

# Eastern European young people's political and community engagement in the UK

Research and Policy Briefing No.3

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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 in 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 have 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 the experiences of young Eastern Europeans living in contemporary Britain.

The Briefings should also help local authorities and other organisations develop policies and improve services for young people, taking 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 consulted Eastern European young people living across the UK, in urban and rural areas, using a range of research methods. We also work with a group of Young Advisors who give us their thoughts 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 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 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.

Our next step is to speak to some more young people and their families about their life in the UK to allow them to share their individual experiences in more depth.

Findings in this Briefing are mainly based on the analysis of the survey data. More Briefings will be released as the research develops.

# Young Eastern Europeans are concerned about their right to stay in the UK

More than half of the young people in our sample (56%) said that the Brexit Referendum had left them uncertain about their future (see also Briefing No. 1). Young people pointed to the lack of clarity about whether they would be able to remain in the UK and whether they would be able to easily visit or bring over family members from other countries.

*'I feel like Britain is my home, but I'm worried that I won't be able to go freely to my birth country, I plan on finishing my education and travel to Europe. I think it's gonna be more difficult now.'* (Alicja, 15, Poland)

Young people tended to relate the concept of 'citizenship' to nationality, or the process of securing British nationality. However, while 41% of young people said that they felt British, only 8% reported having British or dual nationality. In the context of Brexit, many young people said that they wanted to gain British citizenship, but they were concerned about their families' ability to cover the high costs (currently, at £1,330 per person for a citizenship application).

*'When I get a job, I'll start earning and saving money so I can get a British citizenship, which I can legally obtain as I have lived in the UK for 9 years, but due to the expensive prices, my mum who is single parent cannot afford.'* (Janek, 16, Slovakia)

Interviewer: 'Do you know what citizenship means?'  
*'Yeah, that you've got a passport and they're not allowed to kick you out and all that stuff. I feel as if it [citizenship] is more a legal thing. Like, having it on paper, you know, paying for the test and having a passport. Because... I don't know, yeah, I think it is. Although I do feel like, you know like a British citizen, but legally I probably am not.'* (Mitre, 15, Bulgaria)

# Eastern European young people who feel they belong in their communities are more likely to volunteer

Only 17% of the young people who reported on their voluntary/community work said they volunteered at least a few times every month. These rates of volunteering are lower than volunteering rates in the general youth population. An Ipsos Mori survey (2016) run for the #iwill campaign to get more young people involved in social action reported that 43% of young people aged 10-20 were involved in social action in the past year.

In our survey, young people aged 16 - 18 were more likely to volunteer than those aged 12-15, and female respondents were more likely to volunteer than male respondents. This reflects national trends on age and gender groups.

In group discussions, many young people who did not identify as volunteers talked about ways in which they helped people in their communities, such as taking on extra responsibilities in their school or translating for neighbours. Young people also mentioned barriers to volunteering, such as limited access to information on opportunities, age restrictions, the negative attitudes of adults in placements, and the associated costs related to volunteering, such as travel.

The proportion of volunteers was higher among young people who felt they belonged in their local neighbourhoods (48%) than among young people who felt that they did not belong (23%). Among the respondents who said that they volunteered regularly (n=265), 90% felt that they belonged in the UK. It appears, therefore, that there is a relationship between young people's sense of belonging to their local area, and to the UK, and their likelihood of getting involved in social action.

## Box 1. Profile of survey respondents

- The survey took place between October 2016 and April 2017. In total, 1120 young people completed the survey, with 807 full completions.
- Overall, the survey attracted mainly young people aged 16-18 (68%), while 32% of respondents were aged 12-15. There were more female respondents (60%) than male (38%). The vast majority (97%) identified as White and said they were Christian (59%), while over a third (37%) identified as non-religious/atheist.
- Over half of the respondents were Polish born (56%), followed by Romanian (10%) and Lithuanian (9%) nationals. The other 25% of our respondents were originally born in other EU and non-EU countries to Eastern European parents.
- Most respondents lived in England (71%) and some in Scotland (19%), while 10% did not give their location.
- Over a third said they had lived in the UK for 10 or more years.

Sample criteria: Please note that this was a convenience sample, recruited through schools, youth clubs and social media. The data could not be weighted due to the absence of existing reliable data on EU nationals in the UK.

- All names in this Briefing have been changed to protect the participants.

