The politics of EU diaspora in the UK post-Brexit: civic organisations' multi-scalar lobbying and mobilisation strategies

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Abstract

Focusing on *the3million*—a major organisation that was formed after the 2016 Brexit Referendum to represent EU citizens in the UK, this article explores the role of online communication in supporting civic actors' lobbying and mobilisation strategies at local, national and international levels. Apart from multi-scalar dimensions of these civic organisations' work and of the way EU citizens themselves engage, we identify different strategies of impact. These are inter-linked and performed in a nonlinear fashion and include: *emotionalising; politicising*; *channelling*; *contesting*. These findings elaborate on the way multinational diaspora formation and mobilisation in the 21st century should be conceptualised, and their importance for stakeholder empowerment. We argue that contextual factors—both in terms of the sociopolitical capital of the people engaged in mobilisation and the features and dynamics of opportunity structures in a particular country and historical moment—are important in understanding why civic actors emerge, how they mobilise and the way their status and focus of their work transforms over time. The article significantly contributes to research studying the use of digital communications and especially e-newsletters and e-mails by non-state actors for mobilising and lobbying purposes.

Keywords Mobilisation · Lobbying · Civic actors · Brexit · EU diaspora

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Introduction

This article analyses the political engagement of EU citizens in the UK post-Brexit, with a focus on the way civic organisations like *the3million* use multi-scalar modes of lobbying to mobilise EU nationals and stakeholder organisations at local, national and international levels. It follows from the authors' previous work on EU citizens' political engagement and EU diaspora formation (Vathi and Trandafoiu 2020, 2022) and draws on diaspora mobilisation, lobbying and digital self-mediation literatures. Much of existing work on diaspora formation and mobilisation takes the nation-state or homeland to be a given frame of reference for the existence of the diaspora, when migration research has long demonstrated the complexity of diasporas as groups whose heterogeneity and intersectionality challenge any fixed categorisation, and which are better seen as transnational sites of struggle and fluidity. The case of the mobilisation of EU nationals in the UK post-Brexit displays such features, with European identity underpinning the general stance and ground of commonality, and with diverse national identities, alongside feelings of belonging to the UK, adding to the complexity. In line with Sökefeld, we aim to counter "primordialist and essentialising approaches, which represent diasporas as given social formations that are naturally rooted in a distant 'home'" (Sökefeld 2006: 268). Our research explores instead how civic actors use their deterritorialised identities to gain agency and advocate professionally on behalf of common interests that transcend traditional ethnic or national boundaries and continue to legitimise themselves through their lobbying and activism in the host country. As Quinsaat observes, "like other social movements, diaspora mobilisation as a transnational political project stems from the interplay of opportunities and threats, resources in the community, and strategic deployment of ideologies and identities" (Quinsaat 2019: 51). The relevance of our case study lies in its potential to extend our knowledge of the way diasporic communities mobilise transnationally. Consequently, our approach helps shift the focus from research that sees the diaspora's relationship with the homeland as the main site of political engagement and mobilisation, to research that recognises diasporas as full transnational actors able to operate within complex transnational networks of diverse stakeholders.

This article proceeds with an overview of the importance of social media for the transnational mobilisation of diaspora entrepreneurs. It then provides additional information on the formation of *the3million* and our methodological approach to analysing e-newsletters. The empirical findings are organised around our argument that *the3million* use emotionalising, politicising, channelling and contesting strategies to mobilise their grassroot supporters and to build a brand that becomes an effective lobbying instrument.

Diasporic transnational mobilisation and the online lobbying opportunities of civic actors

Diasporic imagination can emerge among transnationally dispersed people in response to critical events (Sökefeld 2006: 275), if collective agents can frame and articulate the issues at stake and use appropriate mobilising practices while taking advantage of political opportunities (Sökefeld 2006: 276). Consequently, the mobilisation of diasporic groups around collective purposes is similar to the formation of social movements (see Goóis and Marques, 2023 in this special issue). Like other forms of activism, it needs strategies for raising awareness, the creation of a narrative from which actions are derived, as well as alliances (Young 2021: 342). The aim is to create legitimacy for one's issues and one's alternative values and policies (Young 2021: 343).

Digital platforms have opened new opportunities for mobilisation and collective action. Leidig's (2019) Twitter analysis of the anti-Muslim Indian diaspora activism in the wake of Brexit and Trump illustrates the extent to which digital media allow transnational multi-identity mobilisation at individual, diasporic (Indian, anti-Muslim) and ideological (radical right) levels. According to Brinkerhoff's (2009: 37), extensive work with diasporic organisations, cultivating similarities and overcoming differences or constraints, allows digital actors to achieve a range of benefits once a shared social identity, an organisational base, clearly framed issues and effective coordination are established (Brinkerhoff 2009: 40).

