

**STATE OF THE UNION CITIZENS' RIGHTS 2021:
MOVING TOGETHER BEYOND THE PANDEMIC**

-REPORT-

**January 21 - 22, 2021
Online event**



On 21-22 January 2021, the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) held the third edition of its “State of the Union Citizens’ Rights” event, an annual conference aimed at identifying challenges faced by EU citizens to their right to free movement and the solutions to overcoming them.

The conference was organised in the framework of the [IMPEU](#) project, under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Commission, and under the [Mobility and Political Rights Enhancement for EU Citizens](#) (MORE for EU Citizens) project supported by the European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM). This time, due to the COVID-19-related restrictions, the conference was organised online on the Webex platform and was live-streamed on Facebook. The event gathered 82 participants, while additional 489 people viewed the live recordings on Facebook.

Day one of the conference: Identifying the Challenges

Keynote speech and opening remarks



Commissioner for Justice, Didier Reynders, delivering the conference opening keynote speech.

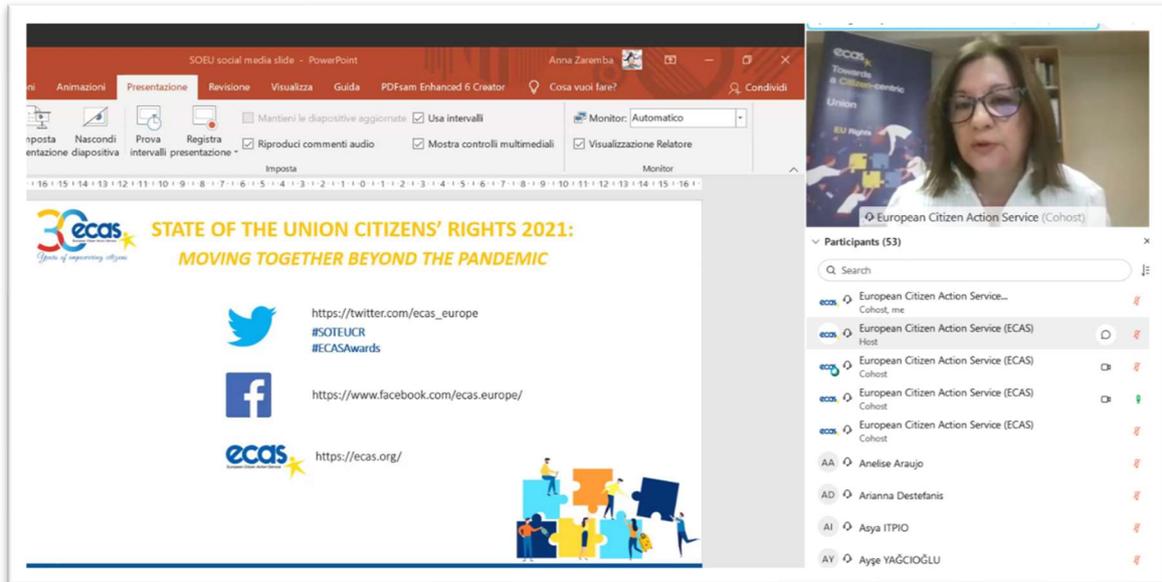
The tone of the conference was set with an opening message by **Commissioner for Justice Didier Reynders**. He emphasized that EU citizenship is one of the Union's greatest achievements, putting the individual at the centre of the European project and transforming the lives of EU citizens. Commissioner Reynders presented the 2020 EU Citizenship Report and outlined the actions the European Commission (EC) will take in the near future to make sure that EU citizens can exercise their rights. Those include, among the others, the revision of 2009 guidelines on Directive 2004/38/EC and an update of the directives on voting rights of mobile EU citizens in municipal and European elections.

“The EU citizenship report delivers tangible steps for the effective exercise of EU rights. It means empowering citizens...and simplifying peoples' daily lives by cutting the red tape and removing barriers to protect their rights!”.

- Commissioner Reynders

The Commissioner also brought attention to the measures introduced by the Member States to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and explained they should not be taken at the expense of fundamental rights, including freedom of speech and political debates for elections. He stressed that the EC is strongly committed to ensuring a return to unrestricted movement as soon as the pandemic has been overcome.

