

Political Participation of EU Mobile Citizens in Belgium

Obstacles and Recommendations

ECAS Brussels, July 2024

Welcome

Political participation of EU mobile citizens in Belgium

Obstacles and Recommendations

07 June 2024 | 10.00 am – 12.00 pm CET

-REPORT-

European Citizenship Accelerator (EURECA) Project

Work Package	Title
2	European Citizenship Rights
Activity	Title
2.2	Voting Rights Focus group in Belgium
Milestone	Title
MS6	Voting Rights focus group in one Member State

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1. Introduction

The aim of the European Citizen Accelerator (EURECA) is to strengthen European citizenship and identity through citizen engagement, support the post-COVID-19 restoration of freedom of movement in the EU, and foster EU mobile citizens' rights, including their voting rights in their host countries.

As part of EURECA, ECAS organised a focus group in Belgium with NGOs, EU mobile citizens and public administrations with special attention to the local elections taking place on 13 October 2024. Previously, similar focus groups took place in the Netherlands, Czechia, Spain, and Luxembourg, ahead of the local elections in 2022 and 2023.

The goal of these focus groups is to acquire a better insight into the challenges EU mobile citizens face regarding their electoral rights, how their participation in elections can be improved, and to define solutions and recommendations. In addition, focus groups contribute to creating new synergies and fostering interaction between different stakeholders.

This report provides information acquired during the focus group in Belgium, which took place online (Webex) on Friday, 7 June 2024, between 10:00 and 12:00 CET. The following participants attended:

- One participant from the Brussels Commissioner for Europe and International Organisations and the Brussels' Voice Platform;
- One participant from the Municipality of Etterbeek;
- One participant from the Municipality of Ixelles;
- One participant from the KMOP Policy Centre (Social Action and Innovation Centre), Brussels;
- One citizen from the Public Participation Network, Ireland;
- Four participants from ECAS (European Citizen Action Service), Brussels.

Moderator:

- Claire Morot-Sir, EU Rights Manager, ECAS.

This report outlines the key points raised by participants during the discussion on the voting rights of EU mobile citizens in Belgium. Additionally, it describes the methodology used and presents the main recommendations along with the final conclusions.

2. Methodology

ECAS has performed a very thorough mapping of all NGOs, local authorities, policymakers, and any other relevant stakeholders located in Belgium who could benefit from the outcomes of the debate. Consequently, an invitation for the focus group was sent to 89 stakeholders: municipalities, EU mobile citizens, academics, expat associations, and Civil Society Organisations in Belgium.

The focus group consisted of two parts: a first session about obstacles experienced by EU mobile citizens regarding their political participation in Belgium, followed by a discussion on solutions to improve political participation. During both sessions, special attention was paid to the matter of compulsory voting in Belgium.

After a short presentation of ECAS, Claire Morot-Sir, the focus group moderator and ECAS' EU Rights Manager, introduced the focus group and initiated a tour-de-table.

During the **first part**, the main obstacles to the political participation of EU mobile citizens in Belgium were discussed. The following questions were raised:

- What main obstacles do EU mobile citizens face regarding their political participation in Belgium, according to observations from your daily work?
- Are EU mobile citizens – including the younger generations and minorities – sufficiently aware of their voting rights in their host Member State?
- How could compulsory voting and the absence of e-voting and proxy options in Belgium deter EU mobile citizens from exercising their voting rights?
- How does the language barrier represent an obstacle to EU mobile citizens' political participation?

The **second part** of the focus group covered recommendations and good practices. The following discussion points were used:

- Discussion about changing certain voting procedures in Belgium, such as registration procedures and deadlines as potential solutions to obstacles faced by unaware and/or disabled EU mobile citizens.
- Discussion regarding best practices by governments and civil society to improve political participation of EU mobile citizens in Belgium.

The presented discussion points were developed after conducting a literature review to define the context, and to formulate the questions for the focus group's participants. The following section presents the results of the literature review.

