

State of flux

Eleni Courea reports from the State of the Union conference on the changing face of European citizenship and its implications for academics.

What does citizenship mean for a scientist? Not much, perhaps, as science aspires to transcend national boundaries and immigration controls in its pursuit of progress. Yet it is rarely so detached as to ignore political realities. Citizenship took centre stage this month at the State of the Union conference hosted by the European University Institute (EUI) in the Italian city of Florence.

The line-up was so impressive that it was essentially an EU high-level catch-up. The bloc's trio of presidents—Jean-Claude Juncker of the European Commission, Donald Tusk of the European Council and Antonio Tajani of the European Parliament—were there, albeit overshadowed by the EU's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier.

All eyes were on Barnier as he laid out the impact of Brexit on European citizenship. What happens next is an urgent question for the 3 million EU citizens in the UK and the 1 million UK citizens on continental Europe, whose legal status is in limbo. But in his speech, Barnier singled out the importance of European citizenship for scientists collaborating across the channel. He echoed the concerns of the dozens of researchers for whom the conference was a chance to discuss the meaning of citizenship.

First, EU citizenship means opportunity. Although science transcends border guards and wire fences, scientists cannot. EU-based researchers have access to hefty Horizon 2020 grants, droves of talented collaborators and a stable and supportive working environment. It's tough luck for those stuck outside, subject to stringent immigration requirements.

Doman Coulibaly, a refugee who arrived from Sierra Leone to study at the EUI in 2016, is one of the few who have been let in. He told the conference that he is preparing for a vocational exam that could help him secure a job in Italy. He wants to "become part of Italian and European society", he said, because of the immeasurable opportunities that the EU has brought him.

Second, EU citizenship is "privilege", said Italy's foreign minister Angelino Alfano. And while some are born with it, others gain it later. Scientists have a head start because some European countries, such as Malta, fast-track citizenship applications from people with sought-after skills. But this practice has been challenged after Malta drew the EU's ire for doling out hundreds of passports to another privileged group—wealthy investors who meet none of the usual residency requirements.

"We must distinguish between human capital and pure capital as a criterion for citizenship," Ayelet Shachar, a

legal and political researcher at the University of Toronto, said. "The former is encapsulated in the person—they have to move to the country that's naturalising them."

But European citizenship is also malleable. Opportunities for international researchers to get EU citizenship without setting foot on the continent may be just round the corner.

Estonia, which will take the helm of the Council's rotating presidency in July, has piloted an e-residency scheme that grants users access to the government's digital services, enabling them to set up Estonian companies remotely. Although the programme does not allow international researchers to access the EU's funding schemes—to the disappointment of hopeful UK scientists—it could herald a change in the way we understand citizenship. If passports can be bought from afar, it is not inconceivable that they will be mailed out to those who display scientific prowess.

So, the face of EU citizenship is changing to address Europe's pressing challenges: accommodating refugees, bringing in skills and profits, and keeping up with digitisation. But the event failed to address what is perhaps the most perplexing, age-old dilemma: how to navigate situations where EU and national citizenship are at odds.

The case of Hungary, where the government passed legislation that could shut down the Central European University in Budapest, is pertinent. The Commission has deemed the law incompatible with fundamental EU freedoms, and therefore pitted Hungarians' national identity—reflected in the decisions of their democratically-elected government—against their European one. It remains an open question how to navigate such conflicts.

Even as our understanding of EU citizenship changes, its old underpinnings remain: to survive, the European project must continue to bridge national and European identity and find unity in national diversity.

"The great axis of Europe is solidarity," Juncker said. This remark rang true for the tens of thousands of European scientists who marched in cities across Europe on 22 April to protest a backlash against truth and expertise. Maintaining that solidarity in times of change may be the essential ingredient to fostering a pan-European science and a robust EU citizenship for the future.

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