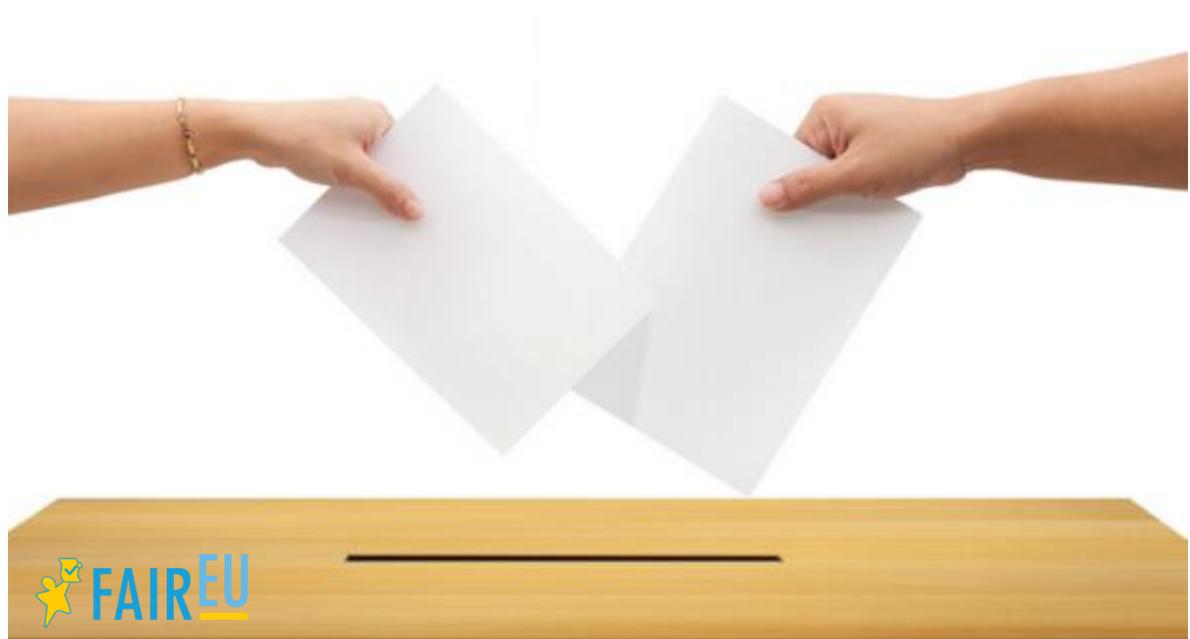


# OBSTACLES TO FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF MOBILE EU CITIZENS



**Report from the  
Focus Group in  
Brussels**

*ECAS Brussels, February 2019*

Co-funded by the Rights,  
Equality and Citizenship (REC)  
Programme of the European Union





# Report from the FAIR EU Focus Group in Brussels (EN)

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23 October 2018

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*FAIR EU was funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020). The content of this report represents the views of the author only and is his/her sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.*

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## Introduction

FAIR EU (Fostering Awareness Inclusion and Recognition) aims to foster the successful inclusion of EU mobile citizens in their host EU country's civic and political life through the provision of a holistic approach to tackling obstacles they face when exercising their rights. Within this framework a focus group was organised in Brussels, Belgium, on 23 October 2018.

The aim of the focus group was to identify and analyse the links between obstacles to free movement and the exercise of political rights of EU mobile citizens in Belgium.

The following people participated in the focus group:

**Participants:** Anna Zaremba (ECAS), Eduardo Guglielmetti (Office of the Brussels Commissioner for Europe), Hèlène Herman (Communications Officer, Brussels Local Authorities), Thomas Huddleston (Migration Policy Group), Serge-Marie Diumuva (Social Cohesion Project Manager FQS-Forest Quartier Santé), Annalisa Gadaleta (Vice Mayor Molenbeek), Zuzana Pundova (ECAS), Claire Damilano (ECAS), Olivier Kilumbu (Political Science Researcher), Larry Moffett (Objectif volunteer and Vote.Brussels), Hèlène Bertrand (Municipal Administration of Etterbeek), Carlo Caldarini (Sociologist, CPAS Schaerbeek), Eva Jimenez Lamas (Trade Union CSC representative for Brussels, Halle, Vilvoorde), Jean-François Maljean (Municipal Administration of Etterbeek), Leila Lahssaini (Lawyer, Progress Lawyers Network), Céline Martens (Municipal Administration of Evere),

**Moderator:** Hassiba Benbouali (Objectif)

## Discussion

The participants focused specifically on the low participation rate of foreigners in the municipal elections. The participants were divided in three groups. Each group received a topic and was able to discuss this for twenty minutes and to identify other obstacles to the participation of foreigners in the municipal elections. Afterwards, each group's rapporteur presented a summary of the discussion. The other two groups were given the chance to react.

