

Political participation of EU mobile citizens in Czech Republic

Obstacles and Recommendations

ECAS Brussels, October 2022

Welcome

Political participation of EU mobile citizens in Czech Republic

Obstacles and Recommendations

16 September 2022 | 10:00 am – 12:00 pm CET

-REPORT-

October 2022

Work Package	
2	European Citizenship Rights
Activity	
2.4	Voting Rights Focus groups in the Netherlands and Czechia
Milestone	
MS6	Voting Rights focus groups in two Member States

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the European Citizen Accelerator (EURECA) project is to strengthen European citizenship and identity through citizen engagement, supporting the post-COVID-19 restoration of freedom of movement in the EU, and fostering EU mobile citizens' rights, including their voting rights in their host countries. As part of the EURECA project, ECAS is organising two focus groups with NGOs, political parties, mobile EU citizens and public administrations in the Member States where local elections took place in 2022 (the Netherlands and Czech Republic). The goal of these focus groups is to get a better insight into the challenges EU mobile citizens face regarding their electoral rights, how their participation in elections can be improved, and to learn and provide good practices. This report includes information acquired during the focus group in the Czech Republic, which took place online (Google Meet) on Friday, 16 September 2022, between 10:00 and 12:00.

Participants:

- A project expert at Integration Center Prague
- A consultant at Expat Center Prague
- A candidate from Praha Sobě

Moderators:

- Claire Morot-Sir, EU Rights Manager ECAS
- Vasiliki Katsikerou, Training and Events' Manager ECAS

This report provides information and recommendations on the voting rights of EU mobile citizens in the Czech Republic.

Furthermore, it describes the methodology, followed by the main points of the discussion and the conclusion.

2. METHODOLOGY

The session started by discussing the main obstacles to the political participation of EU mobile citizens in the Czech Republic. The following discussion questions were raised:

- What are the main obstacles EU mobile citizens face regarding their political participation in Czech Republic as voters and as candidates?
- Are local governments/political parties trying to enhance political participation of mobile EU citizens in the Czech Republic?
- Effectiveness of information campaigns targeting EU mobile citizens in the Czech Republic.

After the first part, participants were given the opportunity to discuss possible solutions to increase the participation of EU mobile citizens in the local elections. Moreover, the following points were raised:

- The interest in targeting EU mobile citizens in activities/ campaigns in the local elections in the Czech Republic.
- Good practices aimed at improving political participation of mobile EU citizens in the Czech Republic.
- Following the example of Belgium, should participating in elections be compulsory for citizens in the Czech Republic.

The discussion points presented were developed after undertaking a literature review to define the context, formulate the questions for the focus group's participants and identify initial good practices.

3. VOTING RIGHTS OF MOBILE EU CITIZENS IN CZECH REPUBLIC

According to Article 22¹ of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union, all EU citizens have the right to vote and stand as candidates in the municipal and European Parliament elections in the country they reside in, regardless if they are nationals of the host country.

To be eligible to vote, the following basic criteria need to be fulfilled (both for municipal and European Parliament elections):

- Meeting the eligibility requirements (EU citizen, 18 years of age on election day);
- Having expressed a wish to vote by applying to be put on the electoral roll of the host State; and
- Not being subject to legal impediments to the right to vote (e.g., serving a custodial sentence).

In the Czech Republic, very little seems to be done by the institutions to inform mobile EU citizens about their rights and duties. Moreover, rules are quite strict and deprive a high number of the mobile EU population of their voting rights. For example, EU mobile citizens are allowed to vote in the municipal elections only if they have a permanent residence, which constitutes a non-obligatory bureaucratic process resulting in drastically reducing the amount of EU citizens allowed to exercise their voting rights. The same limit applies to EU mobile citizens who want to stand as candidates in the municipal elections, who face another obstacle in Prague: mayors, deputy mayors and city councillors have to be of Czech citizenship. For municipal elections in 2014², there were 131245 EU citizens residing in the Czech Republic, among which only 1745 were registered to vote. Registration to the voting lists is necessary to be able to vote, renewal is however automatic.

With regards to European Parliament elections, EU mobile citizens are allowed to vote if they have either a permanent or a temporary residency, provided it was issued at least 45 days prior to the elections. The registration procedure is separate from the municipal elections one. The age limit for candidacy is 21 years old. Voting options are limited as voting is possible only at the polling station (proxy, mail or online voting functionalities are not available). EU mobile citizens of working age in the Czech republic represent 1.1% of the population. The majority of EU mobile citizens come from Slovakia, Poland, Germany, Bulgaria and Romania Non-EU residents are not allowed to participate in any elections. On the other hand, EU citizens living in the Czech Republic with permanent residence have the right to vote in local referendums. Finally, non-resident voters are not allowed to be members of political parties, and therefore need to run as independents.

¹https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=EU_citizens_living_in_another_Member_State_-_statistical_overview

² <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/59568>

4. IDENTIFIED OBSTACLES

4.1 Language

The language barrier was mentioned as an obstacle to participation by all focus group attendees as most of the information available for voters is in Czech. Although, as suggested by one participant, it is a smaller obstacle for the Slovak community due to the similarity of the languages, than for other groups of mobile EU citizens such as Polish, German, Bulgarian and Romanian. It was noted that most political parties do not provide any information in English. It was also suggested that a campaign in the English language is a good way to reach mobile EU citizens. This year Expats Center Prague created a campaign in English encouraging EU citizens to participate in the elections, aiming to show how politic influences their daily lives through, for example, new public transport regulations. Moreover, English-language news from the Czech Republic does not provide much information. It is a goal of the current administration to include English in public administration. According to the law EU mobile citizens have the right to have content translated into their language. Nonetheless, this is not implemented in practice and few citizens are aware of such a possibility. Furthermore, there are some NGOs attempting to provide necessary translations however they struggle to do so due to financial, staff shortages and limited ways of reaching EU mobile citizens. The lack of translation issue also concerns political parties' websites. Only some of them provide information in English, without explaining in detail who are the candidates and what they stand for.

