

DEBATE

Europe Outside Europe? An Interview with Agnieszka Weinar about the Potentials of Building a European Diaspora¹

Hanna Kieschnick² and Kseniia Cherniak³

In this interview, we discuss the book *European Citizenship and Identity Outside of the European Union* with the author, Dr Agnieszka Weinar. Weinar reveals her motivation and broader research behind the book and talks about the colonial heritage of EU emigration policy, the factors for enduring ties between the place of origin and the diaspora and how EU and national diaspora policies could reinforce but also be obstacles towards each other. Ultimately, the author explains her strong plea for a more holistic approach to EU diaspora engagement. The interview was held in July 2023, as an email and video-call conversation.

Keywords: European integration, emigration, diaspora, migration policy, European identity

Introduction

Emigration and diaspora policies are relatively new areas in research and politics of European countries, as for a long time, the EU was considered to be only a region of immigration. Agnieszka Weinar has become one of the first researchers to tackle emigration and diaspora policies and to focus on their Europeanization. Her research explores the intersection of migration and European governance structures, shedding light on the complexities of migration management within the EU framework.

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In her earlier works, Agnieszka Weinar studies European migration cooperation and integration governance, particularly in the context of Eastern Partnership, and considers the role of mobility partnerships in migration, diaspora, and general European neighborhood policies. Later on, her focus shifts solely to EU-level emigration. Agnieszka Weinar is the first researcher to provide a comprehensive overview of EU emigration and diaspora policies (*Emigration policies in contemporary Europe*, 2014 & *From emigrants to free movers: whither European emigration and diaspora policy?*, 2017) and points to the limits of European migration and diaspora studies that follow “a strict West/East divide” (*Politics of emigration in Europe*, 2018). In the focus of her research are primarily highly-skilled migrants who, on the one hand, do not face similar obstacles as low-skilled when deciding to migrate, but at the same time, experience similar problems in the integration process (*Highly-Skilled Migration: Between Settlement and Mobility*, 2020).

Agnieszka Weinar has been involved in various research and consultancy projects for the European Commission, studying and evaluating migration-related initiatives such as the European Migration Network and the European Integration Fund.

The book *European Citizenship and Identity Outside of the European Union: Europe Outside Europe?*, discussed in this interview, is a logical continuation of Agnieszka Weinar’s research on EU emigration. In this book, she studies high-skilled EU migrants outside of the EU, their membership and identification with the EU, and their potential to become a European – rather than national – diaspora. The analysis considers EU national and supranational emigration and diaspora policies, interviews with EU nationals in Canada, and an online survey of EU nationals living outside of the EU. The author concludes that European citizenship as a set of rights and a symbolic membership exists inside the EU but is almost absent abroad. The EU engages little with its citizens abroad, leaving this task to member states. As a result, membership practices and identification with Europe among EU nationals abroad are relatively weak. The nation-state remains the most important political actor, while the value of European citizenship, even in terms of being able to study and work in the EU easier, is not acknowledged.

Why have you started to investigate the issue of EU emigration in the first place? What sparked your interest – both personally and academically?

Agnieszka Weinar: My best friend left Poland when I was 10. Her family was a part of the Aussiedler⁴ wave in the late 1980s. I kept close ties with her and visited her every year after 1989. I could observe the process of integration first-hand, the good and the bad sides of it. Then, I started going abroad myself and experienced a lifetime migration.

In Poland at that time (1990s to early 2000s), one could only study emigration from Poland, but I was interested in the reciprocal relationship of migration in countries of origin and destination. I focused on immigration studies in the context of the EU, hoping I could keep studying the two ends of migration phenomena. Unfortunately, this is not the way European migration studies work. Conceptually, in the EU, *migration* means immigration to the EU, and *diaspora* means non-EU communities in the EU. This rather colonial mindset does not acknowledge the wealth of experiences of all 27 member states, many of whom are now experiencing large-scale emigration to other EU member states and non-EU countries. There is something hierarchical in this: immigration occurs to countries higher up on the value ladder, while emigration is something to be ashamed of; it suggests that people *vote with their feet*. I wanted to change that perception.

