



**BREXIT**  
BRITS ABROAD

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

**Talking Brexit with British in Spain II**

**Professor Karen O'Reilly**



This is an initial fieldwork report produced by Professor Karen O'Reilly based on her conversations with Britons living in Spain in January 2018. Any enquiries about the report should be directed to her by email ([k.oreilly@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:k.oreilly@lboro.ac.uk))

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

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



**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



# What does Brexit mean for UK citizens living in the EU27? Talking Brexit with British in Spain II

By Professor Karen O'Reilly

## Summary

- Karen has been a regular visitor to Spain for research purposes since 1993, and is author of *The British on the Costa del Sol*. This report is mainly based on her most recent field trip in January 2018.
- Most people Karen spoke to in Spain, in January, felt somewhat reassured by the December agreement.
- The December agreement clarified some issues around right to remain and access to services, and these are addressed in the last section of the report.
- However, many complex issues remain unresolved, such as for older people who are having to think about what care provisions there might be for them, people with complex family arrangements, and those with mixed nationality families.
- There is a sense that, in terms of reassurance about one's rights going forward, many people are simply learning how to go on under difficult circumstances.
- During this January field trip, Karen spoke to people who had voted to Remain and people who had voted to Leave the EU.
- She found that for both groups, and those in-between, Brexit taps into emotional responses around national identity.
- Leavers and Remainers both seem to feel passionately about Britain's role in the world, its future, and its people.

## Karen's Research in Spain

Karen has been a regular visitor to Spain for research purposes since 1993. She is author of numerous books and papers about migration (especially British emigration), including: *The British on the Costa del Sol* (2000); *Lifestyle Migration* (2009, with Michaela Benson), *International Migration and Social Theory* (2012), and *Lifestyle Migration and Colonial Traces in Malaysia and Panama* (2018, with Michaela Benson).

Since the start of the 'Brexit Brits Abroad' project in July last year, Karen has made two long field trips to Spain, in October 2017 and January 2018. She has undertaken over 40 interviews, and numerous informal conversations, with over 100 British people living in Spain and representatives of campaign and support groups. Many of these conversations have continued over time through Skype, email and telephone.

The research uses a purposive and iterative sampling procedure (O'Reilly 2012a). This means that as we learn more about the relevant diversity of the populations we are interested in we add further interviewees to ensure we have covered relevant types of people. Since Karen's first report, in November 2017, the project team has been working hard to ensure we include more diversity in terms of age, ethnicity, health, social class, and regional distribution. This sampling rationale is reflected in the pages of this report.

The research for this project also employs a reflexive approach, in which research is enhanced by acknowledgement that the social world, the academic world, and the personal world of the researcher are intermingled and co-created (O'Reilly 2012b). This means that we need to consider our own role and our effects on the research as we progress. It also calls for a longitudinal analysis that takes account of change as part of the process of the research and the nature of the lives we are studying. We will pick this discussion up in a future podcast.

Finally, the research follows an iterative methodology (O'Reilly 2012a). This means that it is developed thematically as we go along, and as we learn more about the topic. This iterative approach has led us to start to think about power and privilege – again, more to come in a future blog or podcast.



## Reassurance and Confusion

Karen went to Spain for one month in January, in order to catch up with some people she had met before and to talk to many new people. On this second field trip, there was no longer the sense of panic she experienced in October last year: British in Spain are somewhat reassured since the December agreement. There was a general sense that they would be mostly OK, retaining the right to remain and eligible for pensions and health-care.

**Roger, for example, feels:**

*“Reasonably calm. I would say probably about 80% sure it will be all right, but there’s a bit of me that thinks it still might not be.”*

**Gary said, in response to the question ‘do you feel more reassured now?’:**

*“Yes I do, and I felt reassured right from the beginning when she (the Prime Minister) stood up and said “My first priority is to protect UK nationals living abroad but I’m not going to say what I’m going to do until I have agreement from the EU that they’re going to do the same.” As soon as she said that, I thought, good, because if it had been Labour in they would have just said “You can all stay,” and they would have forgotten about us.”*

**Trevor added:**

*“After the latest agreement in December, when she agreed those things, it seems we’re going to be OK. I mean she didn’t even mention residency permits, just “Anyone that’s gone to live and work in Europe up to a cut-off date that’s yet to be determined will carry on as before”. But they won’t be able to go into a different European country, I think.”*

While people do feel more reassured about their situation, there remains a lot of confusion about what has actually been decided and what has not. Karen has dealt with some specific issues below, under ‘The December Agreement and other things: What do we know so far?’ But, while many were reassured, or at least felt calmer, others are still struggling to cope with difficult situations that are not easily resolved. Many complex issues remain unresolved, such as for older people who are having to think about what care provisions there might be for them, people with complex family arrangements, and those with mixed nationality families.

