

GUESTS OR PARTICIPANTS?

Political Participation of Mobile EU citizens in host countries as a need and a challenge.



Policy brief

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Political participation is an important core element of citizenship. In the EU, participation of mobile citizens enjoying the freedom of movement in the political life of host countries should be seen as an important aspect of European citizenship. Such participation is possible, for example, through local elections, where EU citizens have the right to vote and to run for office.

However, in practice there is not enough knowledge about political participation in host countries among mobile EU citizens, and not enough confidence. At the same time, local populations in Member States that have significant percentage of immigration from other EU countries often see this immigration in negative terms. Much remains to be done to elicit trust towards fellow EU citizens in countries with high immigration rates. Fostering political participation of mobile EU citizens can and should be one of the steps in this direction.

Ireland, the UK: Participation of mobile EU citizens in local political life is hampered by lack of knowledge and interest

Data on political participation of mobile EU citizens in their host countries in the EU is scarce. Where available, it shows that they are less active politically than locals. Thus, a report on the impact of free movement of EU citizens at the local level in big European cities concluded that EU mobile citizens' participation in the cities' civic and political life was still limited. The participation of mobile citizens from EU-13 (the Member States that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007) in political life in EU-15 countries where they make up a significant percentage of population is neither satisfactory nor visible. A study on the participation of Polish citizens in the UK notes that the level of activism among Poles there is still very limited,¹ and another study indicates that participation of Poles in trade unions is below the national average in the UK.²

Research conducted jointly by PROVIDUS, Diversity Development Group, Institute for Public Affairs and Forum Polonia has revealed that in Ireland, immigrant Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish citizens who have a right to vote in local elections predominantly do not

use this right. Only 17% Lithuanians and 29% Latvians have reported participation in the last local elections. Participation in local elections was slightly higher among Poles (34%),ⁱ perhaps in view of the fact that the Polish community in Ireland has been targeted by 'Vote, You are at Home' campaign by Forum Polonia.ⁱⁱ

This low level of participation is not linked to lack of trust in local institutions: in fact, Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian citizens residing in Ireland tend to have greater trust in Irish institutions, than in the institutions in their countries of origin. They also tend to believe that voting in local elections is more effective than other forms of participation. However, they admit they have little knowledge about the functioning of representative political institutions in the country, especially about political parties and local public authorities. They also do not trust the effectiveness of their own political participation.ⁱ Perceived lack of impact may be linked to lack of interest in local politics, e.g. one of the main obstacles for active political participation of Lithuanians in Ireland is lack of interest.ⁱⁱ

A deficit of trust

A closer look at the general public's attitude towards mobile EU citizens in some Member States with the higher percentage of immigrants shows a deficit of trust. A similar deficit of trust may be seen in the way some governments treat the issue of political participation of their citizens in other EU member states.

Several years before Brexit, attitudes towards immigrants from other EU countries have been predominantly negative in the UK (53%)ⁱ, where also attitudes towards the engagement of EU citizens from Eastern Europe in the labour market in various surveys are negative. The only type of labour migrant that is viewed relatively positively in the UK, is a qualified professional filling vacant jobs not filled by British people, and the attitude is the same whether he or she is from Eastern Europe or a Commonwealth country (e.g. Pakistan).ⁱⁱ Also before Brexit the number of formally recorded hate crimes against Polish immigrants increased in its intensity over a decade.ⁱⁱⁱ

While attitudes in other EU countries with a significant percentage of EU-13 immigration have been less negative, still, in Belgium predominantly negative attitude towards immigrants from other EU countries has been 47% in 2014, in France – 43%, in Germany – 41%.ⁱ At the same time, in other Members States, such as Sweden and Spain, and also Ireland, immigration of EU citizens is perceived predominantly positively.

The situation of mobile EU citizens from EU-13 countries regarding political participation in host countries is particularly challenging, because, with some exceptions (Poland) national governments at home sometimes do little to encourage political participation of their mobile citizens abroad. Thus, the only activities supported by Latvian and Lithuanian governments for their citizens in other EU countries are related to cultural identity of diaspora. Support for political engagement in host countries is seen as problematic, because it may be perceived as support for emigration of citizens to more affluent EU countries. Thus, the free choice of EU citizens to use the freedom of movement does not go hand in hand with encouragement to use political rights in the country of residence.

Way forward

A new approach towards political participation of mobile EU citizens in host countries in Europe would have to address several issues:

- The lack of representation of mobile EU citizens in local political life;
- The lack of knowledge and interest about local politics and institutions and lack of confidence in the impact of own participation among mobile EU citizens;
- The lack of trust towards immigrants from other EU countries in some Member States.