During my stay at the European Commission, I pushed for an exploration of this topic by the Directorate General for External Relations in the context of the Transatlantic Dialogues.⁵ This is when we got the first review paper on contemporary emigration from the EU to the US. The scale of highly skilled migration was striking. During the financial crisis in 2010, the topic of emigration (in particular from Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and Greece) finally got attention in the media. That was also when I decided to work on contemporary emigration from the EU to understand this phenomenon better. Interestingly, many traditional scholars were baffled by my research agenda. For them, the annual outflow of 200,000 Europeans from the EU was not worth the attention. The problem, in my view, is not the number but the quality.

It is important to understand that people who are moving to Canada, the USA, or Australia are usually highly skilled, which puts them in a different situation than

4 Aussiedler – a person recognized to have German ethnicity, usually from an Eastern European country, and therefore enjoys privileged resettlement regulations in the Federal Republic of Germany.

5 The Transatlantic Legislator's Dialogues are held between the US House of Representatives and the European Parliament on matters of common interest regularly since 1972.

low-skilled migrants in low-wage occupations. They emigrate out of curiosity rather than economic need, and it is easier for them to move around – they have more options in other labor markets, financial means, and easier access to visas. In Canada, for example, a points-based immigration system, that also considers the level of education, language proficiency, and work experience already privileges highly skilled migrants. In contrast, low-skilled migrants may become illegal by overstaying their visas to earn more money in the country and then return to their state of origin. For them, it is much easier to stay in the EU, where they have freedom of movement rights.

Another problem is the issue of aging, as mostly young people go abroad. They will contribute to other countries' economies with the skills they often gain thanks to free European education. This is not bad per se, but I felt the EU needed to start building a diaspora engagement policy to keep the ties and bridges. And such a policy starts with knowing your target group.

During my time at the EU Commission's Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs, we pursued a so-called Global Approach to Migration, which included supporting the partner countries in developing their diaspora policies. I remember sitting in a room full of Eastern Partnership⁶ and EU member state civil servants discussing the topic. At one point, the question arose whether EU member states had any lessons learned and good practices to share with regard to approaching their diasporas, and that question was met with total silence and confusion. The leading member states confessed they did not really have a diaspora policy or that their lessons learnt were not applicable. Almost a decade after that event, when I wrote up the conclusions to my Marie Curie research project *Émigré*, I could finally assert that the EU member states' representatives at that meeting were ill-informed: almost all EU countries have a solid diaspora policy, many also focus on economic development ties. But these policies are rarely called *diaspora engagement policy* or *migration for development*. The EU prefers to frame such policies as business development or heritage support.

6 The Eastern Partnership (EaP) has been launched in 2009 and involves the EU member states as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. It seeks to deepen political and economic relationships and to support sustainable development in the six partner countries.

Social and political science researchers often use the terms *Europe* and *European Union* interchangeably, although they do not necessarily signify the same concept.⁷ In your book, you refer to both terms. Interviewees in your study talked a lot about Europe and European identity, though the main focus of the study is on the European Union and citizens of the EU. How would you disentangle these two concepts, and how was this distinction relevant to your research?

Agnieszka Weinar: That was a tricky part. Although the research focuses on the European Union and interviewees were informed that we will talk about the EU, people still referred to the idea of Europe rather than actual relations with the EU as a political entity. The European Union is recognized as the European Union by those who have experienced its mobility instruments, such as Erasmus+⁸ or free movement to another EU country. For example, Polish and Portuguese citizens who migrated to Canada after living in the United Kingdom would have such an understanding of the EU. Everyone else, such as descendants of Europeans in Canada, has this conception of Europe and the European Union primarily as *Western Europe*, usually France, the UK, and maybe Germany.

Here, we speak first of all about values, not about a geographical or political entity. On the one hand, when moving away from the EU, European migrants start to clearly see and appreciate the set of values that makes Europe European. On the other hand, some migrants left when the EU was not a political reality yet – think about pre-2004, pre-1995, pre-1978 – and they do not really recognize the EU as a political actor. They define it as a continental entity with a defined set of values that happen to be Western European values. In both cases, the EU is the principal representative of these specific European values, hence the shorthand.