The successful mobilisation of diaspora 'entrepreneurs' also depends on the powers the diaspora possesses (Koinova 2017: 598). These powers would include, according to Theaker (2001: 97), those typical for all advocacy groups, such as access to decision-makers, knowledge of the power system (in our case, both UK and EU), timing, public interest, support of opinion leaders, effective targeting and favourable media coverage. Koinova believes that if collective diasporic actors perceive to have strong power, they pursue institutional politics; if they perceive to have weak power, they pursue activist networks (Koinova 2017: 606). However, in the case of the UK, where tradition, institutional structures and the voting system make it unlikely for ethnic parties or diasporic movements to succeed politically, establishing an activist network or lobbying group is the most rational alternative. Even then, success depends on the group's ability to self-mediate effectively. In the case of diasporic groups, this is especially important, since they possess little traction with mainstream media and are usually the object of imposed negative frames (see Himmelroos and von Schoultz, 2023 in this special issue). Self-mediation and using all communication opportunities at their disposal allows activists to "be the media", while occupying a civic "third space" allowing activists to inform, debate and link up independently. Digital platforms thus provide the opportunity for resistance through technology, where online communications become a tool for mobilisation and counter-narrative production (Cammaerts 2012: 127). E-mailed newsletters (or e-newsletters), which are the object of our present analysis, fall into this category.

Background and methodology

Interest groups, like *the3million*, operate between formal and informal spaces of negotiation and decision-making, with many digital activities spilling out into non-digital action (e.g. street protest). Dommett and Rye (2018: 412), who studied the websites, newsletters, blogs and press releases of the non-partisan campaign groups *Citizens UK* and *38 Degrees,* found that as political parties decrease their representativity function in favour of marketing and publicity, the representativity baton is picked up by social movements and online campaigning platforms, like *the3million* and *38 Degrees* in the UK, *GetUp* in Australia and *MoveOn* in the USA. All aim to build coalitions of interested individuals around issues and campaigns. However, *the3million* differ from the above-mentioned organisations because they target a specific audience mobilised around one political event (Brexit) and have one main aim (rights protection). As Dommett and Rye (2018: 424) acknowledge, *38 Degrees,* like other pressure groups of this kind, are less concerned with building a coherent political programme and remain fragmented around a range of issues.

When it was set up in July 2016 (it registered as a charity in 2018), *the3million* also stood apart through its multinational constituency. Its leadership gathered French, German, Belgian, Polish and Romanian citizens, while volunteers represented all EU nationalities. Under the umbrella of a multinational EU diaspora, they mobilised transnational resources, lobbying not just the UK Parliament and UK ministers, but also representatives of various EU member states in the UK and in Brussels, as well as EU institutions directly and occasionally together with other pressure groups that have congruent interests (e.g. *British in Europe*). It is significant that the EU's chief Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier (European Commission's Head of Task Force for Relations with the United Kingdom), welcomed *the3million* within the inner circle of the negotiations. He met them three times (Coen and Katsaitis 2021: 44); only nine organisations were significant enough for Barnier to meet with three or more times, but *the3million* was one of them.

Their legitimacy was based on research with a wide demographics, published Brexit testimonies from people belonging to all walks of life, public briefings and volunteers engaging with EU citizens daily, while providing legal advice and help with paperwork. Both the official work of *the3million* and the research and publications undertaken by some of its members, aimed to give, as their website professes, an "equal voice" to EU nationals. At the same time, *the3million* engaged in continuous communication with its fee-paying members, with the help of e-newsletters, that included both canvassing and opportunities for member input.

Research using e-mail newsletters by interest groups is not well represented in the scholarship (Seely and Spillman 2021), researchers choosing instead to focus on more visible social media (Facebook, Twitter). Data collection, while a political event, is still unfolding and is also rare, not least because diaspora studies consist mostly of retrospective intellectual inquiries into the geopolitics of the past (Koinova 2018). While most research sees diasporic mobilisation being linked to the homeland, Kopchick et al. (2021: 3) argue that the success of digital diaspora mobilisation is dependent on more general characteristics, such as

capacity, clear identity goals and any arising threats to those perceived as family. Similarly, Nedelcu's (2019: 494) research shows that scientific e-diasporas emerge because of self-organisation, common goals and use of pooled resources and strategies. This is a bottom-up process, supported by digital platforms, that involves effective communication, maintaining visibility and solving members' problems (Nedelcu 2019: 494). None of these studies look specifically at e-mail newsletters, although they do acknowledge the organisational effect of digital communications, which are deployed at critical times by people with common goals—professional or political.

