

I Had To Change My Foreign Name To Get A Job Post-Brexit

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Lord Baileys via Getty Images

My name is Eve. Or at least most people think it is.

The name I used before seemed to invoke fear in a lot of people, perhaps even suspicion. Foreign names, especially ones Eastern European in origin, are now associated with what is often described as a swarm of migrants invading British society and stealing the jobs of people who are born and bred in Britain.

So in order to survive in the United Kingdom, I felt I had no choice but to make myself palatable to those who cringe at trying to pronounce my real, painfully foreign name: Radvile Kasperaviciute.

I was born in Šiaulai, in northern Lithuania. It's not a particularly large city, and my memories are simple, comforting ones of childhood. But to be completely honest, I remember very little of my life before Britain. Lithuanians don't start school until a

little later than British children, so by the time I moved to London at the ripe old age of 7, I had been in school for only about a year.

In London, my parents were working in simple jobs, which the current government would inevitably describe as “low skilled,” despite the fact that my father was a highly qualified carpenter and my mother was a housekeeper to the elite.

Growing up in the Soviet Union, they hadn’t been exposed to a system of education like the one I now had access to, and my mother was determined that I would get the best education possible — as most immigrant parents are. Our shelves had always been lined with endless copies of classic works of literature, and everyone in the family spoke at least three languages — yet they seemed to have a prevailing sense that they were stupid but that, with the “right” education, I could be “smart.”

All of this meant that most of my adolescence was shaped by two things: the drive to integrate and live in Britain, and my family’s outsider perception of what Britain could help me achieve.

My mother and brother are proud of being Lithuanian. My father, who is no longer with us, was always a patriot. My parents had left a rich life full of friends and family to provide us with financial security and the potential for a better future. In return, I became a self-conscious teenager who slowly detached from her roots to appear less foreign and, in my eyes, less “weird.”

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Eve was first born when I was around 14 and had to go to the hairdresser but didn’t want to explain where I was from and why I was there. Throughout my teens, Eve grew into a part of my identity, but never as seriously as today. It was an identity I donned when I felt exhausted, sick of having to explain where I was from and why, to some, I looked a little different.

This is a narrative that I am aware is not uncommon for people of color. Being white, I have always had the privilege of being able to camouflage myself as somewhat British, until you met my family or asked my name.

After graduating and spending a year teaching abroad as a British person named Radvile, I rejoined life in Britain as Eve, post-Brexit. My boyfriend had to get used to introducing me as Eve to new friends, and I had to get used to responding, but with the simple act of changing my name, my existence in the UK stopped being something anyone wanted to question.

The day before the Brexit vote in Britain, the Daily Mail — one of the bestselling newspapers in the UK — published a front page headline stating “yet another lorry load of migrants” was “arriving in the UK declaring we’re from Europe — let us in!” Regardless of the fact that the migrants turned out to be from Kuwait, the message was indelibly clear: If you are European, you are no longer welcome here, and your desire to live here is a pure sense of misplaced entitlement.

I would argue that I am British — my general demeanor, attitude and lifestyle is British to the point of being a laughable stereotype, and something I was made painfully aware of during the time I spent struggling to fit in when living abroad. I also consider myself working class, despite the fact that most immigrants (from my experience) do not get the privilege of being able to take part in the British class system, even though our labor is a very big part of the foundations that support its continued existence.

Nonetheless, the British government doesn’t recognize me as British, even though I grew up here. And the sheer force of Brexit as an ideology and a reality certainly casts me as little more than a drain on the resources of the society that I’ve called my home. This was something I became aware of when, after some time working in Spain in 2016, I began applying for jobs in England using my real name. Six months later, I appeared to be nowhere closer to getting a job, even though I was brought up in the country and had an undergraduate degree from the University of Oxford in English literature and a master’s in global governance.

The British government doesn’t recognize my life and my childhood here as British.

Enter Eve, who got a job within a single week. I don’t believe my employer at the time would have been perturbed by my birth name or where I was supposedly from, and this is not a reflection on their personal outlook. However, I believe the bias from those who ignored my application was implicit, and innocent (as much as something of this quality can be innocent).

My interview as Eve was unlike any other. I was briefly asked about my heritage, but the assumption was that I had at least one English parent and that I was an acceptable and competent candidate. A far cry from an interview I had the same week under my old name, wherein a middle-aged manager with no interest in hiring me sat on a table and interrogated me on my views of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Putin and the future of Baltic politics. After the difficult interview, I was unsurprisingly met with a cold silence when I inquired about my application.

Eve, on the other hand, received a job offer the very next day after her interview, and I was so relieved that I wanted to cry. Six months of believing I was unemployable was suddenly erased in a single week — by Eve. The idea that some combination of destiny, my heritage and Brexit had made my chances of getting a job inexplicably slim didn't seem so much like a conspiracy theory anymore.

I am not alone in this. I know several people with similar backgrounds who all changed their names way before I did. I also know people from very different backgrounds who changed their names so that they would be more familiar and easier to pronounce in English. I've even met someone who worked in recruitment and encouraged me not to use a foreign name, as applications with long Eastern European names often get "ridiculed and ignored."

In the 11 months after the referendum, a Freedom of Information request revealed how hate crime was at the highest level ever reported in Britain. I began to hear stories of Italians and Germans getting attacked in the street for being "Polish," an identity that had quickly transformed into a slur.

A lot of the time I still use Radvile as a middle name. No one seems to care as much about where I'm from as long as I have the three magic letters in front of my name. If you seem like you belong, it's that simple. My mother was sad when I had to tell her that I was making the change, and this made me realize my initial reluctance was in part due to not wanting to disappoint her. I don't regret changing my name, because in my first year living under this alter ego, I have not once been asked where I'm from or when I'm going home. Using my birth name, this was a question I would have to answer every single day.

I don't feel like I can return to the fight of being Radvile; I am too scared, too weak and too tired.

By keeping Eve, I am able to live the life my parents wanted for me when they sacrificed everything to come to Britain. Without Eve, I believe I would struggle to live happily in a society that is turning against foreigners and looking inward in order to define its collective identity. I was taught to value the difference in people by growing up in a multicultural and liberal society. I can only hope that this is something Britain grows to value once again.