

# Eastern European Youth Identities in Uncertain Times

Research and Policy Briefing No.5

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# What this Briefing is about and why we have produced it

Here to Stay? is a research project which explores the lives of young people who arrived to the UK as migrant children from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). It focuses on young people aged 12-18 who migrated after the EU enlargement in 2004 and had lived in the UK for at least 3 years.

The project explores how migration and current immigration policies are impacting their lives, how satisfied they are with local services, the quality of their relationships, and their feelings of identity and belonging in the UK.

The project is important because it presents the first analysis since the Brexit Referendum on how current plans for Britain to leave the European Union are impacting on young Eastern Europeans' lives.

We have gathered the opinions and experiences of over 1,100 young people on a range of issues: their feelings of national and local belonging, their participation in communities, their access to services, their experiences of racism and exclusion, their experiences of education, their relationships, well-being and plans for future now that the UK is planning to leave the EU.

These Briefings aim to inform a wide range of audiences on young Eastern Europeans' experiences. They should also help local authorities and other organisations improve policies and provision of key services, so that more young people can benefit from provision which takes into account their needs and experiences.

## Introducing the authors and how we produced the evidence for this Briefing

Here to Stay? is a project carried out by researchers from the Universities of Strathclyde, Plymouth and Durham. The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

We engaged with young people in a range of places and in different ways. We also worked with a group of Young Advisors, who give us advice on how best to carry out the study.

To get a UK-wide picture, we asked young Eastern Europeans (who had lived in the UK for 3+ years) to complete an online survey. This was advertised through schools, youth clubs and social media, and over 1100 young people took the survey.

We also talked to people who work in organisations that engage with Eastern European young people living in the UK, such as schools, youth clubs and health centres.

We then talked to 20 groups of young people in schools and youth clubs across Scotland and England. We asked them about their everyday lives, places they go to, things they do and can't do, and how they feel about living in the UK.

We also visited 20 families at home, to talk to young people and their families about their life in the UK, and to gather their individual experiences in more depth.

Findings in this Briefing use mainly data from the focus groups and family case studies. Please see the other Briefings available in this series on our website.



# Young Eastern Europeans feel their identities are fluid and disrupted by Brexit

Young people talked about several factors that were important to their sense of identity. Some key dimensions of their identities were related to being young migrants, their nationality and transnational relationships with family and friends and also, the languages they spoke and the multiple cultures they were navigating. In the context of Brexit, their feelings of being marginalised or not fully accepted also impacted on their sense of identity and who they are.

There was often a disjuncture between what young people identified as their nationality, often related to their country of birth, and where they felt at home - mostly in the UK.

Home was linked to a sense of identity and many young people said they felt they had multiple homes. This was generally seen as a positive thing, although some young people described the challenges of living between different cultures. Feelings of belonging often resulted from feeling connected to people and places which were familiar and welcoming.

For young migrants, identities are fragmented, dynamic and changeable. Young people talked about how their sense of identity had changed since they had moved to the UK. For some, this was about the process of growing older and maturing, while others suggested that they had changed as a result of migrating.

Many Eastern European young people reflected on their potentially hybrid identities and saw the processes of their identity formation as in constant flux, negotiable and consisting of multiple identities.



*'Do you feel more at home when you go to Poland?'*

*Dominik: 'Yeah, always.'*

*'What is it in Poland that makes it feel like home?'*

*Dominik: 'Well, my memories are there and ... If I go back, people recognise me, they say 'Hi, how have you been?' ... I know my neighbours there, I don't really know my neighbours round where I live here [in the UK].'* (Dominik, Male, 16, Poland)

*'We do go back a lot [to Poland] and it does also feel like home back there as well, I guess, because it's your other family that you haven't seen in a while.'* (Nicola, 14, Poland)

*'I feel most at home when I'm actually at home, because that's where my family is.'* (Kondrad, 16, Poland)

