

ENHANCING THE DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENS WITH MIGRATION AND REFUGEE BACKGROUND

Policy Paper





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1. Executive Summary

This policy paper addresses the need to enhance the democratic participation of citizens with migration and refugee backgrounds within the European Union. It emphasizes that true democratic engagement goes beyond voting; it encompasses various forms of civic participation, including public consultations, community organizing, and advocacy. Despite significant progress in the EU's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021-2027, there remains a considerable gap in the political representation and engagement of migrants and refugees.

Currently, 14.5% of the EU population aged 15 to 74 is foreign-born, yet these individuals face multiple barriers to participation in the democratic process. These barriers can be categorized into three primary areas: **legal and structural challenges**, **social and economic hurdles**, and **cultural and political obstacles**. Legal restrictions, lack of targeted information, and inadequate representation in political institutions all contribute to the underrepresentation of migrants in local, national, and European elections.

The paper highlights key challenges, such as the low voter turnout among migrant communities, negative stereotypes that discourage participation, and a political climate that often neglects the concerns of these citizens. It also emphasizes the need for improved monitoring of participation to understand the barriers faced by these communities and to inform policy reforms.

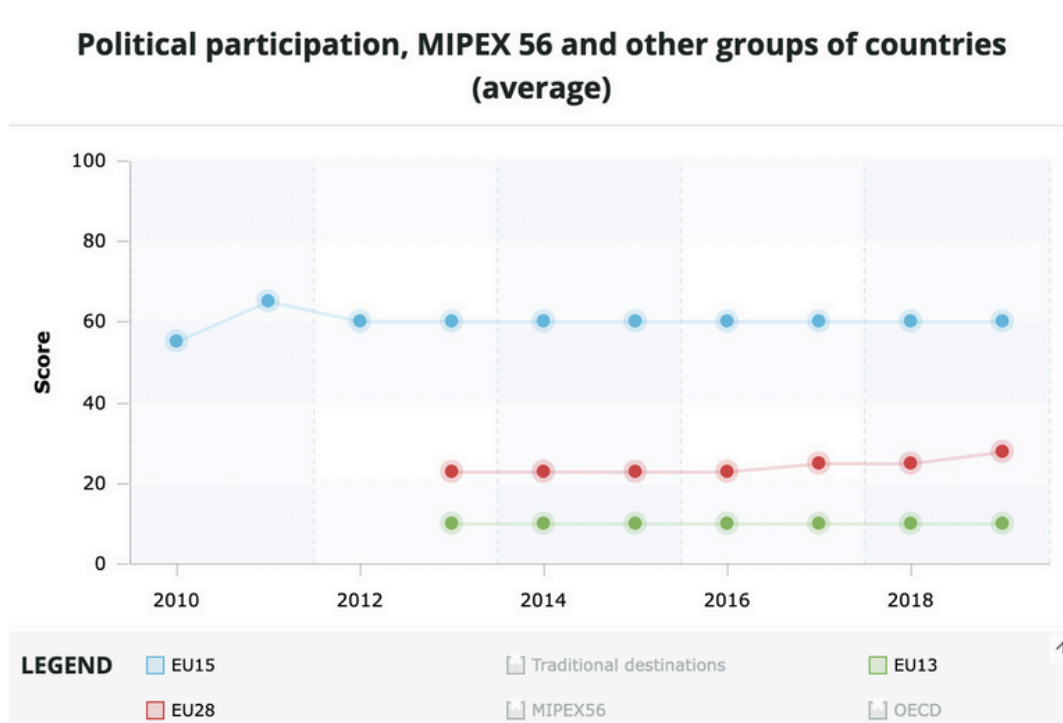
The recommendations in this paper aim to enhance inclusive democracy and ensure that the voices of all citizens—regardless of their background—are heard and valued. By addressing structural, social, and political barriers to participation, these measures seek to foster greater engagement from citizens with migration and refugee backgrounds, empowering them to shape the decisions that impact their lives.