You said that the European Union embodies only particular European values. What are those values?

Agnieszka Weinar: Typically, these values align with Western ideals perceived through a British lens and a British interpretation of principles such as liberalism, democracy, and the free market. Thus, these European values are seen as limited to a handful of

7 The term European Union is more exclusive and denotes the political and economic community and legal entity formed by the member states of the EU. “Europe”, on the other hand, is much more diffuse and could refer to cultural, geographic, political or historical categories and imaginaries (including that of the EU).

8 With its Erasmus + program, the EU funds the promotion of education, training, youth, and sport in Europe.

Western European countries. Notably, some of my respondents even go as far as to exclude countries like Romania or Poland from their understanding of Europe, even though their ancestors come from these very countries.

According to Eurobarometer results, young, skilled, and mobile people feel most attached to the EU. In contrast, according to your results, people with similar characteristics outside the EU do not meet this expectation. What could be a factor for feeling more or less European among the *European diaspora*? Is exercising EU citizenship rights a precondition for feelings of belonging to the EU?

Agnieszka Weinar: In my results, the young people were predominantly one-and-a-half-generation or even second-generation⁹ migrants. Naturally, they did not experience the EU and have had literally no opportunity to get to know it living outside the EU. They were raised in their country of residence's culture and maybe in their parent's culture. The attachment comes from prolonged exposure. If there is no EU engagement with Europeans and their descendants abroad, there is no attachment. I remember I met a student whose parents came from Romania in the early 2000s. She did not have her Romanian passport because her parents renounced Romanian citizenship. It did not occur to them that that passport could bring their daughter the benefits of European citizenship, and there was no European body in Canada that would promote such a message.

Would you say that exposure to EU messaging is the only factor for sentiments of belonging?

Agnieszka Weinar: It is not only about messaging itself but also about building strong diaspora ties and engagement. In accordance with diaspora research, a country (or the EU) should offer thin and thick membership, as well as material and symbolic means to ensure attachment. And it also depends on how significant the symbolism is.

The UK is a good example: They have zero diaspora policy but they do not even need it. The British usually have a significant cultural influence in many of the countries where they reside, and symbols such as, for example, Harry Potter or the Queen make them proud to be British. People automatically relate to this, so British people do not need the EU; they are Brits.

9 The term 1,5 generation refers to first-generation migrants who immigrated to the new country before or during their early teens, age 6-12. Second-generation migrants are individuals who have at least one foreign-born parent.

Poland also has a lot of symbolic relationships, but they primarily focus on history, World War II, and the resistance movement. This is explained by the vast emigration of Polish army members to the US in the 20th century. However, this historical symbolism does not work so well with younger generations. In contrast, Italy has positive symbolism – fine arts, Renaissance, food, modern design. That is why the Italian diaspora is very attached to and proud of their country's achievements.

On top of that you could give people political rights, which we see, for example, again in the case of Poland. Poles living abroad enjoy the right to vote in presidential and parliamentary elections as well as in referendums.

Therefore, the EU has to build pride and symbolism first. There needs to be a glue that sticks people together.

Symbolism and national identification are already inherent in the concept of national citizenship. Eurobarometer polls show that many EU citizens still identify with their member state of origin rather than with the EU. Is identification with the EU a predisposition to build successful diaspora relations?

Agnieszka Weinar: Yes. The EU already invests in identity-building, and surveys suggest that people do feel European in the EU, but the focus lies exclusively on intra-EU identity-building. Outside the EU, they offer only political rights, namely eligibility to vote in European elections. However, political rights only work well with the symbolic layer or spaces to discuss politics. An effect of the absence of European diaspora policies in the sense of shared public spaces and identification offers is that EU citizens abroad are exposed to national diaspora policy and socialize in national diaspora communities only. The EU diaspora strategy is thus precisely the opposite of member states, which usually attach diasporas through cultural engagement policies first and then grant political rights. The EU approach does not make much sense to me.

