

DEMOCRATISATION ON THE MOVE: MOBILE CITIZENS AS A FACTOR FOR POLITICAL STABILITY AND QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN THE EU

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Abstract:

The migration phenomenon has consistently accompanied European civilization's development. Today, the processes of globalization and European integration are intensifying the impact of migration across the European continent. These processes increase the scale of migratory flows, diversify migratory patterns, and stimulate new forms of identity, connectivity, and solidarity. These new forms of relationships between the country of origin, migrants, and the country of destination bring valuable resources for social, economic, and political development.

This analysis¹ is dedicated to examining the potential of mobile EU citizens to enhance political stability and the quality of democracy, both within their home countries and throughout the European Union. The findings reveal an intriguing paradox. Despite the considerable potential for contribution, mobile citizens appear to face disadvantages concerning one of the most noticeable aspects of democratic participation at the EU level-European Parliament elections.

Keywords: free movement of people; migration and democratisation; new citizenship; EU elections

Introduction

People often think of migration as a recent phenomenon. However, migration has been a feature of human existence for centuries. This is also valid for the European continent, which has a long migration history and experience. The historical context is important because it helps understand some of the most recent dynamics both in the migration flows and their management attempt.

¹ This article presents some of the results of the project Connectivity and solidarity with Bulgaria of mobile Bulgarian citizens in the EU: values, innovation, activism (2023-2026) funded by the Fund for Scientific Research, 2023 Fundamental Research Fund competition.

Migration is a priority topic for the EU. It is a complex topic, which comes with opportunities and challenges². Understanding migratory movements and how they evolve is essential for effective migration management but also affects the political stability and democracy within the EU. The phenomenon of migration within the European Union, particularly concerning EU mobile citizens, presents a multifaceted dynamic with the potential to significantly influence both political stability and the quality of democracy across the entire EU³. The free movement of people, a cornerstone of the EU project, has facilitated unprecedented levels of intra-EU migration, leading to a complex interplay of social, economic, and political factors that warrant thorough examination⁴.

Increased mobility appears to foster political participation, knowledge exchange, and democratic resilience, providing opportunities to enhance governance and stability at both national and subnational levels. These effects are noticeable in both the countries of origin and destination. This is primarily associated with the development of new transnational identities and solidarity (See Vertovec 2001; Gould 2007), as well as the transfer of knowledge, remittances, and innovation. The next level of context is crucial. The European Union, particularly through its concept of European citizenship, played a role in stimulating and facilitating these processes.

In the following parts of the text, through the prism of the concept of European citizenship and more specifically the right to free movement and residing in another EU country, the link will be made to the opportunities this holds as a potential for political stability and quality of democracy. Such an effort is worthwhile, especially at the background of the citizen trust in governments and the institutions across EU with is at an all-time low, while nearly half of EU citizens claim they are unsatisfied with the way democracy works in the EU. With populist and nationalistic parties gaining ground in Europe, it seems that the fostering citizens' participation in the European democratic process has become more crucial than ever.

The free movement and democracy in EU

„EU citizenship is the crown jewel of European integration. It is to Political Union what the euro is to our Economic and Monetary Union. Today's Citizenship Report places EU citizens centre stage,“ said in 2013 Viviane Reding, the EU's Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship (European Commission, 2013). The creation of European citizenship strengthens the EU, giving it greater legitimacy and internal security. To some extent, it also provides a solution to the democratic deficit facing the Community. It is citizenship that makes the EU a political and not just an economic entity. At the heart of the

² Chiaramello and all, 2024

³ Estevens, 2018

⁴ Simionescu, 2019

architecture of citizenship of the Union, which can be seen through the classical conceptualization describing it as consisting of the elements of: legal status; rights; and collective identity, lies civic activism⁵.

Free movement is a fundamental right of EU citizens and a cornerstone of European citizenship. As an individual right, mobility is expected to extend opportunities and choices for European citizens beyond national boundaries (Seubert, 2019). The experience of free movement within the EU is considered one of the successful elements of the European ideal. It also has received positive feedback from politicians and citizens, compared to the international migration of third-country nationals. A 2017 Eurobarometer survey showed that support for intra-EU mobility was increasing, with 63% of respondents having a positive view of immigration from other EU countries⁶. Another survey indicates that freedom of movement is regarded as the most significant benefit of the EU for Europeans⁷. Attitudes toward free movement vary across countries, with Eastern European countries generally having more positive views⁸.

In 2019, it was estimated that around 17 million EU citizens lived in an EU Member State of which they were not nationals; 14 million of them were of voting age. Following the UK's departure from the EU, the number of mobile EU citizens went down to 13.3 million, 11 million of whom were of voting age⁹. This group could have an impactful role in shaping political stability and the quality of democracy both in migrants' countries of origin and across the entire Union. Recognizing this importance involves understanding several interconnected dimensions.

Migration within the EU enables individuals to participate actively in different political environments. Mobile citizens often experience diverse political systems and civic practices, which can enhance their understanding of democratic processes. This exposure may lead to increased engagement, advocacy for democratic reforms, and a sense of political agency that transcends national boundaries. Moreover, by gaining democratic experience during mobility, returning citizens can be agents of positive change and transfer of experience in their countries of origin.

Mobile citizens have the potential to establish transnational networks that contribute to democratic sustainability. Migrants, as transnational actors, can form networks that support democratic principles across borders. These networks facilitate information exchange, mobilize collective action, and promote democratic values, thus enhancing democratic resilience in both their countries of origin and host nations.

