



**Fostering the Participation of European Citizens
in Communal and European Elections**

Guidelines for

Local Authorities

in Austria



Participation matters – Fostering Civic and Political Engagement of Mobile EU Citizens

JUST/2014/RCIT/AG/CITI/7283 - Co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union

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Introduction

The presence of non-national EU citizens in most Member states has grown significantly in recent years, passing from 4.7 million in 2005 to more than 15,5 million in 2016 (source: Eurostat). Most intra-EU mobility flows still originate in the Central and Eastern European Member States, despite a substantial increase recorded in the flows from southern Member States affected by economic crisis.

These flows have led to a significant increase in the number of non-national EU citizens of voting age in several Member States but their inclusion in the political life of their countries of residence is still very low. Latest studies¹ show a very low level of active engagement, both inside and outside political parties, and identify many obstacles to participation. These include procedural obstacles to registration in the electoral rolls; lack of or limited information available as a result of poor commitment by local institutions; low interest on the part of eligible EU citizens due to the feeling that political participation has no impact on their daily lives; difficulty of understanding the specific dynamics of a different political system; limited involvement in political activities due to a lack of interest on the part of political parties in engaging non-nationals as active members.

These Guidelines have been written in the framework of the European project 'Participation Matters', co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union, which addresses the issue of insufficient political inclusion and participation of EU citizens residing in member States of which they are not nationals. This project has been implemented in Italy, Austria and Spain with the main agents of change: local authorities, that are primarily responsible for providing information and removing procedural obstacles and associations of EU mobile citizens, which have proven to be the real propulsive forces of participation and engagement.

Activities with local authorities included the testing of innovative procedures and practices aimed at promoting a complete and effective information on voting rights through practical tools and at facilitating the enrolment of EU movers in the electoral rolls. These procedures and practices have been identified during participatory meetings with civil servants working in municipal offices directly responsible for services related to the exercise of voting rights. The present Guidelines illustrate some of the activities implemented in Austria, which have been proven effective and can be easily replicated by other local authorities that experience the same patterns of participation. The activities suggested will inspire all the local authorities that are willing to identify new ways of involving non-national EU citizens in the political life of their territories.

¹ A detailed analysis of the political participation of EU mobile citizens in some European countries is available at: <http://www.operationvote.eu/download-2/publicazioni/?lang=en>.

Background data for Austria

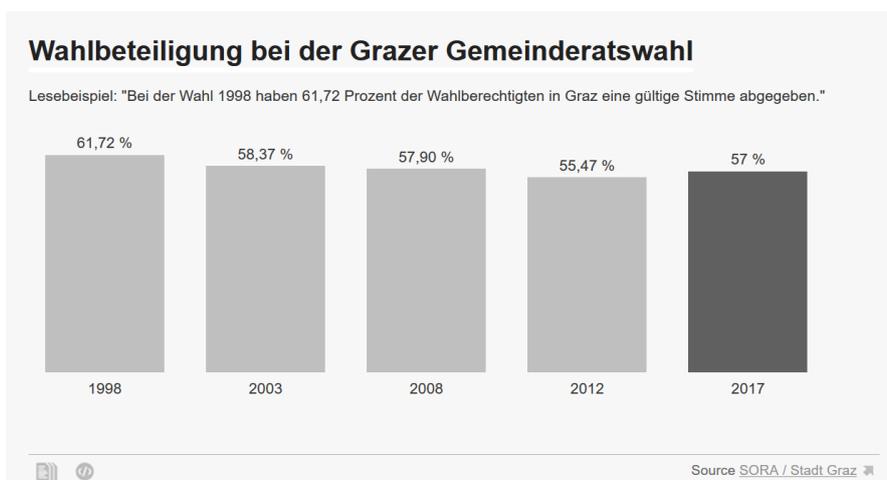
Per January 1st, 2017, the total population of Austria was 8.772.865. Of this amount, 664.729 (7,6%) had the citizenship of another EU country (incl. EEA countries and Switzerland). Around 559.000 (6,4 %) are older than 16 years, which means they can participate in Austria.²

In general, voter turnout in Austria is relatively high. Studies show that the abolishment of provisions on mandatory voting has not significantly changed the attitude of voters. It is neither the Minister's nor the Federal Electoral Board's task to promote elections, democratic institutions or voter turnout in general. Such efforts, if at all, could only be made by the Government when acting as a collegial organ. In reality, it is usually the different political parties' business to promote voter participation. Accordingly, the Austrian law maker grants political parties various opportunities to receive reimbursement for their activities and campaigns.

