



Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education

Studies of Migration, Integration, Equity, and Cultural Survival

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hdim20>

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To cite this article: Yulia Nesterova & Marta Moskal (2023) Conversations: Yulia Nesterova with Marta Moskal, *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 17:1, 1-7, DOI: [10.1080/15595692.2022.2148650](https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2022.2148650)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2022.2148650>



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Published online: 26 Nov 2022.



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Conversations: Yulia Nesterova with Marta Moskal

Yulia Nesterova  and Marta Moskal 

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For this issue of the *Conversations*, I had a discussion with Dr Marta Moskal, Associate Professor (Senior Lecturer) of Sociology of Education and Migration in the School of Education at the University of Glasgow. Dr Moskal's research addresses the need for equitable opportunities for migrant students, workers, refugees, and their families through fair and inclusive policies and practices in the UK. Her research has been funded by the European Commission, Economic and Social Research Council, Art and Humanities Research Council, and British Academy; and her work has been published in leading international journals.

In our discussion, we focussed on Brexit, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) in 2020, following the 2016 EU referendum where 51.9% of the UK voted to leave the EU. Brexit was a significant event for the country and EU citizens residing in it, and the run-up to it – political and media campaigns to “Take Back Control” in particular – set the tone for how immigration has been perceived and discussed in the British society. As Simpson and Startin (2022) assert, for example, the coverage of European affairs has become “vigorously partisan, nationalist and at times xenophobic” (p. 3). In this Conversation, Dr Moskal and I discuss how Brexit and the media and political discourse around it have affected the experiences of young people from Central and Eastern European backgrounds living in the UK.

Yulia: I would like to start by asking you if Brexit has had a negative effect on ethnic and cultural minorities in the UK?

Marta: In terms of minority rights, this question brings me back to my PhD years. I wrote my PhD in the beginning of the 21st century and the climate, scholarship, and public discourse about the minority rights in Europe was going into a different direction then. The dominant discourse of the era was about subsidiarity issue. Subsidiarity is about a need for diversified governance at the local, regional, national, and supranational (European) level and devolution of power by central government. It has been linked to the discourse about the end of strong nation-states in Europe and the opportunity for regional and ethnic minorities to be fully recognized within devolved administrative structures and in public life.

My PhD was about the development of policies toward regional and ethnic minority cultures and languages in Europe. It was the 1990s and the beginning of 2000s when many European countries were revising their legislation in relation to minority rights, regarding the presence of regional and ethnic minority cultures and languages in various areas, including education. This was the time when the Council of Europe proposed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (effective since 1998), which was being ratified and incorporated into legislations of European states. It was a very different climate compared to what is happening now. The issue now is that authoritarian nationalist parties have been rising and gaining power in many European countries, so it's the opposite tendency of what it was back then.

I'm pointing this out because you asked what Brexit means for minority rights. Brexit basically means that it's the end of Britain's membership in the EU and the end of the idea of EU citizenship.

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This is important for the idea of the EU citizenship because the EU has sought to elevate this European citizenship to the primary status that guarantees free movement and free residence within the territory of the European member states.

Obviously, there is an ongoing tension between the nation states within the EU and the EU project of promoting European citizenship. So, you have this introduction of a coherent legal status across the nation states, which is different from national citizenship, permanent residence, and the settlement status, which is now offered to EU citizens in post-Brexit UK. This is important for when we talk about Britain and minority rights because the EU law-based rights coupled with the human rights in the respect for human beings and their identities, particularities, and differences that outline the space where these local identities can simultaneously co-exist. This is why I mentioned the principle of subsidiarity, which includes overlapping levels of governance – as a result, these different identities can co-exist in a peaceful way because the overlap is allowed.

We thus have local level and local belonging, regional belonging, and nation-state belonging. However, the nation state level at the time was at risk of disappearing completely as local and regional belonging showed to be particularly strong. And, of course, we have a strong supranational power of the EU with its laws, regulations, and policies, which put nation states at risk of losing their significance. That was the time for ethnic and regional minorities to be heard. I am comparing these two periods (beginning of the 21st century and Brexit) as they show opposite tendencies, with Brexit obviously being a nationalistic project, called “a requiem for post-national society” (Favell, 2019) that can potentially endanger minority rights. With Brexit, we have authoritarian populism growing and reformation of the nationalists, which makes many diasporic, minority, migrant, and refugee groups in the UK feel threatened.

