

**BREXIT  
AND THE  
BRITISH  
IN SPAIN**



**Karen O'Reilly**



## About the project

This report is based on findings from the *BrExpats* research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through their UK in a Changing Europe Initiative (Grant Number ES/R000875/1). This was a longitudinal study of Brexit and its implications for UK nationals living in other European Union member states. From May 2017 until January 2020, the project team tracked the Brexit negotiations and what they mean for the political rights, social and financial entitlements, identity, citizenship and belonging of Britons living in the EU-27. In particular, the project team documented how the protracted uncertainties about what Brexit means for citizens' rights—the rights and entitlements derived from exercising Freedom of Movement—were experienced by UK nationals living across the EU-27, and with what consequences for their ongoing emotional and practical choices.



## Contents

- 1 Executive summary
- 4 Introduction
- 5 British migration to Spain in (longer) context
- 5 The Norm of (Privileged) Movement for British migrants
- 6 Mass tourism in Spain and 'living the dream'
- 7 Mass tourism to Spain and the way it has shaped perceptions of the British abroad
- 8 The role of Europeanisation in the migration of the British to Spain
- 12 Europe and Free Movement as a dialectic of mobility and enclosure
- 12 The global financial crisis
- 13 Who are the British in Spain today?
- 14 Research with British in Spain in time of Brexit
- 14 British people of all types and all kinds of living arrangements
- 16 British people who have settled and made a home in Spain
- 17 How does Brexit shape the lives of British people living in Spain?
- 24 Moving on through the past three years
- 31 Last words: attempting to explain the impact of Brexit on British people in Spain
- 33 Recommendations

## Executive summary

Many British people living in Spain have been left confused, fearful and in the dark about their post-Brexit future, having received inadequate information and support from both the Spanish and UK governments. This is partly because UK nationals in the country are still largely caricatured as retirees and “residential tourists”, despite this being a highly inaccurate picture of the contemporary British migrant experience in Spain. With between 300,000 and a million British people living at least some of the year in Spain, the uncertainties of Brexit have created an urgent need for a more nuanced understanding of the complexity and diversity of Britons’ living, working and family arrangements in Spain.

These are the core themes of *Brexit and the British in Spain*, which summarises the key findings of extensive, longitudinal empirical research conducted from 2017-20 with UK nationals living in Spain.

### Key findings

*Britons in Spain are confused, fearful and in the dark about the post-Brexit future*

- It remains unclear what future status British citizens currently living in Spain will hold; the residence permits they have been advised to apply for are just temporary measures that will determine their eligibility for this future status.
- Our participants have spent three years feeling confused and fearful, having often received inadequate or misleading information (although information has become clearer over time).
- The Withdrawal Agreement ensures that UK citizens who have exercised their treaty rights and are ‘legally resident’ in the EU27 will be able to stay, and outlines the terms that will guide this. Many of our participants are securing their futures by getting registered, as advised. But this is not straightforward and many are falling through loopholes.
- Even now, in 2020, people are still confused about regulations, unsure where to go for advice, and sometimes given misleading advice. This is partly because many people have complex family and living arrangements that are difficult to resolve with simple regulations, meaning that the implications of Brexit on their lives are not well understood.
- The Withdrawal Agreement has also left several important issues unresolved, notably the question of continued freedom of movement within the European Union, the case of posted workers and diverse other complex individual circumstances.

### *UK nationals in Spain are still treated as "tourists"*

- Many Britons in Spain are not getting the support they need because the UK and Spanish governments (and UK and Spanish media) still treat them as "long-term tourists", even though the classic stereotype of the older, white, retired and working class British expat is well out of date.
- While early waves of large-scale British migration to Spain were fuelled by Spanish "mass tourism" and "residential tourism" initiatives that attracted retirees, entrepreneurs and small business owners, the advent of European Freedom of Movement in 1992 and the financial crisis in 2008 radically diversified the British population in Spain. Today, there are British people of all ages and backgrounds living in every part of Spain, including young people, fluent in Spanish, working in cities and bringing up children. Indeed, every kind of diversity that exists in the UK also pertains to the British in Spain.
- This gap in the understanding of their lives means that the needs of Britons in Spain are persistently overlooked, denied or dismissed.

### *A lack of clarity from Spanish authorities*

- The complexity of people's lives means simple rules and regulations based on legal rights or duties are rarely adequate in practice.
- Many Britons in Spain are not officially registered as Spanish residents, in part because Spanish authorities have tended to interpret free movement policies in different ways in different areas.
- In addition, British migration to Spain has always included part-time, temporary and seasonal visitors for whom the regulations are unclear.





## Introduction

Brexit and the British in Spain focusses on summarising the findings of the extensive, longitudinal empirical research conducted from 2017-20 with UK nationals living in Spain. This research was conducted as part of the *BrExpats* research project. Given the volume of research this project has delivered, it has been impossible to report on everything in-depth here. The report therefore provides a flavour of the key themes emerging for those living, working, and staying in Spain. These key themes are all unpacked in more detail in blogs, reports, podcasts, research papers and other media that we have produced over the course of the project, or will produce in future extended works. You can find out more on the project website.<sup>1</sup>

The report begins by contextualising British migration to Spain historically, socially and culturally. Looking backwards in time to long before the project started, long before Brexit, I examine in turn: the social and material transformations that have shaped (and often privileged) British migration to Spain; the context of mass tourism and how this has moulded attitudes towards migration, and towards these migrants in particular; increasing Europeanisation of the relationship between Britain and Spain; the introduction of the notion of freedom of movement; and how this last was interpreted and enacted by British migrants and state authorities. In turn, this sets the stage for understanding the reactions of Britons in Spain to Brexit, and the impacts of the process on them as it unravelled. The report then sketches who the British in Spain are today, examining their geographical dispersion, their mobility practices, their cultural and home-making practices, and their institutions. It emphasises their diversity and their settlement, and the sedimentation of their migration practices. We see a profound and long-term migration trend that has witnessed significant transformations over time. The rest of the report draws on deep insights into their ongoing responses and reactions to the Referendum and the ensuing negotiations, and understands these in the context of what we understand of the British in Spain as migrants. We hear of the initial shock and fear experienced by many, followed by the ebbs and flows of confusion, reassurance, uncertainty, doubt, information, support, advice, and misinformation. The report outlines the ongoing attempts to ameliorate these ebbs and flows, and reveals some of the complexity of their lives in contrast to simplistic legal interpretations of their needs. Beyond their efforts to secure their futures, major themes that emerge through the report are: the meaning of freedom of movement as a social good; the complex emotional and practical dimensions of national and European identities; the ways in which Brexit, especially, has caused people to rethink how they feel about Britain; and the need people have to find ways to simply go on in difficult and changing times.

---

<sup>1</sup> The project website is available at <https://brexitbritsabroad.org>.

## British migration to Spain in (longer) context

I start this report by looking backwards to the time before the project started. This gives me the opportunity to explicate the ways in which diverse events, changes, developments, policies and practices of the past shape present day lives.<sup>2</sup> Migration is normal, despite the 'norm of stasis'. Our point here then is not to explain this migration but to accept it and to explain its nature, its outcomes, and the ways in which, in turn, it shapes the world. The purpose of our research was to examine what Brexit, as it unfolds, entails for British citizens living and working in the EU-27 exploring in particular questions of citizenship, identity and belonging. However, the present always needs understanding in the context of the past, and with an eye to the future. A whole host of social and material transformations have shaped British migration to Spain. British people have been moving abroad for centuries, and these earlier migrations and movements have often meant that Britons abroad are in a relatively privileged position. British migration to Spain itself needs understanding in the context of mass tourism. Mass tourism shapes how they were enabled to migrate, the attitudes of some of them towards how they will live their lives after migration, and also shapes the way that Britons in Spain are perceived. Migration to Spain was often a form of lifestyle migration, and the earlier migrants were retirees and second-home owners. Despite the fact that things have changed dramatically over the intervening years, and that Britons in Spain are now equally likely to be young, fluent in Spanish, working and bringing up children, they are still widely perceived as older, wealthy, and usually retired 'residential tourists', and their needs are persistently overlooked or denied.

A further development that has shaped British migration to Spain is Europeanisation, especially the introduction of the Free Movement of people (FOM). Over the decades, it became easier for Britons (and other Europeans) to purchase property, work, and move freely within Spain. However, policies relating to free movement have been interpreted by the Spanish authorities in different ways in different areas at different times, leading to a confusing array of constantly changing rules and conditions. The consequent ambiguity enabled the Spanish authorities to retain control over European immigration, while causing some groups of migrants to suffer exclusion as a result of lack of access to full rights. The fear of interpreting the rules wrongly or finding oneself on the wrong side of policies has meant that many Britons have avoided legal registration and have been enabled in this choice by slack regulation. These people are then easier to exclude when legislation is tightened. These and other themes will all be discussed below in further detail.

## The Norm of (Privileged) Movement for British migrants

Migration is normal despite what we term the 'norm of stasis'. One of the most overlooked aspects of migration is the role of the myriad forces that work towards not moving. At the time of making the decision to move abroad, any would-be migrant is faced with the deep-seated

---

<sup>2</sup> This report is inspired by the theoretical framework of practice stories, based on strong structuration theory, that we have used in other writing. See for example: Benson, M. and O'Reilly, K. (2018) *Lifestyle Migration and Colonial Traces in Malaysia and Panama*, London: Palgrave, and O'Reilly, K. (2012) *International Migration and Social Theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

assumption that people (especially some groups, such as older people, retired, disabled, and children) normally do not move away from their town or country, their families, their nation, their histories. The fact that most people do not move, and the assumption of the norm of stasis, are so taken for granted that migration studies always tend to start with the demand to explain migration. This norm of stasis also frames the way all migrants around the world are perceived as going against a norm, as requiring an explanation. I believe this shapes (usually negatively) how they are received and how others relate to them. So, the first point to make in this paper is that migration is normal despite the norm of stasis. Our point here then is not to explain this migration but to accept it and to explain its nature, its outcomes, and its shaping of the world in its turn.

Thinking specifically about the movement of British people to Spain, looking back in time, there has been a whole host of social and material transformations that have shaped this. We need to bear in mind the massive global historical shifts, such as the colonial past that has shaped who has what relative wealth. British people have been moving abroad for centuries, and these earlier migrations and movements, such as through empire building and through the settlement of armed forces, has often meant that Britons abroad are in a relatively privileged position in relation to those in the destination countries. Think for example, of the ease with which British passport holders cross borders and settle elsewhere in the world and the relative lack of scrutiny of their rights to enter other sovereign states. Relative to the challenges that some other people face in crossing borders, British passport holders are undeniably privileged in consequence of this history. We could think of this as a norm of privileged movement: British people (as with many other Western nations) take for granted that movement for them is quite easy and straight-forward much of the time. While some of these seismic historical shifts are specific to Western societies, including international relations, and economic and political shifts such as the spread of the political economy of neoliberalism, others are more specific to the relationship between Britain and Spain, in the context of Europe. I focus here on the latter as they are more relevant to understanding and framing British migration to Spain and how Brexit takes shape in this context.

## **Mass tourism in Spain and 'living the dream'**

British migration to Spain needs understanding, at least partly, in the context of the historical development of mass tourism. Mass tourism shapes how they were enabled to migrate, the attitudes of some of them towards how they will live their lives after migration, and also shapes the way that the British in Spain are perceived.

Many British people in Spain, especially those living in coastal areas, knew Spain first as a tourist destination. During the twentieth century, tourism here evolved from a fairly elite and often educational pastime, through a middle-class pursuit of exotic otherness, to a mass phenomenon based on seasonal escape in search of sun, sea, sand, and leisure. The development of all-inclusive package tours was especially critical, leading to the creation of entire new towns and cities built around tourism consumption. The Costa del Sol is often referred to as the archetypal mass tourism destination, with other regions in the Mediterranean following a similar model. New resorts such as Torremolinos and Fuengirola emerged during the 1960s and attracted British tourists in large numbers, many of whom returned year after year. The subsequent migration to these towns of Britons and Germans especially, did not occur overnight but in stages, with, first, a few individuals buying retirement homes or holiday

homes, or a small tourist business in the 1970s. Increasing numbers visited these homes more frequently through the 1970s and 1980s, with more people retiring to the area, buying properties and providing businesses and services to serve both tourists and settled communities from the late 1980s onwards.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1990s, when mass tourism to Spain faced something of a decline, the Spanish authorities actively sought to remedy its seasonal and geographically polarised nature by encouraging investment in property, in the form of what has become widely known in Spain as 'residential tourism'. Residential tourism had the added advantage of promising inward investment and was later given a boost by the introduction of the Free Movement of people (FOM) ascribed in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. But these 'residential tourists' were expected and encouraged to spend more time and money, to settle for longer, and to embrace the culture and rurality of Spain. Nevertheless, they were still viewed by local people, the Spanish government, and the tourist board as tourists rather than residents.

Tourism shaped the sort of life sought by some migrants to these areas. Mass and package tourism were not designed to enable visitors to experience other cultures so much as to protect them from them. In Spain, mass tourism was framed around embracing the sun, sea, sand, and leisure; it often implied escape and being able to travel abroad while remaining safely ensconced in one's own cultural milieu. And this is how some Britons in Spain have lived their lives as migrants. It is important to understand that migration to Spain was often a form of lifestyle migration,<sup>4</sup> and as we argued when we first defined this term in 2009, the destinations chosen by lifestyle migrants tell us a lot about the lives they aspire to lead.

## Mass tourism to Spain and the way it has shaped perceptions of the British abroad

Perhaps more importantly today, mass tourism and its relationship to the history of British migration to Spain has shaped how the British abroad are received and perceived. Despite the fact that there are between 300,000 and 1 million Britons in Spain - scattered across the country, of all types, and all manners of living - our media, the Spanish media, and our government, continue to perceive them as long-term tourists, and thereby to dismiss their needs. Indeed this was what provoked me to undertake research there in the first place. As I argued:

*Many of the images and representations of the British in Spain were derisory, negative, or at least sensationalist... It seemed important to me that these images of the British in Spain should not be accepted uncritically, but should be viewed for what they were: media constructions which interacted with common knowledge to create a unifying set of representations which had some basis in reality but which were essentially stereotypical constructions.<sup>5</sup>*

---

<sup>3</sup> O'Reilly, K. (2000) *The British on the Costa del Sol*. London: Routledge

<sup>4</sup> Benson, M. and O'Reilly, K. (2009) 'Migration and the Search for a Better Way of Life: a Critical Exploration of Lifestyle Migration', *The Sociological Review* 57(4): 608–25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.01864.x>

<sup>5</sup> O'Reilly, K. (2001) 'Blackpool in the sun: images of the British on the Costa del Sol'. In R. King and N. Woods, (eds) *Media and Migration*, London: Routledge

Even now, when Britons in Spain are very diverse and many have settled permanently or even grown up in Spain all their lives, they are still perceived and portrayed as retired, as 'residential tourists', in pursuit of pleasure, and treated with the same disdain we tend to give to tourism. It is still true to say, as I said in my first book on this topic, that where local town hall services in Spain are provided for British (and other European) migrants, these are often housed in the same offices as tourist services, or are called Foreign Residents departments, thus distinguishing them from other groups who are required to visit 'immigration' offices.

An effect of earlier migrations to Spain (of the elite individual traveller, followed by the wealthier retired, and then self-employed entrepreneurs) has been to plant the seed of an idea in the minds of local residents that British migrants to Spain are all wealthy, elite, and very different to the members of the rural or coastal communities they lived amongst. It has then become taken for granted that British people do not require the advice and support that other migrants might warrant. This is despite the fact that things have changed dramatically over the intervening years and that now Britons in Spain are as likely to be young, fluent in Spanish, working and bringing up children as they are to be older, retired and monolingual. Yet, as I argued way back in 2003,<sup>6</sup> the failure to view them as anything other than tourists has caused problems for understanding both their lives and the impacts of their migration.

Discussions in Parliament about the British in Europe often take place in the context of voting rights. They will often refer to groups such as retirees, long-term taxpayers and ex-military personnel: hard-working taxpayers who have given most of their working lives to the British economy and, more poignantly, the armed services. This is further solidified by the fact that in a lot of the debates the framing of these populations is through the language of the 'past', meaning that this right is something earned over time and thus for the elderly.<sup>7</sup>

## **The role of Europeanisation in the migration of the British to Spain**

A further development that has shaped British migration to Spain is Europeanisation, especially the introduction of the free movement of people. We examine here what this means, how it has been implemented, and how enacted. Freedom of movement is one of the four fundamental freedoms of the European Union, together with the movement of goods, capital, and services. Free movement of people was inscribed in the Treaty on the European Union - signed in Maastricht in 1992 and often referred to as the Maastricht Treaty – and is linked to the notion of EU citizenship, which is a nebulous notion at best. It says on the European Parliament website:

*The Treaty of Maastricht introduced the notion of EU citizenship to be enjoyed automatically by every national of a Member State. It is this EU citizenship that underpins the right of persons to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States.<sup>8</sup>*

---

<sup>6</sup> O'Reilly, K. (2003) When is a tourist? The Articulation of Tourism and Migration in Spain's Costa del Sol. *Tourist Studies*, 3(3): 301-317. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797603049661>

<sup>7</sup> Listen to our podcast on this topic, entitled 'Who Cares about UK Citizens living in the EU27' <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep019-who-cares-about-uk-citizens-living-in-the-eu27>

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/147/free-movement-of-persons>

It is worth noting that the other three freedoms – of capital, goods, and services – were established prior to free movement of people, and that the latter was primarily established to enable the movement of economically-active people, or to be more precise, the movement of labour. Freedom of movement for students, pensioners, and the unemployed, as well as for their families, came to be guaranteed later, in 1990, and ‘citizenship’ as described above was introduced with the Maastricht Treaty, in 1992.

The European Commission website <sup>9</sup> implies that free movement is more about labour than any other kind of movement. EU citizens, they suggest, are entitled to:

- look for a job in another EU country;
- work there without needing a work permit;
- reside there for that purpose;
- stay there even after employment has finished;
- enjoy equal treatment with nationals in access to employment, working conditions and all other social and tax advantages.

This framing of freedom of movement has shaped subsequent debates around Brexit within the EU, often viewing those who have adopted free movement as labour migrants or as migrants retired from labour. For Britons in EU27, freedom of movement has meant much more than that. As I have written before

*They take advantage of Europeans’ right to free movement and construct fluid and flexible migration trajectories. Blurring the distinction between migration and tourism, they migrate, oscillate, circulate, or tour between their home and host countries. Some retain a place in more than one place, some work in one place and live in another; others simply move, while others simply visit.<sup>10</sup>*

Many of our respondents, then, have taken at face value the statement that: “EU citizenship underpins the right of persons to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States”. This is understandable, given that the actual conditions under which this ‘free movement’ is able to take place is somewhat complicated and contradictory, as we shall see below. But, even further than this, freedom of movement is about an identity, a sense of who and how they are, as well as an individual and social good.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> See <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=457&langId=en>

<sup>10</sup> O’Reilly, K. (2007) ‘Intra-European Migration and the mobility-enclosure dialectic’, *Sociology*, 41(2): 277-293 (page 281). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038507074974>

<sup>11</sup> This is discussed in more detail in our report: Collins, Katherine and O’Reilly, Karen. 2018. *What does Freedom of Movement mean to British citizens living in the EU27? Freedom, mobility and the experience of loss*. Project Report. Goldsmiths, University of London, London. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00027352>







## Europe and Free Movement as a dialectic of mobility and enclosure

Over the decades, European and Spanish legislation have coincided to make it easier for British (and other Europeans) to purchase property, to work, and to move freely within Spain. However, as I showed in 2007,<sup>12</sup> policies relating to free movement have been interpreted by the Spanish authorities in different ways in different areas, leading to a confusing array of constantly changing rules and conditions that both enable and constrain migration and residence. In practice, freedom of movement is tempered with the need for state apparatuses to control state borders, and so the idea that mobility might be fluid rather than unidirectional and singular remains at odds with policies of stability and norms of stasis. The consequent ambiguity enabled the Spanish authorities to retain control over European immigration, which seemed more problematic as the years went by and especially as increasing numbers of younger, working-class, and unemployed British migrants joined the earlier, predominantly middle-class, retirement migrants. Indeed, ambiguous rules and regulations led to social exclusion for some British migrants. The diverse and imprecise ways that policy has been implemented has led to British people sometimes making decisions about whether to register as permanent residents, whether to take out a bank account in Spain, or even whether to settle permanently or on a more semi-permanent, flexible basis. In other words, the fear of interpreting the rules wrongly or finding oneself on the wrong side of policies has meant that many Britons have avoided legal registration. These people are then easier to exclude when legislation is tightened. But it is worth noting that they were not necessarily doing anything wrong at the time.

## The global financial crisis

A further aspect that frames how we understand who the British in Spain are, and how they live, is the financial crisis that began in 2008, in the US, and spread across the Western world in subsequent years. The effects for the British in Spain over time was a reduction in income, in expendable wealth, and a sense of nervousness about their how/if they could secure their futures in Spain financially..

Britain is not part of the Eurozone and one impact of the global financial crisis was a drastic fall in the value of pound sterling in relation to the euro, especially between 2008 and 2010, and despite the weakness of the euro in later years.<sup>13</sup> The majority of British pensioners in Spain were then living on a combination of UK based private or state pensions and savings from investments. These are often invested as pound sterling and then transferred to euros as required. Older British residents therefore found their income drastically reduced when the exchange rate became unfavourable. The decreased value of pound sterling against the euro also made travel in Spain less attractive for British tourists, which in turn impacted those businesses and entrepreneurs who relied on tourist custom. Many returned to the UK at this time, although it is impossible to assess how many, given the unreliability of statistics.

---

<sup>12</sup> O'Reilly, K. (2007) 'Intra-European Migration and the mobility-enclosure dialectic', *Sociology*, 41(2): 277-293. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038507074974>

<sup>13</sup> See <https://moneytransfercomparison.com/pound-vs-euro/>

Peripatetic migrants came less often because of the increased cost of visiting Spain and this also reduced the customer base for migrant businesses (as well as Spanish, of course). Over this same period, the price of housing in Spain fell dramatically, whereas in the UK housing prices suffered a slight decline before slowly recovering. Some migrants were effectively stuck in Spain faced with a relatively high cost of living, drastically devalued house prices (and sometimes negative equity), and little opportunity to return. Others have been able to stay where they are because they had enough of a cushion to see them through this difficult period

Some working age migrants who are less reliant on tourist custom have been successful and able to remain in Spain beyond the crisis. In many cases, these are people who are also socially and economically integrated into the local community. There are younger people who have grown up in Spain and for whom Britain is no longer home, if it ever was. There are older people who could afford to stay and others who were 'left behind'. But the latter have often put down roots, made their homes and formed communities in Spain.

This means that the nature and diversity of British people living in Spain has changed a lot since the earlier settlement of retirees, entrepreneurs, and small business owners, and especially since the financial crisis of 2008 and onwards.

## Who are the British in Spain today?

Remaining true to our historical overview of British migration to Spain, and using history and present day practices to understand their lives, I now bring the analysis up to date and examine who are the British in Spain actually, and how they live today. The nature and diversity of the British living in Spain has changed a great deal since the earlier settlement of retirees, entrepreneurs, and small business owners, and especially since the financial crisis of 2008 and onwards. As we shall see below, there are British people of all ages and types living in Spain: indeed, every kind of diversity that exists in the UK also pertains to the British abroad. If we include those who spend some part of the year there, there were approximately a million British living in Spain at the start of our project, though this population is not evenly spread.

Over the decades, British people have settled and made a home in Spain and there has been a noticeable sedimentation.<sup>14</sup> Migrants daily practices, their group-making, their cultural habits, their networks, and behaviours not only indicate how they have settled but also shape destinations for future migrants. Some British live leisured, fluid lives on the margins of society, but most (also) in their search for homeliness practice routines that embody their desire for both ethnic belonging and a Spanish style of life. As we see below, a migration that, in the late 20th century, appeared to be transient and marginal has seen transformations that have led to new ways of being and doing things, that will in turn shape the experiences of those around them, offering new ways of belonging and of being at home in Spain.

---

<sup>14</sup> O'Reilly, K. (2017) The British on the Costa Del Sol Twenty Years On: A story of liquids and sediments. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 7(3), 139–147. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1515/njmr-2017-0017>

## Research with British in Spain in time of Brexit

Information for this report is gleaned from diverse sources, including being a regular visitor to Spain, especially Fuengirola and Mijas in the Malaga province, since an initial 15 months fieldwork in 1993. I have spoken with hundreds of British people living in Spain over the decades and have published numerous reports, articles, books, and other outputs on the topic of British people living abroad, especially in Spain. I share with my participants in this project a passion for Spain, its people and its culture, and I have established some long-term friendships as a result of this decades-long commitment to my research field.<sup>15</sup>

More specifically, for the *BrExpats* project, a longitudinal study of the impact of Brexit of Brits in Europe, I spent a month in Andalusia in October 2017, a further month in January 2018, and three ten-day visits in 2018, 2019, and 2020. I also made short visits to Gran Canaria and to Tenerife. These visits included over 60 recorded in-depth interviews, participant observation, and numerous conversations which have continued since via Skype, Facebook, email and Whatsapp. Other interviews with participants in different parts of the country have taken place by Skype and telephone. Through the citizens' panel we recruited a further 37 individuals living in a range of locations in Spain, and these have made an ongoing contribution to the project. In addition, to help us understand Spain specifically, Mike Danby undertook participant observation and interviews with sixteen 18-35 year olds living in the Granada area. Of course, it has also been essential to do ongoing key informant interviews (often by Skype or email), to consult documents and websites as information has changed, and to generally keep our fingers on the pulse of Brexit and what it means for the British abroad.

## British people of all types and all kinds of living arrangements

As discussed above, at the time of starting our research on the impacts of Brexit in 2016, there were officially 308,000 British people living in Spain. However, our interviews with key informants and experts (including foreign resident department officials, councillors, and consular staff) suggest there are in fact two or three times as many as this.<sup>16</sup> Many British people in Spain at this time were not registered, or settled, as discussed earlier, because of the fluidity, seasonality, or temporary nature of their migration or because of confusion surrounding regulations. If we include those who spend some of the year in Spain, the estimate is closer to a million – a figure generally and widely accepted by experts we met. Many of these live most or all of the year in Spain, some own a property in Spain and live between the two countries, some even live part of the year in a third European country.

This population is not evenly spread, as I said. While some municipalities have no British people, others have a noticeable number. Mijas, in the Costa del Sol, for example, had a population of 89,000 of whom 40% are foreign born, including 12,000 registered British.

---

<sup>15</sup> O'Reilly, K. (2012) 'Ethnographic returning, qualitative longitudinal research and the reflexive analysis of social practice', *Sociological Review*, 60(3): 518-536. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02097.x>

<sup>16</sup> You can read more about the estimated numbers of British in Europe in O'Reilly, K. (2018) Far more Britons live in Europe than government statistics suggest. *The Conversation* April 25th. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/far-more-britons-live-in-europe-than-government-statistics-suggest-95477>

Here council officers told us they estimate two thirds of settled Brits were then not officially registered, so the real percentage of British people in Mijas is closer to a quarter of the population. In Benitaxell, in Alicante province there were 1,177 British residents in a population of 4,104, or over 25%.<sup>17</sup> Again, we were told this was a serious underestimate because so many people were not registered. It is worth noting that there is evidence that these numbers are now even higher, not because many more British have moved to Spain (although emigration there has continued throughout the Brexit negotiations), but because so many have discovered not only how to register, but have been encouraged and supported in this in order to secure their futures in Spain. More of this below.

Our research on the impacts of Brexit, which began in 2017, has been at pains to reflect the true diversity of British people living in Spain.<sup>18</sup> Note that retired people have more time to devote to associational life, to visit cafes and to spend time relaxing during the day and so are seen more readily by those making fleeting visits to Spain. It is the duty of rigorous research to look beyond the surface, and we have met people of all ages and all types in our project. Through the inclusion of the participants in our Citizens' Panel, we also draw attention to Britons living in Spain's cities, such as Barcelona and Madrid, who have been largely unremarked in scholarship, and in public and political discourse. There has been a broader tendency to dismiss skilled migrants and those working in middle-class professions moving within Europe because of the problem focused arena of migration discourse and scholarship. Further, that these British populations are economically and socially integrated, working in French, European and transnational labour markets, means that they are rarely identifiable as a co-ethnic community and so do not stand out in these urban settings. To give an idea of some of the diversity of British people living in Spain, participants in our research included:

- A man in his 70s who had just moved to the Costa del Sol after spending many years running three businesses in France;
- A woman in her 40s who runs a nationwide business in Spain;
- The manager of a large international company, in his 40s;
- A teacher in a Spanish school, in her 30s, and married with three children;
- A young journalist married to a Spanish man;
- A woman married to a Spanish man for 30 years who first moved to Spain as a teenager;
- An 84 year old woman whose husband recently passed away and who has been living in Spain for almost 40 years;
- An 18 year old woman who grew up in Spain since she was 5 years old;
- A 16 year old on his way to London to study for his GCSEs;
- Students, and a young professional circus artist.

---

<sup>17</sup> With thanks to Suzanna McAllister, Councillor for European Residents, Health and Equality, in Lliber Council and Annette Skou, Foreign Residents Department, Mijas, for all their help with this project and for sharing these figures with us.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that although many academics have contributed over the decades to the understanding of the British in Spain as elderly or retired, Esther Bott drew our attention, over a decade ago, to the migration of younger working-class people in precarious work in the tourist industry. See Bott, E. (2006) 'Pole position: migrant British women producing 'selves' through lap dancing work *Feminist Review*'. 83(1), 23-41; and Bott, E. (2010) 'Blagging leads and other hustles: British street workers in Tenerife's timeshare industry'. In: Botterill, D. and Jones, T., eds., *Tourism and crime: key themes* Goodfellow. pp107-126. Similarly, I noted (O'Reilly 2000) that the timeshare and tourism industries include a blurring of tourism and migration patterns for younger migrants.

Our participants included disabled people, people with limiting long-term illness, People of Colour, and wealthy people as well as those who were just getting by. In short, every kind of diversity that exists in the UK also pertains in the British abroad.

## British people who have settled and made a home in Spain

British migration to Spain has become a fact of life, especially in some places. English is now widely spoken in some of the areas where many British people have settled, and this will impact the lives of all of those living there as well as the lives of potential newcomers. There have been mixed marriages and there are numerous bilingual children. There are older people, who have lived in Spain so long that not only have they found a meaningful sense of belonging for themselves, they also enable others to settle and find a sense of home through their voluntary and associational work. One of these is Charles Betty, a 95 year old who was awarded an MBE for services to British nationals overseas in the 2019 honours list. There are British and other North Europeans who have become involved in local politics, people such as Suzanna Mc Allister who is Councillor for European Residents, Health and Equality, in Lliber Council, Alicante and Clodna O'Flynn, Communications Officer, Adeje Council, Tenerife. As Huete and Mantecon noted (and affirming my comment, above, that the British abroad have been perceived as tourists who stay on): "With these new political associations, northern European citizens are trying to leave behind their image among the Spanish as mere consumers...of a tourist space".<sup>19</sup>

At an institutional level, there is now a National Association of British schools, numerous long-established English-language newspapers and television and radio programmes; the Sur in English and the Costa del Sol News are just two examples. The animal charity, PAWS, was established in Spain by British residents and was formally registered as a Spanish charity in 1996. Costa Women is a community of women living in or relocating to Spain, with a vast international membership, and listed as one of The Telegraph's top Twitter accounts for expat advice. Its founder, Ali Meehan, calls herself a "serial inpat: someone who is a foreigner but is IN-tegrating." The Cudeca (Cuidadanos de Cancer) Foundation, Cancer Care Hospice and volunteer organisation, was started in 1992 by a British woman, Joan Hunt, with the support and encouragement of two Spanish doctors and a lawyer. Now in its 20th year, Cudeca has treated and supported thousands of people of all nationalities, and Joan Hunt was awarded an OBE in 2003 for her work as President. I have known Joan for over 25 years and she is always warm and welcoming, enjoying hearing from me about her fellow compatriots and my research. As a little aside, Brexit has left Joan feeling very confused about how she now feels about Britain. I will come back to this later.

These are outcomes of a migration that in the early 21st century appeared to be transient and marginal, and one that Spanish developers, state agencies, and policy makers have rarely even seen as settlement. Such changes are formative, forging new ways of being and doing things, that will in turn shape the experiences of those around them, offering new ways of belonging and of being at home in Spain.

---

<sup>19</sup> Huete, R. and Mantecon, A. (2012) 'Residential Tourism or Lifestyle Migration'. In *Controversies in Tourism*, O. Mouffakir and P. Burns, (eds.) Oxford: Cabi Books. pp. 160-17

What migrants do in practice, how they live their lives and the cultural habits they share, shape their futures, as well as the futures of those on whom their lives impact. While it is true that, as outlined above, some British live as long-term tourists, practicing escape and living fluid lives on the margins of Spanish society, most (also) in their search for homeliness practice routines that embody their desire for both ethnic belonging and a Spanish style of life. Most are in Spain to embrace a slower pace of life, the warmth of local people, a welcoming environment for both the elderly and the young, and the nebulous idea of a Spanish way of life, encompassing food, wine, sunlight, and a healthy balance between work and play. Collective affective belonging is thus sought in diverse ways, sometimes with people like them, and sometimes with people who accept them as different - one needn't exclude the other. Invoking one's Britishness in relations with others is not the same as invoking a strong, exclusive nationalism or patriotism, but is better understood as living comfortably within a complex society.

## How does Brexit shape the lives of British people living in Spain?

We now turn to the main purpose of the research, which was to examine what Brexit, as it unfolds, entails for British citizens living and working in the EU-27 exploring in particular questions of citizenship, identity and belonging. It may seem strange to arrive at this point so late in the report, but a central argument in all our work is that the present needs understanding in the context of the past, and what it might mean for the future. Time is continuous and people's power to adapt to changes and to change things for themselves is always shaped by what has gone before, just as what happens next will be shaped by what is happening in the present. Brexit had immediate effects for the British in Spain.<sup>20</sup>

### Brexit started to affect people immediately

Starting with our first fieldwork, in mid 2017, we were overwhelmed with the responses we received from our participants and this hardly waned over the subsequent months and years. Participants willingly volunteered to take part, to get their voices heard, and to hope, with us, to make any sense of what had happened and what might happen next. Despite the fact there were a small minority who had voted to leave the EU, the vast majority of those we spoke to were in favour of remaining, felt their lives had been fundamentally affected, even turned upside-down, by the process and had serious anxieties about the future. Suzanne, who is in her early 40s, expressed the sentiment well:

*I was sensible and went to bed at about one, I suppose. And it was a text message from a friend and the text message just, I think it just said 'oh shit', or something like that. Yeah. Just. But I went through every stage, couldn't believe it, anger, very emotional, it was just everything that I believed in, since adult life, I just felt like it'd been taken away from me.*

---

<sup>20</sup> Read more about this in my earlier report from Spain O'Reilly, Karen. (2017) *What does Brexit mean for British citizens living in the EU27? Talking Brexit with the British in Spain*. Project Report. Goldsmiths, University of London, London. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00027354>. Other scholars working in this area have similarly related the way Brexit was experienced as unsettling. See for example, Miller, R. G. (2019) '(Un) settling home during the Brexit process'. *Population, Space and Place* 25(1), p.e2203. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2203>

Brexit started to affect people immediately. It has never been helpful, throughout the long drawn-out negotiations, to use the oft-quoted phrase 'Brexit has not happened yet'. People I spoke to were certain that the fall in the value of the pound was a direct result of the Brexit vote, and those who relied on income, a pension, and/or investments from the UK saw a massive reduction in the amount they had to live on. I met people who, while officially retired, were having to work a little where they could to boost their pension income, or were returning to the UK periodically to earn a little extra money. One of these was a pensioner who returned to his previous job of singing in bars, in Spain, while another was popping back periodically to do some freelance teaching in the UK.

There was a general sense at this time that the main effect was of confusion and concern, with people raising concerns about any or all of the following:

- their access to healthcare and other social entitlements;
- future employment and work opportunities;
- whether their qualifications would continue to be recognised;
- continued Freedom of Movement within the EU;
- what this would mean for the value of their pensions and where they would be taxed;
- whether friends and family would still be able to visit;
- their participation in local politics through becoming local councillors and voting in local elections;
- whether they might be asked to leave Spain; and
- how the legal basis of their residence in Spain would be evaluated.

One expert interviewee, who because of her education and background has found herself in the role of informal adviser told me, when talking about how people were so scared and confused early on:

*I had a message this morning on Facebook Messenger, similar to ones that I am getting now a couple of times a day, it doesn't sound much but it builds up, so ten a week or so. The message is basically, this morning's was a woman who is here as a grandmother, her daughter came over with her as a small child, so British born in the UK, married or is living with a Canarian, and has a child here who is British but who was born of a Canarian father in Tenerife and is now studying in the UK doing a degree. And she wants to know what's going to happen to her granddaughter, are they going to let her back in? The father is Canarian, she was born in Tenerife but she is British, are they going to let her back in? Are they going to let her finish her degree in the UK? People are scared.*

The story illustrates the complexity of people's lives and the reason why simple explanations based on legal rights or duties are rarely adequate. Similarly, people were having to make choices almost straight away about how or where they might live in the future, with very little knowledge about how things might work out eventually. I met parents of teenage children who had decided to return to the UK to finish their education because they did not know if they had a future in Spain. If they decided their future was in Spain, and might try to become a permanent resident or apply for Spanish citizenship, they were concerned it might then be

difficult to return to the UK at a later date. I met women married to Spanish men who had assumed that they could return to the UK at some point in the future but now feared they may not be able to – and that the same applied to their children. One woman, Jane, told me with a sense of frustration:

*We are having to decide now whether we are British or Spanish, and that choice affects us for the future... and, of course, having Spanish citizenship doesn't make me Spanish, but I feel as if Britain doesn't want me anymore.*

They also felt that Britain was abandoning them at this time and this had made them realise the extent to which they had taken their own (European and British) citizenship for granted, and had an emotional investment in the UK that was not readily cast aside. Mary, who has been living in Spain over 30 years, is married to a Spanish man, with two adult children who grew up in Spain, who are both fluent in Spanish, told me profoundly and with some surprise even to herself:

*I don't want to take Spanish citizenship because I don't want to jeopardise the possibility of going back home if the need arises... those shared experiences of 30/40 years ago... those things actually define who you became...(also) I feel that it's easier to be an old person in England than it's easier to be an old person here.*

She then went on to tell me how she had recently met up with some old friends she had known in the 1970s and how, though many decades had passed, they spoke for days about the old times. In the early stages of the Brexit process, thinking about how to manage their lives for the future was not an easy consideration and raised turmoil with respect to one's sense of identity. Suzanne, in her early 40s and also partnered with a Spanish man, expressed her own turmoil:

*I've never considered applying for Spanish citizenship just because I've always thought, well, I'm European, I have every right to live here as an EU national. And now I'm seriously beginning to think about whether I should be applying for Spanish citizenship. I don't know necessarily whether I'm always going to live in Spain. My parents aren't getting any younger, I may decide I want to go back. My partner is a teacher and we'd always thought about the idea that at some point we could go back to live in the UK so it's him that gets to live in a different country. Teaching jobs are very difficult to come by in Spain. So, it just all takes - he's the same age as me - so it just takes away that absolute freedom that we've taken for granted, that we've always had, that's been around for longer than we have, to be able to do that, and for me it's very important to be able to do that.*

Although there is a campaign under way to change this, under current Spanish law British people cannot officially obtain Spanish citizenship and retain their British passports. Nevertheless, as time has passed, many of our participants have either taken Spanish citizenship or have seriously explored this option.



A further central way that Brexit has impacted on people's lives is that it has made them rethink how their neighbours and friends might see them. Some, especially in the early days, were afraid they would be ostracised. Almost, without exception, this has turned out to be an unrealised fear and instead people have been told things like 'you are always welcome here'. Chris, who lives with her mother in Valencia and was interviewed in December 2017, was feeling increasingly scared about her future:

*We don't look for handouts from anybody, we don't borrow huge amounts, do you know what I mean? It's just to be pushed into a position where completely against our will in a western civilisation in Europe to feel that we're being displaced, and all the Spanish I know have tapped me on the hand and they said, "Don't worry we want you, we want you to stay, you will be alright, we will look after you." The mayor has collared me about four times since Brexit, because he knows me through the XXX magazine, and he writes for it, and each time he said, "Don't worry we will look after you." But his hands are tied, he's only the mayor of one small town, he's written to Madrid and said we need to do something about the expats in Valencia, he's written to Valencia and said we need to, but he's PSOE. Next time there's an election there's a good chance that PP will get in and then he's out on his ear and then what do we do? It's just... it is I'm frightened. I wasn't but now I am.*

Being in her late 80s, Chris's mother eventually decided she would need to return to the UK to live, as a means of getting some stability in her life. She couldn't live with the uncertainty of Brexit, and so she left the home she had known for almost 40 years to return somewhere that no longer really meant home to her.

### **An ongoing sense of confusion**

The Brexit negotiations themselves – that protracted process with its vicissitudes, and its inbuilt uncertainty and confusion - led to crippling fears and anxieties, that at times felt like a sense of panic, especially because our participants in these early stages of the process were receiving many mixed messages about what to do to secure their futures.

The first ten conversations I had with participants during fieldwork in 2017, produced ten different understanding of the rules and regulations about registering and residence and what might need to be done to secure one's future. This was despite the best efforts of some organisations and groups to give clear advice. The fact is that the situation remains complicated, and varies by individual circumstance. Generally, though people were advised to 'get legal', what this meant in practice was unclear, and even so, people were getting mixed messages.

Even the Consul for Andalusia and the Canary Islands, at a meeting in early 2017 to launch a new support web site, said the consulate themselves find it difficult to advise people as 'we don't know anything yet, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed', a mantra that has been repeated from various sources over the past three years. I also overheard a council official advise a woman of pension age, who lives partly in the UK and partly in Spain, to first decide where she wishes to be legally domiciled for health reasons, rather than think about where she actually lives. That is to say, she was being told she should choose which health service she wishes to rely on, British or Spanish, and then register as a resident in Spain if she preferred

Spain. Later, at the same meeting, a lawyer advised a British man, who didn't know whether or not to register as a resident in Spain, to choose where he wished to be domiciled for tax purposes.

This was not exactly legally wrong or misleading advice, but it did run counter to the message from the consulate and other sources, to become legal to assure one's future residence status. Instead, these experts were advising people to wait and see, to balance out pros and cons, to find out more before deciding which way to go, as if everyone had all the necessary information available to them, and all the necessary resources to find out and take action. Furthermore, it was possible then that any agreement would apply only to those with permanent residence, which is only available to someone who has been resident for five years. But the main point to make here is that the Brexit negotiations led to rampant confusion, panic, gut reactions, and the sort of situation I described below, in 2017.

### **Denise's example (as of late 2017)**

*Denise has had a Residence Permit since 2013 (so, for four years). She can apply for a permanent permit (Permanencia) when she has had her temporary permit for five years, but she will need then to prove she has enough income or savings to support herself. She has a basic state pension, and asks, 'what if they decide it is only those on permanencia who can stay, and they say my pension is not worth enough because with the fall in the pound it has gone down in value about a quarter. To be honest, I don't have enough to live on any more'. Denise is very fearful she will have no choice but to return to the UK, and yet she has no home or family to go back to.*

We soon learned that it was essential for us, as researchers, to learn as much as we could about the policies and practicalities that might affect the British in Spain so that we could advise where possible, despite the fact we do not see ourselves as activist academics. In my first report, I did set out a few facts and regulations as I understood them at the time, but had to add the caveat: "This as much as we know about the situation in Spain. Things are, indeed, confusing, ever-changing, and unpredictable."<sup>22</sup> At this time many of us in the UK also felt affected by the constant reminder that 'nothing is agreed till everything is agreed'. Luckily campaign groups and support groups (and individuals) have taken on the role of informing citizens where they can, and over time both the UK and Spanish governments have improved communications, as we shall see below.

---

<sup>21</sup> O'Reilly, K. (2017) *What does Brexit mean for British citizens living in the EU27? Talking Brexit with the British in Spain*. Project Report. Goldsmiths, University of London, London. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00027354>.

<sup>22</sup> O'Reilly, K. (2017) *What does Brexit mean for British citizens living in the EU27? Talking Brexit with the British in Spain*. Project Report. Goldsmiths, University of London, London. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00027354>.





## Moving on through the past three years

In January 2018, I went back to Spain for a month to catch up with some people I had met before and to talk to new participants.<sup>23</sup> At this time, I was not struck by the strong sense of panic I had experienced in October.

### **From panic to reassurance and back and forth: learning how to go on**

The British in Spain had been somewhat reassured since the December 2017 joint agreement on satisfactory progress of Phase 1 of the negotiations. There was a general sense amongst participants that they would be mostly okay, retaining the right to remain and eligible for pensions and healthcare. However, there was still a lot of confusion about what had actually been decided and what not. While many felt reassured, or at least calmer, others were still struggling to cope with difficult situations that were not easily resolved.

- Robert, for example, who was in his 50s and had been recently diagnosed with a serious long-term illness, remained very unsure about his future in Spain, although he had lived there for 10 years, was fluent in Spanish and had a permanent residence permit. He was anxious around what Brexit might still mean for him in the future as his care needs increase. He spoke about practicalities, anxieties and costs of obtaining Spanish citizenship should he need to and, such was his need to get some control over his life before his health deteriorated further, he even considered returning to the UK, a place he no longer thought of as home.
- A group of older people I spoke to were also anxious about all the bureaucracy and paperwork involved in gaining the right to remain, and relevant services and benefits post-Brexit. They were feeling that these things would be overwhelming and unmanageable as they aged and were desperate to try to get things sorted now.
- A woman in her 40s was anxious about her older son who has mental health difficulties, he is currently living independently in the UK, but she hoped may be able to join her in Spain in the future should he need to. This woman works in Spain and cannot easily return to the UK to be with her son if he needs her.

What comes through loud and clear in the comments sent to us by the Citizens' Panel is the psychological consequences of the threat to restrict one's freedom to be mobile. There is a sense that opportunities are being needlessly thrown away, that people's futures, especially young people's futures, will be restricted, their horizons narrower - all the more frustrating to people who have experienced the benefits of being able to move and look for work in the EU without too much bureaucracy. There was a sense that the Brexit negotiations assumed

---

<sup>23</sup> Read more about this in my second report from Spain for this project O'Reilly, Karen. 2018. *What does Brexit mean for UK citizens living in the EU27? Talking Brexit with the British in Spain II*. Project Report. Goldsmiths, University of London, London. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00027355>.

unilinear migration and subsequent settlement, rather than the more circular, fluid or ongoing mobility that people understood freedom of movement in Europe to mean. Brexit was making people choose between one country or another, rather than keeping their options open for a more flexible future. In many cases people had not even realised themselves that they continued to see Britain as offering a safety net. Now they felt (especially in Spain where dual citizenship is not permitted, as outlined above) that the choice to commit to Spain was also a choice to give up on Britain, and often a choice they would rather not have to make. Furthermore, while people did feel reassured, they continued to feel they could not trust either the UK government or the EU to ensure that their needs would be catered for in the future. This is a quite profound and serious impact of Brexit that I would like to draw attention to.

### **British and European identity as an ongoing negotiation**

We have learned that there are very many complex issues around living in Europe that are not easily understood through legal frameworks. Indeed, one could argue that Britishness itself has become expressed and identified through Brexit itself. Some of this is discussed above, and will be explored in more detail in a forthcoming academic article, but to give a flavour here, Edward, who is fluent in Spanish, plans never to return to the UK, and said he would probably apply for Spanish citizenship eventually, explained he is nevertheless a 'Yorkshireman first, Englishman second':

*I am an Englishman, look at my books. ... I am a Yorkshireman, I had my DNA tested for a bit of fun about five years ago, my white chromosome shows Anglo-Saxon or Danish Viking descendant. And given that we were cousins, and the Vikings were the Anglo-Saxons that stayed behind, I am pure Yorkshire.*

Furthermore, we learned that what was expressed as reassurance was often more a matter of needing to get on with one's life. People cannot live in a state of panic and need to continually re-adjust their perspectives on their lives in order to be able to live. This implies that, rather than responding rationally and actively to external realities, many of our participants were simply learning how, or trying, to go on under difficult circumstances. Of course, as Michaela has argued in her research on Brexit and British citizens in France, this is easier for some than for others.<sup>24</sup>

Also, we have learned that British national identity is complex and multi-dimensional. Moving to Spain to make a new life did not overtly or implicitly mean these people were giving up on Britain. During my January 2018 field trip, I spoke to people who had voted to remain and people who had voted to leave the EU (or at least who would have voted that way if they had had the right to vote). I also spoke to people who were undecided. It seems the leave/remain split is not always as divisive or clear-cut as mass media, politicians, and common knowledge appear to assume. One thing that was really clear, from everyone I spoke to, is that they care about Britain. It might seem odd that people who have moved to Spain might vote to leave the European Union and thereby risk curtailing their rights, but those I spoke to did not do this for

---

<sup>24</sup> Benson, M. (2019) 'Brexit and the classed politics of bordering: the British in France and European belongings'. *Sociology*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519885300>.

selfish or individualistic reasons. Indeed, one man, talking in a large focus group of older people, said “if this makes me worse off for a while then so be it. It’s a price I’m willing to pay”. Their reasons, as with the remainers, usually refer back to the UK or Britain and what they want for the future, for their children or grandchildren. Again, we learn from this that Britishness and Europeanness are shaped and highlighted through Brexit. This highlights the contradictory ways in which Britons in Spain related to their new place of residence and the Spanish population, that I first discussed in 2002. Such contradictions—on the one hand, the decidedly colonialist narratives and, on the other, the openness to difference—have been constantly mirrored also in the ambivalence of the British and Britain towards Europe.<sup>25</sup> But their passionate concern for the UK, for the EU, and for Spain cannot be denied. This goes some way to explaining some of the reactions to Brexit that we witness amongst the British in Spain today – the ambiguity towards both countries and towards the EU, and the complexity of an identity under such changing conditions.

Finally, Brexit is causing British people abroad to ask fundamental questions about their identity. People I spoke to are really questioning their sense of who they are and where they belong, which nation has the right and/or the ability to represent them, which nation they feel has their best interests at heart. Living outside the UK, they see how others view ‘us’ as a nation, and they are not particularly happy about it. David, a man in his 30s who had recently moved to Malaga, told me, ‘I think in other European countries most of what gets reported is that Britain didn’t want immigrants...so that’s what, I think, EU citizens think about us’. Later he talked about the frustration at having to choose whether to be British or Spanish, with European no longer even a choice open to him: ‘We are being told, because we are British we can no longer be, or feel, European’. Mary, who we met above, said in a high-pitched tone, ‘my Spanish friends here think we are all mad, partly to care so much about Brexit but also why we did it! They can’t understand it, they think I can explain, but I can’t’.

Above all, there is a strong sense that the UK has let them down. The Brexit vote has the potential to shatter their lives and yet many of those who live in Spain were not even allowed to vote. Once a British person has lived abroad for 15 years they are no longer permitted to vote in national elections or in referendums in the UK.<sup>26</sup>

### **Ongoing negotiations and feeling let down on all sides**

So much has happened since our project started that we developed a timeline on our website, to summarise it all: <https://brexitbritsabroad.org/brexit-timeline.html>. In short, we have had, in the UK, two general elections, Article 50 invoked, ongoing negotiations, the draft withdrawal agreement, which lost three meaningful votes but was subsequently passed on 20th December 2019, and two Brexit days that never came to pass. The spectre of No Deal arose on the horizon several times, and with it fears that nothing was secure in terms of citizens’ rights. As one example of the highs and lows of this process for the British abroad:

---

<sup>25</sup> O’Reilly, K. (2002) ‘Britain in Europe/The British in Spain. Exploring Britain’s changing relationship to the other’. *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol 8(2) 179-194. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8219.00045>. We also discuss this in Episode 17 of the *Brexit Brits Abroad* Podcast, ‘About Britain’s/Britons’ contradictory relationship to Europe’, available at <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep017-about-britainsbritons-contradictory-relationship-to-europe>

<sup>26</sup> We have discussed this in several of our podcasts. However, an early issue from our archive lays out the issues in detail. Take a listen to Episode 3, which sees us in conversation with Dr Sue Collard about the overseas vote. Available at: <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep019-who-cares-about-uk-citizens-living-in-the-eu27>

*In February 2019, The Costa amendment gained unanimous support in the House of Commons. Proposed by Alberto Costa MP, this sought to protect citizens' rights—for EU citizens in the UK, and UK nationals in the EU—even in the event of No Deal. However, the response from the European Commission on receiving a letter from the UK's Brexit secretary Stephen Barclay, was to reiterate that they would not negotiate mini-deals.*

To go back to the discussion above, British people in Spain were often not registered as resident. Many live most or all of the year in Spain, but some own a property in Spain and live between the two countries, some even live part of the year in a third European country. In Tenerife, for example, the phenomenon of snowbirds is notable – that is people who own a property in Tenerife and who spend much of the winter there, without it becoming their main residence. Policies relating to free movement have been interpreted by the Spanish authorities in different ways in different areas, leading to a confusing array of constantly changing rules and conditions. Nevertheless, people often wanted to make a home there. As I said above, while some Britons practice escape and live fluid lives on the margins, most (also) in their search for homeliness practice routines that embody their desire for both ethnic belonging and a Spanish style of life. In other words, most want to make Spain their home, even if only for part of the year or temporarily. This is the context in which to understand their lives and their negotiations of Brexit. This enables us to understand how the British have felt let down on all sides, and how they have felt like pawns in a game. There is a clear sense that British lives in the EU are not being taken seriously.