*Robert, who is in his fifties and been recently diagnosed with a serious limiting long-term illness, is very unsure about his future in Spain although he has lived there over ten years, is fluent in Spanish, and has a permanent residence permit. If nothing else, the physical and mental effort required to think through what Brexit might mean for him now, and in the future – practicalities and emotionalities around obtaining Spanish citizenship or going home - are almost too much to cope with. Clearly, on top of that he has to plan for managing his illness financially and practically.*

*A group of older people Karen spoke to were anxious about all the bureaucracy and paperwork involved in gaining the right to remain, and relevant services and benefits, post-Brexit, especially as these things can feel overwhelming or unmanageable as one ages.*

*A woman in her forties is still anxious about her son, who she had hoped might be able to join her in Spain one day, should he need to. He has mental health difficulties but is currently living independently in the UK. She needs to stay in Spain for work purposes - she cannot afford to return to the UK - but she is no longer sure she can always provide a safe haven for her son when he needs it.*





Overall, there seems a concern that Brexit is making people have to choose one country or another rather than keep their options open. In many cases, people had not even realised themselves that they continue to see Britain as offering a safety net. Now they feel (especially in Spain where dual Citizenship is not permitted) that the choice to commit to Spain is also a choice to give up on Britain, and often a choice they would rather not have to make.

Furthermore, as we have said in our report Talking Citizens' Rights with UK citizens across the EU27, while people do feel somewhat reassured, they do not trust either the UK government or the EU to ensure their needs are catered for in the future. Many repeated the mantra, 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed'. 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 readjust their perspective on their lives in order to be able to move on. This implies that, rather than responding to external realities, they are simply learning how to go on under difficult circumstances.

## Leavers' and Remainers' feelings about Britain

During this January field trip, Karen 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 had they the right to vote). She 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 she 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 these rights), but those Karen spoke to did not do this for selfish or individualistic reasons. Indeed, one man 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 Remainers, usually refer back to the UK, or Britain, and to what they want for the future, for their children or grandchildren. Similarly, talking about Brexit and Britain taps into emotional responses around national identity.

*Robert, while talking passionately about how Brexit has reignited his interest in British politics, said he is anxious: "partly because obviously it affects our situation in the future, but it is only partly that, it is also about identity. I lived in that country (Britain) for 46 years before I moved out here and you can't just dismiss that. There is always some part of your identity which is your past existence and I think to pretend otherwise is a bit strange".*



*A retired man who was part of a large mixed Focus Group discussion said: “for the last 25 years the dictators, Juncker and his crowd, have demoralised the British system”*

*Andy, who is in his fifties and lives in rural Spain, said: “Twenty economists to one all believe that Brexit was a bad idea and the British economy would be better off if we hadn’t done that vote - twenty to one! I am not an economics expert, but I believe what they say and what they say is that it was ridiculous. You don’t stop caring about your country. But somehow, and I don’t know how this has happened, if voting Leave equals you are (seen as) a patriot, (so) voting Remain means you are not a patriot”.*

One woman talked to Karen of the Brepression (depression around Brexit) she feels from all her friends, be they Leavers, Remainers, or don’t knows. If we take into account the general feelings of reassurance discussed above, then this continuing depression must be more related to strong feelings about Britain as home or as one’s roots, than to personal concerns.

Carefully listening to Leave-voters reveals deep-seated reasons that make sense to them in the context of deep-seated passions about their country, even where they have moved to live in another European country. Kate, for example, who was a trained economist before becoming a teacher in Spain, believes Europe began as ‘a club for rich countries’ that then opened up to other countries in order to exploit them through a forced privatisation agenda: “it is a stupid, childish, pathetic argument of the Milton Friedmanesque bullshit of the ‘80s, the Reagonomics and the Thatcher crap that has put us in the shit hole that we are in now. The market is the king, the market is a cruel and horrible nasty thing (...) The economic policies of Europe put Spain on its arse”. She went on to give several examples of how people in Britain have suffered as a result of being part of the European Union, and continually affected by the right-wing policies of consecutive governments.

