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# **What Does Brexit Mean for UK Citizens Living in the EU27?**

**Talking Brexit with 18-35 year-old UK citizens in southern Spain**

**Mike Danby and Professor Karen O'Reilly**

This is an initial fieldwork report produced by Mike Danby and Professor Karen O'Reilly (Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths) based on research conducted by Mike with 18-35 year old UK citizens living in Spain in Autumn 2017. Any enquiries about the report should be directed to the project lead Dr Michaela Benson (michaela.benson@gold.ac.uk)

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



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# What does Brexit mean for UK citizens living in the EU27? Talking Brexit with 18-35 year-old UK citizens in southern Spain

By Mike Danby and Professor Karen O'Reilly

## Summary

- All participants placed a strong emphasis on their flexibility, acceptance of change, having fluid plans, or 'going with the flow'
- Generally, they feel whatever comes their way, they will cope with it
- However, Brexit is so uncertain that there is an element of holding tight for the moment while also making contingency plans such as applying for Irish citizenship, or making sure to be officially registered in Spain
- This acceptance of change and flexibility, combined with a certain lack of financial and emotional investment in Spain, meant that while they felt strongly about Brexit, they tended not to articulate this in terms of what it meant for their individual lives, its personal impact, reflecting instead on what it means for Britain today
- Sociologically speaking, in our contemporary world 'choosing', or embracing, flexible or fluid plans can be thought of as a pragmatic life strategy, as the experience of resilience and rapid, unexpected change becomes normal and habitualised.

## Introduction

As previous reports from the project have made clear (Benson 2017; Benson and Collins 2018; O'Reilly 2017, 2018) Brexit has made uncertain the rights and future status of UK citizens living in the EU27. As part of our ongoing analysis of what Brexit means for UK citizens living in the EU27, we wanted to make visible the lives of populations that might not readily come to mind when thinking about the British Abroad, and ask what Brexit means for them in the context of their lives.

# 79% OF UK CITIZENS LIVING IN THE EU27 ARE OF WORKING AGE AND UNDER

EUROSTAT data reveals that the British population living in the EU27 includes students, employees, self-employed, people looking for work, families with children in school, younger and older adults, as well as retired people, and diverse ethnic backgrounds.



This report takes its starting point from the recognition that 79 % of UK citizens currently living in the EU27 are under the age of 65, a fact that runs counter to the far-reaching stereotype of UK citizens abroad as older and retired. In the choice to focus on the lives of 18-35 year old Britons living in southern Spain, it seeks to change the conversation about UK citizens living in Spain to better reflect the diversity of this population and their life circumstances.

## About this case study

This report presents the initial analysis of a small case study, based on participant observation, numerous conversations, and in-depth interviews with sixteen UK citizens between the ages of 18-35 living in Granada, southern Spain. Of the sixteen interviewed, 11 were male and 5 female. The interviews that have been undertaken for this report have focused on the participants' lives in the UK and Spain, their experiences of travelling, plans for their future, how they feel about and are affected by Brexit, how they identify as British and/or European (or not), and where they feel 'home' is. Participants included students, as well as people working (part- or full-time, temporarily or more permanently) in diverse sectors such as teaching, music and performance (including a professional circus artist). Those participating had lived in Spain for various lengths of time: ten of the participants had been living in Spain for less than a year; three participants had been living outside of the UK for around six years; and four had been in Spain for over three years. All but one of those who took part stressed that they felt the UK should remain in the European Union.

## Mobile lives, flexibility, and familiarity with uncertainty

In this first section, we describe the highly mobile lives of these younger Britons. All of those Mike spoke with placed a strong emphasis on their flexibility, acceptance of change, having fluid plans, or 'going with the flow'. A strong sense of familiarity with uncertainty was spoken of with a sense of adventure and freedom. Brexit, however, presents a potential threat to this approach, especially perhaps because the outcomes are so unclear and intangible as 'no one really knows what's going to happen'. The disappointment these younger generations feel about Brexit generally differs from the responses from some others we have spoken to in this project; where others taking part in the research appear to be primarily concerned that Brexit threatens their ability to continue their lives on the same terms as previously, for these younger citizens, there is a far stronger sense of detachment from feeling personally affected by Brexit. To be clear, those Mike spoke to felt strongly about Brexit, but tended not to feel strongly affected by it. Rather Brexit is spoken of as a cloud on the horizon which threatens to destabilise lifestyles based on mobility and flexibility. Whilst some steps may be taken to prepare for what might happen, it is so uncertain that there is an element of holding

tight for the moment and reference to a familiar strategy for these younger migrants of 'taking it as it comes'. Rather than the highly charged responses from older generations who have made roots which are at present hanging in a difficult situation, for these younger generations the way they feel about Brexit can rather be thought of a lament for the loss of potential fluid futures, replaced by a certain uncertainty and worry.

