

International

EU nationals try to secure their futures after Brexit

Queen and cricket: Brexit-wary Europeans become British

LONDON: Songs by The Beatles play out as Britain's newest citizens prepare to take their oath to queen and country—some of a growing number of EU nationals hoping to secure their futures after Brexit. There is talk of queuing and cricket as the group gathers in front of the Union flag and a portrait of Elizabeth II in Islington Town Hall, north London.

"Up until the referendum it never occurred to me to take British citizenship," said Almudena Lara, a 43-year-old Spanish charity worker. Under EU freedom of movement laws, the mother-of-two has lived in Britain for 19 years but decided to formalize her status after the 2016 vote to leave the European Union. "As a European citizen I felt very much at home here. But now with all the uncertainty... given that I had the right to get my citizenship, it's safer to do so," she said.

Britain and the EU struck a deal last December to secure the rights after Brexit of around three million EU citizens living in Britain, and one million British expatriates. But many people are wary of politicians' promises, and applications by EU nationals for British citizenship more than doubled in 2017 compared to the previous year, from 15,460 to 38,528. "I probably would have eventually done it—I see my future here," said Julie Kvaerndrup, a 33-year-old Danish music teacher receiving her passport after six years in Britain. "But the referendum pushed the decision. It made me think, what is going to happen in five, ten years from now?"



Applications for British citizenship more than doubled

values. It is a significant event, and for most a joyful occasion, with participants proudly posing for photographs with their certificates of citizenship. In Islington in north London, registrar Dion Goncalves keeps the mood lively by playing hits by the Fab Four that ring out across the wood-paneled council chamber. He checks to make sure everyone says the oath in full, joking that he has the power to delay their citizenship if they miss a bit.

And highlighting their new rights, he references growing calls for a second Brexit vote, noting they can take part in "any new referendum". A South African with Portuguese parents, Goncalves has been overseeing such ceremonies since 2005 - and obtained his own citizenship in 2013. He quips that being British, he can wear socks with sandals "and I like queuing", before adding more seriously: "It just means that I belong here." The largest numbers of people applying for citizenship are from the Indian subcontinent and sub-Saharan Africa, and the ceremonies reflect Britain's multicultural society.

But a growing number are from EU nationals who would not previously have felt the need to apply. Despite the political turbulence caused by Brexit, Britain is also still viewed as a refuge—even by Europeans. "I'm gay, and I grew up in a country where I didn't feel safe," said 36-year-old Cypriot artist George, who asked AFP not to publish his last name. Clutching his certificate, he said: "Today, I felt safe. It's not just about being British, it's about finding a home that accepts me."

'Rules of cricket'

Applicants must normally have lived in Britain for at least five years, and the process itself can be lengthy and expensive, costing more than £1,300 (around 1,500 euros, \$1,800). This includes a test on "Life in the UK", which

'Today I felt safe'

New citizens are required to attend a ceremony at their local town hall where they pledge allegiance to the queen and vow to uphold the rule of law and Britain's democratic



LONDON: Snow falls on a member of the Household Cavalry Mounted Regiment, on Whitehall in central London yesterday. Europe yesterday remained gripped by a blast of Siberian weather which has killed at least 24 people and carpeted palm-lined Mediterranean beaches in snow. —AFP

covers everything from history and politics, sports, culture and culinary habits in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Andrei Misarca, a 26-year-old Romanian software engineer receiving his citizenship in Ealing in west London, said he did not expect life to change much. "I already feel British," he told AFP, while conceding that his new pass-

port might make travelling abroad a bit easier. He has lived in Britain for more than seven years and like others, felt a "sense of urgency" to make his move permanent after the Brexit vote. "Things can change. It's better to have this reassurance rather than hoping for the best," he said. "And I feel like I'm already part of our society. Although I still don't understand the rules of cricket." —AFP

Italy's quake-hit city L'Aquila still grateful to ex-PM Silvio Berlusconi

LAQUILA: Nearly nine years after a devastating earthquake, L'Aquila is still struggling to emerge from the rubble, but residents of the once stunning city thank Silvio Berlusconi for putting roofs over their heads. Then-prime minister Berlusconi is now back in politics as the head of a centre-right coalition tipped to win the most votes in a March 4 poll. While many around Italy are skeptical about the billionaire media mogul's return, people here remember how, following the April 2009 quake that left more than 300 people dead, he moved quickly to build homes for many thousands left with nothing.