Like Nedelcu, Zimmerman's research transcends ethnic-based diasporas, to show that 'a personal narrative that represents a collective experience', which Zimmerman calls *"transmedia testimonio"* (transmedia testimony)*, can be "shared across various media platforms" (Zimmerman 2016: 1887). Transnational and transmedia activism is common for pressure groups representing undocumented migrants, who organise coming out events via YouTube and other online exchanges. The aim of a *transmedia testimonio* is to produce a counter-narrative to the established majority one. Using communication strategies that would counter established frames of meaning is also relevant in the case of *the3million*. These counter frames provided *the3million* with privileged access to the Brexit negotiations because EU representatives could claim that they were speaking not just on behalf of the EU but also EU citizens in the UK and that UK negotiators were not representing a homogeneous constituency (Coen and Katsaitis 2021: 40).

E-mail newsletters have been mostly studied in relation to community campaign groups. Existing research finds that e-mail newsletters have an important community building effect (Seely and Spillman 2021). Like other digital tools, they target interested citizens (Vaccari 2017: 70) and are cheap and quick, allowing the campaign group to respond promptly to emerging situations. They are directed at a variety of stakeholders and can be used for a range of purposes, from organisation and petitioning to fund-raising. Vining (2011), who examined the e-mail campaigns of ten interest groups attempting to mobilise grassroots supporters in response to the US Supreme Court's confirmation process (2005–6), found that e-campaigning had two purposes: appeals for supporters to act (write to or e-mail legislators, sign petitions) and fund-raising (donations). E-mails were therefore used for both organising and advocacy (Vining 2011: 792).

E-newsletters can therefore be a good source of information about unfolding events, and consequently, any changes in mobilising and lobbying strategies. Karpf's (2012) analysis of *MoveOn* shows that the American advocacy group can mobilise "netroots" using e-mails, which provide the organisational "substrate" for mobilisation by a growing membership; it also gains reputation through "waves of heightened citizen interest" (Karpf 2012: 19). This type of hybrid campaigning is flexible and decentralised. Vromen's (2017: 5), decade long analysis of the e-mails and annual reports of the Australian interest group *GetUp*, shows that the group's online campaigning was crucial in ensuring their success against more resourceful organisations. It used storytelling, such as simple cause-effect explanations, a plot and identifiable characters, emotional language, moral urgency and known tropes, such as "people over power", to great public effect.

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In the UK, *38 Degrees* mix digital and media-oriented strategies to simultaneously gain media coverage while also mobilising its own supporters (Chadwick and Dennis 2017: 43). The organisation uses e-mail polls, online petitions and social media to produce outward facing work through collective inner facing mobilisation (Chadwick and Dennis 2017: 43). As evident from our project, *the3million* works with similar principles.

For this article, we analysed *the3million* e-newsletters extracting material to include the earlier stages (6 November 2017–30 June 2019), when it aimed to "lobby, inform and educate" (13 October 2018) and the more recent stage when Brexit negotiations had matured and entered a critical stage (30 October 2020–31 January 2021). *The3million* aimed to e-mail at least a newsletter per week, but frequency often depended on breaking news (the announcement of sufficient progress on a Brexit agreement in December 2017 triggered daily e-newsletters between 7 and 12 December). A total of 86 e-newsletters were chosen for content and thematic analysis, after discarding duplicate e-mails. The focus was on the mobilisation strategies used by *the3million* to organise, lobby and gain legitimacy as a civic actor. Resulting from our thematic analysis, we have termed these: emotionalising, politicising, channelling and contesting strategies.

Empirical findings

The e-newsletters produced by *the3million* are both proactive and reactive in nature and thus closely linked with the impactful and tumultuous Brexit process over the past five years. They read like political campaign leaflets (who we are, why we oppose the current system, what we propose to do), officialised and signed by the CEO Nicolas Hatton who addresses supporters with: "Dear fellow EU citizen" and "love to you all" to signal European diasporic inclusivity. Titles include "Latest from *the3million*" and "Breaking news" to capture immediate attention.

