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REPORT ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF MOBILE EU CITIZENS: LATVIA

AUTHORED BY
JANIS IKSTENS



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GLOBALCIT studies political participation in the context of the project Fostering Awareness, Inclusion and Recognition of EU mobile citizens' Political Rights (FAIR EU) and as a part of the EU-CITIZEN network.

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Report on Political Participation of Mobile EU Citizens

Latvia

*Jānis Ikstens**

Abstract:

Non-resident Latvian citizens have the right to vote and to stand as candidates both in national and European Parliament (EP) elections. Automatic voter registration applies and remote voting is possible in both types of elections. Remote voting options in national elections are broader (voting at diplomatic missions and postal voting) than in EP election (only postal voting). Non-citizen residents from the EU have the right to vote and to stand as candidates in both local and EP elections, and their registration is automatic.

To increase the participation of mobile EU citizens in elections, the author recommends increasing funding for election-related activities, and enhancing information campaigns ahead of EP elections, targeting especially first-time voters and providing content in more European languages..

Abstrakts:

Ārpus Latvijas dzīvojošajiem Latvijas pilsoņiem ir tiesības balsot un balotēties gan Eiropas Parlamenta, gan pašvaldību vēlēšanās. Abās vēlēšanās tiek izmantota automātiskā vēlētāju reģistrācija. Attālinātās balsošanas iespējas ir plašākas Saeimas vēlēšanās (balsojums pa pastu vai diplomātsikajās pārstāvniecībās) nekā Eiropas Parlamenta vēlēšanās (tikai balsojums pa pastu). Citu ES valstu pilsoņiem, kas ir kļuvuši par Latvijas pastāvīgajiem iedzīvotājiem, ir tiesības balsot un balotēties gan Eiropas Parlamenta, gan pašvaldību vēlēšanās un viņi tiek automātiski iekļauti Vēlētāju reģistrā.

Lai palielinātu ES pilsoņu līdzdalību vēlēšanās, autors iesaka palielināt finansējumu ar vēlēšanām saistītajām aktivitātēm un pastiprināt informatīvās kampaņas pirms EP vēlēšanām, īpašu uzsvāru liekot uz pirmreizējiem vēlētājiem un satura nodrošināšanu lielākā skaitā Eiropas valodu.

* University of Latvia.

1. Introduction

Non-resident Latvian citizens have the right to vote and to stand as candidates both in national and European Parliament (EP) elections (see Table 1). Automatic voter registration applies and remote voting is possible in both types of elections. Remote voting options in national elections are broader (voting at diplomatic missions and postal voting) than in EP election (only postal voting). Non-citizen residents from the EU have the right to vote and to stand as candidates in both local and EP elections, and their registration is automatic.

Table 1. Conditions for electoral rights of non-resident citizens and non-citizen residents in Latvia (GLOBALCIT CER 2017)

Type of voter	Election type	Right Voting	Right Candidacy	Automatic registration	Remote voting
Non-resident citizens	National Legislative	YES	YES	YES	YES ¹
Non-resident citizens	European Parliament	YES	YES	YES	YES ²
Non-citizen residents	Local Legislative	YES	YES	YES	NA
Non-citizen residents	Local Mayoral ³	NA	NA	NA	NA
Non-citizen residents	European Parliament	YES	YES	YES	NA

1.1. Demographic Characteristics of Non-citizen Residents and Non-resident Citizens

Non-citizen residents

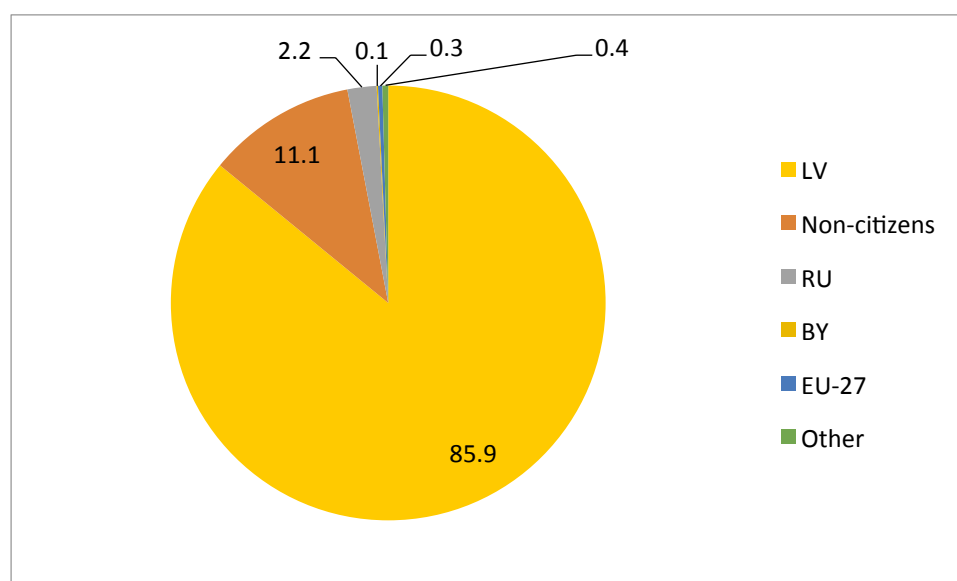
According to the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (CSB), there were 1.934 million inhabitants in Latvia at the beginning of 2018. Citizens of Latvia accounted for 1.662 million while the remainder consisted of EU-27 citizens, citizens of other countries and non-citizens.