*Edward, another Leave voter and early-retired, compared the EU to the fall of the Roman Empire: “the similarities between the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and of the EU are terrifying, very, very similar, and yes you could apply them to most Western democracies. I am like Socrates, he wasn’t a fan of democracy, neither am I.*

*On the other hand, I believe in self-determination and I would have voted for Scotland to have independence, if they wanted it, self-determination I call it and it has been denied. I also think because of the nature of Britain, with the economic cycles, it's just the type of people they are, that to be free from the dead hand of bureaucracy, as it is now, bureaucracy gets a force of its own".*

*Edward's wife, Sue, went on to talk about how corrupt the EU is, and how in Europe "you have got so many different peoples and cultures, they are all being stamped over and something we are very, very keen on is maintaining Great Britain's sovereignty and that is something that is easily being lost and we've seen the change over the years, haven't we, how it has altered and it is sad, it is really sad".*

Finally, Leave voters expressed anger and frustration at being stereotyped as ignorant. The retired man above went on to say: "It infuriates me that people insult those people (who voted leave) by thinking that a load of bull-crap on the side of a bus would influence me. That is an insult to those people and that is somewhat annoying".

So, Leavers and Remainers both seem to feel passionately about Britain's role in the world, its future, and its people.





## The December Agreement and other things: What do we know so far?

The key areas of concern for people Karen has spoken to are: The Right to Remain (and Pensions and Health Cover; Overseas Voting Rights; Carer's Allowance and Disability Living Allowance; and Winter fuel allowance. She has compiled the below from a variety of what she hopes are reliable sources, but with the caveat that the quality of the information depends on who is circulating it.

### Right to Remain (and Pensions and Healthcare)

See: <https://britishineurope.org/where-does-the-december-agreement-leave-me/>

Also see: <https://britishineurope.org/where-does-the-march-agreement-leave-me/>

In respect to Brexit, the current agreement on citizens' rights:

- allows for pensions to still be able to be paid overseas
- you will have the right to remain as long as you are legally resident in Spain on 29th March 2019
- reciprocal healthcare is agreed; if you have an S1 from the UK or will get one when you retire you'll still have your healthcare funded by the UK
- UK pensions will be uprated in accordance with inflation and aggregation of social security contributions including pensions is agreed, both before and after Brexit day.

### Overseas Voting Rights

Many UK citizens living in the EU27 are annoyed that having been out of the country for longer than 15 years, they no longer have the right to vote. Extending the vote for life was a Conservative Manifesto promise in 2015 & 2017. There is a private members' bill currently progressing through the House of Commons on this matter. This would make provision to extend the basis on which British citizens outside the UK qualify to participate in parliamentary elections. You can also read here the House of Commons Briefing paper on this topic.

### Carer's Allowance and Disability Living Allowance

These benefits are currently being transferred to Personal Independence Payments - <https://www.gov.uk/pip> - and the DWP are gradually moving

people over who are currently in receipt of disability living allowance onto these payments. They advise that they will be in touch with people about this - <https://www.gov.uk/dla-disability-living-allowance-benefit>.

In respect to Brexit, provision for the continuation of these exportable benefits for those already in receipt of them will be written into the withdrawal bill.

## Winter fuel allowance

The full explanation of who is eligible for the winter fuel allowance can be found on the government website <https://www.gov.uk/winter-fuel-payment/eligibility>. As they stress, despite the fact that this is an exportable benefit, 'You can't get the payment if you live in Cyprus, France, Gibraltar, Greece, Malta, Portugal or Spain because the average winter temperature is higher than the warmest region of the UK'. To our knowledge there are no bills currently going through parliament that would see this changed.

## No Decision

To confirm - there has been no decision yet about

- continuing rights of free movement,
- continuing recognition of qualifications and enjoyment of economic rights across the EU 27, and
- rights of future family reunification



## Thanks

Finally, as always, Karen would like to thank the many participants in her research, past and present, friends and acquaintances alike, who have been supportive, interested, engaged and engaging and without whom this research would not happen.

## References

- O'Reilly, K. (2012a). *Ethnographic Methods*. 2nd. Edn. London: Routledge
- O'Reilly, K. (2012b). Ethnographic returning, qualitative longitudinal research and the reflexive analysis of social practice, *Sociological Review*, 60(3): 518-536

This report should be cited as follows:

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. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.00027355>



# **BREXIT** BRITS ABROAD

[k.oreilly@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:k.oreilly@lboro.ac.uk) | [www.brexitbritsabroad.org](http://www.brexitbritsabroad.org) | [@BrExpatsEU](https://twitter.com/BrExpatsEU)



The **UK** in a  
**Changing Europe**

[ukandeu@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:ukandeu@kcl.ac.uk) | [www.UKandEU.ac.uk](http://www.UKandEU.ac.uk) | [@UKandEU](https://twitter.com/UKandEU)