Over time, this type of online engagement develops into self-assertion, branding *the3million* as the representative body for EU citizens in the UK and as a mediator between EU citizens and other NGOs on one side, and the UK government on the other. Although in this article we focus exclusively on e-newsletters, as the lesser researched but essential means of civic mobilisation, *the3million* have a well-established online presence (Facebook, Twitter) which is used to flesh out their dimensions as a civic entity and are instrumental to recruitment, networking and connecting, as well as mobilising EU citizens. The engagement strategies that we discuss further serve all these purposes, but also, indirectly, help *the3million* maintain their leading status and representativity in the field of EU citizens' rights in the UK post-Brexit.

Emotionalising strategies

Newsletters channel a strong rhetoric that uses emotionally charged language and risk claims to elicit mobilisation. Phrases such as "morally wrong", "shocking", "woefully inadequate", "the Windrush fiasco", "left out in the cold", "at risk of

deportation", "morally undefendable", are typical in the early stages of *the3million*'s online activities. The frequent use of rhetorical questions, such as, "This deal begs the question: Why require over three million people to apply for the right to stay instead of being granted residence rights?" (11 December 2017), aims to heighten the emotional engagement of readers and question the government agenda. Links with the treatment of other migrant groups (Windrush descendants, asylum seekers and refugees) are utilised to outcry the sense of migratisation EU citizens object to. There is a sense of a change in status for EU nationals, from being integrated, "We are not criminals, guys! We are your colleagues in your hospitals, in your hotels, in your restaurant, in your farms, in your universities…" (6 November 2017), to being left outside by Brexit, "their concerns are ignored, their rights are whittled away" (9 April 2019); "Settled Status will throw us under a bus and into the 'hostile environment'" (5 February 2018).

Metaphors aim to indicate the diverging path that EU nationals have been forced into: "her [Theresa May] flawed Brexit deal is looking as stable as the Titanic on the eve of its virgin journey" (24th November 2018); "there is a moral obligation to protect the rights for a finite group of five million people who got caught up in this messy divorce" (8th Feb. 2019). "Bargaining chip", "crunch time", "still in the dark", "half-baked", "fall by the wayside", "fuelling anxiety", "deaf ears", "choppy ride", "falling prey", "shambles", "glaring injustice", are turns of phrase that symbolise the failings of the UK government who left EU citizens out of the key decisions that most concerned them: "When we're mentioned by politicians, it's often as a resource: a bargaining chip, or an economic piece to be moved around a Monopoly board […] the conversation is usually about us and not with us" (7 April 2018). However, there are indications of strength and using strategies of protection, such as, "to turn anxiety into hope" and "safety blanket". Rhetorical questions are also used as a form of claim, positionality and issue ownership: "As always, we give a voice to the 5 million EU citizens in the UK and the Brits in Europe. Who else will?" (15 November 2018).

Another emotionalising strategy is the use of sarcasm and humour that help reinforce the inadequacy of the government: "Yesterday Theresa May spoke to the press after a rather disastrous Salzburg summit and unexpectedly gave a unilateral guarantee: '[…] even in the event of no-deal your rights will be protected'. EU citizens took out to the streets across the UK and celebrated till the early hours their new-found freedom after two years of being in limbo and heads must be sore this morning. I am only joking – when I asked Forum members yesterday whether they felt reassured, less than 1 in 10 did, citing the lack in trust we have in this Government." (22 September 2018) Other examples, "this week has been another rollercoaster for all of us after the prime minister accused us of jumping the queue, a crime punished by capital punishment in this country (joke)", and "form an orderly line and no queue jumping please" (24 November 2018).

At critical junctures during the overdrawn Brexit negotiation process, emotional appeals are ramped up through war-like language: "last-ditch attempt", "one final push", "holding the fort", "still fighting", "no one will be left behind"; "A key battle for us over the next months will be to ensure that existing citizens' rights are protected through UK legislation" (27 February 2018); "We must continue to fight

for our rights" (3 March 2018). Religious language, alluding to a "mission", is used to support the emotional and political positionality of EU citizens: "we attended this meeting in good faith" (9 November 2017); "[civil servants] can only work within limits set by the ministers and their political dogmas" (14 February 2018). There is frequent mention of a "David vs. Goliath" campaign (e.g. 5 June 2018) that highlights resistance and strife.