What is the role of different member states of origin in feeling more or less belonging to the EU?

Agnieszka Weinar: I have not delved into the different countries' discourses, as my sample was too small to draw any solid conclusions. However, I took the interviews during the post-referendum and pre-Brexit time when the EU suddenly became important for an average person. Each of us had to redefine our relationship with the EU on our own: re-examine what our state had been saying and what our life experience told us.

Nevertheless, European diasporas rely on official narratives about the EU produced by their home country. In most cases in the North American context that I have researched, these narratives equal zero; there is seldom any mention of the EU in the diasporic media. I have encountered some absurd situations when the European diasporic businesses benefitting largely from no-tariff trade under the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement (CETA)¹⁰ thought their nation-state had struck the deal. In some cases, references to the EU are very negative, for example, in the Polish diasporic media fueled by the current extreme governmental discourses¹¹. I think only the French and German discourses abroad include some objective approach to portraying the EU, but they are limited. Objective knowledge about the EU cannot usually be obtained from mainstream media, as the EU has been largely absent from the news. Only when the war against Ukraine started did the EU begin to appear in the news on a regular basis.

Could you observe that the socio-economic position of the respective country of origin within the EU conditioned your respondents' perspective towards the EU? In other words, does a core-periphery "cleavage" extend to feelings of belonging throughout the interviews?

Agnieszka Weinar: The core-periphery cleavage was definitely present during my interviews, but it is always present even in the EU. However, I saw a clear difference in my "cosmopolitan" category of respondents: they were predominantly young people from the so-called periphery (Central-Eastern Europe, new EU member states), and maybe because of that, they could see Europe as a whole more easily.

To close the gap and create an opinion exchange, you need some common space where people can meet. In Canada, the EU is present only in Ottawa, where it organizes some events to attract Europeans and to show that diaspora groups of all member states are part of the EU community. Many diaspora members go there to explain to their children that they also belong to the EU. Other than that, through diaspora engagement activities, people can be attached only to their national diaspora. Moreover, when the UK exited the EU, many networks weakened between Brussels and Canada, as well as other countries where UK influence was traditionally high. If the EU wants to have global influence, it has to engage more.

10 The „Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement“ (CETA) is a progressive trade agreement between the EU and Canada that was signed in 2016. Parts of the agreement have been in force since 2017, while the agreement still awaits ratification of some EU member states to become fully applicable.

11 It refers to the government ruled by the right-wing conservative party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS).

Your research also raised a timely question about the perception of privileges and inequalities among EU citizens abroad. Several of your respondents reflected on their privileged status or recognized their unequal position in relation to other EU citizens. Does this experience impact the feeling towards the EU?

Agnieszka Weinar: That was rather an exception; people usually do not know their differences. An understanding of inequalities occurs when people get into dialogue, but EU emigrants do not talk to each other.

Therefore, I do not think that the EU comes to mind when emigrants struggle with unequal treatment in non-EU contexts. If someone perceives inequality, they blame their country of origin, the country they have a political allegiance to. This may change with time when more emigrants have already lived with the EU regime and can thus relate to it while abroad.

The EU does not go to the Canadian government to discuss the issues of Europeans in Canada; they leave it to the member states, with varied outcomes. The only area of coordination is in consular matters, but not in broader matters of education, work, or social rights: all areas that are not prerogatives of the EU on the EU territory. The EU has no real mandate to coordinate the member states abroad. And yet, in my opinion, it should, based on the requirements of the new generation of trade agreements, for example.

CETA is such a new trade agreement that regulates far more than just tariffs. It also has a dedicated chapter on the recognition of qualifications. But because it is a member state competence, they are supposed to solve the issue with Canada individually. That is why, six years on, little has happened. Only the UK and France, as past colonial powers, have managed to establish broad recognition schemes. The lack of automatic recognition limits the mobility of skilled workers, who could otherwise come and work on EU investment projects in Canada. Recognition of qualification happens, but it is a case-by-case rather than an institutionalized process, as in the case of the Quebec-France agreement¹².

