces for grassroots action. Yet, these spaces are often time-limited, as evidenced by the constrained activities of these organizations following the Brexit transition period.

Looking ahead, the sustainability of these transnational mobilizations will depend on the emergence of new political opportunities and institutional frameworks that can support collective engagement. Initiatives like the EU-funded Our Common Ground (https://ourcommonground.org) project offer potential pathways for maintaining connections between former free movers and the broader European community. However, with the post-Brexit decline in formal political opportunities and lack of sustained institutional support, the risk remains that these grassroots efforts will diminish, leaving untapped the strong identifications and civic potential revealed by our survey research.

In conclusion, Brexit serves as a compelling case for understanding how moments of political transformation can activate and reshape European identities and attachments. It underscores the need to consider the interplay between identity, belonging, and political agency in future studies of transnational mobilizations. At the same time, it raises critical questions about the

long-term viability of such movements in the absence of enduring political opportunity structures.

Notes

1. For more information about both organisations, visit their respective websites https://the3million.org.uk, https://www.britishineurope.org

2. *Rebordering Britain and Britons after Brexit (MIGZEN)* [ES/V004530/1] was funded by the ESRC in Phase 2 of the Governance After Brexit Scheme.

3. A more detailed technical account of the survey methodology is available on the MIGZEN project website https://migzen.net/about/phase-1-online-survey/. Survey data has been archived on the UK Data Reshare archive at https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-857643.

4. To date, we have published the initial findings from the survey in four publicly accessible reports (Benson et al. 2022a; Sigona et al. 2022b; Zambelli et al. 2022; Benson et al. 2022b), and in an article focussed on families and relationships (Zambelli et al. 2023).

5. Other representatives of British citizens living in Europe also received honours in the 2021 session, with Michael Harris (Eurocitizens), Debra Williams (Brexpats Hear our Voice), and Sue Wilson (Bremain in Spain) receiving MBEs for their service.

6. Throughout the negotiations, their work had been supported by private donations and volunteer labour. While there were funds put aside by the British Government to provide advice and support to UK citizens applying for post-Brexit residence statuses across the EU, British in Europe were not eligible to apply. Neither had they, over the course of the negotiations or in the implementation period, been eligible for EU funding.

7. This includes their contributions to the report 'Civil Society: State of the Union 2023'

(Civil Society Europe 2023).

8. For more information about Project ICE, visit https://www.britishineurope.org/articles/143674-celebrating-a-major-milestone-project-ice

9. The Elections Act 2022 restored the vote for life to Britain's emigrants. However, the issue of dedicated political representation of this population via overseas constituencies remains a live and unresolved issue at the heart of a campaign between New Europeans UK and Unlock Democracy (see https://unlockdemocracy.org.uk/overseas-constituencies for more information).

10. Following the Brexit referendum, the numbers of those registered, which had previously never exceeded 35,000 rose to 264,000 in 2016.

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