# Eastern European young people feel less of a sense of belonging to their local communities than to the UK

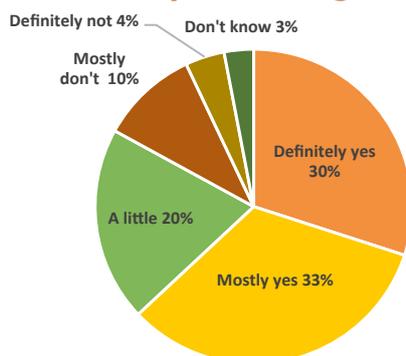
While 83% of young people said they felt they belonged in the UK, at least 'a little', only 14% said they did not have a sense of belonging to the UK. The rest did not know. By comparison, 70% said they felt they belonged to their neighbourhoods - at least 'sometimes', while 22% did not feel a sense of belonging to their neighbourhoods, and the rest did not know.

This suggests that Eastern European young people living in the UK are more likely to feel a sense of belonging to the UK as a whole than to their neighbourhoods and local communities.

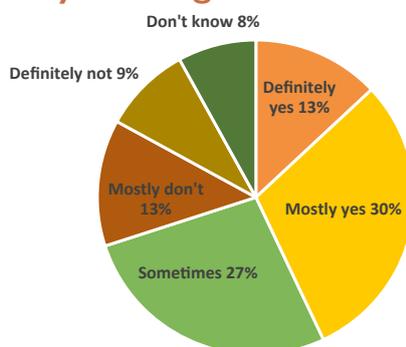
Almost a third of respondents (31%) said they 'sometimes' felt unsafe in their local areas and over 1 in 3 participants (38%) thought that people living in their areas had some level of prejudice against Eastern Europeans. Schools and neighbourhoods were the most common locations for experiences of discrimination and abuse (see also Briefing No. 1).

It is reasonable to assume that those who feel unsafe or unwelcome in their local communities will be less likely to engage with local opportunities. Further research is needed to establish whether this is the case.

### Do you feel that you belong in the UK?



### Do you feel that you belong in your neighbourhood?



*'I go to life-saving classes] to learn the skills and I sometimes do kind of volunteering jobs there as well, just helping out teaching the younger ones about those skills and things like that.'* (Gregorz, 15, Hungary)

*'I volunteer with the Police Scotland volunteers, so we go out in the community and we volunteer at different events... it is fun and also it's something that I can put on my CV, the volunteering and being part of that group'* (Piotyr, 16, Poland)

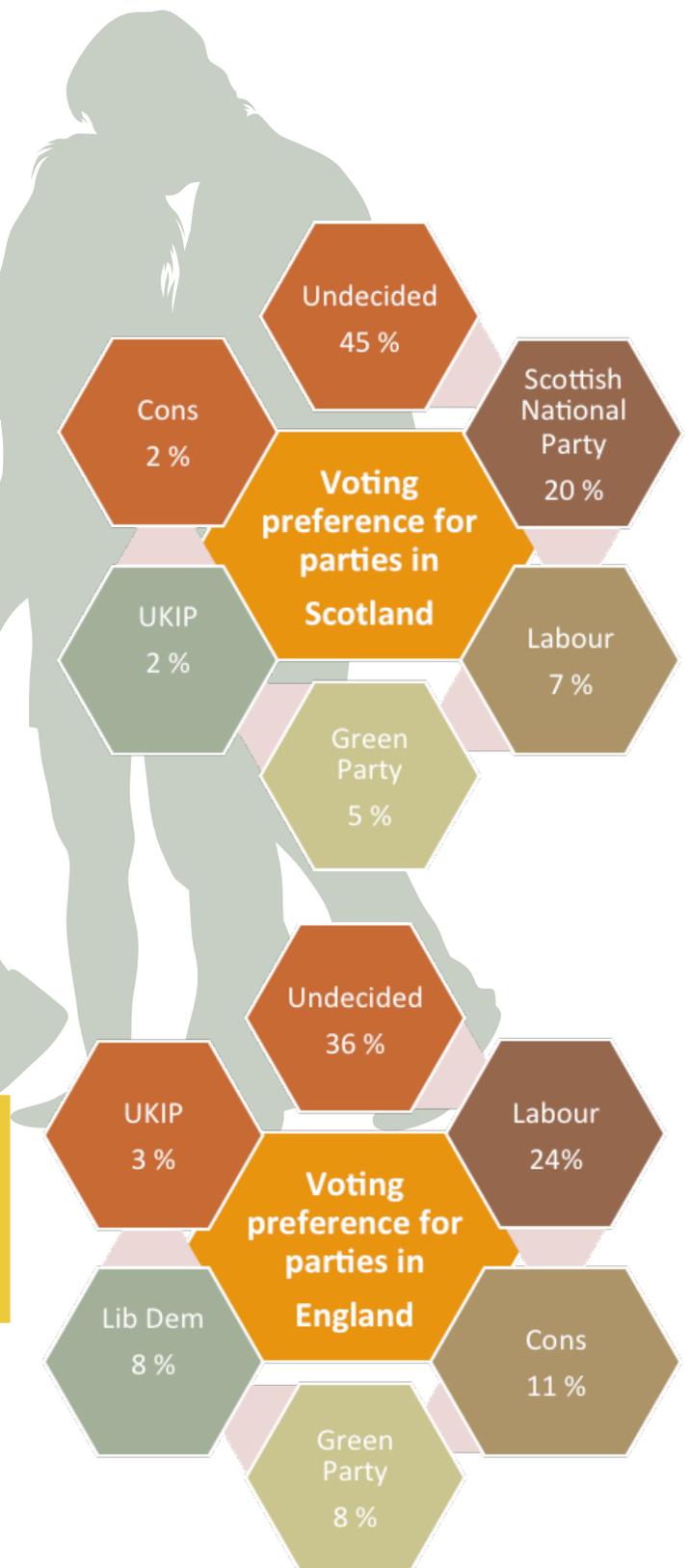
# Many Eastern European young people are interested in politics, but lack key information on politics