The geopolitics of Brexit is framed by spatial references—"limbo", "hostile environment", "barriers", "exclusion", "limits", "ring-fencing"—which significantly, allude to the transnational nature of the process: attempts are made to carve out or isolate EU nationals. *The3million* respond by alluding to the tension between national and European political spaces and reclaim their significance and legitimation through numbers: "Together with *British in Europe, Final Say for All* and *EU Citizens' Champions*, we demand a vote for EU citizens in the UK and British citizens in the EU, if there is a second referendum. Together, we are 5 million people, and I am 'one of the five million'" (13 October 2018). Numbers provide evidence, thus supporting *the3million*'s claims, and help acknowledge the maturity of the campaign and its bottom-up nature, as demonstrated by these quotes in autumn 2020: "We are grateful for your support, as we simply couldn't have campaigned for citizens' rights over the four years without you"; "your support laid the groundwork for changes and moved many minds on this"; "You are brave and wonderful [heart emoji] and the fight is not over yet."

Politicising strategies

Politicising strategies have a double role: they help *the3million* claim a stake in the negotiation process and keep supporters mobilised. They are enacted through making alliances with organisations that have similar goals or are opposed to Brexit, lobbying political parties from across the political spectrum, canvassing for support and linking their agenda to wider political causes enmeshed in the Brexit negotiations, such as the Northern Ireland issue.

At the intersection between emotionalising and politicising is the use of hashtags (e.g. #CitizensRights; #the3millionVote; #the5million; #thelastmile; #acces2justice; in limbo for #900Days). It is a form of eliciting public attention and emotional engagement with the cause, but also a way of documenting the political battle in the public space and establishing the organisation's brand and USP. Their mention in e-newsletters offers supporters ready-made material for use in their own online activities and recalls the organisation's own social media profile. This strategy is at the intersection of channelling and politicising activities.

Through emphasising their brand, collective power and clear aims, *the3million* appeal to be heard at high political levels and claim a place at the negotiating table: "we are asking to have input into [Brexit] discussions" (17 November 2017). Despite their non-partisan stance, lobbying at party conferences and organising fringe events have been key strategies of politicising the civic cause of belongingness and experiences of injustice, although they seem to have had little success: "On a more positive note, I have now attended both Labour #LAB18 and Conservative party #CPC18 conferences, and I feel we are as close to obtaining a commitment to

a legally binding deal on citizens' rights as we've ever been since the 24 June 2016"
(4 October 2018). It is slightly surprising that *the3million* do not forge a stronger
alliance with the Liberal Democrats, as the only clearly anti-Brexit party. However,
the Liberal Democrats saw their power largely diminished in the wake of the 2019
general elections and *the3million* have been cautious about being seen to ally them-
selves with any institutionalised political organisation.

Canvassing for support is another strategy of using civic forms of mobilisation
for political purposes (e.g. recruiting volunteers to staff the "Should I stay or should
I go" conference in March 2018). At a higher and more consequential level, mak-
ing alliances with other similar bodies (e.g. *British in Europe, Unison, Open Rights
Group, In Limbo*) is an important sign of growth and maturation: "We forged strong
partnerships with sister groups, working side by side with the *British in Europe*"
(11 Jan. 2018); "That's the beauty of *the3million*. We are not alone any longer" (27
March 2018); "tomorrow *British in Europe, In Limbo, Final Say for All, EU Citi-
zens Champions* and of course *the3million* will be marching in London" (19th Octo-
ber 2018); "I say 'we' as it includes you and our friends at *In Limbo, Eu Citizens
Champions, UNISON* and many other partners who are supporting our cause" (21st
February 2019). Politicising strategies also brought *the3million* a growing political
and civic audience: EU citizens; MPs/politicians/state actors; landlords, employers,
service providers; other NGOs. The sense of collective power ('we'), non-partisan
but rooted in a just cause, is used as a form of internal communication to keep sup-
porters mobilised: "We used our collective power—people power—and politicians
did sit up and listen to what we had to say. We made a difference" (11 Jan. 2018);
"We are not professional campaigners or politicians, and we couldn't do it without
knowing you are behind us […] united as one team" (8 June 2018).

Despite the focus on unity, *the3million* show diplomacy in their treatment of the
British majority, taking care not to antagonise it, avoiding bipolarism and seeking to
heal the rift of the Leave versus Remain campaigns. Disclaimers are therefore com-
mon: "This [criticism] does not apply to the vast majority of British people of all
political denominations who have shown support and expressed regrets" (6 Novem-
ber 2017); "We wanted to send a message of love to our British spouses, friends,
colleagues and neighbours" (22 December 2017).

Increased accountability is observable in the latter stages of the timeline ana-
lysed, through campaign planning that looks ahead, progress announcements, trans-
parency about how donations are used, recurrent monitoring of crucial issues and
highlighting them to followers. These are also part of an education process in how
to do activist politics: "The democratic process in Westminster is quite random and
these meetings are a form of influencing the process by feeding our concerns and
articulating our proposed solutions to key influencers there" (11 January 2018).