A notable impact of Brexit has been the emergence of campaign groups and support groups, Facebook groups, meetings, social groups, and events all organised around Brexit and how it might impact British people in Spain. There are individuals, some of whom we have interviewed for our podcast series, whose lives have been completely transformed because they have become informal advisers. I have noted before that there was a tendency for the British in Spain to organise into clubs and social groups, but not usually along party lines nor politically.<sup>27</sup> In an earlier survey, only 9% of my respondents had ever voted in an election in Spain. In this same survey half my respondents were not registered with any authority in Spain.<sup>28</sup> But the fact that there were numerous other pre-existing organisations and societies has made it easier for campaign and support groups to emerge somewhat organically. In Spain, different groups serve different functions through different media. In Tenerife, for example, Clio O'Flynn, introduced above, has organised with others to establish an informal support group to advise Britons living in Tenerife about Brexit. They also have a (closed) Facebook group for the Canary Islands. In Fuengirola, *Brexpats* emerged from an informal group of friends to campaign for the rights of British nationals in the EU. In the Lux Mundi Ecumenical Centres, in Torre del Mar and Fuengirola, support comes from those running the centre, and its volunteers, and is loosely organised around religious meetings. Bremain in Spain also campaigns for the rights of British

---

<sup>27</sup> O'Reilly, K. (2000) *The British on the Costa del Sol*. London: Routledge; Huber, A. and O'Reilly, K. (2004) 'The construction of *Heimat* under conditions of individualised modernity: Swiss and British elderly migrants in Spain', *Ageing and Society*, 24(3) 327-352. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X03001478>

<sup>28</sup> O'Reilly, K. (2007) 'Intra-European Migration and the mobility-enclosure dialectic', *Sociology*, 41(2):277-293. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038507074974>



migrants living in Spain and the EU, and also campaigned to reverse Brexit.<sup>29</sup> These groups garner phenomenal resources, both financial and labour, and rely on the extensive and tireless efforts of numerous volunteers. I cannot do justice to their work here; that would require a book-length appraisal. But I wish to draw attention to them to highlight their role in enforcing the sense of a common plight as a British person abroad.<sup>30</sup>

### **Younger people in Spain: going with the flow and embracing free movement**

As discussed above, one of the outcomes of Brexit is that people had to learn how to go on, to adapt on a daily basis to ongoing circumstances. How this is achieved is always shaped by past experiences, by expectations and by what resources one has available. The small case study we conducted with young people living in Granada revealed how ‘coping’ meant being as flexible and adaptable as they have already had to learn to be as young people in 21st century Europe.<sup>31</sup> This case study was based on participant observation, numerous conversations, and in-depth interviews with younger people who had lived in Spain for various lengths of time. All but one of those who took part stressed that they felt the UK should remain in the European Union.

The overwhelming feeling these younger participants expressed about the outcome of the EU referendum was one of disappointment. Some said that it had been the saddest day of their lives in terms of politics, or the first time they had cried because of politics. They spoke of their shock about Brexit, felt disappointed with the result, felt ashamed to be British, angry with perceived misinformation and spoke of the referendum as playing with people’s emotions, of the scapegoating of migrants, or the appropriation of anti-migrant sentiment in the campaigns. They also worried about what Brexit would mean for the future of Britain’s relationship with Europe and the world.

However, rather than attempt to make firm plans to secure their futures in Spain these younger migrants, like many of our other participants, placed their emphasis on the transitional nature of their migration. Their stories of moving to Spain were almost always linked to traveling experiences, with some describing themselves as ‘travellers’, while others spoke of their migration as being ‘even better than traveling’ because it involved a longer stay and more involvement in the locality. Before Brexit they were very open to the idea of perhaps living in other countries in the future, revealing an already deep-seated acceptance of the temporary

---

<sup>29</sup> For more about the campaign groups in Spain that have emerged through Brexit and how these relate to earlier forms of political mobilisation among British citizens resident in Spain, see MacClancy, J. (2019) ‘Before and beyond Brexit: political dimensions of UK lifestyle migration’. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 25(2), pp.368-389. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13030>. You can also listen to Episode 54 of the *Brexit Brits Abroad* podcast, where Michaela discusses this issue with anthropologist Jeremy MacClancy. Available at: <https://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/the-political-mobilisation-of-britons-in-spain-before-and-after-brexit>

<sup>30</sup> Episode 17 of our *Brexit Brits Abroad* podcast, About Britain’s contradictory relationship to Europe, includes a fascinating discussion on this topic. This is available at: <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep017-about-britainsbritons-contradictory-relationship-to-europe>

<sup>31</sup> With thanks to Mike Danby for doing the fieldwork and co-writing the report on this: Danby, M. and O’Reilly, K. (2018). ‘What does Brexit mean for UK citizens living in the EU27? Talking Brexit with 18-35 year old UK citizens in southern Spain’. Project Report. Goldsmiths, University of London, London. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00027353>

nature of their living situation. Their future plans emphasised the fluidity of their lifestyles and there was a strong narrative of 'going with the flow', which communicated their openness to picking up and moving on at short notice. In other words, their capacity to be flexible and itinerant was significant to how they oriented their lives. Unlike many older people we spoke to, these younger participants showed little sign of making a long-term financial or emotional commitment to Spain. No one spoke about buying a second home, setting up a business, or making property investments. Even family relationships were rarely raised in depth..

For these participants, life was already changeable and precarious; they already had a flexible attitude to change with respect to employment or housing contracts, university courses they were enrolled on, or even in relationships or family situations. They had embraced the mobility of free movement, either as a positive thing or as a strategy for coping with the flexibility, insecurity, and rapid change of modern life, and while trying to maintain some control over their lives (by applying for Irish or French passports where they could, for example) there was a clear sense of fatalism, of needing to adapt as a fact of life. Brexit thus took its place alongside these other aspects of their lives as being yet another change with the potential to provoke disruption. We understood their response to Brexit as a pragmatic approach to a generation for whom change has been accepted as normal.<sup>32</sup>

### **Confusion reigns supreme**

Although it is impossible to draw this report to any sort of meaningful conclusion, I would like to end by thinking a bit about where we are now as the project comes to a close.

The consensus reached in December 2017 and now written into the Withdrawal Agreement ensures that UK citizens who have exercised their treaty rights and are 'legally resident' in the EU27 will be able to stay, and outlines the terms that will guide this. Notably, there remain some issues outstanding, including the question of continued freedom of movement within the European Union and what happens in the case of posted workers (who are treated by different articles within European Union Law). Beyond this, while the Withdrawal Agreement deals with those rights and entitlements relating to Freedom of Movement directives, this cannot account for how this interplays with individual circumstances. While on a legal level, this provides some assurances about the future status of UK nationals living in the EU26, it does not resolve some of the issues attributable to Brexit by those participating in the research. For example, the volatility of the exchange rate and how this impacts on the incomes of those who are supported by monies held in pounds to be exchanged to euros (a situation, for example, which includes those in receipt of government pensions, who are obliged to have this taxed at source in the UK, and those with access to over exportable benefits including Personal Independence Planning (PIP, previously called Disability Living Allowance).

Migrants in Spain have made sterling attempts to secure their own futures in whatever ways possible. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of people registered as resident in Spain. More and more people are applying for Spanish citizenship. But still there is confusion and ambivalence.

---

<sup>32</sup> You can read more about Bauman's notion of being individuals by decree in O'Reilly, K. (2009) 'The children of the hunters: Self-realisation projects and class reproduction'. In M. Benson and K. O'Reilly (eds) *Lifestyle Migration. Expectations, Aspirations and Experiences*, Farnham: Ashgate.

There was a recent debate on a Facebook page, with many people congratulating someone who proudly announced she had obtained Spanish citizenship. The comments underneath were very revealing, with some asking how much Spanish you need to learn, others asking whether it is true that you have to give up your British passport (apparently you don't, but in Spain you are only ever considered a Spanish citizen not a dual citizen). Others commented that they still felt British and would not ever feel Spanish even though they love Spain. This raises two issues. One is the way it reveals, that even now, in 2020, people are still confused about regulations, do not know who to turn to for advice, and are sometimes given misleading advice. So this is a key finding. The other issue raised, as discussed above, is how central national identity is to people's sense of who they are now, who they might be in the future, and where they have a right to belong. Brexit has revealed this central plank in British people's identities because it has brought it to the surface. Previously, apparently unchallenged, it was not something many were aware of. This is another key finding.

The status quo for British citizens living in the EU27 continues to be an ongoing chaos of mixed messages, conflicting advice, constant change, and persistent insecurity. The somewhat depressing key findings outlined in our 2018 report for UK in a Changing Europe<sup>33</sup> cited:

- A lack of confidence that the United Kingdom would act in the interests of its overseas citizen population;
- Considerable mistrust directed at the UK Government, particularly around whether the agreement would be honoured beyond the date of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union; and
- A high degree of misinformation and misunderstanding.