12 The Québec-France Agreement allows a person with training and a license to practice a profession or regulated trade in Québec to work in France and anyone so qualified in France to work in Québec. "Québec-France Agreement."2021. Quebec. Retrieved 08 April 2024. <https://www.quebec.ca/en/employment/working-outside-quebec/recognize-skills-work-abroad/quebec-france-agreement>.

Do we end up in a contradiction here? On the one hand, the EU should engage more in diaspora relations and return; on the other, it needs to create better conditions for people to emigrate. What is actually desirable?

Agnieszka Weinar: EU citizens usually tend to come back. They do not emigrate outside the EU because they have no other choice. They emigrate because they have networks, curiosity, and, more generally, a choice of whether to migrate. This is a different type of emigration than in countries with low living standards. For example, France even supports citizens' mobility: they ensure that when people emigrate, they receive as much support as possible to get the most from emigration. This is because studies in France show that people tend to return to the country or contribute from abroad.

The French emigration situation is very different from what we know about Eastern and Southern Europe, where significant migration rates pose problems to the sustainability of the welfare state and labor markets. In addition, in your book, you describe that diaspora policies of different EU member states generally vary a lot. For example, the UK has no comprehensive programs, while Poland has engaged quite extensively with its diaspora recently. Surprisingly, however, Polish citizens in Canada were the only group in your study that did not intend to return to their home state but only to another EU member state. Given this contradiction, would you say that state or EU engagement with the diaspora is effective? What, then, are the preconditions for building the diaspora?

Agnieszka Weinar: I would say that the results were biased: The Poles with whom I engaged were usually young, cosmopolitan people. Self-selection played its role: post-2004, typical economic migrants would not emigrate to Canada; they would go to the UK or Ireland. And this type of people is not the target of diaspora policies of the Polish government, which delivers on the political ties front (i.e., the right to vote or citizenship) but symbolically and ideologically has little to offer to the Europeanized generations of new emigrants. They might not be as sentimental as the previous waves; they are curious about the world and, usually, before coming to Canada, have had other migratory experiences. They do not participate in anything they might regard as *old diaspora* activities. The earlier migratory waves are different: these are people who escaped communism or harsh years of transformation. They do not know the EU, and thus, for them home means Poland. Interestingly enough, the Portuguese were much more into Portugal and sentimental about it.

Thinking about it, there are no clear-cut preconditions for diaspora building. Diaspora engagement is essentially a communication activity. As such, it follows the same rules: you should shape your messaging to your audience, and if the audience changes, you adapt the message and your offer. In order to do this, you need to know your audience. Hence, you need to invest in *market studies*. That is an Achilles heel of all European diaspora policies. There is insufficient funding for non-European diaspora studies, and policies are built on the knowledge gained from national associations abroad or micro-studies. The image gets skewed, and the message engages the already existing audience.

Your book did not elaborate much on EU activities for EU emigrants. Could you tell us more about what the EU already does in this area or how this policy field develops? How can EU and national emigration/diaspora policies coexist? Why would you say diaspora outreach by the EU is desirable?

Agnieszka Weinar: I do not elaborate much because such a policy does not exist on the EU level. Even if some of the EU policies (like trade policy or Erasmus+) benefit diaspora members, they are not presented as diaspora policies, and the EU does not have a particular reach out to these communities. The only thing existing at the EU level is consular groups, where member states discuss the consular issues of their citizens and coordinate legal responses to them.

Member states are not necessarily critical of EU diaspora policy, but it depends on what the EU would do. If the EU would engage because people do not vote enough in the EP elections, this is fine. When the EU creates a research agenda, it will also be recognized positively. Member states might also not have enough money for engagement activities, and if the EU would finance them, that could also be an option, for example via the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). But its budget can be spent only inside the EU at the moment, and there are no other incentives nor intentions to build a diaspora from the side of the EU. And I see a missed opportunity there for two reasons.