However, the Austrian law maker realised a number of changes and improvements in the legal framework in order to increase voter participation and make democratic institutions more transparent. For instance, the opening hours of polling places are usually adjusted to the needs of the local population and there is a degree of flexibility to keep stations open for a relatively long time during a day. Hence, there is no uniform, nation-wide closing time for polling place. By law, the last stations have to close at 5 p.m. (European parliamentary elections 10 p.m.).³

Example: Communal Elections City of Graz, 05.02.2017

Per January 1st, 2017, the total population of the City of Graz was 320.587. Of this amount, 40.181 EU (12,5%) had the citizenship of another EU country. 26.456 (8,3%) were eligible to vote (with 5.578 Croatian citizens and 5.489 German citizens being the two biggest groups)



Total turnout at the Graz Communal Elections including EU citizens from other countries⁴

² source: <http://www.statistik.at>

³ source: http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/BMI_wahlen/english_version

⁴ source: <http://www.graz.at/cms/ziel/694955/DE/>

National legislation on the voting rights of EU mobile citizens in Austria

Residency rights

EU citizens (including Island, Liechtenstein, Norway und Switzerland) may reside in Austria for more than three months according to Union law if

- they are employed or self-employed in Austria or
- they have sufficient means of livelihood and health insurance coverage for themselves and their family members so that they avoid becoming a burden on the social welfare system or claiming compensation allowance (Ausgleichszulage) or
- the primary purpose of their stay is to complete their studies (including vocational training) at an Austrian public school or a legally recognised private school or an education facility and have sufficient means of livelihood and health insurance coverage for themselves and their family members.

All persons establishing their residence in Austria are obliged to comply with the registration requirements of the Austrian registration law (Meldegesetz). Whoever establishes or terminates their residence is obliged to register or deregister with the responsible authority. EU, EEA and Swiss citizens who have a right of residence for a period of more than three months according to Union law can have a registration certificate (Anmeldebescheinigung) issued upon application as documentation of their right of residency. Such an application must be made within a four-month period starting from the applicant's arrival in Austria. After a five-year period of continuous legal residency in Austria a document certifying permanent residency (Bescheinigung des Daueraufenthalts) can be issued upon application.⁵

Opportunities for political and civil participation

- elections on communal and European level
- Chamber of Labour elections
- workers councils and youth consultative councils (Jugendvertrauensrat) elections
- staff council elections in public services
- ÖH (Austrian students` representative body) elections
- civic involvement, civic initiatives and associations

⁵ source: www.help.gv.at

Voting rights and regulations for elections on European and communal level

a) EU citizens can actively and passively take part in the elections to the **European Parliament** every 5 years, which means they can vote as well as being voted for as candidate. Non-Austrian EU citizens with place of residence in Austria have the right to either vote for the Austrian members to the European Parliament or for the candidates of their home country. They have to apply for registration and state that they will vote for the Austrian candidates. Registration is possible any time.

b) EU citizens can actively and passively take part in **communal elections** (Gemeinderatswahlen or Bezirksvertretungswahlen in Vienna) if they have their place of residence in the municipality where the elections are held. If residents have reached the voting age, they will **automatically be entered into the election register** and officially be informed well in time by letter to their registered place of residence about upcoming elections. In this letter they will also be provided with information on where to find the polling station. Exceptions: in Burgenland, EU citizens will only be entered automatically into the election register if they have had their main place of residence in another Austrian province already; otherwise they will have to apply to be entered.⁶

⁶ source: http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/BMI_wahlen/eu_buergerinnen/start.aspx

Good and Effective Practices implemented in the Participation matters Project

Example1: Communal Elections 2017 / City of Graz



Participation matters!
Opportunities for civic and political participation of mobile EU citizens

Partizipation zählt!
Möglichkeiten zur zivilen und politischen Mitbestimmung für EU-BürgerInnen in Österreich

Megéri részt venni a döntéshozatában!
Lehetőségek az Ausztriában élő EU polgárok számára a civil és politikai döntéshozatalban való részvételre.