3. Voting Rights of EU Mobile Citizens in Belgium

According to Article 22 (1) 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 of them being nationals of that country.¹ As of 1 January 2023, 981.700 citizens living in Belgium originate from other EU Member States (8.4%), which classifies them as EU mobile citizens, or non-national EU citizens.² In the Brussels-Capital Region, this percentage of EU mobile citizens is even higher, with more than 1 in 5 being an EU national.³ For these EU mobile citizens to be able to exercise their right to vote and stand as candidate in the Belgian municipal elections and the European Parliament elections, the following basic criteria must be fulfilled:

- Being an EU citizen: 18 years of age or over on election day for the local elections and 16 years of age for the European Parliament elections;
- Citizens must register to be on the electoral roll of the host Member State, as this process is not automatic like it is for national citizens;
- Citizens must be domiciled in the municipality they want to vote in.

3.1. Voting rights awareness of EU mobile citizens in Belgium

In Belgium, the efforts to raise awareness on the rights of EU mobile citizens to vote and stand as candidates in municipal and European Parliament elections vary from one region to another. For example, according to a 2017 survey conducted with Belgian municipalities before the 2018 elections⁴, some municipalities have a low level of involvement, not sending postal letters to inform EU mobile citizens about their right to vote and stand as candidates in local elections. Conversely, other municipalities make substantial efforts to proactively inform EU citizens about their rights. These municipalities send official notifications about registration deadlines via e-mail, distribute informational brochures, collaborate with NGOs, and organise various information sessions in English to ensure EU mobile citizens are well-informed about their voting rights and the registration processes. This approach was confirmed by two focus group participants working at the municipalities of Etterbeek and Ixelles.

With regard to the regional level, official government websites have been providing comprehensive information and guidelines on how EU citizens can register and vote in the run-up to both municipal and European Parliament elections in 2018-2019 and 2024. Overall, however, local governments and CSOs, particularly in Brussels, have made significant and effective efforts to spread awareness about EU electoral rights, especially concerning local elections.⁵ The European Commission corroborated these efforts accordingly in its 2018 report

¹ Article 22(1) TFEU: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016E022>

² [Governance of migrant integration in Belgium – European Commission, European Website on Migration - June 2024.](#)

³ [Annual report of the Brussels Commissioner for Europe and International Organisations - 2023.](#)

⁴ [Report on Political Participation of Mobile EU Citizens: Belgium – Global Citizenship Observatory – May 2023.](#)

⁵ Examples of local projects: <https://www.migpolgroup.com/index.php/portfolio-item/votebrussels-campaign/> and <https://faireu.ecas.org/mobile-included-aware-free-movement-political-right-of-eu-mobile-citizens/>.

on the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in municipal elections.⁶

Despite these efforts, many EU mobile citizens still fail to register to vote. Although concrete data on the awareness of EU mobile citizens in Belgium regarding their EU rights is unavailable, the 2023 Barometer report on EU citizens' rights awareness reveals that only 67% of respondents felt sufficiently informed about their rights to vote and stand as candidates in European Parliament elections. An even lower percentage of 55% accurately identified their rights concerning local elections.⁷ These figures alone already indicate a need for improved awareness about the voting rights of EU mobile citizens residing in Belgium. On top of this, the electoral turnout for both the local elections on 14 October 2018 and the European Parliament elections in 2019 amplifies this need even more, as only 17.45% of eligible EU mobile citizens participated in the local elections, while a mere 9.7% voted in the European Parliament elections, out of a potential 748,267 registered EU mobile citizens.⁸

3.2. Mandatory voting

According to participants, one of the primary obstacles to electoral participation among the EU mobile citizen community in Belgium is the country's mandatory voting procedure. Once EU mobile citizens have voluntarily registered themselves to vote in either the local elections or in the European Parliament elections for Belgian MEPs, these citizens are then subject to compulsory voting laws in the Brussels-Capital Region and Wallonia, which may discourage some from signing up at all.