Keywords: Democratic participation, migration and refugee background, human rights, civic engagement, voting rights, political participation, European Union, monitoring

2. Introduction

At the heart of the European Union lie the values of democracy and equality. Participating in democracy is far more than simply voting at elections; it includes taking part in boycotts, organizing campaigns (online and offline), attending demonstrations and marches, advocacy, petitions, and contributing to public consultations. Real democratic engagement involves citizens actively shaping the decisions and policies that affect their lives. As a result, involving citizens with migrant and refugee backgrounds is imperative to upholding true democracy and ensuring that all EU citizens are being represented.

The push for incorporating migrants into policymaking is evident in the European Union’s Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021-2027. One of the objectives is to have more “EU citizens with a migrant background participate in consultative and decision-making processes at local, regional, national and European levels.” [1] At halfway through the Action Plan, there is still space to improve the integration, inclusion, and civic engagement of citizens with migration and refugee backgrounds.



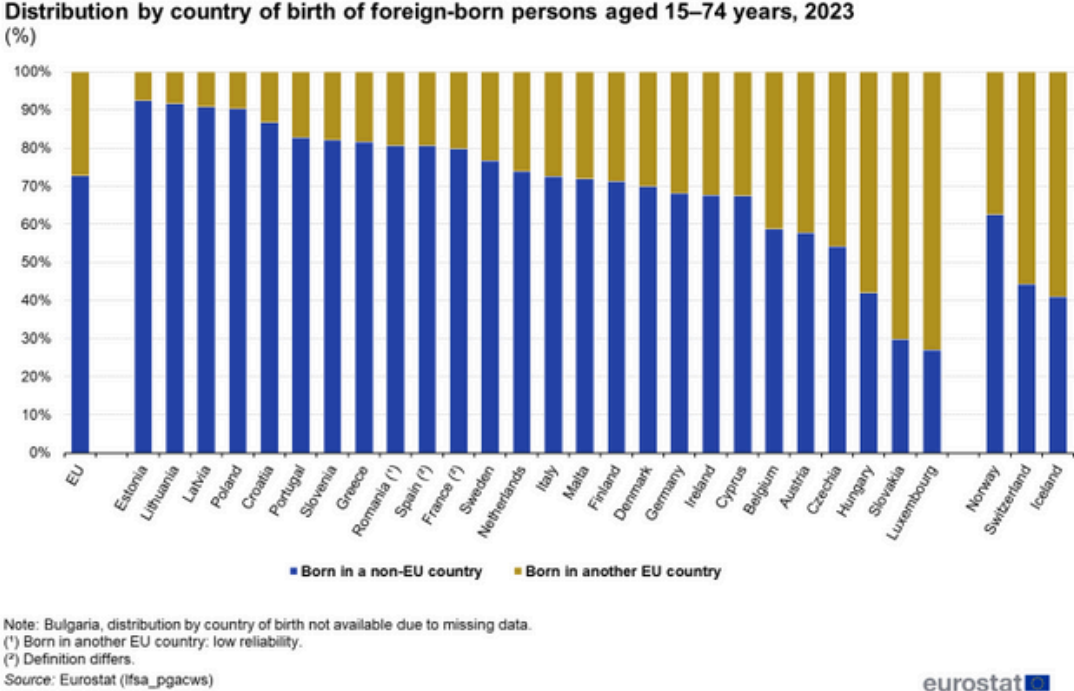
Source: MPEX 2020

As of 2023, **14.5% of the EU population aged between 15 and 74 is foreign born**, and of those 59.7% have EU citizenship [2]. As a result, naturalized migrants and second-generation immigrants make up a considerable portion of the European population. In the last ten years, around 5 million immigrants, ma-

[1] European Commission, Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021-2027, p.21, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0758&qid=1632299185798>, accessed 7 October 2024.

[2] Eurostat (2024). Foreign-born people and their descendants - main characteristics https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Foreign-born_people_and_their_descendants_-_main_characteristics#Overview_by_migration_status, accessed October 2024.