## **'Going with the flow': Familiarity with uncertainty**

To make sense of this, it is worth reflecting further on the highly mobile lives of these 18-35 year old Britons, the conditions and material circumstances that make this possible and necessary. Generally speaking these participants either had firm plans to, or were very open to the idea of, living in other countries. Returning to the UK or staying in Spain indefinitely were not necessarily part of concrete plans for their futures, although given the changing circumstances, they were happy to have this possibility 'on the cards'. Rather than make firm plans, these younger migrants placed their emphasis on the transitional nature of their migration. Stories of having moved to Spain were almost always linked to traveling experiences, some self-identified themselves as 'travellers', while others spoke of their migrations as being 'even better than traveling'. In contrast to what has been found with migrants in other parts of Spain who, especially since Brexit appear to have mobilised under the slogan 'we are not tourists, we live here' (Waldren 1997; see also O'Reilly 2000, Benson 2011), there was a far stronger acceptance of the temporary nature of their living situation. Their future plans emphasise the fluidity of their lifestyle 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, at least for now.

Within the broader research on British migration, flexibility is a feature of migration narratives; in writing about British in Spain that she worked with in the 1990s, Karen describes how they were 'giving it a go for a while, see how it goes' (O'Reilly 2000). She identified a prominence of Brits not wanting their lives to be structured, with the desire to escape being a recurring theme in how they spoke about and lived out their lives (O'Reilly 2000). This sentiment came through clearly in the conversations Mike had with young Britons in Spain too, but for these younger, urban-dwelling migrants there is something more going on. Flexibility and mobility are part of their lives, capacities and actions that are part of their toolkit for managing making



their way in the world. Both a way of navigating uncertain economic and political futures, and producing significant change in their lives, these young migrants seem at ease with mobility. Notably, there was little sign of making a long-term commitment to Spain nor of financial or emotional investment. No one spoke to Mike about buying a second home, setting up a business, or making property investments, as we might hear with other British migrants in Spain. Even family relationships were rarely raised in depth.

Indeed, they often referred to the many wider conditions under which any potential plans could change, things such as employment or housing contracts, university courses they were enrolled on, or potential changes in relationships or family situations. Brexit thus took its place alongside these other parts of their lives as being yet another change with the potential to provoke disruption. The following quotations are indicative of how future plans were spoken:

**Fred** (22 years old, working as a teaching assistant, and participating in an Erasmus+ internship)

*"Well I guess short term I'm here until June ... so I don't really want to concern myself worrying too much about after that"*

**Olivia** (34 years old, working as an English teacher)

*"I'm here until, for sure the summer next year ... and I'm pretty sure I will be here for another two or three years beyond that ... I don't really make plans"*

**Louise** (27 years old, working as an English teacher)

*"I've got no idea. Not at all. Not a clue. I think I'm going to see how I go this year in Seville and then maybe go somewhere else"*

**Frank** (31 years old, working as an English teacher)

*"Well any time I've had plans for the future they've always changed. It's very difficult to say."*

**Paul** (34 years old, recently qualified English teacher)

*"I'm quite fluid really. I've got a contract here until June and then I think the lease we've got on our flat goes till August so that's about as far as I've got at the moment"*

As these last quotations make visible, plans for the future are intertwined with considerations over contracts and employment. Simply, many of these young people are on fixed term contracts, a situation not idiosyncratic to English-language teaching, but characteristic of labour markets that requires a high level of flexibility from employees.

What this translates into in the case of those taking part in this small case study is the acceptance of a need to be flexible and adaptable, a lack of investment in Spain, at an emotional, financial, and practical level, and the awareness they may (need to) move on at some stage. In turn, for this younger cohort in Granada, they were less likely to refer to Brexit's impact on their lives as individuals in the emotive ways we have found elsewhere in the research (Benson 2017; O'Reilly 2017, 2018).

## **'No one really knows what's going to happen': Brexit as a cloud on the horizon**

On the one hand, these highly mobile lives and fluid approaches to planning for the future clashes with the notion of preparing for the structural changes which Brexit will entail. On the other hand, we might consider this as a pragmatic approach to a generation for whom change has been accepted as normal. Almost all of Mike's respondents spoke negatively about the pressure they had felt in the UK to be seen to be progressing with a particular career or life trajectory and of their migration as a form, whether temporary or not, of escape from this as well as a way of dealing with the rapid change that is a feature of contemporary life. The emphasis they placed on flexibility was often spoken of in terms of an adventurous embracing of the unknown and making fixed plans was sometimes specifically spoken about as potentially negative.