### Group 1

**Participants:** Eduardo Guglielmetti (Commissioner for Europe), Hèlène Herman (Communications Officer, Brussels Local Authorities), Thomas Huddleston (Migration Policy Group), Serge-Marie Diumuva (Social Cohesion Project Manager FQS-Forest Quartier Santé), Annalisa Gadaleta (Echevine Molenbeek)

**Topic:** *"I do not feel concerned by the elections in Belgium because during the campaign no one speaks to us, neither the politicians nor the media," - Spanish citizen.*

*"I have lived in Belgium for more than 40 years. I vote in the communal elections but I feel frustrated because I cannot vote at other levels. Moreover, I have never been able to vote in my home country," – a British citizen.*

**Discussion:** The mainstream Belgian media fail to reach certain categories of foreigners. Some politicians do not make efforts to reach foreigners because they assume that they are not interested in the elections anyway. So there is probably a mutual lack of interest: of politicians towards foreigners but also of foreigners towards politicians.

Ideally, contacts between expatriates and the Belgian population should be encouraged, so that information circulates better but also to reinforce the sense of belonging to the same community.

The presence of foreign candidates on the political lists may raise the interest of foreign voters, but this remains to be proven. However, it should not be overlooked that foreigners can only run as candidates if they are EU citizens. This right should therefore be extended to non-EU citizens. But there is not necessarily a correlation between the origin of the candidates and the number of foreigners with the same origin who register to vote.

Some municipal administrations are not proactive as regards voter registration. They lack initiative and dynamism. The late publication of political programs and of party candidate lists leaves only three months for foreigners to register on the list of voters. They don't have enough time to inform themselves.

One can live in one municipality but work in another one. Residence is not always what is most meaningful for people. One may be interested in regional and federal politics and not in local politics.

#### Other obstacles:

- The complexity of the Belgian system
- The language barrier
- The fact that voting is not compulsory in the country of origin and therefore not a habit; Belgium has made voting compulsory for (registered) foreign voters which is not the case in other European countries, mobile EU citizens' approach to politics in Belgium is influenced by their approach to politics in the country of origin
- The temporary nature of residence in Belgium

## Group 2

**Participants:** Zuzana Pundova (ECAS), Claire Damilano (ECAS), Olivier Kilumbu (Political Science Researcher), Larry Moffett (volunteer for Objectif and VoteBrussels), H el ene Bertrand (Municipal Administration of Etterbeek)

**Topic:** *Even if their situation was eventually resolved, some foreign nationals do not want to vote. Indeed, they have unpleasant memories of the administrative burden encountered during their arrival in Belgium. It could be also related to the arrival of a family member.*

**Discussion:** Administrative burdens are not the main obstacles. Moreover, it is important to distinguish between newly arrived immigrants and foreigners who have been living here for a long time. The latter are familiar with the administrative system and its bureaucracy. In Brussels-City, the number of foreign voters has increased despite the many complaints about the delays of its administrative services. At the same time, in Ganshoren and Jette, the percentage of foreign voters has decreased even if these are much smaller communes where waiting times is much shorter and overall work burden is much smaller.

Why aren't municipalities more proactively involved in enhancing political participation of mobile EU citizens? They could, for example, inform about the possibility to participate in local elections when mobile EU citizens come to register in the local commune. The problem is that some municipal employees are not well informed and do not provide correct information.

The voting culture may be different. In Belgium, the system of voting "t ete de liste" (top of the list), etc. is not easy to understand. Sometimes there are pre-election agreements between parties that discourage voters. They become aware of the lack of transparency during the campaign.

There are people who do not wish to integrate here because their career – involving a high degree of mobility - is their priority. They do not know if they will stay in Belgium and so they do not develop an interest in the local life. The target for voting campaigns should be those who are willing to invest in local civic life. At the same time, the perception of all expats living in a bubble is a myth. The 40,000 people who work for the European institutions are not all civil servants.

We must take into account the reality of certain municipalities. For example, Etterbeek has 47,000 inhabitants including 17,000 Europeans. Among Europeans, there is a wider target audience than European civil servants. There are also, for example, Poles and Romanians who are not commuting expatriates. They do not return to their country, they remain and settle here. We must not focus only on the 40 000 workers of the European institutions because they represent a minority compared to the overall number of Europeans.

The administrative obstacle is often due to a lack of information. It can be overcome by providing accurate explanations in plain language. Confusing terms like the word "inscription" (registration in French) should be avoided. There is a lack of channels to build awareness and mobilization within certain communities, and this is the case for mobile EU citizens. Associations do not have a list of email addresses. Neighborhood committees do not want to invest in information campaigns, even when up to 70% of the local residents are not Belgian.

On the other hand, the lack of engagement in local politics is understandable when one considers that in Brussels, 1 in 3 persons live below the poverty line<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ccc-ggc.brussels/sites/default/files/documents/graphics/rapport-pauvrete/barometre\\_social\\_2018.pdf](http://www.ccc-ggc.brussels/sites/default/files/documents/graphics/rapport-pauvrete/barometre_social_2018.pdf) (accessed on 25 February 2019)

According to statistics, the voter participation rate of foreigners is lower in Brussels compared to Wallonia. Is it because in Wallonia, foreigners have been residing there for a longer time?

### Group 3

**Participants:** Carlo Caldarini (Sociologist, CPAS Schaerbeek), Eva Jimenez Lamas (Trade Union CSC representative for Brussels, Halle, Vilvoorde), Jean-François Maljean (Municipal Administration of Etterbeek), Leila Lahssaini (Lawyer, Progress Lawyers Network), Céline Martens (municipal administration of Evere)

*Topic: The denials, the withdrawal of the identity card and/or the order to leave the country - on the basis of insufficient resources - do not encourage EU citizens to vote even if their situation is subsequently resolved.*

**Discussion:** This topic is marginal because it concerns only a certain number of mobile EU citizens. The socio-economic aspect of these expulsions is however important. In fact, if they refrained from claiming a social benefit (to which, moreover, they are legally entitled) these Europeans would not receive an order to leave the country. This is symptomatic of a lack of solidarity of European policy, because Europeans do not enjoy the same rights as Belgians.

Lack of interest in municipal politics may be due to the difference in legal treatment: Belgians receive a notice six months in advance to remind them to renew their identity card, but foreigners (European or not) do not receive this reminder. It should be noted that there are different practices between the communes. Some municipalities do send a letter to the Europeans to warn them that they need to renew their identity card. If a European fails to renew his identity card, he is automatically removed from the local registry. And to get a new card, he will have to prove his right to live in Belgium.

Every day there are 7 to 8 Europeans expelled from Belgium: the self-employed, the unemployed and those who worked less than a year in Belgium. Mostly Romanians and Bulgarians but there are also French, Portuguese citizens. Several examples were cited including the case of an Italian who had paid for 24 years into the social security system in Italy, but who was expelled from Belgium when his company went bankrupt. He is no longer entitled to unemployment in Belgium or Italy. It should be noted that there is a difference of practice between the communes. Some municipalities may refuse to issue an identity card but they do not give orders to leave the country.

Informing EU citizens about their right to vote just 6 months before the elections is pointless. It should be a long-term effort which must be pursued in different places: schools, associations, etc.

Compulsory voting has become an alibi for people who are not interested in voting for a variety of reasons. For some the reality of everyday life takes over and voting is not a priority when one has to try to find a job and keep it. It's the same for housing or other factors related to social welfare.

The numbers of EU citizens and their family members who were ordered to leave the Belgian territory by the Immigration Office<sup>2</sup>:

- In 2008: 8
- In 2013: 2712
- In 2016: 1918

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.feantsa.org/download/prodec-legal-fitness-check\\_belgium1860392861562691280.pdf](https://www.feantsa.org/download/prodec-legal-fitness-check_belgium1860392861562691280.pdf) (accessed on 1 November 2018)

## Conclusions

**In conclusion:** how to reduce or eliminate obstacles that discourage foreigners from voting?

- The obligation to vote is a real obstacle
- The slogan of Brussels Commissioner "Think European, local vote" does not seem to work. Many do not feel European but rather citizens of their home country.
- Public servants know that there is a need to improve contact with the public but they have time constraints (no more than 8 minutes per person), and are understaffed. C-level (CESS - secondary school diploma) staff need to be trained on a permanent basis. There is a lack of support from ministries when the legislation changes.
- Online voter registration should be allowed just as it is for the tax declaration, but not everyone has the required digital skills.
- Information is crucial, which channels of mobilization should be used?
- There is a need for greater awareness of the functions of the municipality.
- To enhance mutual interest, ongoing efforts are necessary. Example: the municipality and/or associations could organize participatory workshops (e.g. cooking) bringing together mobile EU citizens
- "Echevinat" (Council) of European affairs exists in some communes but it should be extended to all communes.
- A multilingual letter could be sent to all new residents to inform them that they can register to vote by email (15 Brussels communes accept email registration).
- Volunteers who have been trained by associations are ready to continue their outreach work on a permanent basis. It is an opportunity for collaboration that municipalities can use to convey information to potential voters.
- Attention should be given to policies implemented in other European countries: e.g. in Italy and the Netherlands, there is a mediator for every major community whose role is important; neighbourhood elections are held in France and Italy.
- The role of schools: they should transmit information to the parents of different communities.
- The lack of interest in communal elections must be placed in a more global context. Political crises, crises of solidarity, racist speech are appearing in countries like Italy and Greece.
- A social Europe must focus on the political participation of foreign citizens in general and not distinguish between Europeans and non-Europeans. One must fight against discrimination at all levels, for equal treatment and rights for Europeans and non-Europeans.
- Each municipality prints its own information material. The municipalities should join the forces and create common message and information material.
- The municipality must strengthen its contacts with citizens. A long-term effort must be led in order to make all citizens feel part of the same community.