Panel discussion: State of play in the EU citizenship field

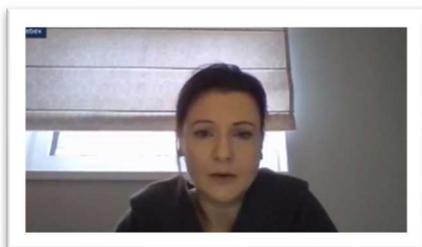


The first panel, moderated by **Assya Kavrakova**, ECAS' Executive Director, outlined the main challenges mobile EU citizens face in their host countries, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of the speakers received two questions related to their area of expertise.



Dr Petar Markovic, Citizens' Rights Training Coordinator at ECAS, discussed a recent ECAS' [study](#) on the impact of COVID-19 on mobile EU citizens. He explained that the findings indicate that EU mobile citizens were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, as they faced a double lockdown, having been both locked away from their community in their host countries and from their families in their home countries. He added that the pandemic had a negative effect on citizens' mental well-being and led to an increase in xenophobia and discrimination.

In response to the second question, Dr Markovic elaborated on the political rights of mobile EU citizens, following the [recommendations](#) under the [Improving Inclusion of EU Mobile Citizens](#) (IMPEU) project. He explained that the following aspects should be taken into account when trying to enhance political participation of mobile EU citizens: more communication and awareness raising by local administrations, EU institutions and civil society organisations; improved citizens' education and the use of new technologies and applications.



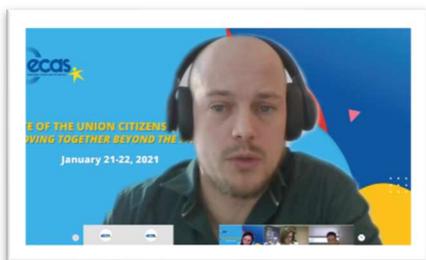
Dr Patrycja Pogodzińska from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights explained that the COVID-19 pandemic and the related measures impacted most of the fundamental rights of EU citizens, including the right to security and family life, freedom of movement, freedom of religion, the right to healthcare, etc. The closure of schools affected negatively the right to education, especially in case of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who were often unable to access the necessary digital materials.

She then elaborated on the impact of COVID-19 on the right to family life, explaining that the pandemic was particularly problematic for unmarried and unregistered partners and for same-sex couples. Non-EU citizens have also faced difficulties when trying to join their EU family members, as requirements and conditions differ across Member States.



Dr Sandra Mantu, Assistant professor at the Radboud University, explained that the pandemic has brought a couple of issues into focus in relation to EU migrant workers. Firstly, certain Member States have sectors that are highly reliant upon migrant workers. To make sure that these shortages are filled, they have decided to take unilateral measures, which often ignore the safety and the healthcare aspects. She emphasized that the pandemic increased the vulnerability of those migrant EU workers who are employed in low-skilled and low-paid jobs.

In her second questions, Dr Mantu elaborated on the impact of COVID-19 on EU citizenship. She said that the Member States need to be reminded by the EU institutions of their obligations to properly implement EU rights and protect mobile EU citizens. She emphasized that mobility and protection need to go hand-in-hand with promoting freedom of movement.



Rasmus Benke-Åberg, Director of Erasmus Student Network (ESN), discussed the results of the [ESN's study](#) on mobile students. He explained that at the beginning of the pandemic students faced many issues regarding the arrangement for online classes, the payment of grants and insufficient information. This in turn led to a significant stress and struggles with mental health.

Mr. Benke-Åberg was also asked about the long-term impact of COVID-19 on youth mobility and Erasmus+ exchanges. He explained that as the pandemic is still ongoing, it is not clear how and if the mobility patterns will change. He expressed his hopes that at the end everyone will recognise, once again, the importance of student mobility.

ECAS' Awards



The panel discussion was followed by the announcement of the winners of the [ECAS' Awards](#) by **Jean Lambert**, Vice-Chairperson of the ECAS Board. The Awards “Hosts Open to Mobile European Citizens” (HOME) were launched in 2020 for the first time to promote practices and initiatives that aim at fostering inclusion of, and provision of information to, mobile EU citizens.