Yulia: You mentioned that the EU project is about respecting multiple identities, co-existing peacefully with others, and creating a supranational EU identity and citizenship. I am wondering was the UK welcoming of this process and ideals before Brexit? And did Brexit happen because this was not acceptable for British nationalism?

Marta: It is a developing and ongoing process. I have been doing research with EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe who come to the UK as migrants and felt discriminated and/or were exposed to some xenophobic or racial discourses and attacks before Brexit. So, it's not like certain things just appeared and minority rights became endangered after Brexit and before everything was fine. But definitely Brexit was a turning point or the next step, the opening phase, so to speak. It is also linked to the EU citizenship project I mentioned because there're millions of people from Central and Eastern Europe and other EU states living in the UK who are now considered foreigners and outsiders. Brexit – and the loss of EU citizenship rights – has impacted these people in many ways and affected social relationships between EU migrants and UK citizens. This also affected further growth of racism, xenophobia, and a lack of solidarity, because there was a shift in thinking as, before, it was the EU territory, and everybody was a European citizen. Now, we have this clear division between Europeans and the British who may now identify as non-Europeans, and, as a result, a more limited space for various forms of solidarity.

In terms of the rights, many authors refer to Brexit as being an event that unsettles European Union nationals and creates a sense of uncertainty and questions people's sense of belonging to the place where they felt they belonged to (Guma & Jones, 2019; Kilkey & Ryan, 2021; Ranta & Nancheva, 2019; Zontini & Però, 2020). This, however, started before Brexit. Many people point out the year of 2012, when Theresa May became a Home Secretary [senior minister who leads the Home Office and is in charge of national security, policing, and immigration policies in the UK] in the government of David Cameron. She began a more aggressive and hostile approach to immigration, saying that the UK did not want thousands of migrants, that there was too many of them. EU migrants were targeted because at that time that was the main group migrating to the UK. This obviously also

targeted the European freedom of movement, which is a basic right under the EU law, and the freedom of movement was threatened by hostile poison eventually of the Brexit referendum on the UK membership in the EU.

Yulia: In addition to the political discourses especially the one framed by the Home Secretary and the hostility of policies you are talking about, I am wondering if the UK media played any role how minorities from the EU member states were perceived in the UK?

Marta: The media played a huge role. A lot of people who do media analysis and cultural studies have already pointed out that a lot of authoritarian populism and anti-immigration climate were steered by the media that cherry picked sensational data and sensational cases (e.g., Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). I remember when Theresa May was still Home Secretary there were shows quoting fake data from reports that were then questioned. It was definitely political. And they achieved Brexit in the end. Theresa May herself said that she wasn't supporting Brexit at first. That's why she became Prime Minister after Brexit to lead negotiations with the EU, which was shown ineffective due to many contradicting decisions to be taken (e.g., the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland). While negotiations continued with Boris Johnson as Prime Minister, at what cost some of these decisions were negotiated.

Yulia: Very interesting. You're talking about this hostile, xenophobic, racist, anti-immigration environment in the society that is being stirred up by politicians, a Home Secretary who then became a Prime Minister, and then we have media sensationalism and fake data. How has it translated into schooling of children and young people who originally come from Central and Eastern European countries? How has it affected their education and the environment they live in.

Marta: My research has been concerned with Central and Eastern European labor migrants who live in the UK. Although my research started with individuals who came here as economic, labor migrants, as with time, they started bringing their families, family issue became more prominent (Moskal, 2011, 2015). As a result, I've focussed on family migration in the context of intra-European migration and the European migration between new accession countries and the countries those citizens move to. The migrants from Central and Eastern European countries moved to the UK as economic migrants, for example, due to high unemployment rates, difficult political situations, and lower living standards at home. This is important to note as in the context of family migration, you know that they come here to settle and to achieve some sense of normalcy in their lives, and for their children.

When Brexit happened, it unsettled these migrant families and their sense of normalcy. These people started feeling insecure regarding their social and legal status. Some started reconsidering whether family migration was the right decision for them, considering the circumstances. We refer to this phenomenon as "Brexit families" which focusses on how the life of many EU families changed after Brexit in the UK. It's not only about the impact of Brexit on families of EU nationals but also about mixed families of EU and UK nationals and EU and non-EU nationals.

