



Research Report

# EU MOBILE CITIZENS IN LATVIA

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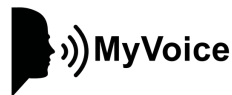
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## Key findings

1. Among the European Union (EU) citizens of working age, 3,3 % resided in an EU country other than that of their citizenship in 2019 and the relative size of the share of the EU's mobile citizens is increasing.
2. "Mobile" EU citizens have the right to participate in local elections and European Parliament while living in the EU country different from their country of citizenship. However a significant share of respondents incorrectly believe that EU citizens living in their country do not have electoral rights in European Parliament (EP) elections and in municipal elections. The main challenges include difficulties related to registering to vote and the insufficient and unclear information.
3. Most previous research on has been concerned with the political equality and inclusion of immigrants in the political life of multi-cultural democracies, focusing on the gap between immigrants and the general population (citizens or native-born) as an indicator of successful integration. A number of scholars point out that engagement in political and social activities depends to a large extent on social connectedness, institutional integration, and an individual's embeddedness in the local community.
4. Migrants' participation is hindered by lack of information of the registration procedures and the political process as such. Researchers often point to insufficient command of language of the receiving country as the most important barrier to participation. The breakdown of migrants' social ties, social isolation and weaker social connectedness in the new country of residence in general can contribute to their lower civic and political engagement.
5. Latvia is among the EU countries with low share of mobile EU citizens. There were 6 276 citizens of other EU Member States permanently living in Latvia, from which 5 705 persons were in the age group 18+ (as of 01.01.2020). This accounted to about 0,32% of the whole population. The largest groups of citizens from other EU Member States are as follows: Lithuania (5221), Germany (2681), Estonia (1327), United Kingdom (1305), Bulgaria (913), Sweden (891), Italy (864), France (860), Poland (827) and others.
6. In Latvia non-citizen residents from the EU have the right to vote and to stand as candidates in both local and EP elections. Their registration for the local elections is automatic, as for EP elections they have to express their will to vote in Latvia by an official application in order to be included in the voters' lists. Over the years the number of citizens of other EU Member States in voter lists for the local elections has increased. In the local elections of 2021 16426 citizens of other EU member states were included in voter lists. The largest groups among these voters were Lithuanian, German and Estonian citizens. Unfortunately there is no recorder data about those who voted in the local or EP elections.

7. The number of persons who had expressed a wish to vote in the EP elections for Latvian candidates is decreasing. In 2019 only 249 voters were included in the electoral roll. Most of them were Lithuanian, German, Estonian and Polish citizens.
8. One of the obstacles for effective communication to inform EU mobile citizens about their right to vote in Latvia was the fact that addresses from the Population Register that are used to send the letters of invitation are not precise. The second obstacle was the fact that by the law the person has to repeatedly register for every EP elections in order to have voting rights in EP election. The third obstacle was the language of communication. According to the Latvian law it is allowed to send the informative letters only in Latvian or another EU member state language. Many Lithuanian, Polish and Estonian citizens who have been born after the Second World War and living in Latvia speak only Russian and have no knowledge in English to be able to understand the letter.
9. Respondents are mostly content with their situation. Identity-wise, most respondents feel a connection to Latvia, thus, lack of attachment is not a reason to abstain from politics. Migrants' main complaints and inconveniences are related to insufficient use of English in public institutions, even those dealing with residence permits. Insufficient information in English is also a factor that hinders migrants' participation in political life in general. Nevertheless, most respondents were able to understand (and speak) at least some Latvian, yet many still did not vote in municipal elections.
10. Although there low political activity in general, some respondents have signed petitions or gotten involved in activism related to issues important to them such as women's' and children's rights, demography, ecology, people with Downs syndrome, animal shelters, petition against removing a park, etc.
11. While most respondents were not very active before coming to Latvia, their level of political and social participation has usually somewhat decreased, though the reasons are varied. Several of respondents are still at least somewhat active in their country's political and civic life.
12. Respondents' answers indicate that people want to make a conscious and responsible decision in the elections. However, this requires a careful consideration of various parties, their positions, candidates, etc. Like locals, mobile EU citizens sometimes do not vote simply because they cannot find a party that they like and that they would be happy to vote for. Importantly, the respondents note that politicians in Latvia do not reach out to expats as potential voters.
13. The realisation that the results of municipal elections will have a direct effect on the lives of migrants in the city, serves as an important motive to vote. Most migrants would like to have more information, such as party programmes, or the interviews of politicians translated into a language they could better understand.
14. In general, those who understand Latvian well, have a much wider set of option where and how to learn about local politics. As the Latvian language skills are usually not

excellent, migrants mostly consume news in a language most convenient to them, which is often news from their country of origin, or in international media.

15. In general, they would welcome more information in English about what is going on in the municipality. The new electronic gateway, such as Open 2 Vote could be a step in the right direction.

## Introduction

The free movement of workers is one of the fundamental right guaranteed by the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (EU), and many EU citizens have lived in another EU member state for a longer period of time. **EU citizens are entitled to various rights and benefits as well as enjoying equal treatment with nationals in accessing to employment to employment, working conditions and all other social and tax advantages. According to Eurostat among the EU citizens of working age, 3,3 % resided in an EU country other than that of their citizenship in 2019 and the relative size of the share of the EU's mobile citizens is increasing** (Eurostat, 2019). In 2009 there were about 2,4% EU citizens of working age residing in an EU country other than of their citizenship. **Altogether EU has almost 15 million mobile EU citizens who are of voting age and eligible to vote according to estimates Global Citizenship Observatory (GLOBALCIT) or 3,41% of the entire voting population in Europe** (GLOBALCIT, 2019).

Because EU citizens are free to move inside the EU borders, it is not always clear about how many EU citizens take advantages of their rights to reside, work and conduct other activities in another EU Member State. Even less is known about the characteristics of these “mobile” citizens, especially in terms of level of education and employment rate, if compared with the “non-mobile” EU citizens (those residing in their country of citizenship). While some useful quantitative insights can be derived from few international study reports, such as EU's annual Migrant Integration Statistics, and GLOBALCIT, less is known about the livelihood of “mobile” EU citizens, including their social, civic and political activities and participation patterns.

With the rate of mobility in the EU is increasing, there is lack of evidence about weather the citizens who are moving to other EU country are aware of their citizen rights including the participation in the elections. **“Mobile” EU citizens have the right to participate in local elections and European Parliament while living in the EU country different from their country of citizenship.** However, according to Eurobarometer, **a significant share of respondents incorrectly believe that EU citizens living in their country do not have electoral rights in European Parliament (EP) elections and in municipal elections** (26% and 40% respectively), while another 7% and 6% for EP elections and municipal elections respectively answer “Don't know” (EC, 2016). Moreover, as GLOBALCIT report illustrates, despite the fact that the majority of respondents know that foreign EU citizens living in their country are allowed to vote in EP elections, in several countries the level of awareness is very low (e.g. in Lithuania and Denmark) (GLOBALCIT, 2019; EC, 2016). At the same time, mobile EU citizens who are aware and decide to participate in elections experience challenges when accessing their rights. **The main challenges include difficulties related to registering to vote and the insufficient and unclear information** (EC, 2015).

**This study is an attempt to illuminate the grey area in lives of “mobile” EU citizens in one EU member state – Latvia.** The study pays particular attention to the right of EU citizens to vote and stand in local elections and to allow EU citizens to become more actively involved in local decision-making processes using digital technologies, since they can significantly help in lowering the obstacles for participation by providing electoral information, including the information about the candidates, and information need for voter registration.