The first day featured the winners in the categories “Practices aimed at alleviating the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on mobile EU citizens” and “Practices aimed at improving the social and cultural inclusion of mobile EU citizens”.

The winner in the 1st category was the **European Disability Forum (EDF)** for their project “Double Mobility”. This project looked at how people with disabilities coped with COVID-19. The Disability Forum aimed to address the information void, provide guidance and ensure that the needs of citizens with disabilities are addressed in the EU recovery process.



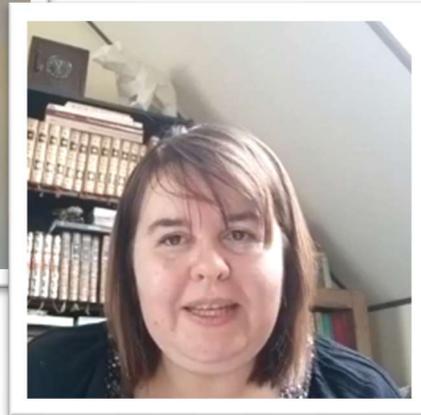
The winner of the 2nd category was **Romanians in Belgium (ROMBEL)** for their project “A Bridge Between Home and Europe”. ROMBEL provides mobile citizens with guidelines and help on administrative procedures, and has launched online dialogues to improve citizens' involvement in their host communities.



The representatives of the organisations John Patrick Clarke (EDF) and Daria Pirvu (ROMBEL) thanked for the Awards and for the recognition of their efforts to improve inclusion of mobile EU citizens.



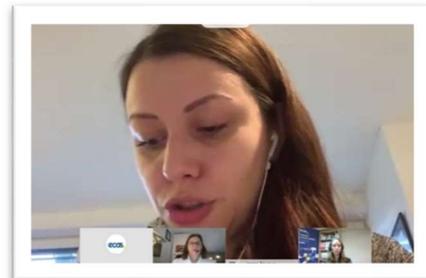
John Patrick Clarke, Double Mobility Initiative



Daria Pirvu, A Bridge Between Home and Europe Initiative

Day two of the conference: Exploring the Solutions

The second day of the conference was opened by a keynote speech of Irena Joveva, Member of the European Parliament. She thanked ECAS for its efforts to create more mechanisms of deliberative and participatory democracy, and to enable the co-creation of policies with citizens. Ms. Joveva emphasized that EU decision-making lacks citizens' participation and there is need to enhance transparency, to strengthen the role of the European Parliament (EP) and to compliment representative democracy with more participatory tools. She welcomed the achievements of the EU in 2020, such as the Stability and Growth Pact, the ambitious 2021-2027 MFF and the historic NextGenEU fund, but warned that much more needs to be done in 2021. Ms. Joveva emphasized that mobile EU citizens need reassurance more than ever during the pandemic, and this can be only achieved through a coordinated and a common EU action. Finally, she warned against enforcing any vaccination certificates for the purposed of moving in the EU, and called on including the voices and opinion of citizens in these discussions.



“One important effort to ensure citizen engagement is the Conference on the Future of Europe, but political struggles are shadowing its vision and content.

- MEP Irena Joveva

Panel discussion - The EU and EU citizens' rights in 2021

The second panel, moderated by **Julie Bishop**, Director of Law Centres Network, member of ECAS, focused on possible future developments in the EU-rights field following the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit and the debate on the EU's long-term budget for 2021-2027.



Dr Marek Benio, Vice-President of the European Labour Mobility Institute, talked about the impact of the pandemic on posted workers. He explained that the focus of his organisation is on temporary work mobility, based on the freedom to provide services, which has been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. He said that several companies lost contracts and income as result of the restrictions and quarantine obligations, and would need to close down if they do not receive state help.

Dr Benio said that several challenges can be expected in 2021. He warned about the risk of segregation among mobile workers, into those who have and those who have not been vaccinated. Other challenges are related to the revision of social security coordination rules, presented in 2016 and still not agreed on, and to the implementation of the provisions of the revised Posting of Workers Directive, especially in the context of ‘short-term’ and ‘long-term postings’.