The latter category is a by-product of Latvia's struggle for independence in the late 20th century – when the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, persons who were citizens of Latvia on the day of Soviet occupation (17 June 1940) or their descendants were given Latvian citizenship. Other permanent residents on the Latvian soil (except the Soviet military and their families) were granted the status of non-citizens, and they were subsequently offered an option to naturalize. Latvia's non-citizens are regarded as permanent residents of the country. It is for this historic reason that the share of resident non-citizens in Latvia has been rather high – over 11% at the beginning of 2018 (see Figure 1). The same historic process accounts for notable shares of Russian (2.2%) and Belarusian (0.1%) citizens among Latvia's population as part of these non-citizens chose to become citizens of the two countries after 1991.

¹ In-country voting. Personal voting at diplomatic missions and postal voting.

² In-country voting and postal voting.

³ Indirect election.

Figure 1. Structure of Latvia's population by citizenship in 2018 (%)⁴

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia

Citizens of EU-27 countries make up a tiny fraction of Latvia's population (0.3%). Moreover, around 60% of this group consist of citizens of Lithuania and Estonia, many of whom have likely resided in Latvia well before 1991. Therefore, it is fair to assume that EU membership has not produced a steep increase of EU-27 citizen residents in Latvia.

Table 1. The age structure of Latvia's population in 2018 (%)

	LV citizens		LV non-citizens		EU-27 citizens	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
0-14	20,2	16,1	2,0	1,7	7,2	8,2
15-29	19,9	16,2	5,7	3,3	11,4	14,4
30-44	22,4	20,0	22,0	11,1	32,3	27,6
45-59	20,1	20,1	32,0	25,3	31,5	24,9
60-74	12,3	16,3	28,0	31,3	12,7	15,0
75+	5,1	11,4	10,3	27,3	5,0	9,8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia

The age structure of various citizenship groups implies that Latvian non-citizens will become extinct in a distant future, as there are few youngsters of this status (see Table 1). An

⁴ Legend of Figure 1: LV: Latvia, RU: Russia, BY: Belarus.

unlikely revitalization of the naturalization process⁵ may speed up this process. The most numerous category of EU-27 citizens present in Latvia is aged between 30 and 59 years.

Statistical data on the geographical localization of EU-27 citizens are not particularly reliable⁶. However, the Central Statistical Bureau states that the highest share of non-citizens is present in and around the capital city of Rīga. Further, citizens of countries other than Latvia and Russia are more concentrated in Rīga and its vicinity⁷. Survey professionals would add that non-citizens and citizens of Russia tend to reside in larger cities (Rīga, Daugavpils, Liepāja, Rēzekne etc.).

Little is known about occupations of Latvian non-citizen residents. At the outset of the 21st century, Pabriks found that ethnic minorities are underrepresented in national and municipal institutions and attributed this to low levels of Latvian citizenship among minorities, lower level of salaries in the public sector, and political alienation of minorities.⁸ Various international surveys (European Social Survey, International Social Survey Programme etc.) have found that minority representatives are more often employed in the private sector.

Non-resident citizens

According to the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA), there were 174,527 Latvian citizens residing abroad in 2018.⁹ The reliability of this figure is questionable as it is calculated on the basis of the place of residence as declared by persons themselves. However, some citizens have chosen to maintain their official residence in Latvia *inter alia* in order to access social and health care services in Latvia.