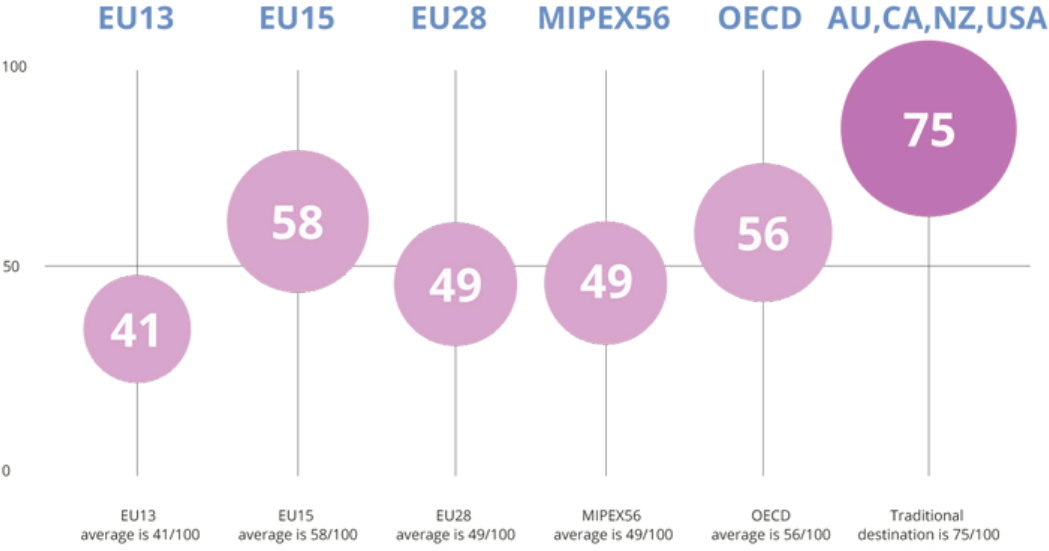
-king up roughly 2% of the total European electorate [3], have become eligible voters. Despite this, they have consistently been underrepresented in elections at the local, national, and European Union level. **Their political presence remains disproportionately low in comparison to their demographic significance**, reflecting ongoing barriers to electoral participation [4]. Addressing this gap in representation is imperative to uphold the EU’s commitment to democracy.



On the local level, access to voting and participation in democracy is more accessible to foreign born residents, albeit there remain differences amongst the Member States. Non-EU foreigners can vote in local elections in 13 out of the 27 member states [5], although this does not necessarily include refugees as there are some prerequisites regarding length of stay or residence status [6]. In 1997, the Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level came into force with initially only four ratifications [7]. As of now, there are only nine ratifications [8], meaning that more can be done by Member States to better include foreign born nationals into their local democratic processes.

[3] Yilmaz, Sinem (2023). Enhancing Electoral Participation of Mobile Voters in the European Parliament Elections 2024, pp.4-6, <https://www.migpolgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Policy-Brief-Enhancing-Electoral-Participation-of-Mobile-Voters-in-the-European-Parliament-Elections-2024.pdf>, accessed 7 October 2024.
 [4] Yilmaz, Sinem (2023). Enhancing Electoral Participation of Mobile Voters in the European Parliament Elections 2024, pp.4-6, <https://www.migpolgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Policy-Brief-Enhancing-Electoral-Participation-of-Mobile-Voters-in-the-European-Parliament-Elections-2024.pdf>, accessed 8 October 2024.
 [5] The countries include Belgium, Denmark (after four years of residence), Estonia, Finland (after two years of residence), Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain (for citizens of countries with bilateral agreements), Sweden (after three years of residence), and Portugal (with bilateral agreements with countries like Brazil). Source: The Local (2022). EXPLAINED: Where in Europe can non-EU foreigners vote in local elections?, <https://www.thelocal.com/20220218/explained-where-in-europe-can-non-eu-foreigners-vote-in-local-elections>, accessed 7 October 2024.
 [6] Jacobi, Milan (2021). How the Political Participation of Refugees is Shaped on the Local Level, p.10, https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP_34.2021.pdf, accessed 9 October 2024.
 [7] Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden.
 [8] Albania, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden.