Professionalisation, accountability, but also expansion, are represented by high-
lighting good practice at local level (e.g. the Brighton branch sending a postcard to
all households reminding EU citizens to apply for EUSS before 30 June 2021; send-
ing a physical EUSS application card to all EU citizens residing in Gibraltar) and
integrating other political crises/major occasions into *the3million*'s agenda: Black
Lives Matter, COVID-19, Christmas. The work of *the3million* becomes thus inte-
grated into the broader activist landscape in the UK. It also gives the movement

continuous relevance and topicality. The more mature stance is evidenced in autumn 2020 when key issues with broader resonance than the EU citizens' rights appear to trigger e-newsletters and political statements linked to the Northern Ireland border situation. In addition, the organisation is using internal polling (e.g. how EU citizens feel about staying or leaving the UK in November 2017) to canvass supporters and involve them in shaping policy: "Please fill in the following short survey so we can feed back your concerns to the Home Office" (10 January 2019). The frequent use of polling also gives *the3million* representativity and validity in the broader political landscape.

Channelling strategies

Growing membership and support online, encouraging the bottom-up engagement of EU citizens with political representatives, generating the reaction of pro-EU bodies and engaging with EU institutions directly, are all strategies that aim to channel political will and action. Means of channelling are various and evolving over time: campaigns, webinars, recorded content accessible online, full copy-paste of correspondence with the UK government, creative expressions (visuals in newsletters, sharing written stories, music, etc.).

Channelling has both material and symbolic dimensions. Crowdfunding (using *CrowdJustice* and *GoFundMe*) is a continuous method of and for mobilisation. Merchandising (suggesting 'In Limbo' books as Christmas presents, selling face masks to raise funds for campaigning in 2021) serves the movement's financial resources, but also strengthen the brand of *the3million* as a representative body. On the other hand, the use of the hands in a prayer emoji (e.g. on 10 July 2018, to thank donors for supporting the legal challenge to the Data Bill immigration exception) is a symbol of emotional channelling.

Using bottom-up mobilisation as a form of participatory democracy has been common practice from the organisation's early formation. It helps the organisation make decisions at critical junctions. For example, it polled its supporters for a decision whether *the3million* should continue to attend the Home Office's users group meeting in Nov. 2017, which received a 'yes' majority. There were frequent calls to lobby MPs (e.g. Hilary Benn, Chair of the Brexit Select Committee in the Commons), MEPs, EU institutions in Brussels and governmental representatives of EU member states (e.g. meeting with ambassadors of the EU27 in November 2017): "*the3million* is calling on EU citizens in the UK to contact the MEPs of their country of origin and ask them to vote against sufficient progress because of fundamental issues with citizens' rights in the deal announced on Friday" (11 December 2017); "today I urge you to write to your MP to invite them to our parliamentary briefing on Monday with the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigration" (8 February 2019). These activities show how action is deployed from the bottom-up level, channelled through *the3million* direct lobbying activities and reaching the top transnational level. Enabling also appears strongly, in the form of preparing and launching platforms for the EU citizens to report cases of injustice linked to the electronic Settled Status, which *the3million* and other similar

groups expect to lead to unfair treatment of EU citizens at the border, and when interacting with key actors of structural integration, such as employers, housing officers and health service providers.

Sustained action is observable when major political changes take place in the UK government. *The3million* have met with successive Home Office ministers and officials from the Home Office's Department of Exiting the EU (DExEU) over a period of about five years to brief them on the organisation's agenda. Advertising parliamentary events, on the other hand (e.g. 6 May 2019), is an example of top-down information that keeps supporters engaged. Occasional warnings that the Irish border is eclipsing EU citizens' issues are attempts to get ahead of the established hierarchy of needs and reset the political agenda in favour of EU nationals in the UK, thus channelling public attention from issues that concern the British state towards the fundamental rights of those negatively affected by Brexit: "The media's focus on the Irish border eclipsed the remaining deadlock on citizens' rights" (5 December 2017); "There is an urgency in the Brexit negotiations, and it's not just the Irish border" (11 October 2018).

Another form of channelling is the facilitation or promotion of intellectual inquiry and expression. Working closely with academics is a feature of the very emergence of *the3million*, with various research partnerships being established over the years, such as the University of Birmingham's project "EU families and Eurochildren in Brexiting Britain". Creative expressions appear to have their place in the newsletters as a means of connecting different initiatives on EU citizens' rights post-Brexit and further pressing on the emotional stance that underpins mobilisation. The newsletters market Elena Remigi's 'In Limbo' books and a music composition by Dimitri Scarlato, inspired by the testimonies contained in the books.