This sizeable pool of non-resident citizens resulted from two waves of emigration. The first dates back to the end of World War II when, fearing the renewed Soviet occupation, between 120,000 and 140,000 persons fled Latvia¹⁰. They settled mostly in Western Europe but large Latvian diasporas emerged also in USA and Australia. The other wave began around the time of Latvia's accession to the EU in 2004. It is estimated that between 2002/2003 to 2014 up to 260,000 persons left the country, with a majority of them being citizens of Latvia. Most frequently cited reasons for leaving the country concern poor quality of life in Latvia, better prospects for children, and personal financial problems.¹¹

⁵ The pace of naturalization in Latvia has slowed considerably after the country's accession to the EU. For details, see http://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/documents/naturalizacija33/Naturalizacijamaijs/stat_latv1.pdf (last accessed 27 July 2018).

⁶ For details, see a footnote to CSB data on place of residence of Latvia's population: https://data1.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/iedz/iedz_riga/RIG030.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=57b06b48-be5a-4277-8e3b-b72f7cda6997 (last accessed 30 July 2018)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pabriks, A. (2002). Etniskās proporcijas, nodarbinātība un diskriminācija Latvijā (Ethnic proportions, employment and discrimination in Latvia). Rīga: Nordik. 55 p.

⁹ For a detailed breakdown see: http://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/documents/1aaa/PSAV_Aarvalstiis_Latvijas_VPD.pdf (last accessed 30 July 2018)

¹⁰ Bleiere, D., Butulis, I., Feldmanis I., Stranga, A., & Zunda, A. (2008) Latvija Otrajā pasaules karā (1939-1945), Rīga: Jumava. P.471.

¹¹ Hazans, M. (2015). Emigrācija no Latvijas 21. gadsimtā reģionu, pilsētu un novadu griezumā. Latvijas emigrantu kopienas: cerību diaspora, 11-25. Rīga: LU Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts.

Table 2. The number of Latvian non-resident citizens (2018), by country

Country of residence	Number of Latvian citizens
UK	70,953
Ireland	19,919
Germany	17,236
USA	14,945
Australia	5,630
Canada	5,034
Sweden	4,226
Israel	4,198
Russia	4,189
Norway	3,700
France	2,505
Estonia	2,279
Netherlands	2,061
Other	17,652

Source: Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs

In the absence of reliable data on emigration from Latvia, the age structure of non-resident citizens is rather difficult to establish. According to the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, the age group most affected by emigration is between 20 and 35 years (see Table 3).

Table 3. Age structure of emigrants from Latvia in 2000-2017 (%)

Age (years)	(%)
0-4	4,1
5-9	4,1
10-14	4,1
15-19	6,1
20-24	15,1
25-29	15,1
30-34	11,2
35-39	9,0
40-44	7,8
45-49	6,8
50-54	5,4
55-59	3,6
60-64	2,2
65-69	1,6
70-74	1,3
75-79	1,1
80+	1,4
Total	100

Source: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia

As emigration affected both citizens and non-citizens, it is reasonable to assume that the age structure of the two emigrant groups is not excessively different. Indirect evidence to that effect is provided by the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia that reported the ethnic structure of emigrants from Latvia in 2017, which broadly corresponded to the ethnic structure of Latvia's population.¹² Further, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that 12,603 children born abroad in 2015-2017 were issued Latvian passports.¹³ This figure approximates some 20% of new-borns in Latvia for the same period of time.

A large-scale survey of emigrants from Latvia (N=14'068) conducted in 2014, which mostly covered recent emigrants, provides insights into the educational and occupational structure of this community. The spread of higher education among emigrants is slightly lower than among Latvian residents. However, the brain drain intensified after the 2009 economic crisis.¹⁴ The employment level among the Latvian emigrants is about 10 percentage points higher than the employment level among the indigenous population. Also, the Latvian emigrants have higher employment level than people in Latvia. However, Latvian emigrants tend to have lower job positions if compared to persons with similar education and qualification residing in Latvia.¹⁵

1.2. Summary of the Electoral Rights of Non-citizen Residents and Non-resident Citizens

Electoral rights under the list-based proportional system with preferential voting in Latvia are closely linked to citizenship, with residency playing a less important role. This is to be seen as a consequence of the Soviet occupation because the institutional framework was reconstructed in the 1990s with a view of restricting the political influence of the Soviet-era migrants and retired military personnel.

Non-citizen residents

Only citizens of Latvia are allowed to vote and run for office in the Saeima elections. Certain categories of EU-27 citizens, however, were granted opportunities to participate in both local and European elections after Latvia became a member of the European Union in 2004.

The Law on Municipal Elections stipulates that the right to vote in local elections is granted not only to citizens of Latvia but also to citizens of other EU member states who are entered into the Registry of Residents. However, citizens of both Latvia and other EU member countries need to fulfil additional criteria to be eligible to vote in municipal elections: (i) have reached the age of 18 on the day of elections; and (ii) have held a registered address in the related municipality for no less than 90 days before the elections, or own a real estate in the municipality. Further restrictions of active voting rights exist for persons who have been stripped of voting rights in any other EU country, for incarcerated persons, and for persons deemed incapacitated by a court ruling.

¹² Centrālā Statistikas pārvalde (2017). Demogrāfija 2017. Rīga. P.121.

¹³ Veidemanis, G. (2018). Tautieši ārzemēs: visvairāk Latvijas pilsoņu dzimst Lielbritānijā. <http://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/tautiesi-arzemes-visvairak-latvijas-pilsonu-dzimst-lielbritanija.d?id=49806345> (last accessed 30 July 2018)

¹⁴ Hazans, M. (2015). Smadzeņu aizplūde no Latvijas 21. gadsimtā. Latvijas emigrantu kopienas: cerību diaspora, 85-92. Rīga: LU Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts.

¹⁵ Hazans, M. (2015). Latvijas emigrant Eiropas darba tirgos. Latvijas emigrantu kopienas: cerību diaspora, 66-74. Rīga: LU Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts.

There are slightly more demanding requirements for persons wishing to run for a councillor's position. In addition to being a citizen of Latvia or another EU country and being at least 18 years old, one has to have: (i) a registered address, (ii) a real estate, or (iii) an employment in the municipality. Moreover, the candidate must not be incarcerated or incapacitated, must not have been officers of Soviet secret services or active in the Communist party of the Soviet Union after 13 January 1991, or must not have been convicted of serious crime in order to be placed on the ballot. Lists of candidates can be submitted only by registered political parties in municipalities where the population exceeds 5,000 residents, while in smaller municipalities also groups of local residents may submit candidate lists.

The Law on European Parliament (EP) elections provides fewer restrictions on voting rights. The right to vote in EP elections is given to all EU citizens who have reached the age of 18 on the day of elections held in Latvia, unless s/he is stripped of voting rights in his/her country of citizenship. The right to run for the EP is granted to all EU citizens who have reached 21 years of age, unless they are incapacitated, incarcerated or have been convicted of serious crime. A person cannot run for the EP in Latvia if s/he is stripped of such a right in his/her country of citizenship.

Non-resident citizens

Non-resident citizens of Latvia can exercise their electoral rights mostly on a par with resident citizens. The place of residence does not affect the right to vote or to run for office in the Saeima elections. Polling stations are operated in an increasing number of locations abroad. Further, non-resident citizens may vote by mail.

In European elections and subject to restrictions defined in law, non-resident citizens are in a position to vote in Latvia up to three days before the election day or vote by mail. In addition, non-resident citizens of Latvia may exercise their voting rights in another EU member country subject to the relevant legislation. Non-resident citizens of Latvia may run for member of the European Parliament in Latvia if they are entered into the Voter Registry of Latvia.

The place of residence plays the largest role in municipal elections. In order to exercise the voting rights, a Latvian citizen must have had official domicile for no less than 90 days in the municipality where s/he intends to vote. Alternatively, owning a real estate allows a non-resident citizen of Latvia to vote in the municipality where the real estate is located. Similarly, property ownership enables non-resident citizens to run for office in municipal elections.

2. Non-national EU Citizens' Franchise in EP and Local Elections

2.1. Overview of Relevant Administrative Regulations

A range of legal acts regulate administration of local and EP elections and, thus, are relevant for exercising voting rights of non-national EU citizens. These documents issued by the Latvian parliament include the Law on Voter Registry, the Law on Election Commissions, the Law on Election Campaigns. Legislative acts are based on the principle that citizens of other

EU countries should have the same rights and obligations as Latvian citizens. Further, the Central Elections Commission issues a range of technical documents (instructions, manuals etc.) to smooth the administration of local and European elections. Topics covered in these technical documents typically include set-up of premises of polling stations, submission of candidate lists, counting of votes etc.

EP elections

The Law on European Parliament elections provides a rather comprehensive framework for exercising both passive and active voting rights of non-national EU citizens. This law outlines the eligibility to vote and to run for the European Parliament, describes the procedure for voting and changing the polling station, and lays out the rules for translating the votes into seats. The Law on Voter Registry describes under what conditions a non-national EU citizen becomes automatically included in the Voter Registry. The Law on Election Campaigns outlines rules for third-party advertising in various elections may be of relevance for non-national EU citizens wishing to have a more active say during the campaign.

Local elections

The Law on municipal elections provides a rather comprehensive framework for exercising both passive and active voting rights of non-national EU citizens. This law outlines the eligibility to vote and to run for the position municipal deputy, describes the procedure for voting, and lays out the rules for translating the votes into seats. The Law on Voter Registry describes under what conditions a non-national EU citizen becomes automatically included in the Voter Registry. The Law on Election Campaigns outlines rules for third-party advertising in various elections may be of relevance for non-national EU citizens wishing to have a more active say during the campaign.

2.2. Voter Registration

EP elections

The process of voter registration is regulated in the Law on Voter Registry. This law builds on the Law on EP elections that provides for the existence of voter registration to comply with the relevant regulations at the European level¹⁶.

Before any EP elections, all eligible permanent residents (citizens of Latvia or any other EU country) are automatically entered into the Voter Registry on the basis of information provided by the Registry of Residents. Both the Voter Registry and the Registry of Residents are maintained by the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs. This registration procedure does not require any participation by prospective voters. However, if a non-resident citizen of another EU country wishes to vote in Latvia, s/he needs to submit a corresponding petition no less than 30 days before the elections in order to be included in the Voter Registry. The petition is to be submitted to the Central Elections Commission in person.

Voters are assigned a particular polling station at the time of registration and sent a letter to that effect no less than 70 days prior to the elections. In addition, the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) makes information about assignation available on

¹⁶ A voter registry is not used for parliamentary elections in Latvia.

its website. If a voter wants to change the polling station, s/he needs to submit a petition to any municipality no less than 18 days prior to the elections. The petition is to be submitted either in person or via the public administration services portal www.latvija.lv. For EP elections, a voter may choose any polling station in Latvia. If an incarcerated person wishes to change the polling station, this issue is settled via prison administration.

Exact figures for EU citizens registered for voting in Latvia are not available for all EP elections. However, 8,577 EU citizens were reportedly included in the Voter Registry for the 2009 elections.¹⁷ Officials interviewed for this report did not highlight any particular issues with registration for EP elections except for a shortage of funding that would enable a wider information campaign ahead of the elections.

Local elections

Voter registration is also used for local elections in Latvia but opportunities for choosing a polling station are fewer. All persons eligible to vote in local elections (see Section 1.2) are automatically entered into the Voter Registry on the basis of information provided by the Registry of Residents. Both the Voter Registry and the Registry of Residents are maintained by the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA). This registration procedure does not require any participation by prospective voters.

Each eligible person is assigned a polling station on the basis of the person's official home address. No less than 70 days before the elections, OCMA sends a personalized letter to each eligible person's official home address, informing about the location of that polling station. Alternatively, this information can be obtained from the OCMA website.

If a person wishes to vote at a different polling station within the same electoral district or change the district altogether (provided s/he is eligible to vote in that district; see Section 1.2), s/he needs to submit a petition to any municipality no less than 18 days prior to the elections. The petition is to be submitted either in person or via the public administration services portal www.latvija.lv. If an incarcerated person wishes to change the polling station or district, this issue is settled via prison administration.

Officials interviewed for this report admitted that no targeted efforts have been made to encourage participation of non-citizen residents in local elections. The interviewees did not mention any issues specific to registration of this group of voters.

2.3. Information during election campaigns

EP elections

For European Parliament elections, information campaigns are somewhat wider than ones for local elections. The Central Elections Commission publishes general information about upcoming EP elections and the way non-citizen residents can exercise their voting rights. This information is placed on (CEC) website in 15 EU languages. Further, CEC makes available on its website a template for application to exercise one's voting rights in Latvia. The template is available in Latvian and English only¹⁸. Elections hotline provides communication

¹⁷ EP vēlēšanās Latvijā varētu balsot 8,5 tūkstoši ārzemnieku. <https://spoki.tvnet.lv/tribine/EP-velesanas-Latvija-varetu-balsot-85/588914> (last accessed 30 July 2018)

¹⁸ In 2014, 326 citizens of 23 EU members states chose to register for voting in Latvia.

in Latvian and English. In addition, CEC teamed up with the Representation of the European Commission in Latvia (REC) and the Office of the European Parliament in Latvia to design and distribute fact sheets about EP elections. REC organized a series of lectures in English on issues relevant for EU policy making in an effort to raise Latvia's residents' awareness of EP elections and to boost electoral participation. Those lectures, however, were not specifically targeted at non-resident citizens. REC also set up information stands during festive occasions in larger urban areas. European Documentation and Information Centres (EDIC) across Latvia were also involved in disseminating information about EP elections and EDIC staff members will be specifically trained for the 2019 elections. On top of these efforts, OCMA sends individual letters to each person eligible to vote in local elections about the date of elections and the polling station the particular person is affiliated with.