*'By heritage, I am Latvian. I am also Scottish and Portuguese, but my family in Portugal said I couldn't be a Portuguese because I do not exhibit Portuguese traits. In Latvia, I am not Latvian, because I have not lived long enough in the country to absorb the culture, and in Scotland, I do not belong, because I am not a Scottish by heritage. That puts me in a sort of a limbo because I do not belong anywhere and I just felt I am out. I came to realise that it does not matter about having one single identity. It does matter how I feel as a person, because to me, identity is fluid.'* (Tania, 16, Latvia)

Figure 1. Ketso activity where young people explore their identities

*'I visit my family in Poland once, maybe twice a year. So, it's not really that often. Whenever we can, we just go to as many places as we can. My grandma also comes to visit us sometimes, but my granddad is not able to because he needs to use crutches, which is stopping him to travel too far.'* (Lidia, 15, Poland)

*'I've still got some friends in Hungary who I usually visit in the summer. I used to live in a little village and I went to school there, we kind of grew up together, so we always go back in the summer and hang out outside. I arrange this online before I go... When I'm there, we usually just like go to each other's houses and go out together.'* (Robert, 15, Hungary)

*'We've been friends since we were about three years old, when we still both lived in Lithuania. Then she moved to France and I saw her for two years there. We didn't see each other for about eight, nine years [but keep in touch on Messenger].'* (Victor, 17, Lithuania)

*'I speak to some friends from school, but not very often...because there's not much to talk about and I find it hard to type in Polish as well. So, I am scared I'm going to get it wrong or something.'* (Julia, 15, Poland)

## Box 1. Focus groups and family case studies

- The focus groups took place between May and October 2017. In total, 108 young people participated in 20 focus groups across England and Scotland.
- Young people aged 12-18 attended the focus groups. There were more male participants (58) than female (50). Well over half of the participants were Polish born (70), followed by Romanian (10), Lithuanian (5) and Slovakia (3) nationals. The other respondents were born in other EU countries.
- The family case studies took place between November 2017 and April 2018. In total, 20 young people (12 female and 8 male) aged 15-18 and their families participated in the case studies in England and Scotland. The majority of families came from Poland (13), followed by Hungary (5) and Latvia (2).

We used a kit for creative engagement called Ketso ([www.ketso.com](http://www.ketso.com)) in the focus groups and family visits to engage adults and young people with the research themes (see Figures 1 and 2).

# Young people often link feelings of being at home to family and friends

Family was extremely important to young people in the study, who talked about the distinction between their wider, transnational family and their much smaller family in the UK. Most young people lived with their parent(s) in the UK, but some lived with other family members.

Young people said that their move to the UK meant they could see family members much less regularly. Many missed family members who they were close to, such as grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. Some had lived with these family members before they came to the UK to join their parents.

Most young people thought that they had positive relationships with their family. In some cases, migration strengthened these relationships and participants described how their migration had also made them physically closer to other family members who had moved to the UK before them.

Young people regularly visited family, mainly grandparents but also other relatives, in their country of birth. Several young people described how visits became more important as their grandparents got older and less able to travel.

While young people stayed in touch with friends abroad mainly through social media, and saw friends mainly during the summer holiday, most communicated with grandparents and older relatives by Skype or phone.

However, young people were aware that changes in their lives and their friends' lives were sometimes impacting their friendships. Changing language abilities and lifestyle preferences also had a negative impact on transnational friendships.





# Young people's identities can lead to exclusion from social groups

Migrant young people associate themselves with people and groups and while their complex identities can lead to inclusion in several social groups, they can also be marginalised due to their identities. There are certain advantages to group membership, like a sense of belonging and self-worth.

Young people can adopt different identities depending on social contexts and individual perspectives. While some talked about not feeling like they belonged to their birth country, others talked about not feeling accepted in the UK. Yet, others felt they did not belong to either.

Young Eastern Europeans are subjected to ongoing insecurities in light of Brexit, which is seen as a 'rupture' to the way they construct their identities (see also Briefing 1).