Regarding young people from these countries, we recently did project around this issue among young people ages between 12 and 18 who are already settled in the UK and had lived here for more than three years at the start of the project. We started collecting data through a survey of 1,000 young people, followed by looking at family case studies after the EU referendum vote just took place and the UK decided to leave the EU. At the start, the objective was to explore identity and belonging of young people who were originally from Central and Eastern Europe but were settled in the UK. It then became a project about Brexit and how these young people and their families felt, post-Brexit referendum, and how they were planning their futures in relation to this unsettling event (Moskal & Sime, 2022). We were also interested in how their thinking was related to their families as opinions, behaviors, and decisions of migrant young people are linked to and dictated by their families that either also live in the UK and/or those that reside in their home countries (Sime et al., 2020). As

existing evidence comes mainly from accounts of adults, we produced much-needed quantitative and qualitative data of young people's experiences of exclusion. Their age, nationality, and migration status leave them in increasingly marginal situations, just as they go through a key life course transition from childhood to adulthood (Sime et al., 2021).

As we see in our project, most of these young people who migrated from Central and Eastern European countries to the UK, have developed attachment to the place they now live. For many of them, the UK has been the only country they know or could remember and often they don't really have a strong relationship with their home countries. Now, as Brexit happened, suddenly, they've become guests and foreigners in the country where they spent most of their lives. Their rights and status are now different to the rights and status of their British peers. With Brexit, the process of othering has become more apparent for them. But also, more obviously, the experiences of xenophobia, racism, and racialization have become more common.

Yulia: I read your articles, and they are very powerful. As a teacher, as an adult, it is terrifying to know, to see that children go through such racism and xenophobia. And it was incredible to read how these young people from migrant backgrounds want to address these issues, to make it better for others.

Marta: That's right. Although you will see that there is not much research done among young people of migrant background regarding Brexit, so we still don't really know much about what they think and what their experiences are, especially experiences of acute exclusion, racialization, and xenophobia. Apart from that, it was interesting to see other aspects young people focussed on, depending on their age and stage of development. The older ones naturally were more interested in issues of transitioning to adulthood and what they should do next after they finish school, and what can happen next for them in the context of Brexit and the current political and social climate – for example, what decisions they can or should make regarding staying in or leaving the UK for further studies and/or work (Sime et al., 2020)

Yulia: Can you talk more about their experiences of racialization, exclusion, or xenophobia against these young people?

Marta: There were many testimonies where young people from Central and Eastern European countries described incidents of xenophobia and racialization. Many young people reported this in the survey as it was anonymous, but also during focus group discussions they did talk about such experiences. Many of such instances happen in schools. That was actually a bit of a surprise to me. There were experiences of violence and bullying in schools, not so much physical violence as much as xenophobic comments and verbal abuse, masked as jokes about their origins. Incidences like that were often not reported. On one hand, they were reluctant to report such abuse, on the other hand, there was passive acceptance on the side of the teachers. Often, teachers ignored such racist incidents, as young people commented. Sometimes teachers themselves were xenophobic and discriminate against students from Central and Eastern European countries.

One student, for example, said that they were given a lower grade due to their accent. Another student said that the Head of the English Department told them that they were not capable of doing English national exam and should do TESOL instead. And when the student insisted on being capable, the Head just said that they were not good enough at English, which was proven wrong (Sime et al., 2022). In other cases, students were not given enough challenges in their studies. This was recorded post-Brexit vote, but it is not possible to say whether it is related to Brexit because in my previous project with migrant families that was also reported a number of times (Moskal, 2016a, 2016b). There has been this lack of trust and confidence on the side of some teachers who don't encourage their students to perform. Sometimes teachers' attitude can be prejudiced when they work with the students who are not fluent enough in English or don't speak with the right accent.

Yulia: That's very interesting data – this can also be seen in other countries where there are much lower expectations for ethnic, linguistic, and cultural minorities in schools and that negatively affects their learning and outcomes.

Marta: Correct. But we obviously don't want to blame the system because there are many compassionate and supportive teachers working in schools. And they do excellent job. But usually when everything is fine, nobody talks about it when the system functions as it should. We want to point out bad incidents here, right? They do happen and that impacts learning of minority young people. And in our study young people talked about lack of action of teachers when xenophobic and racialized incidents happened and that inaction is important to see for young people in terms of their consequent action. If teachers are passive or reluctant to act and ignorant to prevent this culture of violence, young people won't report such incidents as they won't be taken seriously.

Young people from Central and Eastern European countries compared themselves to Asian and Black young people in the UK. Schools tend to believe that encounters of white migrants from Central and Eastern European countries were not racialized as physically they are not that different from the white British population compared to Asian and Black people who have historically been discriminated against and racialized here. When youth from Central and Eastern European countries reported that they were exposed to racialization and xenophobia, the system (schools and teachers) simply did not believe they were discriminated against or bullied because of their ethnic origin (Sime et al., 2022).