Local elections

For local elections, non-citizen residents have not been a particular target group in terms of tailor-made information campaigns. The Central Elections Commission (CEC) may run a very limited nation-wide campaign to inform the whole population about upcoming local elections, voting procedure, various deadlines (for the change of polling station etc.) and the opening hours of polling stations. That campaign can use both offline and online media and may include not only official press releases, maps and infographics but also interviews with CEC officials. In recent years, CEC has been increasingly using social media to spread relevant information about elections but CEC accounts appear to have small audiences. All official information pertaining to local elections is disseminated in Latvian only and may thus be less visible/appealing for non-citizen residents. The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) sends individual letters in Latvian to each person eligible to vote in local elections about the date of elections and the polling station the particular person is affiliated with.

2.4. Political Parties and Candidacy Rights

Only citizens of Latvia can establish political parties. At least 200 officially certified signatures of attendees of the founding meeting are to be submitted to authorities for a political organization to become registered. Only registered political organizations are allowed to submit candidate lists for national and European elections, as well as for local elections in municipalities where the number of residents exceed 5000. After a political organization is registered with authorities, persons who are not citizens of Latvia (citizens of other countries, Latvian non-citizens) are allowed to join the party. However, the share of Latvian citizens may never fall below 50 % among a party's membership. Should that be the case, the party may lose its status of a registered political organization following a court decision.

EP elections

As reported above, the share of EU-27 citizens residing in Latvia is small. Citizens of EU-27 countries make up only 0.3 % of Latvia's resident population (see Figure 1). In addition, interest of non-resident EU citizens to vote in Latvia has been miniscule – a few hundred non-resident EU-27 citizens expressed their intent to vote in EP elections in Latvia in 2014. These figures well explain the virtually non-existent interest of Latvia's parties to target resident non-citizens and mobilize their support in EP elections.

EU-27 citizens are allowed to run for the European Parliament in Latvia. As only registered political organizations (or blocs thereof) may submit candidate lists, those citizens need to negotiate their placement on the lists with any of Latvia's parties. However, those parties should have no less than 500 members to be eligible to submit a candidate list. Alternatively, a bloc of several smaller parties may submit the list if all constituent parts can prove the combined membership of no less than 500 persons. Further, the prospective candidates from among EU-27 citizens must satisfy the same criteria as Latvian nationals (see Section 1.2).

While the Latvian legislation does not set any additional requirements for exercising candidacy rights of EU-27 citizens, the actual number of EU-27 citizens running for the European Parliament in Latvia has been tiny. As of 2018, only one person has been included in candidate lists of Latvia's parties. In 2009, Giulietto Chiesa, an Italian citizen, was placed on the list of "For Human Rights in United Latvia" but he failed to garner sufficient voter support to surpass Tatyana Zhdanok and gain an EP seat.

Local elections

The pool of EU-27 citizens eligible to vote in local elections is even smaller than that for the European elections due to domicile requirements set by the Latvian legislation (see Section 1.2). Moreover, this pool is spread across the country's 118 electoral districts, which reasonably undermines any party strategy to mobilize specifically EU citizens, even in larger cities.

EU-27 citizens are allowed to run for local councillors in Latvia, and the candidacy barrier is somewhat lower than in EP elections. As only registered political organizations (or blocs thereof) may submit candidate lists in municipalities with more than 5,000 residents, those citizens need to negotiate their placement on the lists with any of Latvia's parties. In smaller municipalities, candidate lists can be submitted not only by political parties or their blocs but also by informal associations of voters. In the latter case, the list of candidates needs to be signed by 20 persons eligible to vote in the respective electoral district. Prospective candidates from among EU-27 citizens must satisfy the same criteria as Latvian nationals (see Section 1.2). Since Latvia joined the European Union, the share of EU citizens among candidates in local elections fluctuated between 0.08 % and 0.15 %.

2.5. Turnout

The Central Elections Commission provides data about the total turnout in each electoral district but does not collect specific information about the actual participation of EU citizens in European or local elections in Latvia. This issue has never merited media attention.

3. Non-resident Citizens' Franchise in National and EP Elections when Residing in Other EU Member States

3.1. Overview of Relevant Administrative Regulations

Sizeable Latvian diaspora exists across continents, and it has grown since Latvia's accession to the EU (see Section 1.1). Moreover, diaspora organizations were actively promoting the restoration of Latvia's independence throughout the period of Soviet occupation, and they took active part in the democratic political life in the 1990s. This largely conditioned a regulatory framework that sets as low participation barriers for non-resident citizens in national (and, subsequently, European) elections as possible. This approach is further reinforced by the commitment of authorities to foster close links with diaspora organizations in the face of recent emigration from Latvia and the resultant long-term demographic issues.