The study is commissioned by the project “Open Cities for EU Citizens” (OPENCIT) which aims at raising the awareness of the rights of mobile EU citizens and facilitate their democratic participation. The project also intends to design and implement civic participation platform “Open2Vote” – for all EU mobile citizens living in Latvia’s capital – Rīga.

The research report is structured into 4 main parts

1. The first part provides an extensive literature review about the factors affecting political participation of migrants
2. The second part outlines research design and methodology
3. The third part provides an overview of the situation with “mobile” EU citizens in Latvia by outlining the rights and procedures to participate in elections and examining the participation activity.
4. The fourth part outlines the most relevant results from the interviews with “mobile” citizens in Latvia.



## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. Democracy, participation, and voting rights of migrants: debates and perspectives

**Political participation is an indispensable condition of democracy** (Parry et al. 1992; Gherghina 2016), and migrants' civic participation in their country of residence is crucial to their successful integration in the recipient society (Scuzzarello 2015) as well as their ability to influence socially important decisions. Bauböck (2003:139) aptly referred to the nowadays understanding of democratic citizenship as '*the outcome of struggles over who should be included in or excluded from the polity*', stressing that these conflicts emerge primarily in urban settings, i.e. at the local rather than national level. Local-level citizenship granting access to participation in formal decision-making is seen as a '*democratic requirement*' that should be based on residence and not on birthright or nationality (Bauböck 2003; Bauböck 2015).

Drawing upon the results of several multinational studies, Earnest (2014) notes that while enshrining voting rights in local elections to alien residents has become a widespread practice by mid-2000s, the actual content and scale of these rights is far from uniform and may vary depending on the local residency duration, country citizenship, level of election (e.g. local vs. national), and whether the authority to enfranchise foreigners is vested in the central government or shared between the central/federal and regional bodies. Evidence from different countries shows migrants' turnout in elections to be lower than that of citizens, sometimes even with a tendency to decline over time (Seidle 2015).

Munro (2008) outlines the debate between the opponents and proponents of granting electoral rights to permanent residents of a country not holding its citizenship. While opponents believe that granting rights before or regardless of naturalization removes one of the incentives that stimulate foreigners to integrate and adopt the values of their country of residence, the advocates of non-citizen enfranchisement stress the importance of voting rights not only for securing non-citizens representation but also for learning the civic and political skills necessary for the healthy functioning of democracy. This debate has parallels in a similar one that tries to define what kind of integration, i.e., into the receiving country's customs, traditions, and culture or rather into norms and institutions is that best promotes and secures democratic decision-making.

### 1.2. Factors affecting political participation of migrants

**Political participation can be generally defined as actions of private citizens aimed at influencing political outcomes** (cf. Brady, 1999). From this definition follows the multidimensional nature of political participation that can take various forms (e.g. petitioning, contacting politicians, being active online, donating, fundraising, etc.), although voting in elections remains the most widespread, and for many people, the only form of participation they usually engage in. Migrants and non-nationals represent a specific social group which is characterized by their newcomer status in a receiving country. From that, one might expect

their patterns of political involvement to be distinct from those of the native population, both in its forms and in factors that facilitate or hinder political activism.

**Most previous research has been concerned with the political equality and inclusion of immigrants in the political life of multi-cultural democracies, focusing on the gap between immigrants and the general population (citizens or native-born) as an indicator of successful integration** (Huddleston et al. 2013; Martiniello 2006; Indicators of immigrant integration REPORT). The findings reveal that – although activism differs from one migrant group to the other (Myrberg 2011; Morales BOOK, 1ch.) – generally foreign-born individuals participate at lower rates than native-born individuals (Aleksynska 2010; Bevelander 2014; Just and Anderson 2012; De Rooj 2011; Sandovici and Listhaug 2010; Michalikova 2013; Eggert and Giugni 2010; Myrberg 2011; Evaluation of the impact of... 2014; Kljave 2015; Seidle 2015). The largest difference between immigrants and natives can be found as regards to ‘symbolic action’ or mobilized activities, and particularly unconventional activities (Aleksynska 2010; Rooj 2012) as well as voting (Voicu and Comsa 2014; Morales BOOK; Evaluation of the impact of... 2014). The evidence as regards to immigrants’ participation in associations is mixed (Barreto and Munoz 2003; Myrberg 2011), partly due to immigrants’ higher involvement in ethnic associations, but besides that foreign-born individuals are generally less active members of organisations than the natives.

**Some studies focused specifically on migrants’ running in the local or regional elections as candidates, in the countries where the institutional arrangements allow for that.** For instance, Febrache (2019) interviewed British citizens residing in France as candidates and councilors in the local municipality elections. Some of her informants were encouraged by local political leaders to run in the elections, as it was seen beneficial for the representation of the Britons residing in French municipalities and strengthen their inclusion in the local community.

Seidle (2015) studied the effect of local enfranchisement of non-nationals in Sweden, Belgium, and the Netherlands. He found the non-nationals turnout in elections to be lower than that of citizens with a tendency to decline over time. Although he admits that providing local voting rights to non-nationals can be of some benefit for the political integration of migrants, other factors such as political parties’ recruitment strategies to be of far more importance. Therefore, one needs to distinguish between enfranchising, on the one hand, and the actual exercising of voting rights, on the other.

**The lower participation rates of migrants are sometimes linked to their pre-emigration experiences.** Most immigrants have been politically socialized in countries where the political culture is less democratic or less developed, and transfer their habits to the new context (Pérez-Armendjriz and Crow 2010; Bilodeau 2008). For instance, Golubeva et.al. (2016) find that East-Central European migrants in Ireland have little confidence in the effectiveness of political participation, mirroring the attitudes of stayers (Mierina 2014). Wass et al. (2015) found that foreign-born voters in Finnish municipal elections are more likely to vote if they came from a democratic country. Pszczółkowska & Lesińska (2021) found that it was common for Polish candidates in Irish local elections to be politically and socially active in Poland before coming to Ireland.

**Another of the dominant explanations focuses on immigrants' lower average socio-economic status**, arguing that immigrants simply might not have sufficient civic resources (time, money, political skills) to participate (Verba et al. 1995). They find that individual differences between immigrants and natives (income, education, citizenship, trust, networks, etc.) explain to a large extent the participation gap between these groups (Leighley 2001; Norris et al. 2004a; Rooj 2012; Quintelier 2009). Yet, an important question is, could the gap be partly attributed to emigration itself? Could immigrants' lower participation rates in the social and political life be seen as the 'civic consequences' or negative externalities of migration, naturally linked to the process of moving from one country to another?

The literature provides us with several explanations as to why this might be the case. **A number of scholars point out that engagement in political and social activities depends to a large extent on social connectedness, institutional integration, and an individual's embeddedness in the local community** (Coleman 1988; Klandermans and van den Toorn 2008; Sandovici and Listhaugh 2010; Gerghina 2016). It particularly concerns participation in collective activities such as protests, demonstrations, or volunteering (De Rooj 2001). Moving to another country entails loosening of social ties, a change in social, cultural, institutional, political and often linguistic context, inevitably affecting a person's political behaviour.

**Important drivers of collective action and contribution to public good are community attachment and identification with the group**, as they facilitate trust, cooperation, and commitment (Putnam 2000; 1993; Tyler, 2001; Goette et al., 2006; Simpson, 2006; Yamagishi and Mifune, 2008; Dawes and Messick 2010). Immigrants, especially those who have arrived recently, tend to be less attached to their new community and not identify to the same extent with the residents of the country as the natives (Morales BOOK; Schenkler et al 2016; Goette et al., 2006; Simpson, 2006; Yamagishi and Mifune, 2008; Dawes and Messick 2010; Klandermans and van den Toorn 2008; Albarracin and Valeva 2011; Quintelier 2009; Stokes 2003; Leighley and Vedlitz, 1999: 1095). This affects both the type of activities a migrant engages in, and their activism in general (Klandermans, Roefs, and Olivier 2001; Klandermans, Sabucedo, and Rodriguez 2004; Klandermans and van den Toorn 2008; Albarracin and Valeva 2011; Quintelier's 2009; Stokes 2003). Sometimes migrants maintain closer ties and/or attachment to their country of origin and might even participate in its elections but not those of the recipient country, as shown in the study by Scuzzarello (2015). Developing dual identification, e.g. with the country of origin and the country of residence, can also have a complex impact on the probability of political participation and its forms (Scuzzarello 2015).

**Networks play an important role in mobilizing individuals politically, creating a positive predisposition and providing the necessary information for political action** (Klandermans and van den Toorn 2008; Albarracin and Valeva 2011; Leighley & Vedlitz 1999; Marshall 2001; Quintelier 2009; Stoll and Wong 2007; Huckfeldt 2001; Mutz 2002; McClurg 2003). Workplace, friends and family, community, church, professional associations and other voluntary organizations also function as 'recruitment networks' (Brady et al., 1995, cf de Rooj 2011). For instance, According to the findings by Wass et al. (2015), foreign-born citizens of

Finland having a native spouse and minor children are more likely to vote in local elections. After moving abroad, social networks usually become less dense (Bilodeau 2008).

**Immigrants are also less likely to follow the local news and discuss local politics with friends and family, most of whom live abroad** (Golubeva et al. 2016). Having little information and knowledge of the current political events in the country diminishes their likelihood of participation (Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam 2000; Shah et al. 2005; Golubeva et al. 2016; Evaluation of the impact of... 2014). **Migrants' participation is also hindered by lack of information of the registration procedures and the political process as such** (Vintila & Soare 2018a).

**The breakdown of migrants' social ties, social isolation and weaker social connectedness in the new country of residence in general can contribute to their lower civic and political engagement** (Bilodeau 2008; Klandermans and van den Toorn 2008; Diani and McAdam 2003; Kitts 2000; Albarracin and Valeva 2011; Bowers 2004; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade, 2001). Those who have friends among locals, or who have a native-born partner, are much more likely to be politically active (Quitnelier 2009; Stoll and Wong 2007; Boyd and Couture-Carron 2015). In some cases, though, political activity as such helps immigrants establish new or simply better relationships with the local natives and integrate into the receiving community (Febrache 2019).

**Having recently arrived, immigrants might be politically detached and have insufficient understanding of the political issues in their new country of residence, electoral and party system, and the channels of influence** (Waldinger and Soehl 2013; De Rooj 2011; Ramakrishnan, 2005, Ghergina 2016). For instance, many intra-EU migrants lack information on their citizenship rights (Evaluation of the impact of... 2014; Scuzzarello 2015). **Thinking about a stay abroad as temporary might further diminish immigrants' stake in the society and their incentives to participate** (Martinello 2006; Albarracin and Valeva 2011) focusing their efforts on short-term economic goals instead. Morales (BOOK) and Golubeva et al. (2016) study finds that indeed immigrants in most countries/cities are less interested in receiving country's (or local) politics. Likewise, a study conducted in Italy by Ortensi and Riniolo (2020) demonstrates that migrants' participation levels are lower than those of Italian citizens; gender, residence in particular regions, as well as lower level of education appear as important predictors of political passivity; the same applies to poorer command of the official language and lower length of stay in Italy. Echoing these results, Bevelander (2014) reported that immigrants' odds of voting correlate positively with the length of residence in the recipient country; also, naturalized immigrants are more likely to vote in local and provincial elections than those who do not acquire the country's citizenship even if it is not linked to voting eligibility.

There are other reasons to expect lower participation rates among migrants, too, directly related to the fact of migration. **Immigrants' ability to work with others to solve problems and improve local communities might be hindered by lack of confidence in a foreign country's government and in a fair treatment by the local authorities such as the police**

(Ebert and Okamoto 2013). Even though it can increase the likelihood of participating in unconventional activities, it is likely to decrease the rates of conventional participation (De Rooj 2011). **Social and political participation of immigrants – not just in elections – might also be obstructed by their citizenship status** (Just and Anderson 2012; Sandovici and Listaugh 2010)<sup>1</sup>. Due to restricted access to social security, immigrants might not feel confident enough or financially stable enough to miss work in order to participate in protest activities or they might simply have other concerns (Bilodeau, 2008, cf. de Rooj 2011). Finally, **researchers often point to insufficient command of language of the receiving country as the most important barrier to participation** (Jacobs et al 2004, cf. Morales book; Evaluation of the impact of... 2014; Eggert and Giugni 2010; Michalikova 2013; Ortensi and Riniolo 2020; Stoll and Wong 2007; Van Tubergen and Kalmijn, 2005).

**On the other hand, one can find several arguments as to how migration could facilitate participation instead of hindering it.** First, **we might expect immigrants to be more involved in protest activities due to grievances related to possible discrimination, disrespectful treatment or relative deprivation** (Klandermans and van den Toorn 2008; Just and Anderson 2012; Albarracin and Valeva 2011; Spaizer 2012).<sup>2</sup> **Minority status in itself can be a spark for political participation, considering that group solidarity and issues pertaining to the group can be strong motivational factors** (Sandovici and Listaugh 2010). Finally, **it is possible that weaker ties and inability to rely on the support from family can push people towards more active civic engagement in search for information and network capital** (Alesina and Guiliano). **Diaspora organisations can provide legal assistance, lobby for political rights in the home country, mobilize immigrant communities to make connections with educational and social welfare institutions to deal with community concerns** (Barreto and Munoz 2003; Fennema and Tillie 1999, 2001). Moreover, **participation in associations can have a positive spill-over effect on other forms of democratic participation via teaching democratic skills, as well as providing valuable networks and access to information and resources necessary for collective action** (Paxton 2002; Klandermans and van den Toorn 2008; Myrberg 2011; Fong and Ooka 2006; Eggert and Giugni 2010; Verba et al 1995; Gerghina 2016). Seidle (2015) found the minority community mobilization conducive for participation, and Ciornei (2013) argues that the inclusion of intra-EU migrants in the party lists is an important indicator of whether they are regarded as full citizens by the receiving society. The centrality of mobilization efforts was highlighted by Togeby (1999) who found that the migrants' and refugees' turnout in Danish local elections was sometimes even higher than that of the Danes as certain ethnic groups were efficiently mobilizing their members to participate in the elections. All in all, the evidence as to how migration should affect participation of migrants in their new country of residence is indeed mixed.

**When studying the effect of migration on participation, it is important to keep in mind that integration is a process that occurs over prolonged period of time.** Many studies have found that as migrants become more familiar with the host country institutions, acquire more

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<sup>1</sup> Researchers (Just and Anderson 2012; Sandovici and Listaugh 2010) find that citizenship status has a significant impact on political participation far beyond simply voting. Others, however, find that naturalisation has no effect on participation rates of immigrants (Barreto and Munoz 2003; Quintelier 2009). Thus, whether citizenship matters is still unclear.

<sup>2</sup> Although, it might also be the other way round – immigrants might be very happy with their new government (Golubeva et al. 2016) and thus involve in these activities less frequently.

friends and acquaintances, and master the host country language, participation rates go up (Jacobs et al 2004, ef. Morales book, De Rooj 2011, Indicators of immigrant interation REPORT; Gerghina 2016; Togeby 1999; vanLonden, Phalet, and Hagendoorn 2007; White et al. 2008; Chui, Curtis, and Lambert 1991; Ginieniewicz 2007; Togeby 1999; van Londen, Phalet, and Hagendoorn 2007; White et al. 2008; Aleksynska 2010; Bueker 2005; Just and Anderson 2012; Michalikova 2013; Rooj 2012)<sup>3</sup>). **Having lived longer in the country of residence increases the likelihood of voting and being involved in the local community life** (Evaluation of the impact of... 2014). In terms of participation in organisations, Aleksynska (2010) finds that immigrants fully catch-up with the native-born 20 years after migration. In a number of studies, acquiring the receiving country's citizenship was found to increase migrants' participation levels (Bevelander 2014; Scuzzarello 2015). Thus, naturalization per se might be regarded as one of those factors that actually stimulate migrants to take a more active role in their new communities (cf. Eisenberg 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> Eggert and Giugni 2010 find no effect of duration on participation in the city of Zurich, but their sample sizes are rather small (under 300). Also, Klandermans and van den Toorn (2008) in their study of Turkish (N = 126) and Moroccan immigrants( N = 80) in the Netherlands and Turkish immigrants( N = 100) in New York find that the duration does not affect participation.

## 2. Research design and methodology

This study included a number of interviews with Latvian non-nationals residing in Riga on their civic and political participation. The interviews were organized in a semi-structured mode, allowing to alternate certain questions while still providing for a framework of subtopics to be asked.

**The goal of the interviews was to better understand what drives or inhibits electoral participation of the mobile EU citizens, what alternative political participation practices they get involved in, what are their information needs as regards to their involvement in the political processes in Latvia, and what their attitudes would be towards the newly proposed online participatory tool “Open2Vote.”**

The advantage of interviews is that it allows to acquire a more profound understanding of the respondents’ reasoning and motives behind choosing to participate or not to participate in the political activities of their new country of residence, as well as factors facilitating or hindering this kind of engagement.

In order to access the potential interviewees informative invitation letters and information banner were prepared, inviting people with another EU member state citizenship living in Riga to share their experience and thoughts about their life in Latvia and social, political participation and what would be necessary for them to facilitate their participation. Invitation letters and banner were spread through different channels by writing e-mails and calling to different non-governmental organisations that work with newcomers and integration issues, language centres who provide Latvian language lessons for foreigners, foreign cultural and language institutes in Latvia, minority organizations, schools such as Lithuanian, Estonian, German and others, different non-governmental organizations who bring together for example German speakers in Latvia (for example The Baltic-German University Liaison Office, Konrad Adenauer foundation and others), embassies.

The information banner and invitations were also spread through social networks: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn posting messages in different expat groups such as Expats in Latvia, Riga Expats, Life in Riga, Expatvians, Erasmus Students Riga and others, as well through LinkedIn, Twitter, InterNations – network for expats in Latvia and Riga. Interviewees were also found through private contacts reaching out for people asking them to advise if they knew someone with another EU member state citizenship living in Riga or Riga region.

**Until 01 July, 2021 interviews have been made with 10 people with the citizenship from the following countries: 2 - Estonia, 1 - Lithuania, 1- France, 1 - Belgium, 2 - Poland, 2 - Germany, 1 – Denmark.** Among the respondents one person had been a candidate in local elections in Riga (representative with Lithuanian citizenship).

4 respondents were female and 6 – male. The length of residence in Latvia varied from 2,5 years to 35 years. All the interviews were conducted on English, recorded and transcribed. Considering the epidemiological situation, all interviews were conducted Online, via Zoom. In

order to protect the identity of respondents, the each respondent was assigned a pseudonym. The quotes, included (after anonymization) in the article, were selected on the basis of their relevance and succinctness.

The interview questions, totalling 35, focused on four main subtopics of interest. The first group of questions was aimed at the informants' motives of coming to Latvia and staying here, as well their plans for the future regarding the country of residence, as well as their current professional situation (e.g., *'What were your primary reasons or motives to relocate to Latvia? [e.g. family, job/business, studies, medical treatment, other]'*). The next question block inquired into the networks that informants could have developed, such as family and friends, and whether and how the informants socialize with them (e.g., *'Have you got any friends from your own country of origin/your ethnic or linguistic group who are also living in Latvia? Do you stay in touch, meet, or socialize together?'*). The subsequent group of questions covered issues and problems that informants could have run into while living in Latvia, related to language skills (or lack thereof), interaction with the locals, and getting services or other help from public authorities at both the national and the local level (e.g., *'Could you evaluate your interaction with Latvian authorities and public institutions? What would be your most memorable/recent experiences with them?'*). The final and the largest block of question guidelines focused on the general interest in politics, associational involvement, voting in local elections, as well as a number of other non-electoral forms of political participation (e.g., *'How do you express/satisfy your interest in politics - e.g. reading, discussing political issues, contacting with like-minded people, signing petitions, voting in elections, etc.?' and 'Have you ever voted in local/municipal elections while living in Latvia?'*). Two extra questions were designed for those who may have run at the elections as candidate and was actually elected local representative, although such cases are extremely rare. Despite the questions being formulated precisely, no strict requirements regarding their wording, order, or possible omissions were set so some questions that were of less relevance to certain informants could be shortened or skipped. At the same time, other questions of key importance could be asked in more detail. analysts were also free to include additional ones to facilitate the informant's narration where deemed necessary.



### 3. “Mobile” EU citizens in Latvia

#### 3.1. Background

Being among the new EU member states which joined the EU in 2004, Latvia is a country with a population of 1,9 million and low average population density (31 people per square km). More than 1 million of population is concentrated in the capital city Riga and its agglomeration. Because of historically specific reasons, Latvia is considered a country inhabited by people of many different ethnic backgrounds : Latvians, Russians, Belarussians, Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians, Roma, etc. Two largest lingual groups are Latvians (62%) and Russian native speakers (37%). The majority of Russophones are descendants of ethnic Russians who came as settlers during the Soviet occupation and their descendants. This accounts for the fact that Latvia has one of the highest share of non-EU citizens living in Latvia. As of 1 January, 2019 there were 13,6% non-EU citizens living in Latvia. The rest 86,1% were Latvian citizens and 0,3 citizens of other EU member states.

**Latvia has experienced several significant waves of immigration and emigration during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.** Since independence, the immigration to Latvia has been minimal, but the waves of emigration has been rather significant since the early 1990s when the Russian army departed and significant as many Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians left Latvia. Since the accession in the EU the emigration continued at a slower pace, but still outpaced immigration. Taking into consideration the economic situation of Latvia in comparison with current European Union member states, the immigration from the EU countries did not increase. On the contrary, the introduction of the free movement between the member states of the Schengen area greatly increased the out migration of labor and family migrants.

**This is one of the reasons why Latvians themselves account for relatively high share of EU mobile citizens if compared to their home country resident population.** Romanians, Croatians, Lithuanians, Portuguese and Latvians leave their country of origin in high proportions (over 5%) while the contrary is true for older member states of the EU, especially Germany, Sweden and France (under 0,1%). “Mobile” EU citizens of working age (20-64) with Latvian citizenship jumped from 2,2% to 6,0% of their home-country resident population. Romanians are far the largest national group of among “mobile” EU citizens with 19,4% of their home country resident population. In absolute terms the most numerous national groups of mobile EU citizens aged 20-64 were those from Romania (2 280 000 persons), Poland (1 079 000 persons), Italy (965 500 persons) and Portugal (655 600 persons)

**Latvia is among the EU countries with low share of mobile EU citizens. According to the data of Central Statistical Bureau of Republic of Latvia (CSB) there were 6 276 citizens of other EU Member States permanently living in Latvia, from which 5 705 persons were in the age group 18+ (as of 01.01.2020). This accounted to about 0,32% of the whole population.** Similar situation can also be observed in other countries that joined the EU since 2004 including Lithuania, Bulgaria and Croatia, which all have a population of under 15,000 mobile EU citizens, whereas the largest shares of mobile EU citizens as part of the total voting population reside in small and older member States: in Luxembourg, Cyprus, Ireland, Belgium and Austria, which all have over 7% of mobile EU citizens. Luxembourg and Cyprus stand out

from other Member States by having the highest shares of foreign EU citizens living in their countries (circa 40% and 14% of mobile citizens respectively).

According to the data of Central Statistical Bureau of Republic of Latvia (CSB) data, there is information available about the citizens of other EU Member States who are permanent residents of Latvia. According to the CSB data available on 01.01.2020. **there were 6 276 citizens of other EU Member States permanently living in Latvia, from which 5 705 persons were in the age group 18+ (not identified whether the persons are eligible to vote).**

According to the data of Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs Republic of Latvia (OCMA), the number of people registered in the Population Register of Latvia on 01.01.2021 was 2067986 from which 16924 citizens of other EU Member States. **The largest groups of citizens from other EU Member States are as follows: Lithuania (5221), Germany (2681), Estonia (1327), United Kingdom (1305), Bulgaria (913), Sweden (891), Italy (864), France (860), Poland (827), which totals 14899 persons.**<sup>4</sup> There are no publicly available data on how many of them are in the 18+ age group.

**There is some differences in statistics provided by OCMA and CSB.** The Population Register (under the supervision of OCMA) include information regarding citizens and non-citizens of Latvia; persons who have received a residence permit, registration certificate or permanent residence card in Latvia; persons who have been granted stateless, refugee or alternative status or temporary protection in Latvia; persons of whom a decision has been taken on the issue of a residence permit, registration certificate or permanent residence card. However, the Population and Housing Census 2011 determined that the number of actual resident population in Latvia was approximately 7% smaller than registered in the Population Register administered by OCMA, thus the Population Register does not fully describe the number of actual number of resident living in Latvia.

**The CSB includes information only regarding permanent residents or such persons who have lived at their place of residence for a continuous period of at least 12 months before 1st January of a specific year, as well as persons who have arrived at the place of their residence with the intention of spending at least one year there.** In order to determine whether a person is a long-term resident, a method ([https://stat.gov.lv/sites/default/files/Metadati/iedz\\_Metodologija\\_LV.pdf](https://stat.gov.lv/sites/default/files/Metadati/iedz_Metodologija_LV.pdf)) has been developed, which is based not only on data of the Population Register, but includes information from other administrative data. With the help of the method CSB determines persons who are considered permanent residents, thus CSB indicator differs from OCMA.

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<sup>4</sup> PMLP, 2021. Available: <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/iedzivotaju-registra-statistika-2021-gada>; <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/media/2889/download>

### 3.2. Overview of the rights and procedures to participate in local elections and European Parliament elections by mobile EU citizens living in Latvia

**Non-citizen residents from the EU have the right to vote and to stand as candidates in both local and EP elections. Their registration for the local elections is automatic, as for EP elections they have to express their will to vote in Latvia by an official application in order to be included in the voters' lists.**

#### *Local elections*

In Local elections the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs Republic of Latvia in the Register of Voters includes information about the voter according to the Law on the Election of Local Government Councils (before 15 January, 2021 the City Council and Municipality Council Election Law). In the Law on Municipal Elections Article 5 who describes the voting rights it is stated that in the Republic of Latvia the following shall have the right to elect the council: 1) citizens of Latvia; 2) citizens of the European Union who are not citizens of Latvia but are registered on the Population Register; 3) persons who have reached the age of 18 on the day of the election, have been registered on the Voters' Register and filed with their place of residence on the administrative territory of the respective local government at least 90 days before the day of the election, or persons who own real estate which is filed with the territory of the respective local government according to the procedure set out by law and do not fall under any of the limitations set out in Article 6. No rights to elect the council have persons who are serving a sentence in places of deprivation of liberty and persons who do not have the right to vote in the Member State of the European Union of which they are citizens.<sup>5</sup>

Thus only the person who is registered in the Population Register will be registered in the Register of Voters if they meet eligibility criteria to vote. This is one of the reasons why it is so important for everybody to register place of living.

#### *European Parliament Elections*

According to the European Parliament Election Law Article 2, citizens of other European Union Member States residing in Latvia have the right to participate in the European Parliament (EP) elections in Latvia and to vote for the Latvian lists of candidates. In order to exercise the right to vote in Latvia, a citizen of an EU Member State must be at least 18 years old on the election day, and be registered in the Population Register of Latvia. If a person meets previously mentioned eligibility criteria citizens of other EU Member States who wishes to participate in EP elections in Latvia, have to register to vote in the European Parliament elections not later than 30 days before the elections by submitting a signed application to the Central Election Commission of Latvia. The application may be sent by post or submitted in person. The application may also be submitted electronically on the Latvija.lv portal or by e-mail if it has been signed with a secure electronic signature.<sup>6</sup> Upon receipt of the application, the Central

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<sup>5</sup> The City Council and Municipality Council Election Law. Available: [https://www.cvk.lv/uploads/files/rus\\_eng/Pasvald\\_2020\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.cvk.lv/uploads/files/rus_eng/Pasvald_2020_ENG.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>CVK. Available: <https://www.cvk.lv/en/elections/ep-elections/elections-to-the-european-parliament-2019/information-for-citizens-of-other-eu-member-states>; CVK. Available: <https://www.cvk.lv/lv/velesanas/eiropas-parlamenta-velesanas>; Eiropas Parlamenta vēlēšanu likums. Pieejams: <https://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=84185>

Election Commission takes a decision to include the EU citizen in the Register of Voters of the Republic of Latvia and sends the voter a notification about the polling station where he/she should vote. Each voter may vote only once in EP elections. Thus, when having registered to vote in EP elections in Latvia, an EU citizen will lose a possibility to participate in the EP elections in his/her home member state. The persons have no rights to vote in Latvia if they have no right to vote in European Union member states whereof they are citizens.

In addition, in accordance with Section 5, Paragraph two, Articles 10 and 11 of the Electoral Register Law, information regarding European Union citizens who are not citizens of Latvia and who have reached 18 years and who have been registered in the Population Register or have applied to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in respect of whom the Central Election Commission has taken a decision to enrol them in the voters list is also updated and stored in the Electoral Register. The Central Election Commission not later than 20 days prior to the EP elections include information in the Electoral Register regarding EU citizens who are not citizens of Latvia, but who are registered in the Population Register and in respect of whom the Central Election Commission according to the law has taken a decision to include them in the voters list. The Central Election Commission not later than 20 days before the EP elections include in the voters list information regarding citizens of the European Union who, in accordance with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 18 April 1961 and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations of 24 April 1963, are exempted from registration in the Population Register and who have applied to vote in EP elections in the Republic of Latvia not later than 30 days before the elections to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### 3.3. Outreach activities

The group of the people with another EU Member State citizenship living in Latvia and being eligible voters is very small and Central Election Commission budget is very limited in order to effectively reach this group of people to motivate them to participate in voting. According to the representatives of Central Election Commission there are several obstacles that hinder effective communication with this group of people and their participation in the elections.

