



BREXIT
BRITS ABROAD

What Does Brexit Mean for British Citizens Living in the EU27?

Talking Brexit with the British in Rural France

Dr Michaela Benson

This is an initial fieldwork report produced by Dr Michaela Benson (Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths) based on her conversations with Britons living in the Lot in summer 2017. Any enquiries about the report should be directed to her by email michaela.benson@gold.ac.uk.

The study is funded by the **Economic and Social Research Council** and the **UK in a Changing Europe Initiative** (Grant Number ES/R000875/1).

Further information about the project is available on the project website (<https://brexitbritsabroad.com>) and at RCUK's Gateway to Research (<http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=ES/R000875/1>)



Goldsmiths
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The **UK** in a
Changing Europe

SUMMARY

In this first research report from the BrExpats research project, Dr Michaela Benson (Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths) draws out the initial themes from her conversations with Britons living in rural France about what Brexit means for the British living in the EU27. The research on which the report is based was carried out in the Lot, Southwest France, in summer 2017.

- **Brexit elicits complex emotions from the British migrants who have made this corner of rural France their home.**
- **Even though withdrawal from the European Union has not yet taken place, it is having a tangible impact on the lives of some of these migrants. Concerns include, but are not limited to, their continued right to live, work and own property in France, the value of their pensions, and access to healthcare and education.**
- **Particularly notable are the high levels of uncertainty, anxiety and anger among many of those taking part in the research.**
- **It was also apparent that such feelings were accompanied by the sense of having been neglected and overlooked by the British government, and in recognizing this some of them had started to question their political allegiances back in the United Kingdom.**
- **The outcome of the referendum has caused them to question what it means to them to be European and how they feel about being British.**
- **It has also raised questions about where they feel they belong and at home. Brexit was a transformative moment in the way they thought about their relationship to Britain.**
- **Even in the absence of knowledge of what Brexit will mean for their lives, those taking part in the research were actively evaluating and acting on their options for the future. Such options included applying for dual nationality or residence permits, moving back to the United Kingdom but also, holding tight, waiting to see what the outcome of the negotiations will be.**

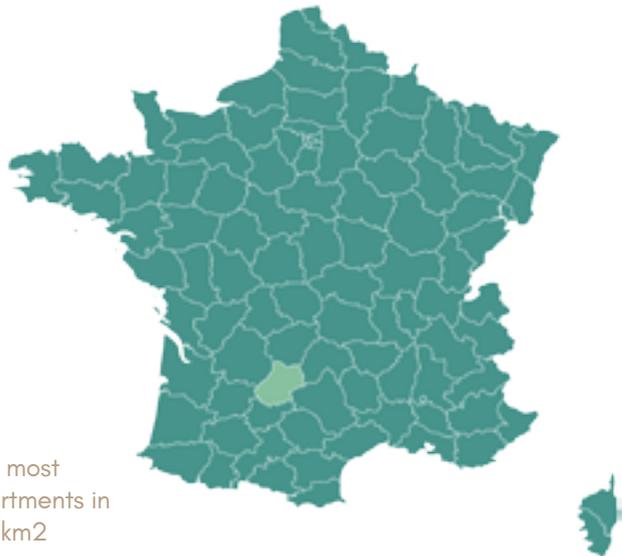


Introduction

Earlier this summer, Michaela spent three weeks in the Lot talking with British Citizens who had made this corner of rural France their home about what Brexit means to them. Her visit coincided with the anniversary of Britain's referendum on its continued membership of the EU and the first round of talks between the United Kingdom and the European Union since Article 50 was triggered. In this brief report, she presents some initial thoughts drawn from these conversations that reveal their diverse feelings about Brexit and their actions and plans for managing the impact of this monumental political moment on their lives.

Who Are the British in the Lot?

When we think of British people who have migrated and set up their homes elsewhere in the world, our imaginings are often flavoured by particular characters and representations. This is as true of the British in rural France as for any population. And yet this is a diverse population, it includes families with young children, young couples and individuals looking for new opportunities in life, early retirees and pensioners. There are people who set up businesses in the Lot, within the tourism industry, offering services to other Britons living locally, as well as finding work within the local economy on a full-time, part-time or freelance basis. Their economic circumstances vary significantly, as do their continued links back to the United Kingdom.



P.S. The Lot is one of the most sparsely populated departments in France at 33 people per km²

While, for some, relocating to France coincides with leaving Britain, for others, it is the culmination of years of living outside of the United Kingdom. And their reasons for moving to the Lot are similarly diverse, related to their different stages in the life course, the conditions under which they left the United Kingdom and individual biographies. While for some moving to France is considered a permanent move, for others, it is a move for the time being, open-minded to the possibility that they might move on elsewhere, or return to the United Kingdom. They live amongst the French. There are dual nationals among them, some holding their British citizenship alongside that of another European Union member state.

The initial research Michaela conducted for the BrExpats research project and reported here, was with 43 people interviewed as individuals, couples and small groups. The themes emerging from these conversations reveal complex emotions about Brexit, Britain and Europe, demonstrating that while withdrawal has not yet taken place its impacts are already being felt in their lives, their actions and plans for the future changing in response.

What Brexit means to these individuals needs to be understood within the context of what brought them to the Lot in the first place, the conditions in which they currently live, as well as the options open to them on the basis of their own personal circumstances.

Talking Brexit

Just as for the British population resident in the United Kingdom, for the Britons resident in the Lot, the referendum and the Brexit negotiations elicited mixed feelings. While conversations revealed strong support for remaining in the European Union, there were also those who had supported the Leave campaign and voted—where they still had the right to vote—accordingly. Despite the stark extremes that these positions seem to occupy, it is important to recognise the contexts within which people support these positions in relation to their own identities and biographies—including political persuasion, knowledge and understanding of the European Union and the UK's position within it and the potential impact of Brexit on their lives.

Furthermore, while Brexit was a topic of conversation that many people were keen and willing to talk about, it is also worth documenting that there



were those who did not want to talk about Brexit. They might frame this as being tired of talking about it, or ask how it would be possible to discuss the impacts of Brexit on their lives when it hadn't happened yet. Similarly, there were some who were adamant that Brexit would have limited impact on their lives.

However, as I sketch out below, despite the lack of clarity at this stage about what withdrawal will mean for these Britons resident in rural France and elsewhere in the EU27, it is clear that Brexit is already affecting the lives of some of Britain's citizens living and working in Europe, (a) changing the way that some people think about their lives in France, (b) consider identity, home and belonging, and (c) that this interplays with the actions and plans for their futures.

Reactions of Disbelief, Anger and Sadness

Perhaps unsurprisingly, among those who opposed the outcome of the referendum, emotions ran high. As we spoke about Brexit a year on, they described how they had been glued to the television on the night of the referendum, or awoken to the news the following morning, disbelief a common sentiment that has given way to uncertainty, grief and sadness. It became clear that their anger and frustration was deeply felt; despite the passing of time. As we switched to talking about Brexit, their voices became noticeably raised, their faces showing clear signs of anger, regret, or frustration. On more than one occasion, people choked back tears, dabbing at the corner of their eyes to stop these rolling down their face.



Similarly, their agitation was communicated via the strong language they used to describe Brexit, the politicians involved in the referendum, and the (imagined) British public who had voted to leave. In making clear their belief that Brexit was the product of self-interest, there were references to Brexit as the 'easy' or 'selfish' option, and to careerist politicians.

But it was also clear that, for some, Brexit elicited sadness. This sadness was expressed in the way they described what Britain had become; it was no longer the country they had left, but a deeply divided, insular place that they no longer recognised. They described what being European (or a European citizen) meant to them, the freedom of movement and the experiences of other cultures that this had permitted, and it was clear that they mourned the loss of this from their own perspectives but also in terms of what this would mean for future generations for whom Brexit meant the loss of such opportunities.

The Day After the Referendum

Waking up to the news of the referendum was something that many people described. From the excitement of those who had voted to leave, to the disbelief of those who had supported remaining in the European Union, this was a moment that people remembered. However, beyond their own feelings about Brexit

and what it might mean for their lives, there was also curiosity and concern about what Brexit would mean for how their French neighbours thought of the Britons living in their midst. As Maggie who had only recently moved to France explained, one of her first thoughts was, 'more how we would be perceived by the French, what the reactions from them would be', her partner Si, describing how their fears were laid to rest, 'We went to the market didn't we? It wasn't that day, but the first market was on the Tuesday, and everyone was so kind, weren't they?' Others similarly presented their initial thoughts about the vote through their descriptions of their encounters with their French neighbours in the hours and days following Brexit.

Without fail, they described feeling reassured through these encounters, their French friends, acquaintances and neighbours making them feel as though they would continue being welcome, that their contributions—to the local economy, to the community—were a valued part of daily life in this sparsely populated part of the French countryside. They told me of the matter-of-fact way that their French neighbours came up with 'solutions' to ensure their continued residence in France— 'Well, you're just going to take French citizenship aren't you?' The tone of these conversations as much as the content a consolation to them at a time when they felt that their futures were plunged into uncertainty. At the same time, these conversations revealed a range of attitudes from their French neighbours towards Europe, including those who had described Brexit as 'Britain's revolution'— championing the British public's stand against Europe; those who stressed that in an equivalent FrExit referendum, they would have voted to leave; as well as those who supported the European Union.

These initial conversations with the British in the Lot, brought home to me the diversity and complexity of their feelings about Brexit, Europe, and living in France post-Brexit.

Uncertainties and Anxieties

Just as has been widely reported in the case of EU nationals currently living and working in the UK, many of those who took part in the research described the uncertainty that Brexit had brought in respect to their continued rights to live in France and the social entitlements—for example, access to healthcare—currently ensured through European Union legislation on acquired rights. The negotiations, ongoing at the time of the

research, further exacerbated this uncertainty. Indeed, it was precisely such uncertainty that lay in the indignation, for some, that a decision that might so fundamentally change the conditions under which they lived was taken on the basis of a referendum, and in a situation where many of them—because of the loss of overseas voting rights after 15 years—did not have a say.

Common concerns were about future access to healthcare, the exchange rate, pensions, but also concerns over whether they would still be allowed to own property in France, their rights to work, whether they would still be allowed to live and under what conditions, once the negotiations were completed and the United Kingdom left the European Union. To be clear, the legal basis of their migration and settlement was, and is, all up in the air.

Undoubtedly, this uncertainty had a more profound impact for some than for others. Those who suffered from long-term chronic illness were understandably worried about how the costs of their treatment—currently covered 100% in line with French healthcare legislation—would be covered post-Brexit. In one case, the stress of this uncertainty had further exacerbated a chronic condition; I also heard of others who had not slept since the referendum, worries about their futures keeping them awake long into the night. And there were no answers, at least, not yet. Similarly, there were those who had very small incomes from their British pensions, which currently stretched to support their day-to-day living expenses in France, for whom exchange rate fluctuations were already having an impact.

Although the United Kingdom is still in the European Union and the withdrawal process has not yet commenced, the uncertainties and anxieties briefly stated here make clear that Brexit is having a tangible impact on the lives of some Britons living elsewhere in the European Union.

Disenfranchisement & Shifting Political Allegiances

While the Conservative government had proposed to extend the vote for life, by the time of the referendum, this had only been presented as a white paper. Eligibility to vote in the referendum was on the same terms as national elections; Britons living overseas only eligible to vote if they had been registered to vote at a UK address in the last fifteen years.

What became clear in my conversations was the indignation of those who had lost their right to vote, who felt that with an extraordinary event such as a referendum, the ordinary rules could have been suspended. They felt strongly that they should have had the right to have their say, given that its outcome was likely to have a substantial impact on their lives. Justine—who had lived outside of the UK for over forty years and was now aged in her early 70s—captured the strong feelings that many of those who took part in the research emphasised, describing how she felt betrayed and alienated by the outcome of the referendum and its continuing negotiations.

In response to those who might ask why should Britons resident overseas have the right to vote, they stressed that although they had stopped living in the UK they still cared about what happened there: they had paid into the UK economy—and in some cases continued to do so—through taxation and they had friends and family for whom this vote would also have an impact, and whose futures they cared about.

Some had chosen not to exercise their right to vote in Britain since they had left, with others questioning whether they should have that right.



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We've lived here for twelve years and we have chosen, until the referendum, not to vote here, not to exercise our right to vote, not to vote in the UK so we've chosen not to exercise our right --- because we believe that we've moved here, we've made a conscious choice, this is our home and we shouldn't interfere in things there despite the fact that because of the nature of our pensions ... we have to pay tax in the UK. (Carol)

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But the referendum vote was seen as a case apart to some extent, precisely because of its potential to impact on the legal structures that supported their lives, their identities and futures in France. In part, it seemed to mark a moment of political awakening among some of those I spoke to, with people questioning the political allegiances they had formerly held—in some cases, unquestioningly until now. As Tom described, he had followed in his father's footsteps, reading the same broadsheet newspapers and voting for the same political party unquestioningly. He had lived outside the UK since he had been in his late 20s and had lost the right to vote, but after the referendum and watching the negotiations unfold he found himself questioning whether his 'natural' party, was really reflective of his politics and whether they supported his interests. He has since joined another political party, supporting them in the 2017 General Election. Far from idiosyncratic, this theme of shifting allegiances came to light in a number of the interviews.

What became clear through these conversations is the extent to which Britons living abroad feel abandoned and disenfranchised. The consequences of these can be seen in their political mobilisation.

Talking about the EU, Europe, and European Citizenship

Europe, the European Union and European citizenship were closely allied in the way that people spoke about Brexit. For several of them, Britain's membership had meant that they had been able to go and live and work in other member states; these opportunities were remembered as formative experiences that had changed the way they looked at the world and that

they worried that future generations would not have. As they stressed, they felt European. Such statements were further clarified as signalling openness to other cultures, ability to live with difference, a curiosity about the world beyond Britain. Further, these were located within the broader context of their lives in France, of their desire to be part of the community, to be involved in the life of the places that they lived. Being European was a future that was, they keenly felt, being denied to their children and grandchildren.

Our discussions about the European Union took into account what Europe meant to them and for their lives. It is significant that whatever their own opinions about the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, there was unanimous agreement among those I spoke to that the European Union was in need of reform. The question, as for the British population at large, lay in whether people felt that this was best done with Britain in or out. Cutting across the sentiments to leave or remain, people were passionate about the referendum and its outcome.

A few among these Britons in the Lot stressed that they had been uneasy about what they understood as the transformation from a trade bloc, to a supranational structure, the latter believed to present a challenge to the sovereignty of the United Kingdom. As Jack described, he had been happy when things were just about money, but less so as things became political. With withdrawal, he argued, Britain would exit the EU but it would still be in Europe. The EU, which had been in need of reform for a long time, would need to find its way without Britain, who had tried time and again to bring about such reform. His arguments were finely honed, the consequence, he stressed, of standing his ground in conversation with other Britons—remainders—living in the area. In contrast, others were hopeful about the future of the European Union. They were positive about the outcome of the recent French election; they emphasised their trust in Macron to bring about these changes.

Securing Lives into The Future

While nothing is certain about the legal position of Britons living in the EU27, many of those I spoke to were making plans for their futures and trying to counter uncertainties and anxieties through their own actions. This included applying for *carte de séjours*—residence permits, which they had not been



obliged to have for many years—and in some cases starting the process of applying for French citizenship (which they could hold as dual nationals). What became clear was that these moves were largely about being able to stay put (at least for the foreseeable future), and continue living the way they had up until now, in France where they felt at home. This at least promised some security within the context of considerable uncertainty.

Talking about Britain and Britishness

In light of the referendum, my conversations with Britons living in the Lot about Europe and being European were often paired with talk about Britain and being British. For them, their current feelings about Britain were a product of Brexit, rather than being a reason for leaving Britain in the first place. In many cases, they took care to stress they had moved to the Lot because of what it offered them rather, and they did not associate with the ‘bad Britain’ discourse. It was clear that how they felt about Britain had become more complicated in light of Brexit than it had been when they had chosen their current lifestyles.

Brexit was a transformational moment in the way that they thought of Britain. For those in favour of Britain’s exit from the European Union, the sense of confidence in Britain’s future, its ability to manage its own affairs going forward were passionately conveyed. It was a moment of excitement where the perceived ills wrought on Britain—immigration paramount within this—by its membership could be reversed. But for those who had come out strongly against Brexit, Britain was presented as insular, not the country they had left, as intolerant and xenophobic. Many of those I

spoke to described how they did not recognise Britain any longer, and felt ashamed to call themselves British, drawing instead on regional and local identities (e.g. Scottish, Welsh, Lancastrian, from Yorkshire).

Such evaluations were drawn up both through their observations of Britain's mass media, but also through experiences back in Britain and their discussions with friends and family around the entire process of the referendum. People described having to explain to family members what leaving the European Union might mean for themselves, and even trying to talk people out of voting to leave. Others talked about the way that the British populations living elsewhere in the European Union had been described in the media as traitors—for leaving Britain in the first place—and as unpatriotic, and how this had fed through into the way that some of their friends and families had talked to them about Brexit. They had often experienced this as hurtful and presented it as evidence that their lives in France were misunderstood. Val described a conversation she had had with a close friend back in the UK:

“I just don't mention Brexit anymore because she voted out and she's very, gets very angry over it and early days we were discussing it but it got to the point where it was putting a strain on our friendship. I said something at one point and she said 'oh well it's nothing to do with you anyway you're sitting out there in the sunshine while we're all working here in the UK and why should you have any input into our decisions' and things like that. So I said 'I'll accept that, fair enough if we don't have to pay our taxes, because we're still paying taxes into the UK', I don't think she realised that but I said 'if we're going to be completely cut off then fair enough but let us choose to pay our tax in the country where we live'.”

What becomes clear is that Brexit marks a moment where British populations living elsewhere in the European Union are re-evaluating their relationship with Britain, and with Europe, but also considering what this means for how they understand who they are and their relationships with friends and family. This is the landscape, paired with a deep sense of being part of the local community, through which these migrants expressed their sense of where they belong in the world.

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David: *I'm worried that if the finance houses such as the banks and there's a problem there, my pension originates in England ... I would be worried if things went wrong and there was problems with paying our pension, our old age pension, state pension, if they froze that as well ... and these uncertainties have brought us to the point where we now think, and my wife Helen is very worried about our future here. I wouldn't risk her being unwell through worry so I've suggested that we sell, we actually sell this house and probably rent a house here in France and ... during this time of rental we can start to look for a new home in the UK.*

Helen: *The other thing that, which we don't know about is, say we, in the future so we didn't sell it and, if we can sell it, say in five years' time and they've come to these agreements, and something happens to our money.*

David: *All these are anxieties ... But it will break my heart to move from here. This was an overgrown patch, it was a beautiful piece of land but it'd been neglected for thirty years ... all this has turned from being a building site into what you see now, and I've put a lot of work in, we both have put a lot of work in haven't we, into turning this into a home, and it will, it'll be a sad day when I walked away from this. I think it may happen, and I don't think we're going to be the only ones.*

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For others, a future return to Britain was on the cards. While for some, this had always been part of the plan, perhaps brought forward in light of Brexit. For others, this was a new consideration, brought on by the uncertainties around Brexit and what this might mean for their futures:

As David and Helen's conversation demonstrates, even for those considering return, this is not an easy decision, but one that is driven by the relative security that moving back to Britain might allow in this situation. Even in the absence of knowledge of what Brexit will mean for their lives, people are evaluating their options and how they can ensure some certainty about their lives in the short-term.

Conclusion

Even in the absence of knowing what Britain's withdrawal from the European Union will mean in terms of their legal status, it is clear that many of those that I spoke to have been making plans to secure their futures. They counter their uncertainties and anxieties by evaluating their options—how to stay in France, whether to go back to Britain—and starting to take action on the basis of what they believe will be best for their lives. What becomes clear is the extent to which these plans and actions aim to restore certainty to their lives.

What becomes clear is that Brexit as an ongoing process has impacted on many of these migrants in a profound way. It has elicited feelings of uncertainty about their futures and identities, it has caused them to question where they belong, their place in the world, and to evaluate their futures as Britons resident in the EU27.

Acknowledgements

Michaela would like to thank all of those who generously gave up their time to participate in the research.

This report should be cited as follows:

Benson, M. (2017) What does Brexit mean for British citizens living in the EU27? Talking Brexit with the British in rural France. London: Goldsmiths. Available at: <https://brexitbritsabroad.com/talking-and-writing-about-brexpats/the-british-in-rural-france/>



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