Importantly, compulsory voting for the local elections in Flanders has been abolished by the decree of 16 July 2021.⁹ This regulatory change means that EU mobile citizens in Flanders, even if registered to vote, do not face any penalties for not heading to the polling stations. One of the participants noted, rightfully, that this significant divergence in voting regulations could provide valuable insights for comparative analysis after the Belgian local elections scheduled for 13 October 2024.

3.3. General overview

The next section of this report outlines and elaborates further on six more obstacles to political participation among EU mobile citizens in Belgium, as identified by the focus group attendees. These include language barriers, early registration deadlines, and citizens feeling apprehensive due to unfamiliarity with the political context of their host country.

The final part of the report focuses on potential solutions and recommendations proposed to enhance participation and increase voter turnout in upcoming elections in Belgium in which EU mobile citizens are eligible to partake.

⁶ [European Commission - 2018 report on the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in municipal elections.](#)

⁷ [Citizenship and Democracy - Eurobarometer report - 2023.](#)

⁸ [Report on Political Participation of Mobile EU Citizens: Belgium – Global Citizenship Observatory – May 2023.](#)

⁹ <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnews/nl/2021/04/30/hervorming-lokale-verkiezingen-krijg-groen-licht-opkomstplicht/> Accessed 13 June 2024.

4. Identified Obstacles to Political Participation

Most participants agreed that **mandatory voting** in Belgium poses a significant obstacle for EU mobile citizens registering to vote in both the European Parliament and local elections. Although many are “keen to vote”, as one attendee noted, the fear of ultimately being unable to go to the polling stations after registration, and thus risking a fine, combined with confusion and misunderstandings about the possibilities of proxy voting in Belgium, produce obstacles to their electoral participation. And while the chance of receiving an actual fine might be mostly insignificant, these overall feelings of confusion and fear often lead to non-registration.

Belgium also **lacks a tradition of strong pro-voting campaigns**, arguably less required in a country with compulsory voting. Whereas other EU Member States tend to describe voting as a “democratic moment” that citizens should feel privileged to partake in in the run-up to elections, participants agreed that Belgian governments do not seem to exhibit the same “reflex” to use such motivating language. This increases the risk of the non-national citizen segment of society falling behind in electoral participation, as they are not automatically registered. As previously mentioned, the abolition of compulsory voting in Flanders could pave the way for intriguing comparative research on the differences in electoral participation among EU mobile citizens.

One attendee identified **Belgium's early registration deadlines** – among the earliest in the EU – as the primary hurdle to political participation of EU mobile citizens. As a consequence, these citizens are required to sign up months before election day, at a time when the elections are not yet widely discussed. This challenge is amplified by the aforementioned lack of strong early pro-voting campaigns in Belgium. Importantly, the participant mentioned that early registration deadlines are specific to Belgium and complicated to solve due to the extensive paperwork required to compile the electoral list on time, unlike in many other Member States where the process has already been simplified.

Another issue observed by the focus group participants pertains to **a loss of faith in democratic procedures**, which affects both EU mobile citizens and Belgium's national citizens alike. EU mobile citizens may feel that their vote is inconsequential and unlikely to influence the final outcome in Belgium, leading to a reluctance to register. This sense of powerlessness is exacerbated by a widespread lack of trust in politicians who appear disconnected from citizens' concerns. Young people, in particular, may feel their voices are marginalised, further diminishing their interest in political participation. Building on this, one attendee underpinned the prejudice of authorities perceiving social media merely as a platform for entertainment. Doing so disregards its potential to rebuild citizens' trust in politics, especially among young people who could be reached through representative micro influencers.

Language barriers, too, act as major impediments to political participation of EU mobile citizens in Belgium who do not speak French or Dutch, two of the country's official languages. This prevents them from accessing and understanding the programmes of political parties unless these materials are translated into English. As a result, EU mobile citizens may struggle to grasp the messages and positions of various politicians and parties, hindering their effective participation in the political process. Addressing this challenge can be complex, as highlighted by a municipality representative who mentioned difficulties in including English in communication campaigns. These challenges stem from **financial constraints and logistical issues such as limited space for multilingual materials**. Consequently, efforts to overcome language barriers and promote inclusivity in political engagement require careful planning and resource allocation.

Linguistic obstacles further exacerbate the **feelings of political uncertainty** among EU mobile citizens in Belgium. They may feel more comfortable and confident voting in municipal and European elections in their home countries, where they have a better understanding of the political environment and candidates. This preference stems from a fear of not being sufficiently informed about the host country's political scene, which can significantly deter these citizens' participation in the Belgian local elections. One attendee remarked accordingly that the country's multilingual nature and its proportional representation system contribute to a complex political landscape that can be daunting to those unfamiliar with local politics.

Moving on, attendees also identified two "big myths" as obstacles to the political participation of EU mobile citizens in Belgium, based on their daily work. The first one suggested that some citizens **fear losing their right to vote in national elections or referenda in their home countries**, as the action of voting in another country can be perceived as intimidating and definitive, leading to feelings of anxiety about "double voting". Mainly concerns about the illegality of double voting in the European Parliament elections have been wrongly understood and have led to misunderstandings about the right to participate in the municipal elections of the host country.

Others fear **losing their "special tax status"**¹⁰ if they register to vote in the municipal elections, mistakenly believing this would subject them to the same tax obligations as national citizens, rather than the reduced rates for "not settle" workers.

In conclusion, **EU mobile citizens' insufficient awareness of the voting procedures in their host Member State** has been recognised as the most important hurdle to their political participation in Belgium.

¹⁰ <https://taxsummaries.pwc.com/belgium/individual/significant-developments> Accessed 20 June 2024. It is important to note that, by capping eligibility to a maximum of eight years, this law has been amended to restrict long-term residents from benefiting from reductions that were originally intended only for expatriates on temporary assignments.

5. Proposed Recommendations and Good Practices

After identifying several obstacles to the political participation of EU mobile citizens, the second session of the focus group shifted its focus to discussing potential solutions to these barriers. Several practical suggestions were highlighted, summarised in the following key points.

5.1. Mandatory voting and the registration process

In Belgium, mandatory voting and the registration process, including early deadlines, are closely intertwined obstacles to political participation of EU mobile citizens. Several focus group participants suggested the following to address EU mobile citizens' concerns and confusion about mandatory voting: to implement an **automatic process** where these citizens are offered the opportunity to register for local elections immediately upon registering at a municipality. This initiative could serve as a “key moment” of contact with Belgian government authorities and solidify a genuine connection with the citizen's host Member State. Another participant, while supporting this proposal, emphasised the need to maintain separation between the registration processes for Belgian citizens – who are obliged to vote – and non-national EU citizens – who instead have the option to do so – to prevent confusion among administrative staff at the municipalities in Brussels-Capital Region and Wallonia.

Consequently, if many EU mobile citizens indeed opt to register to vote for upcoming local elections when they first arrive in a Belgian municipality, it could potentially allow for extending the registration deadline for other citizens, thereby reducing the administrative burden on municipalities.

Addressing the feelings of apprehension and uncertainty that EU mobile citizens may feel about mandatory voting procedures in a foreign country, one participant recommended that local governments revise their voting campaigns in such a way that, **through effective use of framing language**, these concerns can be alleviated.

5.2. Civic and political education for EU mobile citizens

First and foremost, **political education must be actively supported by local governments across all Member States** as it is crucial to educate individuals from a young age about how their vote impacts their surroundings. For instance, one participant highlighted the importance of introducing engaging educational tools in primary and secondary schools to underscore the significance of voting as a fundamental political right. Implementing interactive experiences like virtual gaming can effectively engage young people, making the learning process about voting enjoyable and memorable.

In alignment with this approach, municipalities such as Ixelles and Etterbeek have already taken proactive steps by implementing educational initiatives in three different high schools in Brussels. These efforts include showing animated videos to educate students about civic duties and voting rights.