4.2 Lack of automatic registration for elections

In order to be eligible for participation in the elections, obtaining registration for permanent residence is necessary as applications to be entered into the voters list must be made with the local authority of the administrative district in which the mobile EU citizen is registered as a resident. Registration for municipal elections is not automatic in the Czech Republic and mobile EU citizens are not automatically entered into the list of voters for these elections which significantly limits the accessibility to elections. There is an exception for subsequent elections after a successful application to register on the permanent list of voters for municipal elections. Even though it is possible to enter the permanent list of voters for municipal elections in the administrative district even 2 days (the latest possible date) before the date of the election, there seems to be a lack of interest in voting on the EU mobile citizens' side. It was indicated that the lack of automatic registration for elections is an obstacle also for Czech citizens as many people are not registered where they live due to the non-compulsory registration. Consequently, they do not possess proof of living in a certain area. One participant pointed out that the government has plans to change that law.

4.3 Knowledge of stakeholders

It was mentioned that it is difficult to find information about EU mobile citizens and their numbers. The lack of measurable data on the participation of EU mobile citizens in the Czech Republic was also highlighted. Additionally, due to the non-compulsory registration, the population of EU mobile citizens is rather immeasurable.

4.4 Lack of interest

As one participant suggested, mobile EU citizens may have a limited interest in participating in the elections due to their short-term stay and may not be aware of the situation in local politics. Additionally, they may not feel fully integrated which decreases the internal drive to vote. They face many obstacles which undeniably discourages them from voting such as a lack of possibility of voting neither via post nor by proxy. As a result of the voting law in the Czech Republic, it is necessary to go in person to the place of a person's registration, which adds another obstacle to participation.

5. PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS AND GOOD PRACTICES

5.1 Language

It was proposed to require the parties to provide some information in English about their candidates, what they stand for as well as general ideas for implementing policies. According to the focus group participants, it may create a welcoming atmosphere for EU mobile citizens to vote and show willingness of political parties to include them.

5.2 Change in the law

All participants suggested changes in the law, for instance: automatic registration for elections, removing the obligation of being a permanent resident and receiving an envelope with the list of candidates. It would remove an extra step for EU mobile citizens willing to participate in the local elections as well as provide them with necessary information about the candidates.

5.3 Target campaigns

It was suggested that EU mobile citizens may not realise how local politics influence their daily lives. Therefore, in the campaign of Expat Centre Prague, reasons to vote in the elections were presented. For instance, the urgent issue of public transport in the capital and how through voting, EU mobile citizens are able to contribute to solving that problem were highlighted. Moreover, the campaign aims at providing information on how to vote, where and when. It was indicated that it was the first time that such a campaign took place in Prague. One participant pointed out that a political party which would specifically focus on encouraging EU mobile citizens to vote for them by addressing their needs and showing what people can gain from choosing them would gain a large number of votes.

6. CONCLUSION

The discrepancy between Czech Nationals living in their home country and EU mobile citizens residing in the Czech Republic and voting there for municipal and European Parliament elections is significant. While it is difficult to evaluate the exact number of EU mobile citizens living in the Czech Republic as most of them do not register upon arrival in the country, the obligation to have obtained permanent residence in order to be allowed to vote surely hinders the voting capacity of non-citizen voters.

Participants of the focus group identified four key obstacles to full EU mobile citizens voting rights: the language barrier, the lack of interest on behalf of EU mobile citizens, the lack of knowledge on voting rights and the obligatory residence registration. To tackle that, participants proposed a sequence of communication and legal measures that would improve voting circumstances. For instance, providing material in English regarding the elections, and the parties' official positions on several matters. Moreover, a shift in legislation regarding the registration procedure could erase several bureaucratic steps. It would also be useful to extend the voting right to all residents, both permanent and temporary. Finally, targeting specifically EU mobile citizens as a group and developing a strategy on how to address them could potentially increase their engagement.

7. ANNEX 1 – AGENDA

Round-table on the political participation of EU mobile citizens in the Czech Republic 16 September 2022

Time	Activity
10:00-10:10	Welcome and presentation of the agenda
10:10-10:25	Short introduction by the participants
10:25-10:45	Session on the obstacles experienced by mobile EU citizens regarding their political participation in the Czech Republic
10:45-11:05	Presentations of the outcomes of the first session and discussion
11:05-11:25	Session on the possible improvements of the political participation of mobile EU citizens in the Czech Republic
11:25-11:45	Presentations of the recommendations and discussion
11:45-12:00	Conclusions

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European Citizen Action Service

BeCentral
Cantersteen 12

B-1000 Brussels, Belgium

info@ecas.org

Twitter: [@ecas_europe](https://twitter.com/ecas_europe)

Facebook: [ecas.europe](https://www.facebook.com/ecas.europe)

LinkedIn: [ECAS – European Citizen Action Service](https://www.linkedin.com/company/ecas-european-citizen-action-service)

Welcome