The expansion of networks and partnering up with other organisations are a form of politicising, but also channelling: "thank you and the thousands of EU citizens in the UK, *British Citizens in the EU* and *UNISON* members for taking part in our best ever UK lobby on Monday. Together we said loud and clear that no-deal is not an option for EU citizens" (8 November 2018). Another example of this is utilising the expertise of other organisations for their actions, leading the engagement of twenty-three NGOs to join in the campaign for allowing physical proof of Settled Status for EU citizens residing in the UK. *The3million* escalated action and led on the further development of post-Brexit mobilisation and lobbying infrastructure through the formation of the Brexit Civil Society Alliance, heralded in autumn 2020.

Channelling also increasingly appears in combination with contesting. Translating Home Office communication into accessible information, monitoring and reporting rejected Settled Status applications while calling for assistance for those EU citizens who are vulnerable and have limited access to the online EUSS platform, are forms of contestation based on the channelling of relevant information among networked supporters. Channelling therefore works bottom-up (information gathering and action by supporters), laterally (among supporters or among NGOs) and top-down (information from government and EU representatives is disseminated among supporters).

Contesting strategies

Contesting is continuous as well as target oriented, both in the virtual and physical environments (sometimes simultaneously), and is aimed at key actors of governance, such as the UK government, the media, and transnational actors such as the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. Documenting EU citizens' testimonials with the purpose of "bearing witness" and "forcing the government to face the consequences of their own decisions" has a double purpose: it allows citizens to gain voice and visibility in the public domain and it contests the government's version of events. Fifty 500-word testimonies from both UK and EU citizens on what Brexit means to them were therefore collected and reported on 29 March 2018. Contesting through converging also includes several ongoing activities, such as campaigning for the naturalisation of the EU citizens in the UK, as a political act, and working with MPs to amend the new immigration bill.

Providing legal analysis of key documents to show the working of the hostile environment (e.g. highlighting three possible situations and seven concerns about the guidance published on the rights of EU citizens in a no-deal Brexit on 8 December 2018), criticising the lack of personal data protection (*the3million*'s appeal against the UK government's immigration exemptions in the Data Protection Act 2018) and raising awareness of criminalisation through additional checks, are forms of contesting through the education of EU citizens on the unfavourable changes to their status and the erosion of their rights. In addition, an important development is the extension of contesting to include the rights of all migrants, not just EU nationals (e.g. regarding a new registration system, lifelong guarantees, data access, criminal checks, etc.).

Providing legal aid is a means to empower EU citizens and help with their individual contesting activities (e.g. acting against suggested unlawful acts of Government, the Electoral Commission and local councils during local elections in May 2019). Calling upon EU citizens to enforce access to rights in practice testifies to the maturation of mobilisation that complements *the3million*'s actions against the UK government with action at the local level.

Legal action against state institutions is conducted in cooperation with legal experts and legal aid organisations. Prof. Stijn Smismans at Cardiff University acted as *the3million*'s legal advisor for the challenge to the Immigration Exemption (Data Bill) in June 2018, an action that was coordinated by the Open Rights Group: "This morning *the3million* and the Open Rights Group were at the High Court to challenge the Government over their immigration exemption to GDPR" (17 January 2019). These legal activities are used to publicly counteract Government propaganda: "We are seriously disputing the claim made by the British government, the European Commission and many politicians that citizens' rights are now protected" (10 December 2017).

The legal challenges appear to replace some of the guerrilla tactics (flash mobs) and public protest and marching activities that were more typical in the early stages, although instances of these can still be observed: "We are organising a photo op on Trafalgar Square under the hashtag #MayTheyStay on 13 December at 8AM, just before the meeting of the Council of Europe when sufficient progress will be decided