Ixelles and Etterbeek have also implemented good educational practices for EU mobile citizens that extend beyond the classroom. These include the **distribution of informative leaflets or flyers in English** that clearly outline the political rights of newly arrived EU mobile citizens as well as crucial information about how political parties operate in Belgium and the voting process. This approach could immediately address language barriers and misconceptions about the Belgian political landscape and voting procedures.

One attendee advised to send citizens periodic reminders of these rights over the course of several years to ensure citizens do not lose awareness of their political EU rights shortly after arriving in Belgium. This approach would allow EU mobile citizens to ask questions if in doubt and assists in dispelling any “myths”, such as the loss of voting rights in national elections or special tax status.

However, as noted by another participant, disseminating comprehensive information is not solely the responsibility of the host Member State’s authorities. EU mobile citizens would also benefit greatly from communication from both Consulates and Embassies. This extra communication would help clarify nuances that the municipalities might fail to mention, such as the loss of the right to vote in municipal elections back home when registered in a municipality in their host Member State.

5.3. Inclusion, coherence, and cooperation among stakeholders

The concept of inclusion was a recurring theme throughout the focus group discussions, particularly concerning two interconnected groups within Belgian society: youth and minorities. When addressing how to effectively engage young EU mobile citizens in Belgium to increase their voter turnout, one suggestion was to **leverage the influence of micro influencers on social media who are active within specific communities**. This approach could significantly increase awareness of the political rights of EU mobile citizens.

Beyond social media, establishing and **coordinating a network of socio-cultural partners** was also proposed as a valuable strategy to extend outreach beyond the “Brussels bubble”, to less represented segments of the population. Having the “right intermediaries” within these groups to facilitate ongoing communication and information dissemination – again, including **translations** –, then, could prove instrumental in reaching all parts of society.

Nonetheless, achieving these objectives requires strong support, as civil society organisations cannot undertake this effort alone. Several participants expressed a pressing need for collaboration and support mainly from political parties, but also from the public sector. **Developing a collective and coherent action plan** aimed at prioritising and integrating all EU mobile citizens into Belgian politics could be paramount to changing voter turnout figures of EU mobile citizens in upcoming elections.

6. Conclusions

To summarise the outcomes of the focus group on electoral participation of EU mobile citizens in Belgium, here are the main recommendations that were provided by the participants:

- An automatic process should be implemented where EU mobile citizens in Belgium are offered the opportunity to register to the electoral roll for local elections immediately upon registering at a municipality. If many EU mobile citizens indeed choose to register in this way, it could potentially allow for extending the registration deadline for other citizens, thereby reducing the administrative burden on municipalities.
- In schools, but also more generally in all municipalities in Belgium, a coherent education plan should be developed to inform young citizens about their fundamental EU citizenship rights, and information brochures should be disseminated to newly arrived EU nationals in Belgium about their political rights as EU mobile citizens.
- More effort should be put into cooperation among stakeholders (CSOs, political parties, public authorities, including both Consulates and municipalities), to ensure that all EU mobile citizens are sufficiently informed about their rights and about voting procedures in Belgium.
- Stakeholders should also collaborate with appropriate intermediaries to disseminate useful information about EU citizenship rights within specific marginalised communities, as this would foster a more inclusive political participation in society.
- To further ensure political inclusion in Belgium, information about the proposals of various political parties should be translated at least into English. This effort will help increase the knowledge of EU mobile citizens about local parties and ideologies, enabling them to make more informed decisions.
- Finally, to implement these recommendations and turn them into reality, additional financial support should be at the disposal of municipalities.

7. Agenda

Round table on the political participation of EU mobile citizens in Belgium

Online, June 7th, 2024

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 of experienced by mobile EU citizens regarding their political participation in Belgium and reflection on compulsory voting
10:45-11:05	Presentations of the outcomes of the first session and discussion
11:05-11:25	Discussion about solutions to improve political participation; focus on the Belgian municipal elections in October
11:25-11:45	Presentations of the recommendations and main outcomes of the discussion
11:45-12:00	Concluding remarks

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Welcome