Yulia: Did these young people in your research talk about teachers in their schools that were actually supportive of them, especially when such incidents happened?

Marta: Obviously, there are a lot of good things happening in schools. In our research, we focussed on problematic cases, as researchers usually do, but schools are not necessarily bad places. It is more about pointing out the areas that should be improved instead of saying that everything is functioning as it should. Many schools are functioning as they should and the teachers are supportive, but in many areas, teachers do not necessarily have a strong sense of what is happening in schools and that xenophobia and bullying happen in their schools.

Also, to remind us, migrants experienced such verbal abuse before Brexit. Brexit just created this change in the environment where there is further increased of xenophobic incidents discussed and reported, especially in England. Our research showed that the English context appears to be more intense in this respect.

Yulia: Was it surprising to find out that there were more of such incidents in England compared to Scotland?

Marta: Not really. I think the political climate and the public discourse in England, which are different in Scotland, influence what happens in schools. Scotland is considered to be a friendlier society and more welcoming to migrants than England. Obviously, there is also a different scale as England is more densely populated and there are more migrants coming there than in Scotland.

Yulia: I wonder then if you explored in any detail how teachers tend to address these issues in the two home countries?

Marta: The first thing is awareness of schools that such incidents do happen and their sensitivity to such incidents. What we see is that often young people try to blend in and ignore what is happening because the system ignores what is happening. The first step to improve the situation is to be aware that there is an issue in many schools and many classrooms and that students are treated differently, and that some are bullied. This acknowledgment is an important step. For me, the most surprising testimony from young people was that teachers just ignore it or don't accept it,

and this leads to no action. But sometimes action can be quite difficult because action requires all sorts of procedures to track things. Sometimes acknowledging matters, teachers being there and speaking out matters. We know that teachers sometimes may be afraid, and they prefer to stand on the majority side. They thus create this impression that they don't do much, that they approve such incidents of discrimination. This needs to be changed in schools, although the issue here might be the current burden of bureaucracy and paperwork teachers and schools are swamped under. Teachers sometimes just don't have enough energy and time to attend to young people, their learning, and development. This is a general comment about the school system in the UK.

Another thing here is that young people don't report violent and aggressive incidents often, and that is the question for policy and practice in schools – why they were not reporting such incidents? Can it be because they were not familiar with the mechanism of reporting because they are strangers in the schools? Or are they afraid of reporting as they fear further stigmatisation? This shows malfunctioning in the school system that schools need to think about and how this can be regulated.

Yulia: We talked a lot about negative things, but you mentioned that there are positives, that young people are now more aware about racism and xenophobia, and in your articles, you wrote about how young people from Central and Eastern European countries want to resist discrimination, populism, and exclusion. Can you talk more about it?

Marta: Many people just go by and see discrimination and xenophobia as their everyday life. Despite Brexit, and post-Brexit ambiance, which is perceived as hostile by many of these young people, overwhelmingly they reported that they still feel that this is their place to live, that the UK is their country, their home. They don't have another place to live and want to stay here. But obviously Brexit puts many of them and their families in the minority situation – because of the accent and origins, that are not British, many of them are still perceived as foreigners. So sometimes their formal status doesn't necessarily mean that they are treated as British citizens or residents. These are two different things – their status and how they are treated by the society, peers, neighbors, and the education system.

In addition, while young people didn't discuss their involvement in political movements or activism, they discussed looking after their friends, trying to adapt to the country, and other such small actions. Also, while young people may receive support from their families and the wider diaspora, they also reported that in some instances, when teachers tell their parents about xenophobic incidents, the situation can become even worse for them as they may be further excluded from their peer groups and reminded of their difference and non-belonging.

However, here in Scotland, many teachers and people have this awareness that this is still Europe, and we are still European that we are part of the European culture, and the sense of Europeanness is cultivated in schools. This is part of the school curriculum through modern studies, learning languages, history and science and goes beyond Europe. This is also space for teachers to show solidarity with others. We can really build on this to develop a whole range of activities and engagements to strengthen solidarity and commonality that we had as inhabitants of Europe and of the world through our common history and culture. We need to focus on these similarities rather than on differences. And teachers of course here can change the whole atmosphere in schools to focus on solidarity and prevent and address any types of violence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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