
“In Limbo”, the human cost of Brexit. The voices of people paying the price of UK divorce from the EU

Two extremely interesting books were released as a result of the "In Limbo" Project. The books give voice to Italians living in the UK and to British citizens living in Europe. Daily stories of people whose lives were dramatically affected by the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU in the June 2016 referendum. SIR discussed the matter with Elena Remigi, inspirer of the project and editor of the volumes: born in Milan in 1968, she lived and studied in Pavia (Italy), Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, where she has been living for 15 years with her husband and 24-year-old son. Elena is an interpreter, translator and foreign language teacher.



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The project (<https://www.inlimboproject.org/>) was launched in March 2017, during the months that followed the Brexit referendum, in an effort to give a voice to European citizens living in the United Kingdom. During the referendum campaign, advocates of Vote Leave, such as Boris Johnson, put in writing that nothing would change for European citizens after the vote. Unfortunately, that promise was subsequently broken. Not only. European citizens became "bargaining chips" for the government, and found themselves in a serious limbo. As many of us started sharing feelings of sadness, concern, or betrayal on social media, I felt it was important not to dismiss those voices and record them in a book, with a twofold purpose: to bring together stories with a collective voice, reaching out to both politicians and the British population at large, and to ensure that our voices would be recorded as a reminder of a distressing period in British history. I firmly believe that books can win many battles. **What happened next?** With this in mind, I opened a Facebook group and in two years *In Limbo* was published, featuring European citizens living in the UK, along with the volume *In Limbo Too*, that gives a voice to British citizens living in the EU. We sent these two books to over 1,800 politicians and opinion leaders on both sides of the English Channel and thereby started to make our voices heard across world media, with lectures in universities and public squares, rather than in the French Senate or the European Parliament. The books have recently been published by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and, in the case of *In Limbo*, the first book was enriched with a chapter dealing with Settled Status, which EU nationals must obtain in order to remain in the United Kingdom. *Our initiative received significant positive feedback from many - including from politicians - who gained a deeper understanding of the human impact of Brexit as well as our psychological and practical limbo.*



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The underlying idea of *In Limbo* is in fact to delve into the human dimension, the human cost of Brexit, which was utterly ignored during the referendum campaign, even by Remain supporters - i.e. by those who wanted to stay in Europe - focused primarily on the financial aspects. Faced with what was sometimes a demeaning attitude and speech, the purpose of *In Limbo* is to demonstrate, through the various first-hand accounts, that the "other" is not a number or a statistical figure, but a person like us. The group eventually became "an oasis of fraternity" citing French sociologist Edgar Morin, a place to exchange ideas, ask for help, or offer support and friendship to those feeling lonely. Our volunteers refer citizens to organizations offering legal or psychological support. *In the midst of the COVID-19 emergency we decided to intensify solidarity efforts, continuing our outreach to those in greatest need*, especially those who lost their jobs and were left without economic support, since persons lacking full Settled Status, for example, are not entitled to subsidies. It's a drop in the ocean, but every drop counts. **In your book you give voice to people who were affected, in various ways, by the outcome of the 2016 referendum and the impending exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union. What nationalities do these people belong to? Why did they move to the UK?** The stories recorded in the book were from citizens of all EU Member States - our group is in fact a kind of mini-Europe - but we also have non-European citizens who married Europeans and, of course, British citizens. These people represent all social classes. In fact everyone has been affected by the referendum result: academia, scientists, professionals, housewives, unemployed people, students, employees, health care workers... *In Limbo* brings together very different stories, although women's voices prevail, since those who had decided to work from home - women in most cases - are finding it harder to substantiate their presence in the UK and thus be granted the required permits. *Many citizens relocated to the UK to study or find a job, but there are also offspring of immigrants who moved to the UK after World War II, naturally including many Italians*. Their parents, now in their 90s, suddenly discovered that they had to file an application to remain in their home and many of them found it hard to accept that they were being treated as guests after having emigrated to the UK at the invitation of Her Majesty's Government in the 1950s.



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The Settled Status raised many practical challenges. First of all it should be said that it entails an application, not an automatic registration. One of the most frequent problems is the absence of a formal document required by tenants, to get a mortgage, or to be submitted at job interviews. Although this is still the transition period, some citizens have already been requested to prove their right to remain in the UK. Just to give a few examples, a young woman, who had just discovered she had cancer, was asked by the hospital to provide evidence of her right to free medical care. A Danish citizen who was travelling to London from an Italian airport was asked to submit a document proving his right to return to the UK. Too bad that the Settled Status is only online! Many elderly people are struggling to register successfully. **In your opinion, what will be the main impact on everyday life of "foreigners" living in the country, in the coming months?** Let me just give you an example: we will have to prove that we are legally resident every time we go to hospital, apply for a mortgage, or a job. This will not be simple with a digital-only system. **Yes or no Europe: in the light of the experiences gathered through the project, is Brexit worthwhile?** The project demonstrated that when individuals' rights are affected, the repercussions can be severe. When our rights were suspended for more than two years, when Theresa May said that "if you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere", many of us realized that there is a European identity that must be strongly defended, and they appreciated the gift of the freedom of movement, which allows us to live, work, study and circulate in 27 countries with no difficulties. A professor in Brussels described our book as "the first example of what European citizenship is in practical terms". At a time of COVID-19 and barriers separating regions or States for very different reasons, I believe that this freedom is increasingly appreciated. The younger generations of UK citizens who have lost this right, now face fewer opportunities than their parents. This is all very sad and a serious loss. Renowned British journalist and writer Ian Dunt, who wrote the introduction to the second edition of *In Limbo*, said that "Brexit has asked us to choose between our identities." *While I could previously feel Italian, English, and European, without any contradiction, now's it's as if Brexit asked us to choose only one of these identities.* In short, besides the economic repercussions, besides the inherent risks Brexit will pose to the United Kingdom, increasingly divided and endangering Irish peace, we have all grown emotionally poorer.

Gianni Borsa