Without concrete monitoring, it is difficult to fully grasp the participation of the underrepresented group. As a result, **monitoring human rights and monitoring of participation throughout the electoral cycle is essential** to ensure that everyone is being given the same platform to express their opinions.



Evaluation of integration policies 2020

Source: MPEX 2020

3. Key challenges

The underrepresentation of EU citizens with refugee and migration background can be explained by a **mix of obstacles**, which can be broken down into **three categories**: legal and structural barriers, social and economic, cultural and political.

a) Legal and structural:

In certain Member States, specifically Cyprus, France, and Ireland potential voters need to register to vote. This can create an obstacle as EU citizens with migration and refugee backgrounds who are voting for the first time may not be aware of this, thus missing out on the chance to vote. Ensuring that **voting rights are inherently provided**, rather than requested, is imperative to make voting more accessible; especially for those who may not be as familiar with the legal procedures. This challenge also links to the issue of lack of targeted dispersal of information. Citizens with migration backgrounds frequently face difficulties in obtaining essential information, such as how to vote or how to participate in public consultations, which limits their ability to engage fully in local communities and democratic processes.

[9] European Parliament (2024), <https://elections.europa.eu/en/how-to-vote/>, accessed 7 October 2024.

Legal restrictions on voting rights can also affect participation of those who can vote. According to a study in Switzerland [10], in areas where non-citizens could not vote, the political engagement of citizens with migration and refugee backgrounds was significantly lower than in the areas where they could vote. The lack of a diverse and politically active community may contribute to a sense of disengagement or marginalization, resulting in lower levels of democratic participation. As a result, **the political climate of a locality can be both a challenge and an opportunity for civic engagement.**

b) Social and economic:

When immigrants do not vote, it not only diminishes their political representation but can also discourage their peers and subsequent generations from participating in the electoral process due to socialization effects [11]. As a result, the low voting rates among immigrants can have a cascading impact, influencing the overall democratic participation within their communities.

Moreover, in European countries, non-EU immigrants tend to be more geographically concentrated than EU immigrants [12], contributing to greater **residential segregation**. As a result, this could hinder the political participation of migrants and refugees by isolating them from mainstream society, limiting their exposure to political institutions, and reinforcing exclusion. When migrant communities are concentrated in certain neighborhoods, they tend to have fewer interactions with the majority population and local political actors, which further reduces opportunities for political engagement [13]. This **geographic and social separation** can also prevent them from accessing the resources and networks that are vital for political participation.

A study on young migrant women [14], found that **negative stereotypes** discourage their political participation, further marginalizing them. These stereotypes make them feel more invisible and less listened to; resulting in them having little faith that their political participation could make a difference. Addressing these stereotypes and racist discourses is essential to diminish the challenges faced by citizens with migration and refugee backgrounds.

[10] Kayran, Elif Naz and Nadler, Anna-Lena (2022). Non-citizen voting rights and political participation of citizens: evidence from Switzerland, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-political-science-review/article/noncitizen-voting-rights-and-political-participation-of-citizens-evidence-from-switzerland/45638FBBA81C88C3F1811A5386BFEC83>, accessed 8 October 2024.

[11] Aggeborn, Linuz; Andersson, Henrik; Dehdari and Lindgren, Karl-Oskar (2023). Granting Immigrants the Right to Vote in National Elections: Empirical Evidence from Swedish Administrative Data, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/granting-immigrants-the-right-to-vote-in-national-elections-empirical-evidence-from-swedish-administrative-data/3D75B2CE59099196D2AFD82A0C884B6F>, accessed 8 October 2024.

[12] Liebig, Thomas and Spielvogel, Gilles (2021). OECD. Residential segregation of immigrants: Patterns, drivers, effects and policy responses. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/29f23e9d-en/1/3/5/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/29f23e9d-en&_csp_a9da7d4f182770aaa63ad86232529333&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book, accessed 8 October 2024.

[13] Dollmann, Jörg (2021). The Political Integration of Immigrants: How Pre- and Postmigration Contexts Matter, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12134-021-00867-5>, accessed 8 October 2024.