⁵ Staykova, 2025

⁶ Darvas, 2017

⁷ Garton, Macfarlane, Snow, 2021

⁸ Meltzer and all, 2018

⁹ Corlig and Mentzelopoulou, 2024

Mobile citizens often acquire skills, knowledge, and innovative ideas during their migration experience. When they maintain social and professional ties with their countries of origin, they can contribute to institutional strengthening and democratic reforms there, potentially reducing governance deficits and corruption.

Inclusive policies that recognize mobile citizens' rights – such as voting in local and European elections – can enhance democratic legitimacy, foster trust in institutions, and encourage political participation among diverse groups.

Mobile Europeans are very often known to be Europhile. Compared with the non-mobile population, Europeans with (past) transnational experiences feel more European, and they are more likely to favour redistributive solidarity with EU citizens and other immigrants in their country¹⁰.

European migrants are also very often not only pro-European, but they are also unlikely to vote for populist radical right parties¹¹, which are a current threat to the democratic consensus in the EU.

Considering the points above, the subsequent sections of the text will offer an overview of the tools available for citizen participation at the EU level, with a particular focus on the most renowned and widely recognized tool – elections.

European Parliamentary elections – can or cannot vote

This part of the text focuses on perhaps the most visible element of European citizenship and a tool for the democratic participation of mobile Europeans. The European Parliamentary elections, a fundamental aspect of the European Union's democratic framework serve as a crucial mechanism for citizens to directly influence the trajectory of European policy and legislation. Since 1979 when the first elections were held the elections have offered citizens from member states a chance to elect representatives to the European Parliament¹². These elections embody the principle of representative democracy on a transnational scale, enabling the selection of Members of the European Parliament who will subsequently advocate for their constituents' interests and contribute to the formulation of EU-wide policies¹³. A unique aspect of those elections is the right of the EU citizens to vote even out of their country of origin. Participation in the electoral process is a product of two interconnected factors; first, eligibility to vote; and second, the ability to access the ballot in practice¹⁴. In the 2024 European elections, there was the highest voter turnout in 30 years, with 50.97%

¹⁰ Witte and Deutschmann, 2024

¹¹ Visconti, 2023

¹² König & Luig, 2017

¹³ McElroy & Benoit, 2006

¹⁴ Hutcheson and Ostling, 2021

of the 357 million eligible citizens participating¹⁵. This is a slight increase compared to the 2019 elections (50.66%).

Based on data from 2020, the share of mobile EU citizens in the overall voting population varies greatly between EU countries. It is by far the highest in Luxembourg (40.4%) and the lowest in Poland (0.09 %). In Cyprus, Ireland, Belgium, Austria, and Malta, the share of non-national EU citizens of voting age is also considerable, corresponding to between 7 and 14% of the electorate¹⁶.

On the eve of the last elections to the European Parliament elections, pundits expected a big change on the right. In such a situation - when the stakes are high - it seems important that everyone who is eligible to vote can do so without difficulty. However, recent research shows that there are significant obstacles for mobile Europeans who reside outside their country of origin¹⁷.

In contrast to non-mobile Europeans, who usually do not have to become proactive until election day, many mobile Europeans have to actively register beforehand to be able to cast their votes. And they have to do so very early on, often several months before the election.

Based on official EU information, the cited research shows the prerequisites for mobile Europeans who want to vote in the upcoming election. It reveals several major obstacles: First, the registration options and deadlines differ a lot between EU member states. For example, Swedish citizens residing in Belgium had to decide if they wanted to register to vote in Sweden by 16 May, while if they wanted to vote in Belgium the deadline was 29 February. Many mobile EU citizens have a choice between voting for candidates in their origin country or in their residence country. But there are exceptions: Slovaks abroad, for example, cannot vote in Slovakia. This multiplicity of rules creates a need to actively search for the conditions that apply in each particular case¹⁸.

Against this backdrop, the legal and practical arrangements for voting in the European elections for citizens who live or are temporarily outside their home Member State vary greatly between the Member States. Most allow voting at embassies or consulates abroad, several allow citizens living abroad to vote by post, a few allow voting by proxy, and one (Estonia) allows electronic voting. On the other hand, Czechia, Ireland, Malta and Slovakia do not permit their citizens to vote in the European elections from abroad¹⁹.

Free movement of European citizens is hailed as a fundamental right. It is bad news for democracy if those who enjoy this fundamental right encounter obstacles to exercising their electoral rights. Free European mobility and Euro-

¹⁵ Armangau, 2024

¹⁶ European Parliament, 2022

¹⁷ Witte and Deutschmann, 2024

¹⁸ Witte and Deutschmann, 2024

¹⁹ Corlig and Mentzelopoulou, 2024

pean electoral rights should not be mutually exclusive, but current bureaucratic hurdles (including early registration deadlines and country-specific opt-in registration systems) seem to create practical trade-offs between the two. This could reduce turnout among mobile Europeans²⁰.

Conclusion

Analysis reveals several preconditions and areas where mobile European citizens could bolster political stability and democracy at the European level. While methods for precisely measuring this influence are still under development, the potential is evident. A key finding is that despite the theoretical democratic potential of mobile citizens, their participation in European Parliament elections – a traditional avenue for influencing the democratic process – faces practical barriers. There's a lack of statistical tracking of their electoral activity, and harmonization of regulations across member states to facilitate their participation is lacking²¹. This is concerning, especially given the democratic potential these citizens possess due to their mobility. The obstacles to political participation among mobile EU citizens include their non-citizen status in their country of residence and external status relative to their country of citizenship.²²

European mobile citizens mainly use passive and non-institutional channels to impact democratic quality and stability.

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²⁰ Witte, N. and Deutschmann, E., 2024

²¹ Hutcheson and Ostling, 2021, p. 2-3

²² Hutcheson and Ostling, 2021, p.2-3

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