A range of legal acts regulating the administration of national and European elections reflect the above considerations. These documents issued by the Latvian parliament include the Law on Saeima Elections, the law on Elections to the European Parliament, the Law on Voter Registry, the Law on Election Commissions, the Law on Election Campaigns. Further, the Central Elections Commission issues a range of technical documents (instructions, manuals etc.) to smooth the administration of national and European elections. Topics covered in these technical documents typically include set-up of premises of polling stations, submission of candidate lists, counting of votes etc.

3.2. Voter Registration

EP elections

The process of voter registration for EP elections is regulated in the Law on Voter Registry. This law builds on the Law on European Parliament elections that provides for the existence of voter registration to comply with the relevant regulations at the European level¹⁹.

Before any European Parliament elections, all eligible persons in Latvia are automatically entered into the Voter Registry on the basis of information provided by the Registry of Residents. Both the Voter Registry and the Registry of Residents are maintained by the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs. This registration procedure does not require any participation by prospective voters.

Voters are assigned a particular polling station at the time of registration and sent a letter to that effect no less than 70 days prior to the elections. In addition, OCMA makes information about assignation available on its website. If a voter wants to change the polling station, s/he needs to submit a petition to any municipality no less than 18 days prior to the elections. The petition is to be submitted either in person or via the public administration services portal www.latvija.lv. For European elections, a voter may choose any polling station in Latvia.

If a non-resident citizen wishes to vote for EP candidates in Latvia, vote by mail is to be used. This is a rather lengthy procedure taking several weeks and has not been widely used²⁰.

¹⁹ A voter registry is not used for parliamentary elections in Latvia.

Alternatively, non-resident citizens may register to vote in another EU country as long as they comply with registration procedures in the country of their choice. The Central Elections Commission has asked the Saeima to allocate funding for opening polling stations abroad but no decision has been made at the time of completion of this report²¹.

National elections

In Latvia, no voter registry is employed for the Saeima elections. Any eligible person is allowed to vote at any polling station in one of the five electoral districts. A stamp in passport is used to comply with 'one person, one vote' principle.

In order to facilitate voting among non-resident citizens, polling stations abroad are operated at Latvian embassies and consulates. The number of those stations has grown from 20 in 1993 to 121 in 2018. Latvian citizens at polling stations abroad are allowed to vote only for candidate lists registered in the Riga electoral district. In addition, non-resident citizens may vote by mail in the Riga electoral district. This is a rather lengthy procedure and has not been widely used. If a non-resident citizen happens to be in Latvia on the eve of elections, s/he may cast an advance vote at any polling station in Latvia no more than five days ahead of the elections.

3.3. Turnout

EP elections

For European elections, polling stations have so far been located in Latvia only, with the stations in Latvia's diplomatic representations absent. Thus, voting by mail is the only realistic option for non-resident Latvian citizens to participate in EP elections if they wish to choose among candidate lists registered in Latvia.

Official data provided by Central Elections Commission (CEC) demonstrate that the number of persons who voted by mail shrunk from 4079 in 2009²² to 2370 in 2014²³. As EP elections in Latvia closely resemble second-order elections²⁴, the small number of non-resident citizens turning out to vote has not attracted much media attention or merited the attention of domestic policy makers.

National elections

The participation rate in the Saeima elections has been considerably higher than in the European elections although both have seen turnout decreases since the mid-2000s. One factor contributing to this decrease is the growing emigration from Latvia. Official election returns demonstrate that the turnout level among non-resident citizens of Latvia is considerably lower than that among resident citizens. For example, the total turnout in the

²⁰ In the 2014 EP elections, 0.53 % of all valid votes were cast by mail.

²¹ For details, see CEC website: <https://www.cvk.lv/pub/public/32155.html> (last accessed 30 July 2018).

²² CVK. Rezultāti pilsētās, novados, iecirkņos un pasta iecirknī. https://www.cvk.lv/cgi-bin/wdbcgiw/base/eiro9.veles9_rezult.sak (last accessed 30 July 2018).

²³ CVK. Pasta balsošanas iecirknis. <http://ep2014.cvk.lv/Result-1079.html> (last accessed 30 July 2018).

²⁴ Ikstens, Jānis; Matonyte, Irmina; Ehin, Piret (2012). Les élections européennes dans les pays baltes: question de "second ordre" ou européenne? In: Bayou, C.; Chillaud, M. (eds.) Les pays baltes en transition: le retour à l'Europe. Bern : Peter Lang.