[14] Majko, Gabrielle and Medina, Carolina (2021). Young Migrant Women's Political Participation, p.12-14, https://www.migrantwomennetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/CEDAW_youngmigrantwomen_toolkit_PRINT.pdf, accessed 9 October 2024.

c) Cultural and political:

One major political problem, cited both in the literature and by participants of the online discussion, is that **migrants and refugees do not feel represented by political parties and candidates**. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, national parties and candidates rarely explicitly addressed minority concerns in their campaigns, yet many framed immigration as an issue [15]. The far-right online campaigns frequently contained **anti-immigration, xenophobic and Islamophobic content** [16]. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights' Special Election Assessment Mission [17] revealed that in most of the Member States visited there was an **increase in public discourses that stigmatized minority communities**, including immigrants and refugees, leading to an unwelcoming environment for them to exercise their right to participate.

The **ethnic and racial make-up of politicians** also counts towards the feeling of being represented. In 2019, the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) [18] revealed that while racial and ethnic minorities comprised at least 10% of the population within the European Union, they only represented 36 of the 751 elected Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), which is roughly 5%. After the UK left the EU, this representation fell to 4%. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, this percentage rose to 5% with almost a quarter being elected by France [19]. This lack of representation gives little faith to voters with migration and refugee backgrounds that their views would be listened to. Women from a study on young migrant women's political participation highlighted that the **under-representation of migrant women** in decision-making positions makes them and their experiences feel unacknowledged [20]. This has also led to "tokenistic" [21] inclusion of migrant women in decision-making processes, resulting in no concrete actions being taken to address the issues presented by this group.

Moreover, even when there are candidates of migrant background, anti-migration violence impedes them from participating fully in their campaigns. During Ireland's local elections this year, 10% of the candidates with migration backgrounds did not canvas during their campaign "out of fear of anti-migrant violence." [22] As a result, this limits their visibility and likelihood to be elected.

[15] OSCE (2024), Special Election Assessment Mission: European Parliament Elections, 6-9 June 2024 Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, p.11, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/8/570492_2.pdf, accessed 9 October 2024.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] The European Network Against Racism (2019), ENAR's Election Analysis: Ethnic Minorities in the New European Parliament 2019-2025, https://www.enar-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2019_06-Racial-diversity-EU-Parliament-elected-MEPs.pdf, accessed 8 October 2024.

[19] EuroNews (2024), Incoming EU parliament lacking ethnic diversity, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/08/16/incoming-eu-parliament-lacking-ethnic-diversity>, accessed 8 October 2024.

[20] Majko, Gabrielle and Medina, Carolina (2021), Young Migrant Women's Political Participation, p.12-14, https://www.migrantwomennetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/CEDAW_youngmigrantwomen_toolkit_PRINT.pdf, accessed 9 October 2024.

[21] Ibid. p. 14

[22] Ryan, Abby (2024). Anti-migrant violence and small resources stop migrants from electoral success, <https://immigrantcouncil.ie/news/anti-migrant-violence-and-small-resources-stop-migrants-electoral-success>, accessed 9 October 2024.

Language has been long stated as the main cultural obstacle to the political participation of immigrants [23]. Despite Paragraph 12 of the UN Committee on Human Rights, General Comment No. 25 (1996) stating that **information and materials about voting should be available in minority languages**, many Member States only had election material in the official state languages during the European elections [24]. On the other hand, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain did provide such material in multiple languages to cater to their immigration populations. Nevertheless, without a widespread usage of translating election material, many immigrants miss out on vital information needed to not only decide who to vote for, but also how to vote. Even outside of election periods, the limited access to information makes it difficult for them to participate in other democratic practices such as participating in demonstrations and public consultations.