Given these challenges, it is not easy to suggest ways forward, however, the following recommendations address some of the more obvious stakeholders who can make a difference to the participation of mobile EU citizens in host countries.

- A more pro-active attitude towards promoting participation of mobile EU citizens in host countries has to be demonstrated by the European institutions, particularly, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of Ministers, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions.
- Local politicians and political parties in EU Member States should be more proactive in engaging mobile EU citizens. Proactive approaches – not only informing, but also engaging locally settled citizens of other EU countries through initiatives designed to raise their political activity – are necessary. These could take the form, for instance, of engaging the leaders of immigrant communities and encouraging them to introduce community members to election procedures and party programmes. Given today's digital and technological opportunities and the presence of social media, information about local political processes and agendas should be made available in the languages of immigration communities.

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- Host country institutions and policy makers need to ensure that there is support mechanism for encouraging mobile EU citizens living in their country to get involved. This could be achieved through funding for active citizenship projects by immigrant communities jointly with host country NGOs. Such support would demonstrate that encouragement for their participation is coming not only from the local diaspora community, but also from host country society.
 - The selection of the right channels of communication with immigrant communities is significant – for example, among the Latvians in Ireland, organised diaspora groups seem to be the hub of local activity, but this is not necessarily true of Poles or Lithuanians. Communication strategies taking note of these differences may be more effective than ‘one size fits all’ approaches.
 - Since the data on political participation of mobile EU citizens in their countries of residence in the EU is incomplete, transnational efforts for improvement of longitudinal monitoring mechanisms are needed. Monitoring of EU citizens’ actual access to political and civic rights should be a priority for both sending (home) and receiving (host) countries. EU countries with diaspora policies should look not only at the participation of their mobile citizens in national elections in the home country, but also at their use of civic, political and labour rights in the country of residence. For instance, embassies in countries of residence could collect data on political participation and civic engagement of their national communities in the host country, and use research to monitor engagement. In addition, the impact of different possible sources of inequality (for example, gender, age, education, ethnicity, form of employment, etc.) on different forms of political participation of mobile EU citizens has to be assessed and if necessary, targeted with adequate policy response.
 - EU countries with diaspora policies and intense emigration flows should consider changing the political discourse towards emigration (diaspora) policies, emphasising not only cultural ties (identity, language, culture) and economic aspects (investments, social capital, remittances), but also social and political rights, civic and political engagement in countries of residence. Such a shift of emigration (diaspora) policies needs to be followed by adequate funding, monitoring and policy developments. At the same time, these developments need broader political debate and more targeted approach within the home countries’ legislation for maintaining ties with diaspora.
 - Targetted information campaigns encouraging political participation are needed, emphasising not only voting rights, but also such possibilities as consultative bodies, trade unions, formal migrant associations as an alternative way for political involvement.

¹ Kucharczyk, J. (ed.) (2013) Nothing about us, without us. Civic participation of Poles in Great Britain, IPA, Warsaw.

² Fulton, L. (2015) Polish Workers in the UK. Their Involvement with Unions and Their Employment Rights. IPA, Warsaw.

ⁱ EY for the European Commission (2014) Evaluation of the impact of the free movement of EU citizens at local level. Final report.

ⁱⁱ Golubeva, M., Žibas, K., et al (2016) Do mobile citizens engage? A Study on the Participation of Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian Citizens in Ireland. PROVIDUS.

ⁱⁱⁱ The research targeted the diaspora communities, hence, the figures of political activism reflect predominantly the attitude of socially active members of respective diaspora communities. However, as socially active members are in minority, the political activism among the immigrant communities may be even lower.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Feldman, Alice and Gilmartin, Mary and Loyal, Steven and Migge, Bettina (2008) Getting On: From Migration to Integration - Chinese, Indian, Lithuanian and Nigerian Migrants' Experiences in Ireland. Technical Report. Immigrant Council of Ireland, Dublin. ISBN: 978-0-9545496-7-1.

^{vi} Eurobarometer (2014)

<http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/themeKy/59/groupKy/278>

^{vii} Ford, R., Morrell, G., and Heath, A. (2012) British Social Attitudes 29. Chapter 3.

^{viii} McDevitt, J.(2014), New figures reveal dramatic increase in hate crimes against Polish people, The Guardian, 11 June, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jun/11/polish-people-rise-in-attacks-blame-recession-politicians-media>

^{ix} Eurobarometer (2014)

<http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/themeKy/59/groupKy/278>



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