In September that year the first quake-resistant Progetto CASE (meaning "homes project") apartment blocks were thrown up. By August 2010 they would offer shelter to around 15,000 people. Despite the fact that last year some families had to be evacuated due to structural problems, the speed with which Berlusconi's government moved in the wake of the tragedy has not been forgotten. "I cried when I moved in here," says Pierluigi Lo Marco, standing outside the place he called home until May 2014.

'Roof over my head'

Lo Marco was among those, in the presence of Berlusconi in September 2009, to be given the first 400 homes in the Bazzano area, one of 19 new neighborhoods placed effectively in the Abruzzo countryside. There was some controversy over the speed with which the houses were built, while many suspected Berlusconi was merely after a popularity boost.

Also, many of the houses were built in locations isolated from the rest of the city and left without maintenance. "Regardless I thank God that, whether for honest reasons or not, there was someone who put a roof over my head," Lo Marco adds. "You can't ignore that ... I'd be a hypocrite to do so." Today more than 10,000 people still live in the homes built in the wake of the disaster. Lo Marco explains that they are largely people who are still waiting to return to their city centre homes and young couples who can't afford the rent elsewhere.

Workmen, diggers, cranes

Some are paying as little as 15 euros (\$18) a month and have little incentive to move back onto the private housing market. "Often ... the building work would be done, but in the meantime the tenant lost their job and couldn't pay the rent anymore," says Lo Marco. "So they've stayed here." In the centre of L'Aquila workmen, diggers and cranes crowd the streets and dominate the skyline. The elegant buildings and squares—which span the medieval, Renaissance and Baroque periods—are beginning to take shape and restaurants and bars are open for business. But local restorer Francesca Aloisio says: "Normal life hasn't come back to this city."

Aloisio is working to restore the facades on three buildings in central L'Aquila's "red zone"—the area still considered unsafe. She points to the "spotty" way the rebuilding has been carried out since work began in the city centre in 2013 - four years after the earthquake hit. "Often a building is done but it's not connected to the water, gas or electricity," she says. "Or it's a white elephant surrounded by buildings propped up and others that need to be knocked down."

The other issue holding L'Aquila back is the lack of businesses other than the bars and restaurants. Family-run bakers and grocers, for instance, are conspicuous by their absence. —AFP

Trump son-in-law Kushner loses top security clearance

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior aide Jared Kushner has lost his top-level security clearance, sources familiar with the matter said Tuesday, a decision with potentially profound implications for the US administration. Two sources, who could not speak on the record because the status of security clearances is classified, confirmed US media reports that the 37-year-old White House aide will no longer be able to access America's most closely guarded secrets.

The White House-up to and including the president himself—refused to comment on the record, but officials insisted that the decision would not impact Kushner's role. Still, Kushner's loss of access to "Top Secret/SCI (Sensitive Compartmented Information)" data casts serious doubt on his status as a powerbroker inside the White House and his ability to negotiate Middle East peace.

Kushner had been an integral part of Trump's election campaign and, among White House advisors, is seen as something like a first among equals. The soft-spoken aide is married to the president's daughter Ivanka and has been a leading figure in efforts to reach a peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians. He has also been a strong proponent of Washington's intensified support for the government of embattled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Politico and CNN first reported that his clearance may have been rescinded late last week. The decision comes just days before Netanyahu visits the White House.