2014 parliamentary elections reached 58.9 % while the turnout among non-resident citizens reached only 26.4 %.

The markedly lower turnout among non-resident citizens has been a subject of limited public discussions. Although part of the abstentions likely result from a more general feeling of (political) alienation after a person emigrated from Latvia, procedural issues may also contribute to a lower turnout. As postal voting is rather cumbersome, a greater number of polling stations abroad were initially seen as a solution. However, an ever-increasing number of those polling stations have not had a positive effect on turnout. Advance voting was seen as yet another measure that could boost electoral participation in Latvia and abroad as well. As this institutional innovation did not produce the desired effect, policy makers entertained the idea of introducing Internet voting. However, this proposal was put on ice after a group of Latvian software experts highlighted the dangers of interference in the electoral process if Internet voting would be used and repeatedly referred to several cases of hacking the voting machines in USA. Recent examples of Russian meddling in elections in other countries have seemingly crushed the idea altogether.

4. Conclusion

The Latvian legislation provides a range of opportunities for Latvian and other EU citizens to participate in the democratic process at various levels. In European Parliament (EP) elections, the right to vote is given to both groups of citizens on virtually the same conditions. Moreover, all eligible persons residing in Latvia are automatically included in the voter registry and informed about exercising their rights in due course. Further, institutional arrangements have been made to foster the participation of those citizens who are mobile within Latvia. In addition, non-resident EU citizens may also vote in EP elections in Latvia, if they comply with the existing procedure.

Both Latvian authorities and EU institutions have made certain efforts to raise the public awareness of EP elections. The Central Elections Commission (CEC) and Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) send individualized letters to each person eligible to vote in the EP elections. CEC worked with the Representation of the European Commission in Latvia to create fact sheets about EP elections. The Representation actively distributes the fact sheets at public events held both on its premises and throughout the country. Both CEC and the Representation use online channels to communicate about the organization and significance of EP elections.

However, the turnout rate has remained rather low. Moreover, Latvia has followed the broad pattern of decreasing turnout in EP elections. It is impossible to establish the participation rate of resident EU-27 citizens due to a lack of relevant data. Some CEC representatives interviewed for this report speculated that the turnout rate of EU-27 citizens would be comparable to that of Latvian citizens. Reasons for the falling turnout in EP elections in Latvia have not been thoroughly studied but the perceived relevance of the institution, attitudes towards EU, the numerical weakness of Latvian MEPs, and alienation from politics likely have an impact. Further, the virtually non-existent interest of political parties in mobilizing EU-27 citizens residing in Latvia could also be a factor. Yet, a stronger

voting motivation of resident EU-27 citizens will hardly affect the total turnout rate in a significant way as this segment makes up only 0.3 % of Latvia's population.

Turnout in EP elections has clearly been associated with a range of attitudinal factors that fall outside the scope of this report. It is not immediately apparent what effective institutional steps could be taken to improve the turnout in EP elections. In line with research findings highlighting the positive weekend effect on turnout²⁵, Latvia holds the elections on a Saturday. While the polling stations close at 20:00 local time and the opening hours could be extended to 22:00 (as in the national elections), this was not identified in expert interviews as a remedy. Also, polling stations are usually located at premises that are accessible to persons with physical disabilities.

In terms of facilitators, the interviewed experts emphasized the role of extended information campaigns ahead of the EP elections in order to raise public awareness and facilitate participation. First-time voters emerged as one of key target groups, as they are likely to hold more positive attitudes towards the EU and the socializing effect of voting could have long-term consequences. Also, interlocutors from European institutions based in Latvia mentioned increased funding for election-related activities. CEC representatives hypothesized that availability of EP election-related content in more languages could have a minor effect on the participation of EU-27 citizens. CEC, however, did not have immediate plans to extend the choice of languages (including for official documents), citing the small size of the target audience and a shortage of funding.

The exercising of the passive voting rights of EU-27 citizens residing in Latvia faces somewhat bigger challenges as political parties serve as key gatekeepers in this process. Registration of a political organisation (thereby enabling it to submit candidate lists in EP elections) is impossible without a sizeable participation of Latvia's citizens. Therefore, EU-27 citizens should associate with the existing political parties if they want to exercise their passive voting rights. However, it is difficult to imagine that conditions for registering a political party would be relaxed under current global political circumstances characterized by increased tensions between Russia, on the one hand, and NATO and the European Union, on the other.

²⁵ Mattila, M. (2003). Why bother? Determinants of turnout in the European elections. *Electoral studies*, 22(3), 449-468.