Suodlučivanje je bitno!
Mogućnosti građanskog i političkog suodlučivanja građana EU-a u Austriji.

Uczestnictwo liczy się!
Możliwości cywilnego i politycznego współdecydowania dla obywateli UE w Austrii.

Merită să mergi să votezi!
Posibilități civile și politice de a participa la viața politică pentru cetățenii UE în Austria

Title: Informational Leaflet

Local Authority / Place of Experimentation: City of Graz

Target Group: 26.500 EU-citizens who are eligible to vote in the communal elections

Description of Process:

The process proposed by the City of Graz was to inform EU-movers about their right to vote and motivate them to turn up at the polls. Inspire printed informational leaflets which were added to the official election announcement.

Graz started to prepare for the communal elections, which were held on the 5th of February 2017, early September 2016. After a first meeting in October with the head of the department responsible for administering elections in Graz, it was decided to prepare an informational leaflet, which would be enclosed to the official announcement to be sent out to Graz residents. There were around 26.500 EU-movers in Graz who were entitled to vote.

The leaflet was prepared and designed by 5th December. There was a check back if it would meet the Graz PR departments' requirements. Paper quality was chosen as to be appropriate for mechanical processing and sorting. After approval, required copies were printed. Leaflets were delivered directly to the electoral office.

Materials produced: 30.000 Leaflets (costs per leaflet were lower than if printed in the exact number of 26.500)

Example2: Involving EU – movers` associations in Linz, Upper Austria

Title: Effective Networking

Local Authority / Place of Experimentation: City of Linz

Target Group: Members of the Migration and Integration Board of the City of Linz



Description of Process:

First contact via telephone with the secretary of Migration Advisory Board of the City of Linz was established in late Autumn 2016. Further commitment to collaboration was achieved via contact with the City Counsellor for Social Affairs, who we met at an EU-mover event organized in Linz with the Polonia Association early November, where Participation matters was introduced. Contact was re-established in January to agree on a personal meeting.

Following two more telephone calls with the Migration Advisory Board secretary at the Integration Office Linz, we were invited to an open meeting of the Migration Board of the City of Linz, which was scheduled for April 2017.

We presented the project and discussed collaboration regarding future events. There were altogether 21 people, many of them EU-movers, present, including representatives of the main political parties, who attended the meeting in their role as consultative body.

Materials produced: Project brochures and leaflets were used and distributed.

Example 3: Raising Awareness among EU – movers in Vienna

Title: Know Your Rights

Local Authority / Place of Experimentation: Department of Integration and Diversity, Vienna

Target Group: EU-Nationals from Poland, Romania and Germany resident in Vienna



Description of Process:

The Department of Integration and Diversity has a database of associations representing EU-Nationals and organizes regular meetings and events for EU-nationals aimed at informing them of their rights as EU-citizens. Contacts to citizens from Poland, Romania and Germany were established through the Vienna Department of Integration and Diversity. Together, EU-movers from Poland, Romania and Germany account for 50.1 % of all EU-citizens living in Vienna.

In collaboration with the department, we attended three information dissemination events organised for German, Polish and Romanian nationals. At these events, issues relating to political rights of EU citizens, election laws and voting regulations in Austria were discussed. Simplified information leaflets in German, Polish and Romanian explaining the major voting requirements and stating relevant dates and deadlines.

In addition to these meetings, the information provided was further disseminated through various channels available to the EU – movers` associations such as websites, Facebook and free-radio stations.

Materials produced: Information leaflets translated into German, Romanian and Polish, posters.

Project “Participation matters”

The Guidelines in hand is a publication issued within the framework of the EU-funded project “Participation matters – Fostering civic and political participation of mobile EU citizens” (JUST/2014/RCIT/AG/CITI/7283).

The general objective of this project is to foster the successful inclusion and participation of mobile EU citizens in the host EU country’s civic and political life.
Interviews with EU-movers on the topic of participation.

www.inspire-thinking.at

www.participationmatters.eu

<https://www.facebook.com/participationmattersinAustria/>