Risk of losing credibility

Former US negotiator Aaron David Miller said Kushner now risks losing "credibility" with interlocutors in the Middle East. "They know you can't be reading about them," he said, and "you can't possibly know what you



WASHINGTON: Photo shows an empty seat in front of a name plate for White House Senior Advisor Jared Kushner during the 2018 White House business session with governors in the State dining room of the White House. —AFP

don't know." Kushner's lawyer had earlier admitted that he has not yet completed the formal clearance procedure, despite reportedly getting access to the most secret material contained in the president's daily briefing—the crown jewels of US intelligence. White House Chief of Staff John Kelly ordered changes to the clearance system after a top aide—Rob Porter—worked for months without full clearance because of allegations he abused both his former wives. "I will not comment on anybody's specific security clearance," Kelly said in a statement.

Kelly has told Kushner he had "full confidence in his ability to continue performing his duties in his foreign policy portfolio, including overseeing our Israeli-Palestinian

peace effort and serving as an integral part of our relationship with Mexico." "Everyone in the White House is grateful for these valuable contributions to furthering the president's agenda. There is no truth to any suggestion otherwise," Kelly added. Ivanka Trump's level of security clearance has also been in question. She recently visited South Korea and briefed that country's president Moon Jae-in on new North Korea sanctions.

For almost any staffer other than Kushner, his future in the White House would now be under serious doubt. He had already been forced to repeatedly revise statements to US intelligence and law enforcement about his contacts with foreign officials and his business interests. —AFP

Murdered Slovak journalist 'probed Italian mafia links'

BRATISLAVA: Murdered Slovak journalist Jan Kuciak was probing alleged high-level political corruption linked to the Italian mafia, the news portal he worked for revealed yesterday, as the killing sparked calls for fresh anti-corruption protests in the small EU state. Opposition politicians have demanded the interior minister and police chief step down, accusing them of failing to protect Kuciak when he filed criminal complaints after receiving threats. Kuciak, 27, and his fiancée Martina Kusnirova were found shot dead on Sunday at his home in Velka Maca, a town to the east of Bratislava, raising concerns at home and abroad about media freedoms and the level of corruption in Slovakia.

He reported for actuality.sk, a news portal owned by German-Swiss Axel Springer and Ringier group, focusing on fraud cases involving businessmen with links to Prime Minister Robert Fico's governing SMER-SD party and other politicians. At the stroke of midnight, actuality.sk published Kuciak's last, unfinished investigative report on possible political links to Italian businessmen with alleged ties to Calabria's notorious 'Ndrangheta mafia supposedly operating in eastern Slovakia.

"Two people from the circles of a man who came to Slovakia as someone accused in a mafia case in Italy have daily access to the country's prime minister," Kuciak wrote in the article titled "Italian mafia in Slovakia. Its goblins extend into politics." "Italians with ties to the mafia have found a second home in Slovakia. They started doing business, receiving subsidies, drawing EU funds, but especially building relationships with influential people in politics—



BRATISLAVA: A policeman stands guard behind bundles of Euro banknotes during a press conference on the murder case of a leading journalist who investigated high-profile tax fraud in Bratislava, Slovakia. —AFP

even in the government office of the Slovak Republic.

"They owned or still own dozens of companies. Their property is worth tens of millions of euros." Slovakia's leading SME broadsheet had first revealed details of Kuciak's investigation on Tuesday. The report triggered an angry rebuke from Fico, who showed reporters stacks of euro bills totaling the one million euro (\$1.2 million) reward he has offered for information that could lead to the killers. "Do not link innocent people without any evidence to a

double homicide. It's crossing the line. It's no longer funny," he warned. The Kuciak shooting followed the October murder of campaigning Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia—who exposed crime and corruption on the Mediterranean island—in a car bombing. Police commander Tibor Gaspar, who has said the motive was "most likely" related to Kuciak's investigative journalism, warned reporters that publishing details of the case could tip off suspects. —AFP