(or not)" (5 December 2017); supporting 1 Day Without Us in January 2018; "Join our MASS LOBBY and Human Chain today from 10am on Parliament Square, London" (5 November 2018); "hand in hand, EU citizens in the UK and British citizens in the EU walked to No. 10 and formed a human chain to symbolise the friendship between us. Together we delivered a letter to the Prime Minister at No. 10 asking her to do the right thing" (8 November 2018); *"We marched in London on Saturday asking for the 5 million EU citizens in the UK and British Citizens in the EU to be included in the event of another referendum"* (26th March 2019). The range of digitally supported political tactics prove that *the3million* use a hybrid approach aimed to maximise impact. One of their main successes has been winning an Appeal Court ruling in May 2021 that now gives EU citizens the right to fully access their Home Office records in cases where people are denied Settled Status or immigration visas. The government's attempt to impose an "immigration exemption" rule to the Data Protection Act 2018 thus failed.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the strategies of mobilisation and lobbying that *the3million*—a major civic actor which formed in the UK post-Brexit—has developed and performed to fight against the loss of rights that EU citizens have experienced in the UK. During this process, *the3million* managed to help build a network of support from individuals at local levels, similar organisations at a national level and transnational actors. *The3million* also established their brand and maintained a leadership position in the area of EU citizens' rights. The original aspect of our project lies in the approach we take to diasporic civic actors as they emerge, as they begin to establish themselves and as they evolve their strategies over time, which is different from taking a retro approach and developing theorisation and typologies based on already established organisations and movements (Sökefeld 2006; Brinkerhoff 2009; Cammaerts 2012; Koinova 2017). Our work follows the campaign work of *the3million* over a very dynamic period of five years, defined by unprecedented political changes with significant impact on EU citizens in the UK and beyond. While we found significant similarities in our work and that of Brinkerhoff (2009), Vining (2011), Karpf (2012), Vaccari (2017), Dommett and Rye (2018) and Seely and Spillman (2021) in terms of online association and lobbying strategies, we note other elements, such as self-investment in the cause and the role of the social and political capital of the leaders. Self-investment thus allows members and supporters to use emotional resources to frame issues from inside the organisation, while leaders use their own professional resources (academic, legal) to shape communication and lobbying strategies.

We also argue that contextual factors—both in terms of the socio-political capital of the people engaged in mobilisation and the features and dynamics of opportunity structures in a particular country and historical moment—are important in understanding why civic actors emerge, how they mobilise and the way the status and focus of their work transforms over time. Compared to Koinova (2017) who considers access or proximity to power nodes and actors, the ability to influence, as well

as the self-perception of one's position as key drivers of mobilisation, we observe a less premeditated approach, driven by a sense of injustice and assurance in processes of democratic participation.

The causal mechanisms *the3million* used to mobilise EU citizens are indeed in line with the typology developed by Koinova and Karabegović (2019: 1810), which includes "emotional, cognitive, symbolic/value-based, strategic, and networks-based" approaches. Yet we identify a more dynamic set of strategies that feed into each other: emotionalising, politicising, channelling and contesting, which are pertinent to the fast-transforming Brexit situation and the positionality of the EU citizens in it.

The3million therefore managed to establish themselves not just as a diasporic constituency, but also as a self-governing body that used their diasporic consciousness crafted through hardship and the sharing of interests for empowerment, self-determination and visibility. Of course, such organisations also present weaknesses. Interest groups are used by decision-makers (in this case the UK government) to legitimise their position by claiming that consultation had taken place and thus increase their democratic credentials. Although *the3million* might have been able to lobby a succession of government ministers and MPs across several legislatures, this did not necessarily lead to desired outcomes. While accepted at the table, diasporic trans-state advocacy networks may suffer from or be blamed for a lack of accountability and representativity and their power to influence is liable to fluctuations (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003: 775). Østergaard-Nielsen (2003: 777) is right to observe that although the literature on the positive impact of diaspora transnational engagement on the democratisation of their homeland is well represented, it is less clear what impact diasporic organisations have on the host country. Empowerment is often taken for granted in the case of these organisations.

In addition, some organisations, especially multinational and multi-stakeholder ones like *the3million* might represent contrasting or competing interests—in this case Western European and Eastern European interest might not always align and *the3million* felt throughout the negotiation process in competition with the Irish lobby (looking to secure the benefits of the Good Friday Agreement and fight against a hard border in Northern Ireland). Access to decision-makers is a limited commodity. Transparency and accountability would always be issues for lobbying groups like *the3million*. However, one positive outcome from the work of organisations like *the3million* is that such organisations erode the border between foreign and domestic politics and challenge the role of the state by legitimising the importance of non-state actors (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003: 778). While influence is often an illusion, as decisions are mainly shaped by an inner circle (Coen and Katsaitis 2021: 38), especially when it comes to high-stake decisions, stakeholder consultations can have transformative, depolarising and coordinative outcomes (Coen and Katsaitis 2021: 39). This article furthers the debate on the transnational role of multi-stakeholder campaign groups and raises further questions about the sustainability of such organisations beyond one political event. Furthermore, the article contributes to the growing body of research on the way pressure groups use digital communications and especially e-newsletters, that are, although, not a new medium, tend to be longer-lasting campaign materials.

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