*I watched an interview with Stephen Fry once and he talks about how he believes one of the most dangerous things you can do is set goals, because people become quite obsessed with goals, especially in London, it's a kind of career driven mentality, and often people set themselves a goal and they just, they'll just plough the way until, forwards until they achieve that goal and they don't really care what they sacrifice along the way. Which I agree is really dangerous. So I try not to set goals and have too much of a clear definition of what I want in the future ... I've always had different ideas of things I'd like to do and I try to make them flexible. So to some extent I'm seeing where life will take me. (Kieran, 23)*

Nevertheless, it was clear participants could not ignore Brexit altogether. Sarah, for example, has been living in Spain for 2 years. She had moved there after finishing university and on finding it difficult to return to live at her parents' house or find meaningful work in London. She works as an English teacher and is taking a part-time masters course in Psychology as she is potentially interested in becoming a special educational needs support worker when she returns to the UK. Sarah appears to have some solid plans, then, but it appears this may be because of Brexit, as she explained:

*It's like a cloud on the horizon, it's a threat and no-one really knows in what form it's going to take, no-one knows exactly what it's going to do, and that's I think the most worrying thing... it definitely did hammer home the idea that I might, that TEFL would only be like a two or three year thing because I don't know what's going to happen with it.*

How Brexit has intervened in the flexible approaches and plans for the future of these young people is the matter to which we will now turn. Brexit has meant that the goal posts have changed in the life strategy of these young UK citizens. There is the uncertainty about what it would mean, both personally and because Brexit is so up in the air since 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed'. In such unpredictable circumstances it is difficult to prepare or make plans. Nevertheless, these people are making some contingency plans. A third of the participants had already, or were planning to, apply for passports through having Irish or French grandparents, for example.

*Andrew (32 years old) has lived most of his life outside of the UK, traveling in South America, and Asia; he has now lived in Spain for almost 5 years and is currently living with his Spanish girlfriend in Seville. He said "I definitely might stay here forever, I don't know 100% but definitely seems like a good place to raise a family one day ... I don't like to plan too much in advance ... I just take each year sort of as it comes, but I have no immediate plans to leave, put it like that, especially after Brexit. Because now, this idea that if I leave I might not be able to come back ... in terms of our rights I'm not really worried that we will lose the right to continue to live here, I think that's extremely unlikely".*

Andrew seems to be hanging tight to see what will happen before making any drastic decisions about what to do, but he is aware he may need to think about it at some point. Although those Mike spoke to often reassured themselves that they would still be allowed to live and work in Spain, many were starting to plan for alternative futures which depended on what happens with Brexit. The respondents who had arrived within the last two years especially recognised that the fact that perhaps they would be okay because 'we are here now, and are working' and they had taken some steps, such as being *empadrinado* (registered locally), to hopefully ensure their status and futures in the country.

Phil had been in Spain for only four months when Mike met him. He had finished school in the UK and was wary of rushing into a decision to go to university and taking on so much debt. His older brother had been traveling and he felt this had changed his brother's life for the better. Phil moved to Granada where his parents had a small property in a nearby village. He has been working as an English teacher and busking. Regarding how he felt affected by Brexit he talked of balancing flexibility and security, as we have discussed above:

*... it's all speculation and I think still to a large extent it's all, it's all up in the air... But yeah I dunno, out here it doesn't affect me. I can't think that it would. It might do economically in the future but, OK so I got my NIE and I've done most of the stuff that I need to do out here and I thought I'll do that before Brexit in case it becomes more difficult. I can't see what's going to change ... I don't feel discriminated against because of Brexit, ever ... to be honest like the most honest answer I can give you is Brexit really hasn't affected me at all.*

We conclude this section by reflecting on the overwhelming certainty that those Mike spoke to conveyed about their continued ability to live and work in Spain and/or move around Europe post-Brexit. They generally believed that, although it might require more paperwork, there would be another type of structure ensuring freedom of movement. Indeed, they were so reassured (or reassured themselves) to the extent that the notion of being deported was often spoken of jokingly as something that they could not envision.

## Brexit was ‘probably the saddest day politically that I ever had’

We have seen above that a recurring theme in how these young people expressed their feelings about the Brexit vote was with a strong sense of personal detachment, but this does not hold true at the more general, abstract or political level. Despite their sense that they would be able to cope adequately with the outcomes of Brexit at a personal level, the overwhelming feeling people expressed about the outcome of the EU referendum was one of disappointment. In all but one of the interviews, people made it clear that they were against Britain leaving the EU and saw it as negative. 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. In this way, many of the themes that have come to the fore through our research with other UK citizens living in the EU27 were shared by this group: 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 emotions, of the scapegoating of migrants, or the appropriation of anti-migrant sentiment in the campaigns (see also Benson 2017; Benson, Collins and O’Reilly 2018; O’Reilly 2017, 2018). They worried about what Brexit would mean for the future of Britain’s relationship with Europe and the world.