First, the EU wants to be a Global Power Europe, which will shape the world by selling good policy ideas. It can only become this if it creates communities of its advocates and champions abroad. European diasporas could be the best ambassadors of the EU in their countries, but they are not equipped with any tools to achieve that status. We have recently seen how the Ukrainian diaspora has organized to achieve concrete political and policy gains here in Canada. Settled diaspora members are an influence to reckon with. If the EU wants to influence the discourse on the green transition, AI, data privacy, or public health, it needs to curate communities that could

bring this message to the right places. Talking to the heads of state can get one only that far. From the EU-centric perspective, it is difficult to understand that the EU really has no presence in other powerful economies. From the perspective of North America, Australia, or New Zealand, the EU is an afterthought. As an example: Last week I spoke to a group of Canadians about geothermal developments in the North of Alberta. Most believed that technology was a new thing coming from the US and were surprised to know that the EU had supported its development in my home country, Poland, already twenty years ago. The recognition gap is enormous. It would not matter for a smaller country, but it could be an important tool for the EU's ambitious plan to be a leader. Well, it takes a lot of work to get recognition among countries with a similar economic income. It is much easier to get that recognition in low- and middle-income countries through so-called development work. The EU is great at that. But it really lacks understanding and the right tools to design and develop a strategy of engagement with other countries and their extensive markets.

Second, I am a bit confused with the idea of European citizenship, which has great political rights but is not applied evenly abroad. Voting rights in European elections outside the EU are inexistent for many Europeans. The EU should care unless, of course, it wants to remove these rights altogether from anyone who left its territory. I discussed the issue of disenfranchisement and several options here.¹³ Transnational lists for temporary migrants, whose home countries do not allow them to vote outside of the EU, is one important element. Another element consists of the MEPs from the diaspora. We have very clear examples in France or Portugal on how to ensure equality for voters in the European elections everywhere, so nothing I propose is outlandish.

Where do you see the most need for further research in this area? What intrigues you most? How has this research changed your perception of your own experience as an EU emigrant?

Agnieszka Weinar: I learned many things about EU citizens in Canada. First, I learned that I might be among the very few who even think about the EU at all. It is sad, but the EU is a non-existent actor in everyday life. In the news, I can read more about the UK or China.

Second, European emigrants are ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse – the historic form of Europeanness as we imagine it looking at the pictures from Ellis

13 Weinar, Agnieszka. 2020 "European Citizenship Outside of the European Union: How to Make It Relevant to All Mobile Europeans." Centre for European Studies EU Policy Brief 4: 1-2. <https://carleton.ca/ces/wp-content/uploads/Weinar-EU-Policy-Brief-Citizenship.pdf>.

Island¹⁴ is long gone. This diversity really drives my curiosity and passion. In a sense, this plays out as the decolonization of European immigration. This diversity drives my curiosity and passion. In a sense, this plays out as the decolonization of European immigration. The diversity opens a new chapter in our migration history and understanding of what *European* means outside Europe in the 21st century. In my sample, European citizens spoke 11 languages in their households, including non-EU languages, and were of different ethnicities and religions. Current emigration from Europe is a reproduction of what we witness in the EU, so we have to stop thinking about EU emigration as a white, Christian monolithic process. This also includes so-called “return migration” from the EU. After all, people with French or Austrian passports are European citizens. They should be treated as such, not as foreigners. And if they go to do business in Turkey or Morocco, it should be treated as an opportunity to claim their networks and their loyalty by the EU. But for this to happen, the EU would have to be far more welcoming and inclusive, which is an entirely different story.

Finally, after Brexit, it has become more challenging to raise a new generation of European citizens outside of the EU territory. Many young Canadians used to study in the UK using their inherited EU passports because of the language and real ties. Now that path has closed, and sadly, continental universities are not considered.

To finish, I think I have only scratched the surface of the vast topic of European diasporas. We need to learn more about Europeans outside of the EU in every aspect. This can only happen through an extensive, sustained research effort and cannot be achieved through microstudies like mine.

14 Ellis Island was an immigrant inspection and procession station in the USA from the end of the XIX century to the middle of the XX century.

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