Lastly, **the lack of proximity to MEPs** and political candidates in general has been flagged as a significant obstacle to actively participating by participants in the online discussion. This ties in with the feeling of marginalization and lack of representation, but also highlights the practical challenges of engaging with the political process. When citizens, particularly those from marginalized groups, do not have direct access to political decision-making and candidates, it becomes harder for them to voice their concerns, seek representation, or build meaningful connections with policymakers. This disconnect not only reinforces feelings of marginalization but also diminishes the visibility and responsiveness of political figures, making it more difficult for people to stay informed and motivated to participate in elections or political discussions.

4. Good practices

Cities are a central place for enhancing political participation, especially amongst EU citizens with refugee and migration backgrounds [25]. Below are examples of effective practices, drawn from European cities and beyond, that promote this engagement — not just on election day:

1. The three-year (2022 - 2025) EU project Must-A-Lab was created to better integrate migrants into society in the pilot cities of Fuenlabrada (Spain), Grenoble (France), Livadia (Greece), Mechelen (Belgium), Modena (Italy), and Vienna (Austria). Through ‘Policy Labs’ immigrants alongside representatives from various local institutions and organizations, are invited to freely share their ideas.

[23] Adamson, Göran (2006), Immigrants and Political Participation - Background, Theory, and Empirical Suggestions, p.21, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/221-Immigrants_and_political_participation_2006.pdf, accessed 9 October 2024.

[24] OSCE (2024), Special Election Assessment Mission: European Parliament Elections, 6-9 June 2024 Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, p.12, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/8/570492_2.pdf, accessed 9 October 2024.

[25] Eurocities (2014). Integrating Cities Toolkit, <https://integratingcities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Engagementofmigrantcommunities.pdf>, accessed 9 October 2024.

2. CLAIM Cascais is a service that assists the process of welcoming and integrating immigrants and their families, with special attention given to the most severe cases of vulnerability and social exclusion. It provides them with information, including how to access language lessons and participate politically.

3. The Migrant Integration Policy Index 2020 enables the comparison of government efforts to promote the integration of migrants throughout Europe and globally.

4. Resilient cities is an initiative by Place Network which strengthens the resilience and social cohesion of local democracies in France and Europe by fostering collaborative spaces between newcomers and local actors, amplifying the voices of often unheard citizens.

5. Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-Seat) is an international initiative focused on improving the effectiveness of global refugee responses by co-developing mechanisms that strengthen refugee leadership networks and enhance meaningful, sustainable, and transformative participation of refugees at the state level.

6. The Bilbao Immigration Council was set up in 2011 with the aim of empowering immigrants to organize, engage in dialogue, and contribute proposals for the development of public policies and initiatives.

7. The municipality of Sindelfingen, Germany, created a Council for Diversity, Participation, and Dialogue, to provide individuals with migration backgrounds and those previously excluded from decision-making processes an opportunity to actively contribute to policy development.

8. In 2013, the Municipality 1 Centro Est of Genoa, Italy, introduced 'Partecip@' - a call for projects by not only citizens but also residents. This marked the first time that a migrant without Italian citizenship could participate in such a call. This not only encouraged non-citizens to participate, but it also made EU citizens with migration and refugee backgrounds feel more included and represented.

9. Every year, the Riga City Council, Latvia, sets aside funding to support participatory budgeting, enabling residents to cast their votes on proposed ideas. The implementation of this initiative is overseen by the Riga City Neighbourhood Residents Center, while a special commission, appointed by the city council, reviews the submitted ideas to assess their feasibility and ensure they comply with established guidelines.



Source: Resilient cities initiative by Place Network

Participation of the MUST-a-Lab Project Team from Livadia in the Meeting of S.E.M.P. of the Municipality of Athens



Source: Must-a-Lab

In addition to cities, as part of its Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021-2027, the European Commission has committed to “finance projects to increase the capacity of national, regional and local authorities to involve migrants and migrant organizations in decision-making processes” and “closely involve the newly created Expert Group on the views of migrants in designing and implementing EU policies in the field of migration, asylum and integration.” [26] Follow-through on this commitment is imperative to ensure that EU citizens with migration and refugee background are truly involved in decision-making processes and feel included.

[26] European Commission (2020). Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, p.21, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0758&qid=1632299185798>, accessed 9 October 2024.