Over half of survey respondents (51%) said that they were 'quite interested' or 'very interested' in politics. Young people who said that their family were 'badly off' were more likely to say they were interested in politics. Male respondents were more likely to have strong reactions to politics, saying that they were either 'very interested' or 'completely disinterested'. Female respondents, in contrast, were more likely to express more moderate attitudes, such as being 'not very interested', 'neither' or 'quite interested' in politics.

*"Since I'm not a British national, I don't have the right to vote and hence politicians don't care about what I have to say. Really it's a bit sad that despite feeling British and being completely integrated, I am denied this." (Jakub, 17, Poland)*

Young people aged 12-15 were more likely to say they wouldn't vote (13%) or didn't know who they would vote for (47%) than 16-18 year-olds (10% and 35%, respectively). Female respondents were more likely to say they would vote Labour and less likely to say they would vote for the Conservative Party or UKIP than male respondents.

Young people living in England were more likely to say they were interested in politics than those living in Scotland. In addition, respondents in Scotland were more likely to say that they wouldn't vote (18%) for than those in England (9%). The voting intentions of those who said they would vote are in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Young people's voting intentions, if they said they would vote, (England N=718; Scotland N=191)**

# Key findings

The main issues to emerge from the research in relation to Eastern European young people's political participation and involvement in their communities are:

- Young Eastern Europeans are mostly interested in politics, but many have not yet decided which party to support. They need more information to make informed decisions about their voting intentions.
- Young Eastern Europeans are more likely to express a sense of national belonging than a sense of local belonging. Since the Brexit Referendum, many young people report feeling unwelcome in their communities. This impacts negatively on their ability to get involved in volunteering and community social action.
- Young Eastern Europeans think about citizenship mainly in terms of securing British nationality than volunteering and social action.
- There seems to be a strong relationship between young people's sense of belonging to their communities and the likelihood of them volunteering and getting involved in social action.

*'I used to volunteer at an old folks home, but they sort of realised that I wasn't old enough to be there because I was under sixteen, so they took it from me.'* (Marcel, 16, Poland)

*'I was ridiculed for my accent during a volunteering programme.'* (Malina, 18, Poland)

Have you used our Briefing in your work to change policy or practice? Has it changed your personal views or made you take action?

Let us know with this 5 minute survey:  
<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/heretostayimpact>

# Policy and service recommendations

Based on the project findings, we are making the following recommendations to local authorities and organisations working with young Eastern Europeans and their families. We hope these recommendations will ensure that young people can benefit from services and policies which support them to be active citizens in their communities:

- In light of Brexit, Eastern European young people need immediate clarity about their legal status in the UK, and confirmation of the rights they had as EU nationals migrating under the freedom of movement.
- Citizenship education in schools should emphasise the individual acts of civic participation, as well as the act of gaining citizenship through documentation. It is important to consider that citizenship has additional meanings for young people from a migrant background whose nationality is not British.
- Political education and access to information about politics are key to ensure that CEE-born young people are able to make informed choices.
- CEE-born young people have a stronger sense of belonging to the UK than to their local communities. Services need to support young people to feel more valued and connected and able to play active roles in their neighbourhoods.
- There appears to be an association between the likelihood of young people volunteering in their local communities and their feelings of belonging, suggesting a link between volunteering and community cohesion. Volunteer agencies should, therefore, specifically target young Europeans and consider addressing the specific barriers that may stop this group from volunteering.

## 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, 2016-2018). You can read more about the project at: [www.migrantyouth.org](http://www.migrantyouth.org)

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