Young migrants want to celebrate their unique identities and be accepted for who they are.

*'I am proud to be Latvian; I find the language, culture and history so beautiful and unique. I am proud to be Scottish, as this country has given me so much and there have been so many individual people who have just been so lovely and amazing. However, I don't feel I'm British.'* (Tania, 16, Latvia)

*'You can be anyone you want to be. It doesn't matter what another person thinks about you, it is about what you feel about yourself. In the end, the only person the validation you need is yourself (...). It is just good to know that you can have a fluid identity.'* (Tania, 16, Latvia)

*'I'm not sure if I belong in here and whenever people will ever stop judging my accent, I would like to keep living in the country, at very least until I finish a Masters degree.'* (Anita, 18, Poland)

*'I feel like I'm not patriotic enough because I'm not really that proud of being Polish, just because of the experiences I've had with Polish people in Poland and the stereotypes that come with saying I'm Polish – because whenever you say I'm Polish, people just assume you swear a lot.'* (Mary, 17, Poland)



Figure 2. Young people exploring their sense of belonging

## About the Here to Stay? Project

*Here to Stay? Identity, belonging and citizenship among Eastern European settled children and young people in the UK (a decade after EU enlargement)* is a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/M011038/1, 2016-2019).

You can read more about the project at: [www.migrantyouth.org](http://www.migrantyouth.org)

Find us on Twitter @MigrantYouth or Facebook [www.facebook.com/MigrantYouthUK/](http://www.facebook.com/MigrantYouthUK/)

# Key findings

The main issues to emerge from the research are:

- Many young Eastern Europeans talked about their potentially hybrid identities and see the processes of their identity formation as fluid, negotiable and consisting of multiple identities. Their adopted identities depended on social contexts, family circumstances and individual perspectives on how included they felt.
- Almost all Eastern European young people talked about staying in touch with family and friends from their country of birth as important. Many of these relationships are maintained online and through regular visits to the country of birth. In the context of Brexit, young people want security that their family life will not be affected by mobility restrictions to themselves or their family abroad.
- Many young people commented on their complex identities as a source of both social inclusion and exclusion. They shared feelings of not belonging at certain times on in certain places, especially in the context of a more hostile environment since the Brexit vote. Some felt they belonged more to the country of birth, others felt they belonged to the UK as they lived here longer. Yet, many felt like not belonging to one place or culture.
- Young migrants' identities are at a stage where a sense of belonging and being valued member of a community are important to their future decisions to stay in the UK long-term. Belonging and feeling part of a community are essential dimensions to one's well-being, too.

# Policy and service recommendations

**Based on the research findings, we are making the following recommendations to local authorities and organisations working with young people originally from Eastern Europe. We hope these recommendations will ensure young people can benefit from services and policies which support them throughout the Brexit transition.**

- Organisations working with Eastern European young people need to be aware that they have a sense of developing, fluid identity and a complex sense of home and belonging. These complexities need to be better understood, by openly discussing them with the young people.
- Fostering supportive environments and an active recognition of young people's complex identities are very important for young people's self-esteem, sense of self, psychological well-being and the overall inclusion. Organisations such as schools should ensure that EEA-born young people and their families feel valued members of these communities. Their cultural capital, including language skills, should be actively recognised and built upon.
- Eastern European young people's perspectives on issues of identity, belonging and citizenship can help identify priority areas for long-term inclusion, providing evidence for the public debate on the impact of migrants on UK's social cohesion and cultural identity.
- Visible, on-going recognition of the valuable contribution that young people from a migrant background make to the cultural fabric of our society and as current and future citizens will be key to giving them and their families a sense of security and belonging to the UK.
- Access to full citizenship rights, for example through affordable British citizenship for those who want to apply and voting and political rights, should be a priority in the Brexit transition, to ensure young people do not become marginalised or excluded from rights and services long-term.

We would like to know how our research is used and if it is making a difference to you or your organisation.

Please let us know with this 5 minutes survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/heretostayimpact>