5. The importance of human rights monitoring and monitoring of participation throughout the electoral cycle

Human rights monitoring and monitoring participation throughout the electoral cycle is crucial for enhancing the democratic participation of citizens with migration and refugee backgrounds. This would ensure transparency, accountability, and fairness throughout the electoral cycle, fostering a more inclusive political environment. Without monitoring tools to measure democratic participation of EU citizens with migration and refugee backgrounds, and actions to enhance their participation, it is difficult to assess the level of participation and the areas that could be improved [27].

Monitoring throughout the electoral cycle **provides insights into various barriers** that citizens with migration or refugee backgrounds may face, including legal, social, or logistical challenges. As a result, the data and insights gathered from monitoring can **inform policymakers about necessary reforms to foster inclusivity**. By highlighting gaps in participation, monitoring can encourage governments to implement policies that promote broader political inclusion, helping migrant and refugee communities to feel more connected to the democratic process.

Moreover, monitoring can also **increase trust** as people feel as though they are being listened to as there is **accountability**. As a result, people may be more inclined to participate as it decreases the feeling of marginalization and not being listened to. Ensuring that all segments of society, regardless of origin, can fully participate in the democratic process helps to **bridge divides, reduce marginalization, and build stronger, more inclusive communities**. Inclusive political participation sends a message that everyone's voice matters, promoting a sense of belonging and reducing the potential for social fragmentation.

6. Recommendations

- **Participatory budgeting:** This allows citizens to participate in the allocation of public resources in their municipality, which is especially important for immigrants as it gives them a voice in local decision-making processes [28].
- **Language accessibility:** Governments and local authorities should ensure that all official materials, election information, public services, and civic engagement platforms are available in multiple languages.
- **Improve voting rights for non-citizens:** All European Member States should sign the Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level. Extending voting rights to non-citizens—especially in local elections—would enhance the political inclusion of migrant populations.
- **Consultations with citizens:** Governments should regularly consult with migrant communities through structured dialogues so they can communicate their concerns, suggest policies, and collaborate with local authorities to address community issues.
- **Civic Education Programs for Immigrants and Refugees:** Providing comprehensive civic education tailored to the needs of migrants and refugees is essential to promoting informed democratic participation. This includes more educational programs for young people and ensuring they also encompass the new citizens.
- **Increased Support for Migrant and Refugee Organizations:** Governments should provide financial, technical, and logistical support to migrants and refugees organizations, enabling them to serve as a voice for migrants in policy dialogues, develop grassroots community initiatives that promote civic engagement, and facilitate legal aid, language education, and leadership development programs.
- **Anti-Discrimination Legislation and Safeguards:** A legal framework that combats discrimination is essential for ensuring equal access to democratic participation for migrants and refugees. Governments should strengthen anti-discrimination laws and policies.
- **Migrant Advisory Boards:** Establish institutional, local, national level council of migrants so they can be part of decision making processes.
- **Migration Participation Monitoring at the Local and National Level:** The development of the Migrant Integration Policy Index 2020 tool to also include cities, and to be done yearly to track progress.
- **Civic Mentorship Programmes:** People working in EU institutions offering mentoring to young citizens with migration background.

[28] Cabannes, Y. (2004). Participatory budgeting: a significant contribution to participatory democracy. *Environment and urbanization*, pp.27-46, [Add a little bit of body text](#), accessed 9 October 2024.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, fostering the democratic participation of citizens with migration and refugee backgrounds is not just a matter of inclusivity; it is essential for democracy to thrive within the European Union. By acknowledging the multifaceted barriers these individuals face—be they legal, social, economic, or cultural—policymakers can implement targeted strategies that promote true representation and engagement.

The recommendations outlined in this paper serve as a roadmap for enhancing political participation among these communities. From participatory budgeting and language accessibility to mentorship programs and anti-discrimination legislation, these initiatives can empower migrants and refugees to actively shape the decisions that impact their lives. As the EU continues to navigate its Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, it is imperative that local, national, and European authorities prioritize the inclusion of all citizens, ensuring that every voice is heard and valued.



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