*I was just gutted really like I felt about it, politically, not that to say that worse things haven’t happened in human history but absolutely by miles, but for me that was probably the saddest day politically that I ever had ... you tried to find out what it’s going to mean and all that but you can’t, but yeah I was just sad. A bit embarrassed to be British, sort of Spanish in the future won’t be able to live there, things like that. Just depressing in general. (Andrew)*

Andrew went on to speak in more detail of how a Spanish friend living in London talked to him about how unwelcome the Brexit vote had made him feel. Many people spoke of the shame they felt in relation to friends who are European citizens, and how the anti-migrant sentiment of the Brexit campaign has left them feeling more unwelcome in the UK, a country Mike’s participants perceived to be becoming increasingly isolationist with delusions about its position as a global power. This sadness was linked to the

effects it would have on others first and foremost. As one person poignantly put it: 'the real problems which will come out of Brexit aren't that people like me won't be able to travel and work around Europe as easily, they will be bigger than that.'

Phil regretted not having voted (for Remain) and talked about how 'politics seemed so far away from me and I didn't have time to research it ...'. His example is useful because it represents the trend in many of the interviews whereby people didn't feel very affected by Brexit but did feel a very strong anti-Brexit feeling. Phil went on to talk about the problems caused by what he saw as a right wing turn in British politics and a rise in xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment.

*... all these people saying 'we want our country back'... like what the XXXX are they actually talking about!!!?? like all the migrant have stolen their country and hidden it under the carpet. That's just something I've never got! (Phil)*

*I was quite affected at first. I did shed a few tears when I read the results. I think, because London and most of the other major cities as far as I'm aware voted very strongly to stay and I just never really knew anyone who voted for Brexit or who had that mentality, so I was quite shocked that that was actually the majority mentality in my country. I think that's what affected me the most. **I always felt slightly estranged from my country, I never really felt, as I've said already, I never felt that British, but it made me feel even less British.** (Joe; emphasis added)*

This quotation draws attention to a sense of distance from being affected personally in practical terms by Brexit, the impact experienced more in the realm of identity and citizenship. This issue seems to take a different form amongst these younger generations whose emphasis on cosmopolitanism, regionalism and alternative identity formations do not fit easily with the notion of nation-states.



## Concluding thoughts: the post-modern life-game?

The way these young people embrace a strong level of uncertainty may be an exemplar of the classic sociological dance between structure and agency. The structural conditions into which these younger people have grown up are those of widespread accelerated change. In this context 'choosing', or embracing, flexible or fluid plans can be thought of as a pragmatic life strategy, as the experience of rapid, unexpected change becomes normal and habitualised. They have come of age in a world of globalisation, in which the speed of communication and change is increasingly accelerated. They are also far more likely than previous cohorts to have been to university, often accumulating a massive amount of debt in the process. Theirs is a world of increasing austerity, privatisation and insecurity, a backlash against multiculturalism and anti-migrant sentiment, and a far more unequal and uncertain society than that into which they were born. These young people have much less job security than the generation before them. The idea of a 'job for life' seems more like a laughable ode to some distant nostalgic past than an actual possibility (or desire) in the present. This is an age of transferable skills, zero hours contracts, fluidity, uncertainty and risk. Moreover, this is the context within which the lives and futures that those speaking to Mike narrate are located and without which their understandings of Brexit and what it means for their lives are located.

Simply put, for those who are required to be highly flexible, adept at changing direction at a moment's notice, not thinking too far ahead, the UK's exit from the European Union may be a source of sadness and shame, but the capacities and skills they have developed lead them to believe that they will find a way through this latest change in the broader economic and political landscape, which for them, has always been in flux. Whether this is a naïve hope or a realistic prospect remains to be seen, particularly given that continued Freedom of Movement for UK citizens living in the EU27 is not, at present, on the cards within the draft withdrawal agreement.

## About the authors

**Mike Danby** is a 31 year-old sociology graduate from London who has lived outside of the UK for most of his adult life. He first moved abroad for a sense of adventure and to discover other parts of the world. Tired of working in London, Mike took a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course, and moved to Spain at the age of 21 for five years. After graduating with a degree in Sociology from Goldsmiths, October 2017 he returned to Spain and has contributed to the research by conducting some interviews with some of the 18-35 year-old UK citizens he met in Granada.

**Professor Karen O'Reilly** is professor emerita in Sociology at the University of Loughborough and joins the BrExpats project as Professorial Research Fellow. She has been conducting research with UK citizens living in Spain since the 1990's. This work published as *The British on the Costa del Sol* (2000, Routledge) is the best known piece of research about the lives of these UK citizens and dispels many of the myths about Britons living abroad. Her role on the project includes coordinating and leading the work package concerned with what Brexit means for UK citizens who have made their homes and lives in Spain; in this role she has conducted indepth interviews with UK citizens of all ages living in Andalusia.

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