“The Covid-19 pandemic has created a very uncertain situation for EU cross-border workers. Though Member States have introduced some protective measures, more needs to be done to address the challenges”.

- Dr Marek Benio



Agnès Leroux, Policy Director at the Airlines for Europe (A4E), discussed on how the rights of passengers have been protected during COVID-19. She explained that the pandemic posed unprecedented challenges to those rights, as the Regulation EC 261/2004 did not foresee such a crisis. In particular, the members of A4E had to deal with an

enormous number of requests for refunds and rebooking. Ms. Leroux said there is a need to revise the Regulation and it is in the interest of citizens and the industry to provide clarity in case of disruptions and to be prepared for future crises.

She emphasized that the priority in the coming months should be to restore the freedom of movement for all EU citizens. She added that it needs to be done in a coordinated EU manner, taking into account the following issues: the requirements for testing and the use of rapid tests, a unique regime for quarantines throughout the EU, better information provision to citizens, fast rollout of vaccinations.



Maja Simunic, Policy Officer at the European Commission (EC), talked about the impact of the pandemic on of EU citizenship rights. She explained that the difficulties experienced by EU citizens made them realise the importance of those rights. She assured that the Commission is committed to restoring freedom of movement as soon as possible.

Ms Simunic also presented the actions that the Commission is planning to take as a follow-up to the Citizenship Report 2020. The priorities include: the revision of the 2009 guidelines on

2004/38 Directive; strengthening democratic participation and supporting deliberative democracy; and updating the Directives on voting rights of mobile EU citizens in municipal and European elections.



Dr Anthony Valcke, founder and supervising solicitor of the [EU Rights Clinic](#), clarified how the rights of EU mobile citizens are protected after Brexit. He explained that Brexit negotiations defended some citizens' rights but also left a number of gaps, for instance, in the protection of the voting rights for EU citizens to vote in the UK, and the rights of UK citizens to vote in the EU. He said that citizens living in the UK prior to Brexit would be able to benefit from life-long protections of their rights to residency, to work and to the recognition of qualifications.

Dr Valcke also warned that some vulnerable groups, including children in foster care, may not be aware of their rights and thus may miss the deadline to apply for the settled or pre-settled status by June 2021. He explained, however, that the Home Office must consider late applications if there are "reasonable grounds" for a delay, but this is not defined in the Withdrawal Agreement.

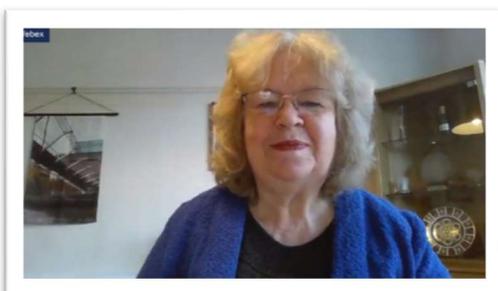


Chrysa Psyllaki, Researcher at the Helping Hand, one of the organisations involved in the implementation of the [IMPEU project](#), discussed the online course for civil servants which was developed in the framework of the project. She explained that its aim is to provide civil servants with the knowledge they need to support citizens in their respective countries. The course was developed based on active learning

principles and a modular approach, allowing for studying at own pace.

Ms. Psyllaki also elaborated on the IMPEU recommendations on how to improve political participation of mobile EU citizens. She said that the most important aspects are: fostering the communication and outreach to citizens by local and regional authorities; training opportunities for civil servants so that they can provide more accurate information on citizens' rights; and promoting citizens participation beyond the elections.

ECAS' Awards



The panel discussion was followed by the announcement of the winners of the ECAS' Awards by **Jean Lambert**, Vice-Chairperson of the ECAS' Board. The second day featured the winners in the categories "Practices aimed at improving the political inclusion of mobile EU citizens" and of "ECAS' choice".