#### *Local elections*

Previously before the current law was adopted and entered into force by the local elections in 2021, before each local elections each eligible voter who had been enrolled in the voters list both Latvian citizens and also voters with an another EU member state citizenship received a letter from – (OCMA) Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs Republic of Latvia informing the voters about their number of their voting office and address where they have to be present on the election day in order to cast their ballot. As well information about possibilities to change the voting office was included in this letter. Since 2021 with the new law there is online voters' register introduced and everyone will be able to check their voting office in the internet and no letters will be sent to voters' registered addresses of living anymore and it gives a new challenge how to reach foreign people who might not follow media news and might not know their rights to participate in Latvian elections. All information on candidates is mainly in Latvian. If a person doesn't speak in Latvian the possibilities to effectively participate diminishes.

### *European Parliament elections*

As for residents with another EU member state citizenship willing to vote in Latvia for EU parliament and to be eligible to vote it is necessary that they have been registered in the Population Register in Latvia and not later than 30 days they express their will to vote in Latvia by submitting an application to the Central Election Commission.

Concerning foreign voters **one of the obstacles for effective communication to inform them about their right to vote was the fact that addresses registered in the Population Register are not precise.** In previous years of 2004, 2009 and 2014 CEC were sending letters in to those foreign citizens who would potentially have right to apply for voting in Latvia. In 2019 the decision was made not to send the letters as after year 2014 it was noted that most of the people didn't live anymore in the addresses stated in the Population Register. In most cases this address had been the first address the person had declared arriving in Latvia and had never changed it when moving to another place of living. There are no automatic letters sent by OCMA as it was for local elections.

**The second obstacle – the fact that by the law the person has to register for every EP elections from new in order to have voting rights in EP election.** Many of the voters are not informed about this and once they have voted they consider that in the following elections they have automatic rights to vote but unfortunately they have to submit the application expressing their will to vote every five years. The next thing is that the application must be submitted 30 days before elections. In most cases when people start to get information how to vote the deadline for application submission has been passed.

**The third main obstacle – language.** According to the Latvian law is allowed to send these letters only in Latvian or another EU member state language. The question rises in which language to communicate with these people. Not all speak English. For example it was noted that many Lithuanian, Polish and Estonian citizens who have been born after the Second World War and living in Latvia speak only Russian and they have no knowledge in English to be able to understand the letter. After receiving the letter many people were coming to CEC asking to translate the letter. The law doesn't allow to send letter in Russian. As for sending the letters in each EU member state language – the obstacles are where to translators for rare language and how to finance it. The letters were previously send in English and a Latvian translation added. In 2014 for those nationalities who live in Latvia in a number more than 100, CEC translated the letter into their national language. But the costs of producing these letters were very high. The budget of CEC is limited and the budget for covering the costs of these letters would be too large comparing with possible reachable result as the group of other EU citizens in Latvia is relatively small.

Meanwhile this information is covered by the European Parliament information office webpage who provide information in each EU member state's language how to vote if you are a foreign citizen and if you want to vote in another country.

### 3.4. Participation of the EU “mobile” citizens in Latvian elections

#### *Local elections*

Since Latvia joined EU in 2004 there have been held five local elections (excluding emergency elections). The last ones took place in June, 2021. **The number of citizens of other EU Member States in voter lists has increased:**

2021 – 16426;

2017 – 15053;

2013 – 10524;

2009 – 8637;

2005 – 3981.<sup>7</sup>

More detailed information is available on the elections in 2013, where according to the information provided by the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, 10 524 citizens of other European Union Member States were listed in the voter list. The largest groups among these voters were Lithuanian citizens – 3755, German citizens – 1406 and Estonian citizens – 898.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, in the 2017 local elections, from 1 443 796 eligible voters listed in the voter list 15 053 were citizens of other Member States of the European Union.<sup>9</sup>

Data about registering the number of registered voters from other EU Member States who have voted in one or another elections haven't been recorded. Only the total number of voters who have casted the ballots in each elections is available.<sup>10</sup>

In local elections 2021 there were 6 candidates with citizenship of another EU Member State: 1 – Irish citizen, 2 – Lithuanian, 1 – Spanish, 1 – Bulgarian, 1 – Finnish.<sup>11</sup>

In the emergency elections of Riga City Council in 2020 there were 1 candidate with citizenship of another EU Member State – with Lithuanian citizenship.

In local elections 2017 there were 13 candidates with citizenship of another EU Member State: 7 – Lithuanian, 1 – Finnish, 5 – German citizens.<sup>12</sup>

In local elections 2013 there were 10 candidates with citizenship of another EU Member State.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Information provided by the Central Election Commission.

<sup>8</sup> CVK, 2013. Republikas pilsētas domes un novada domes vēlēšanas 2013.gada 1.jūnijā. Rīga. Pp.8.

<sup>9</sup> CVK, 2017. Republikas pilsētas domes un novada domes vēlēšanas 2017.gada 3.jūnijā. Rīga. Pp.17.

<sup>10</sup> CVK, 2017. Republikas pilsētas domes un novada domes vēlēšanas 2017.gada 3.jūnijā. Rīga. Pp.17.

<sup>11</sup> Central Election Commission. Available: <https://pv2021.cvk.lv/pub/kandidatu-saraksti>

<sup>12</sup> Central Election Commission. Available: <http://pv2017.cvk.lv/CandidateLists>; CVK, 2017. Republikas pilsētas domes un novada domes vēlēšanas 2017.gada 3.jūnijā. Rīga. Pp.17.

<sup>13</sup> Central Election Commission. Available: <http://www.pv2013.cvk.lv/saraksti/>; CVK, 2013. Republikas pilsētas domes un novada domes vēlēšanas 2013.gada 1.jūnijā. Rīga. Pp.10.

In local elections 2009 there were 8 candidates with citizenship of another EU Member State: 3 – Germany, 2 – Danish, 2 –Lithuanian, 1 – Swedish. In addition, two German citizens also had double citizenship with Latvia.<sup>14</sup>

In local elections 2005 there were 7 candidates with citizenship of another EU Member State: 3 – Lithuanian citizens, 1 – British citizen, 1 - Polish citizen, 1 – German citizen, 1 - Swedish citizen.<sup>15</sup>

#### *European Parliament elections*

**Data suggests, the number of persons who had expressed a wish to vote in the European Parliament elections for Latvian candidates is decreasing.** Total number of selected eligible voters (persons who are citizens of other European Union countries) to the European Parliament elections, which had expressed a wish and were included in the electoral roll in 2019 was 249 voters, in 2014 - 326 voters, in 2009 - 28 voters.

**Most of them were Lithuanian, German, Estonian and Polish citizens.** For example, in 2014, out of the total 326 registered citizens of other EU Member States, there were 124 Lithuanian citizens, 60 – German, 35 – Estonian, 18 – Polish. In 2019 out of 249 registered voters with other EU citizenship were 79 Lithuanian citizens, 57 – German, 28 – Estonian and 14 – Polish citizens.<sup>16</sup>

**Data on how many registered voters from other EU Member States have voted in EP elections is not registered.** But it is believed that this number could be similar to registered voters and enrolled in the voter list. Taking into account that a person must register in advance to participate in the EP elections by submitting an application to the Central Electoral Commission, expressing his or her wish to vote directly in Latvia.

In the elections 2019 there were two citizens of other EU Member States among the candidates of the EP elections: 1 – Spanish citizen, 1 – German citizen.<sup>17</sup>

There were no candidates with citizenship from other EU Member States in the elections 2014. The only two candidates with a foreign citizenship were : 1 – U.S. citizen and 1 – Australian.

In the EP elections 2009, there were three candidates with citizenship of another EU Member State: 1 – Italian, 1 – British, 1 – Swedish. Both British and Swedish candidates had double citizenship together with Latvian citizenship. No such statistics are available for the European Parliament elections in 2004.

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<sup>14</sup> Central Election Commission. Available: [https://www.cvk.lv/upload\\_file/Publiskais\\_parskats\\_2009.pdf](https://www.cvk.lv/upload_file/Publiskais_parskats_2009.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> CVK. 2005. *gada pilsētas domes, novada domes un pagasta padomes vēlēšanas.*

<sup>16</sup> Interview with representatives from the Central Election Commission.

<sup>17</sup> Central Election Commission. Available: <https://epv2019.cvk.lv/pub/kandidatu-saraksti>

## 4. Results from the interviews with EU “mobile” citizens in Latvia

**Our interviews in Latvia did not support the hypothesis that political participation of migrants might be driven by some grievances, significant unmet needs, or discrimination by the local population** (Ciornei 2013; Febrache 2019). All our respondents feel good and accepted in Latvia. Several respondents mentioned that the locals like foreigners, at least those who look similar to them:

*“I think I am very well accepted here in the countryside by local shop people and... Sometimes of course they are curious where I am from because of the accent but they are very accepting. I am not sure how it would be if I were a person of color. I am not sure if there is a typical looking Latvian but I guess I fall in the range of looking like one.”* (F, male).

**And they have mostly positive things to say about the local society, too:**

*“They are very supportive about the language, and its totally not true that they are cold or distanced, like some people say. But i feel like what they have very similar to Scandinavians, is they have this personal zone, space. [...]”* (P, female)

**Identity-wise, most respondents feel a connection to Latvia, thus, lack of attachment is not a reason to abstain from politics:**

*“From the very beginning I felt very well here. That this is my place. Even though, as we talked in the beginning – I don’t know if I will stay forever, but I know that forever it will be a part of me. I will be coming back.”* (P, female).

**Respondents are mostly content with their situation.** They face few problems, and mainly at the very beginning of their stay (e.g., complicated registration process).

**Migrants’ main complaints and inconveniences are related to insufficient use of English in public institutions, even those dealing with residence permits.**

*“[Getting] the personal code took some effort. [...] when I was signing up, I needed to stand in a queue and needed to choose why I was there, and it was only in Latvian maybe also Russian. I would think that since there are so many foreigners signing up to be residents, it would be helpful to put the info in English.”* (N, male)

*“[...] in general, in 2021 more information should be in English. For government webpage, taxes, hospital. There is Latvian and Russian, I understand, most people do these two languages, but since Latvia is a EU country...”* (D, male).

In these situations their Latvian spouse or friends are often there to help, however, navigating the system and receiving services might be much more difficult for those who do not have a local support system. Importantly, the aforementioned problems mostly occur when migrants are not eligible to vote in the municipal elections yet. **Moreover, insufficient information in English is also a factor that hinders migrants’ participation in political life in general.**



According to theory, social connectedness and individual's embeddedness in the local community are crucial factors affecting civic activism, as most forms of political participation are collective in nature (Coleman 1988; De Rooj 2001; Gerghina 2016). **In our case, we did not find that a lack of social connections would hinder migrants' political participation.** Almost all our respondents are the so-called 'family migrants' who have come to Latvia because of their Latvian spouse. As a result, they are well connected and embedded in the local Latvian community via family and circle of Latvian friends (usually from work or spouse). Especially those who have children have opportunities to socialize with the parents of the local kids, even during the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, some mention that the social contacts are not as frequent as they used to be back home, not just because of the pandemic, but also because people in Latvia need time to form friendships. Even when there is contact with the locals, they do not talk about politics much:

*"[...] when I go to Poland, everybody speaks about politics. Here – nobody."* (P, female).

A similar opinion is shared by others:

*"Most of my Latvian friends are quite unpolitical. Maybe they are talking politics only in Latvian. But the majority of people are not talking about the parties or the issues. I feel that they also don't know much about these parties."* (G, male).

F mentions that he is cautious in regard to talking about politics with the locals in order not to get into arguments:

*"[...] we talk about politics with people, of course. But we don't want to get in fights with locals, because we're also guests."*(F, male).

This illustrates that the local context matters, not just social ties per se. **In a society that avoids political themes, and is not as active politically in general, migrants have fewer opportunities to discuss politics, learn about politics, and they are less likely to participate themselves.**

Some respondents were involved, at least for some time, in an international community and have international friends, for example, via international women's club, cafeteria where many international visitors come, etc. **However, participation in an ethnic community is not common, except for some of those from traditional ethnic minorities in Latvia such as Estonians and Poles that do have ethnic associations, schools, etc.**

*"[My friends are] mostly Latvians but these days we are not meeting that much. The friends I got to know from my girlfriend I count as friends, but other than that, mostly international."* (N, male)

Local language skills have been emphasised in the literature as one of the most important factors that impacts on participation (Bevelander 2014; Ortensi and Riniolo 2020), and indeed, our research does confirm its crucial role in understanding and following the local

political events. **Nevertheless, most of our respondents were able to understand (and speak) at least some Latvian, yet many still did not vote in municipal elections.**

Previous research has pointed out insufficient information about political process, participation rights, politicians and their views, etc. as one of the main reasons why migrants abstain from political participation in their new country of residence (Waldinger and Soehl 2013; Scuzzarello 2015; Ghergina 2016). Our interviewed **EU mobile citizens were informed about their rights to vote in municipal elections, nevertheless, some used these rights, and others did not. Few knew about their rights to also be candidates at local elections, but they were also not interested in it.** As expected, **we observed low political activity in general, although some have signed petitions or gotten involved in activism related to issues important to them such as womens' and childrens' rights, demography, ecology, people with Downs syndrom, animal shelters, petition against removing a park, etc.**

**Overall, while most of our respondents were not very active before coming to Latvia, their level of political and social participation has usually somewhat decreased, though the reasons are varied** – from having lived in a more politically active country, community and a circle of friends, to family obligations and other priorities, language barriers, politically fragmented society, etc. Interestingly, a respondent from Germany said that he did not get involved in any NGOs, as he is not sure that they would welcome an English speaking person. A respondent from France noted that there are too few people to effectively organise, for example, a movement. **Several of our respondents are still at least somewhat active in their country's political and civic life** via, for example, signing petitions and voting, more so than in Latvia. For example, even having lived in Latvia for 18 years, F has never voted in local elections in Latvia, yet still votes in elections in France. Just a few of our respondents had voted in the European Parliament elections.

**Respondents' answers indicate that people want to make a conscious and responsible decision. However, this requires a careful consideration of various parties, their positions, candidates, etc.** – a substantial time investment which only pays off if the respondent sees a potential future benefit that this could bring.

**The realisation that the results of municipal elections will have a direct effect on the lives of migrants in the city, serves as an important motive to vote.** For example, our interviews showed that the Estonian diaspora organisation is very aware that who is elected has a profound impact on the municipalities' relations with the expat/minority communities, and this motivates them to be active in these elections:

*"[...] we have daily contact with the municipal authorities, and there is quite a difference in which party is in power in the city. We had very good contacts with the previous ones. The attitude was very good. The relationship with the next municipality leader was much more tense. Now it's much better again. At that level, relations depend on which party is in power and how they view minorities." (E, male)*

However, at the moment, **most of our informants didn't feel sufficiently informed about the candidates** to make a decision, and this was highlighted as the main reason for not voting:

*"[...] I don't know anybody here that I would vote for, I don't know the candidates. [...] If I would be getting some information, if I would know some of those candidates, then I would be happy to go and vote. But it was never getting to me." (P, female).*

**Despite having (some) Latvian language skills, few read media in Latvian, yet information in English is limited, and researching it would require too much effort.** If one is very interested, it is possible to use, for example Google Translate which is said to translate to Latvian quite well, but usually expats do not have such strong motivation. Several respondents follow the news in English on the LSM portal's English language section and the English newspaper Baltic Times, some whose Latvian is better – the Delfi portal, but overall the information saturation is clearly insufficient:

*"It's nice that on LSM English site there are more and more articles. LETA site has something. There is more information translated into English lately. But it's still less than there is on the Latvian site. But I would say that it's improving." (G, male)*

*"I feel that something here is missing. There is space for some kind of news platform for foreigners. Baltic times – it's a little bit there, but then I have to Google find it on the internet, then searching...it kind of takes time. [...] Most of my news I have in apps, and it's easy, because I can quickly open and..." (P, female)*

**Social networks can provide up-to-date information about the current events and politicians views and activities; however, they are for the most part accessible only to those who understand Latvian.** There are also some informative Facebook groups in English, as well as Online expat communities where one can ask some questions and be up to date regarding what concerns expats, however, not many know about them. A few respondents mention that there is a very good podcast in English, explaining what's going on in Latvia, but this, too, is not widely known:

*"It was quite good, I was listening to this podcast, "Latvia-?" They were covering parties and their members. What is different and what they stand for. It was quite easy to understand, and there were only two people I didn't like." (D, male)*

**As the Latvian language skills are usually not excellent, migrants mostly consume news in a language most convenient to them, which is often news from their country of origin, or in international media** such as BBC which does not normally feature any information on the local issues in Riga. Those who can read Latvian well enough, sometimes do not read the local Latvian media because they are dissatisfied with its contents, or because they simply do not have time to read newspapers.

**In general, those who understand Latvian well, have a much wider set of options where and how to learn about local politics.** For example, the Estonian respondents who are almost fluent in Latvian follow political debates on TV, read advertisement leaflets or newspapers by candidates and parties, they analyse how parties have performed so far, what their achievements are. However, people like this are a minority among the mobile EU citizens. If information is insufficient, migrants sometimes ask the opinion of their Latvian friends and family who serve as the main source of information about politics in Latvia:

*“I haven’t read about it that much, I have mostly talked with friends and my girlfriend if she could explain a bit to me what the different parties are. I didn’t check if they had any programs in English to be honest so I am not fully aware of that. I based it only on what I heard second hand which maybe is not correct to make a decision but I do trust the people that I talk with, we are like minded so I feel well enough informed to make a decision.” (N, male).*

**Importantly, the respondents note that politicians in Latvia do not reach out to expats as potential voters.** This corresponds to the theory that emphasizes the importance of mobilization efforts of networks, parties, and other organisations (Klandermans and van den Toorn 2008; Marshall 2001; Quitnelier 2009; Stoll and Wong 2007). One respondent suggests that if politicians really wanted expats to vote, they should put more effort into this. For example, at the time of registration people could be explained their rights and opportunities to participate in the political process:

*“I’ve never seen that they would encourage foreigners to take action. For example, you see, I go as a foreigner to make an ID, and I think it’s a perfect moment to tell to those foreigners what are your rights, your possibilities. Perfect moment – they could devote five minutes to you. [...] if somebody would just tell me – once in four years you can participate. If you want – you check the box here and we’ll send you detailed information. This is the perfect moment, because all foreigners go through registration.” (P, female)*

A similar opinion is voiced by F:

*“I would say that the parties – they don’t reach out. They don’t try to get foreigner votes. There is not a big interest on both sides. The foreigners don’t reach much to the parties and the parties don’t really care. For them it’s not interesting. These are two different worlds.” (F, male)*

**Overall, most migrants would like to have more information, such as party programmes, or the interviews of politicians translated into a language they could better understand:**

*“There needs to be more information for foreigners who come here to settle down. More information about the family matters, i.e. if a French guy marries a local one, the family will help. But if you have two French nationals with children, if you had a portal with a lot of information regarding family matters, social security and so on, it would help a lot. And maybe some translation of the programs of political parties, what they propose. Would be interesting to see a comparative list, and maybe a bit of history, just for – this subject or that subject – which party voted for what and so on.” (F, male)*

**Like locals, mobile EU citizens sometimes do not vote simply because they cannot find a party that they like and that they would be happy to vote for.** For example, G notes a lack of political options as a problem – according to him, 80% of parties are conservative which does not align with his views. F also notes that if there was a party proposing to rebuild roads or a good family policy, he might vote.

*“Only when I deeply trusted myself that I want to give a vote to some person I went to vote. I do not want to give my vote only because it is necessary, I want to vote only if I trust the person I vote for.” (L, female)*

**Our respondents’ answers also confirm the assumption that future plans matter for the decision to participate, too.** For example, L notes that she only decided to get involved in politics and vote in municipal elections when she decided that she might stay in Latvia. One can conclude that, as predicted, migrants’ future plans as regards to the length of their stay can be expected to affect their decision to participate or not. In our study, probably due to their migration circumstances, most of our respondents plan to stay and would be interested in having more say in local matters.

**Asked, if they would be willing to vote on issues discussed in the Riga city council if it was available Online on a platform like *Open2Vote*, 8 out of 10 respondents answer confirmatory.**

*“I would like to participate to get more objective information that I would share with others.”, notes L.*

**In general, they would welcome more information in English about what is going on in the municipality,** as in most cases their Latvian language skills are not good enough to follow complicated discussions in Latvian. The Estonian respondents also suggested that such a website should have information about what was done, what was achieved.

We also asked respondents about their interactions with government institutions in general. G has **noticed the institutions in Latvia are not always willing to see people as their customers that they should help:**

*“In general, I would say that some of these institutions (...) that we as citizens are their customers. And they should care for their customers. There is a wrong mentality out there, I think. They should help us to get things achieved. That doesn’t mean that they have to let us slip the rules, but just the mentality thing that you are actually helping the people with what they want to do.” (G, male).*

A similar opinion about public services is shared by F:

*“Sometimes, maybe it is a bit of a culture chock, because in Netherlands there are very high standards when you are in customer service to be polite... Sometimes I got the phone hung up on me if my Latvian was not smooth enough. But there also very helpful, kind and polite people. I have encountered a mixture of both.” (N, male)*

**The new platform could be a step in the right direction,** as it would show that opinions of people, and particularly mobile EU citizens, matter, and the municipality wants to hear their views and learn about their concerns. Moreover, G notes:

*“The most important thing is that the topic gets public attention. i.e. “Pilsēta cilvēkiem” is doing a good job in Riga. It gives an idea that things could be different.” (G, male)*

Asking people for their opinion would be helpful in getting topics discussed. One of the research participants – L - has joined a political party and stood in the municipal elections as a candidate herself. Despite her non-Latvian ethnic background and citizenship, she was born in Latvia and considers Latvia ‘her country’. As her motivation to stand in municipal elections she mentions helping people and advancing issues that she feels strongly about:

*“My biggest dream was to be useful for the people who are living here, to give people what they ask for. I also like to help animal shelters and other things that I mostly love to do.”* (L, female).

Among issues she wants to improve are reducing inequality, providing adequate support for children and pensioners, and attracting businesses and investment. Her foreign citizenship influenced her decision to join the most multinational party, that also strongly supports the rights of minority citizens:

*“I’m a bit different, I’m not a usual Latvian person. I love my country, Latvia, but the biggest difference is that I have a different passport. I am interested not only in the citizens of Latvia but also people from other countries. So, the reason I joined this party is because there are people with different nationalities.”* (L, female)

She would like to see politicians come closer to the public, to really try to understand them and address their needs and concerns:

*“The politicians should come out on the streets to the people, to see and understand their needs. To see what is going on in the real life not only in the small team that they are sitting in [...]”* (L, female).

During the pandemic, unfortunately, there were few options to communicate with potential voters to gather their support. Thus, Online tools are becoming and will become more important in the future.

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