Despite serious attempts by individuals and groups across Spain, frustration prevails, as best illustrated here by Janet Anscombe, who calls herself an accidental adviser and blogger:

*Do you know what really strikes me hardest about Brexit at the moment? It's the lack of anything I can actually post to inform British nationals affected by it. OK I post lots in this group because I feel among friends, and friends who moreover seem to value the posts, and because I write, that's what I do ... and because I've ended up unintentionally as an adviser here in Tenerife, mainly by accident because I know how to research, how to evaluate and analyse sources, how to write ... it's something I value anyway, to be able to use what talents I have to help people who are floundering...*

*and OK it's been some use because my learning has ended up helping, in the most microscopic way, the legal fight against this crap. But I've learned it - over what is now bloody years - because it matters to us, and in a situation of such peril for Brits in the EU, we have to know what is happening, how it affects us, what we need to do, what's going on ... and I was expecting to be*

---

<sup>33</sup> Benson, M., Collins, K. and O'Reilly, K. (2018) *What does Brexit mean for UK citizens living in the EU27? Talking citizens' rights with UK citizens across the EU27*. Project Report. Goldsmiths, University of London, London. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00027351>

*able to provide endless detail and information, giving people confirmed advice about what they can do...But now, at the time of greatest need for clarity, detail, information, advice, help and assistance, I have ... nothing. Virtually nothing, anyway, apart from the occasional notice about another public meeting, or an update that we should "get ready" for something that no-one can define...*

*That is the measure of how we have been treated by our own Government. Spain's done its bit, the EU has too. But our own Government has done absolutely fucking nothing for us. Nada. Zip. This isn't a post about me, as it happens, nor the Embassy in Madrid, the Consul in Malaga, the Consulate in Tenerife, who've all been as brilliant as they were able to be in the circumstances. There is only one source of betrayal. Our own Government. (Janet Anscombe, accidental adviser and blogger, Nov 2019)*

## **Last words: attempting to explain the impact of Brexit on British people in Spain**

The needs and concerns of British people living in Spain have been consistently overlooked, downplayed or dismissed because they (like many other Westerners) have a relatively privileged status in the world. Government agents have assumed they have few needs and a great deal of independence of choice. Similarly, Britons themselves have taken for granted this ease of travel and migration, openly embracing the European notion of freedom of movement, and so having their rights curtailed in such a dramatic way as Brexit has wrought has come as something of a shock.

In Spain, migration to tourist areas emerged as a consequence of mass tourism and so early migrants sought sun, sea, sand, and leisure, and the opportunity to escape abroad while remaining safely ensconced in own's own cultural milieu. Many of these earlier migrants were reluctant to register, to learn the language, or to integrate. Despite the fact that there are between 300,000 and 1 million British in Spain, many of whom sought a more meaningful and integrated way of life, both the Spanish and UK governments continue to perceive them as long-term (residential) tourists, and thereby to overlook any needs they may have. This all helps explain why they might not have had the recognition or support they need through the Brexit negotiations.

Although the Treaty of Maastricht introduced the right of persons to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States, this was never a freedom without controls and limits. It always had regulations attached to it, and yet policies relating to free movement have been interpreted by the Spanish authorities in different ways in different areas, leading to a confusing array of constantly changing rules and conditions. The fear of interpreting the rules wrongly or finding oneself on the wrong side of policies has meant many British have avoided legal registration. These people are then easier to exclude when legislation is tightened. These are the same people who are finding Brexit most challenging to navigate.

Nevertheless, the nature and diversity of British people living in Spain has changed a lot since the earlier settlement of retirees, entrepreneurs, and small business owners, and especially since the financial crisis of 2008 and onwards. Now, every kind of diversity that exists in the UK also pertains among the British in Spain. Many British have settled long term; many are fluent in Spanish; there have been mixed marriages and there are numerous bilingual children. There are British-founded institutions and groups, and other diverse outcomes of a migration that in the early 21st century appeared to be transient and marginal, and that property developers, state agencies, and policy makers have rarely even seen as settlement. But the stereotype of all British in Europe as gin-swilling pensioners living the dream in the Costa del Sol holds sway, and hampers attempts to have them taken seriously.<sup>34</sup>

Brexit had immediate effects for the British in Spain. Most felt their lives had been turned upside-down by the process and had serious anxieties about the future. Some were affected by the fall in the value of the pound, others were concerned about pensions, taxes, family members, health care, and employment rights (among many other issues). It soon became apparent that the complexity of people's lives meant simple solutions based on legal rights or duties were inadequate. Furthermore, they started to feel that Britain had abandoned them. They began to be aware of their national identity and what it meant to them, and their relationship to Spain. They started to think, perhaps for the first time, about what being European meant and how much had been taken for granted.

As the Brexit process unravelled, they were subject to constantly changing, conflicting advice and a misrepresentation of facts. Campaign groups and support groups emerged, to help fight for their rights. People had to learn how to go on, and of course this has been easier for some than for others.

Over time, British migrants in Spain have made sterling attempts to secure their own futures in whatever ways possible. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of people registered as resident in Spain. There are more and more people applying for Spanish citizenship. But still there is confusion and ambivalence, and a desperate sadness on the part of many that with Brexit something intangible – about an identity, about a sense of openness, about the freedom to embrace something more than a narrow view of a nation state - is irrevocably lost and can never be replaced.

---

<sup>34</sup> We have broadcast a few podcasts on this topic, but we especially recommend Episode 14 *We need to talk about how UK citizens in the EU live*. This is DOI: <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/we-need-to-talk-about-how-uk-citizens-living-in-the-eu27-live>.

## Recommendations

- The UK Government should take proactive steps to provide better support to UK nationals living in Spain (and in other overseas countries), and to counter their prevailing impression of having been abandoned by their own government during Brexit and beyond. This should include reconsidering the role of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in supporting these emigrants and rethinking the services and provisions on offer through consular services, perhaps through the development of one-stop shops or surgeries.
- We recommend that the UK Government take steps to build a rigorous knowledge base about UK nationals living in Spain and elsewhere in the EU, that can inform and drive understandings of the various meanings of Brexit for these Britons. This needs to account for the scale of this population, its demographic diversity, and its geographical spread. Knowledge exchange with the academic experts who have been systematically collecting evidence about what Brexit means for this population, tracing how this varies and is unevenly experienced would be a good first step in developing these understandings.
- Further, recognising the close connections that Britons living in Spain maintain with the UK, members of the UK Government should reconsider the current disenfranchisement of UK nationals living overseas after 15 years abroad, and deliver the Conservative manifesto promise to extend lifetime enfranchisement to Britain's emigrants.
- The UK and Spanish governments need also to attend urgently to how Brexit might intervene in the lives of those living part-time in Spain, part-time in the UK.
- We also recommend that the UK and EU negotiators working on the terms of the UK's future relationship with the EU should take heed of the persistent concerns of UK nationals living in Spain about the removal of their right to Freedom of Movement within Europe and consider the options for maintaining this through the terms of the future economic relationship. Within the EU, the continued value of EU citizenship rights and the strength of the European identities of UK nationals living in the EU27 should inform ongoing conversations within the European Union, its institutions and member states concerned with transforming or extending EU citizenship (e.g. calls for Associate EU citizenship).

## About the author

Karen O'Reilly is Professor Emeritus at Loughborough University. From 2017-19 she was Professorial Research Fellow for 'BrExpats: freedom of movement, citizenship, and Brexit in the lives of Britons resident in the EU-27', a longitudinal research project which examined Brexit and its impacts for the 1.2 million Britons resident in the EU-27 funded by the ESRC through the UK in a Changing Europe Initiative. Through her research with British migrants living in Spain in the 1990s, Karen set the agenda for the sociological study of British migration. Her research has been published as *The British on the Costa del Sol* (Routledge, 2000) and in numerous academic journal articles. She has more recently complemented this with research with British citizens living and working in Malaysia and Thailand, research which informed her collaboration with Michaela Benson for the book *Lifestyle Migration and Colonial Traces in Malaysia and Panama* (Palgrave, 2018). Her book *International Migration and Social Theory* (Palgrave, 2012) won the CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title Award.



Since her original research in the 1990s, she has frequently returned to Spain, updating her research on this topic over a period of 25 years. In her role as co-investigator on the *BrExpats* research project, she has had responsibility for in-depth research with British citizens in Spain.

## Acknowledgements

This report was written on the basis of research conducted for the 'BrExpats: freedom of movement, citizenship, and Brexit in the lives of Britons living in the EU-27' project, led by Dr Michaela Benson. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through their UK in a changing Europe initiative (Grant Number ES/R000875/1).

For their insights, comments, and recommendations, the author thanks the other members of the project team, Michaela Benson, Katherine Collins and Chantelle Lewis, as well as Mike Danby, who conducted a number of interviews for the project with young British citizens living in Granada and Seville. The author also thanks Janet Anscombe, Suzanna McAllister, Clodna O'Flynn and Jennie Rhodes, for their support on the ground in Spain, and members of the project's International Advisory Board Aliyyah Ahad, Meghan Benton, Maria Casado-Diaz, Vincent LaGarde, Laura Lopez, Liv Rowland, and Debbie Williams. Finally, the author thanks the many British citizens living in Spain who, in taking part in the research contributed valuable insights and perspectives that enriched the research.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit:  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

A full text PDF of this document is available for free download from:  
<https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00028223>

Suggested citation:

O'Reilly, K. 2020. Brexit and the British in Spain. Project Report. Goldsmiths, London.

For further information get in touch with the *BrExpats* research team at:  
[contact@brexitbritsabroad.org](mailto:contact@brexitbritsabroad.org)