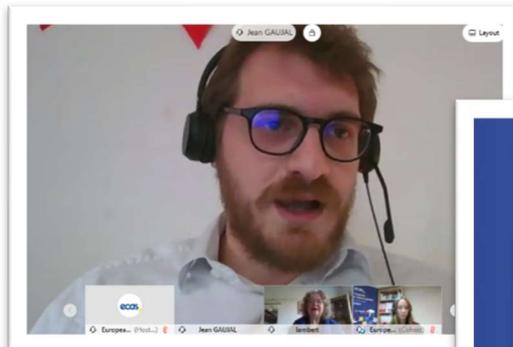
Paris municipality and its project “INCLUDE” was selected in the political inclusion category. To encourage the political participation of EU mobile citizens living in Paris, a consultative council dedicated to European citizens representing all of EU nationalities was created in the Paris municipality, with a mission to enlighten the City Council’s executive branch on the issues linked to EU citizenship.



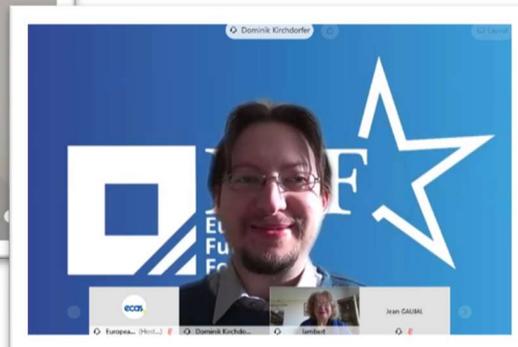
Finally, the **Euro Babble** initiative of the European Future Forum (EFF) won in the category ‘ECAS’ choice” based on the votes of ECAS’ staff. This category was created to recognize projects which are closest to the mission and the values of ECAS.



The representatives of the organizations - André Duramois (Paris municipality) and Dominik Kirchdorfer (EFF) - thanked for the awards and for the recognition of their efforts to improve inclusion of mobile EU citizens.



André Duramois, INCLUDE initiative



Dominik Kirchdorfer, Euro Babble initiative

Ms Lambert congratulated the winners and emphasized the importance of initiatives which enhance the inclusion of mobile EU citizens and promote the rights of EU citizens.

Catch more event highlights, as summarised [in a conversation](#) with ECAS’ Executive Director, Assya Kavrakova, and Citizens’ Rights Training Coordinator, Petar Markovic.

State of the Union Citizens' Rights 2021: *Moving Together Beyond the Pandemic*

Agenda

Day 1

- 9:30 – 9:45 *Keynote speech*
Didier Reynders, Commissioner for Justice
- 9:45 – 10:15 *Panel discussion: State of play in the EU citizenship field*
Moderator: Assya Kavrakova, ECAS' Executive Director
- Dr Petar Markovic, European Citizen Action Service
 - Dr Patrycja Pogodzinska, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
 - Dr Sandra Mantu, Radboud University
 - Rasmus Benke-Åberg, Erasmus Student Network
- 10:15 – 10:30 Q&A session with the audience
- 10:30 – 11:00 *HOME Awards 2020* for the Most EU Mobile Citizen-Friendly Locations, presented by Jean Lambert, Vice-Chairperson of the ECAS' Board
Announcement of the two most voted initiatives by citizens in the categories "Practices aimed at alleviating the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on mobile EU citizens" and "Practices aimed at improving the social and cultural inclusion of mobile EU citizens"

Day 2

- 9:30 – 9:45 *Keynote speech*
Irena Joveva, Member of the European Parliament
- 9:45 – 10:30 *Panel discussion: The EU and EU citizens' rights in 2021*
Moderator: Julie Bishop, Director, Law Centres Network, member of ECAS
- Dr Marek Benio, European Labour Mobility Institute
 - Agnès Leroux, Airlines for Europe
 - Marie-Hélène Boulanger, European Commission
 - Dr Anthony Valcke, EU Rights Clinic
 - Chrysa Psyllaki, Helping Hand
- 10:30 – 10:45 Q&A session with the audience
- 10:45 – 11:15 *HOME Awards 2020* for the Most EU Mobile Citizen-Friendly Locations, presented by Jean Lambert, Vice-Chairperson of the ECAS' Board
Announcement of the most voted initiative by citizens in the category "Practices aimed at improving the political inclusion of mobile EU citizens" and of the "ECAS' award"

This event was funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020) and the European Programme for Integration and Migration. The content of this conference represents the views of the organiser only and is his/her sole responsibility. The European Commission and EPIM do not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains