



# Empowering European Mobile Youth: Case Studies from Austria and Estonia

Christine Leitner<sup>1</sup>✉, Mohammad Allagha<sup>2</sup>, Jelizaveta Krenjova<sup>3</sup>,  
Kristina Reinsalu<sup>3</sup>, and Christian Stiefmueller<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> CEPA | Centre for Economics and Public Administration Limited,  
111 Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 0SR, UK  
{Christine.Leitner, Christian.Stiefmueller}@cepanet.eu  
<sup>2</sup> Politikos – Wir Muessen Reden!, Thayagasse 1A/1/19, 1210 Vienna, Austria  
Mohammad.Allagha@politikos.at  
<sup>3</sup> e-Governance Academy Foundation, Rotermanni 8, 10111 Tallinn, Estonia  
{Jelizaveta.Krenjova, Kristina.Reinsalu}@ega.ee

**Abstract.** This paper presents the preliminary findings of two case studies currently conducted in Austria and Estonia on the empowerment of mobile youth in the European Union, i.e. citizens from other EU member states aged 16 to 29 who are resident in Austria and Estonia. The case studies are actions within the framework of a two-year project funded by the European Union (Empowerment of European Mobile Youth - EMY). The project's principal objective is to identify opportunities and barriers for the democratic and social engagement of mobile youth in these two countries. More specifically, the two case studies aim to (1) explore how young EU citizens experience the exercise of their EU citizenship rights in their host country and (2) identify requirements for a practical web-based tool to facilitate their engagement in the political life in their host country. This tool should potentially be transferable to other EU member states.

**Keywords:** Human side of service engineering · Empowerment · Citizenship · Mobile youth · User requirements

## 1 Introduction

This paper presents the preliminary findings of two case studies currently conducted in Austria and Estonia on the empowerment of mobile youth within the European Union. The case studies are actions within the framework of a two-year project funded by the European Union (Empowerment of European Mobile Youth - EMY).<sup>1</sup> The project's main goal is to identify opportunities and barriers for the engagement of young citizens from other EU countries in the political and social life in Austria and Estonia. The following sections outline the preliminary results of activities undertaken in the first project phase from 1 February to 30 June 2019.

<sup>1</sup> The European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014–2020). Project duration: 1 February 2019–31 January 2021. See <https://europeanmobileyouth.eu/>.

## 1.1 Context

Mobile EU citizens have been neglected as a specific target group in elections and other forms of democratic participation across all levels of government in the 28 EU member states.<sup>2</sup> [3] Young people are the most mobile age group within the EU living in large numbers outside their home countries, especially for studying. Moreover, evidence shows that young people in general, are the least engaged in traditional democratic participation, asking for more and different channels of participation [1, 4].

While Austria and Estonia are fairly small EU member states,<sup>3</sup> they have been chosen as pilot countries because of their unique features: Austria was the first EU member state to grant citizens the right to vote at the age of 16 in elections at all government levels, including at the EU level. This also applies to other EU citizens who are resident in Austria. Estonia is a pioneer in the use of online voting ('i-Voting'), which has been in use for elections at all levels for more than ten years now [1]. i-Voting in Estonia is also available to other EU citizens who are resident in Estonia.

## 1.2 Target Group and Key Stakeholders

The project covers two types of beneficiaries: (1) Direct beneficiaries (the "target group") are students and other young citizens from EU countries aged 16 to 29 who are resident in Estonia and Austria but not citizens of their respective country of residence and (2) indirect beneficiaries ("key stakeholders") are member-state governmental authorities dealing with the support for and integration of international students into the political and social life and responsible for mobility; electoral authorities interested in fostering active involvement and participation in local and European Parliament (EP) elections; universities and schools; political parties; civil society organisations; as well as EU politicians and officials responsible for EU citizenship rights, mobility policies and educational/exchange programmes.

Students from other EU countries who are resident in Austria and Estonia to pursue their academic studies are the principal target group. Students in higher education including, in particular, participants of the Erasmus+ programme,<sup>4</sup> are the largest segment of this target group. They also tend to be socially and politically active. Much of this activity takes place within the organisational setting of student unions, which renders this target group relatively accessible. As the circumstances of students in higher education, such as their motivation for travelling and staying abroad and the time limitation of their stay, are quite specific the project seeks, in a second step, to address an extended target group of young mobile EU citizens who are not university or secondary school students.

<sup>2</sup> 27 EU member states as of 1 February 2020 due to the UK leaving the European Union.

<sup>3</sup> Population size: approx. 8,9 million in Austria, approx. 1,3 million in Estonia.

<sup>4</sup> Erasmus+ is an EU programme (budget: € 14.7 billion) which funds opportunities to study, teach/train, and gain experience abroad, [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/node\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/node_en).

### 1.3 Objectives

The overall objective of this project is to test ways to raise the level of inclusion and democratic participation of mobile youth in the social and political life of the EU, in general, and of their host EU countries, in particular. A particular emphasis is put on EU citizenship rights enshrined in Art. 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which establishes the right to vote and stand as candidate in European and local elections in the country of residence (host country) for all EU citizens.<sup>5</sup> Member states' governments are free to extend these rights to national and/or regional elections, but so far, no one member state has done so. In doing so, we aim to explore how support can be best provided to young EU citizens living and/or studying in Estonia and Austria to strengthen their interest and participation in EU elections and policy making and to assist them in engaging in the democratic life of their host country.

Earlier studies have already singled out a number of barriers to engagement of mobile citizens at EU and local level such as the lack of harmonization of national electoral systems across the EU, technical and administrative requirements, as well as the provision of timely and accessible information. [3] We examine the relevance of these barriers for mobile EU youth in Austria and Estonia and, more specifically, aim to:

- Gain a better understanding of the motivation of young mobile EU citizens to engage in the political life in their host country; their awareness of the political choices in their host country; and their preferred communication and voting channels, especially in connection with the 2019 EP elections<sup>6</sup>;
- Identify the reasons why young mobile EU citizens are not exercising their democratic rights emanating from EU citizenship and to find ways to encourage more active engagement and participation;
- Explore a more effective use of technology and social media channels to support the target group based on their requirements.

The findings of the case studies will inform policy recommendations for EU decision makers. In addition, the project aims to create a sustainable community and to pilot a practical tool to support young mobile EU citizens to exercise their democratic rights while being abroad.

## 2 Methodology

The apparent lack of democratic engagement among young Europeans has been the subject of intense research. [5, 7] Limited information, educational deficits, unemployment, social exclusion, and low overall levels of trust in government [8] and in the

<sup>5</sup> EU citizens can choose whether to vote in their home or host country provided they are registered according to national election regulations, which differ in terms of administrative requirements.

<sup>6</sup> European Parliament elections take place every five years. The last elections took place from 23–26 May 2019.

EU institutions have been highlighted variously as the main contributing factors. Researchers and policymakers are coming to the conclusion, however, that young people's disappointing participation in the polls cannot be blamed solely on political apathy. [2] We therefore examine a number of other explanatory factors in relation to the specific target group described in Sect. 1.2 including social and cultural aspects, such as home-country bias, information and communication deficits, and administrative barriers.

The methodology follows a mixed method approach using mapping activities such as online surveys, focus groups and interviews, and other interaction activities such as online debates and crowdsourcing activities. Mapping and other interaction activities are conducted in two phases: before and after the EP elections in May 2019.

In the first project phase (February to June 2019) the following activities were conducted in Austria and Estonia: a pre-election survey, four focus groups and approximately 30 interviews with key stakeholder. Section 3 summarizes the findings from activities undertaken in Austria and Estonia in the first project phase. They cover three main topics: (1) The general political activism and engagement of the target group in Austria and Estonia; (2) Their voting experience, interest in and attitudes towards the 2019 European Parliament elections; and (3) The use of communication channels in getting and handling the information about the elections.

### 3 Findings from Mapping and Interaction Exercises

#### 3.1 Austria

In the academic year 2017/2018 all Austrian universities (public and private) hosted 98,663 international students in total. The majority of them came from Europe, with 70% from EU member states, 17% from other European countries and 13% from other parts of the world. [9] The actual number of all mobile students from the EU may differ slightly (but not significantly) at this stage.

Part of the mapping exercises was a pre-election survey, two focus group discussions with mobile students and a series of interviews with key stakeholders relevant to the target group, who have a direct and indirect influence on European mobile youth. In total, there were 191 survey participants and 13 focus group participants. Overall, students from 23 EU member states (out of 28) participated in the survey and focus group discussions.

Both the survey and the results of the focus groups showed that there was awareness of the possibility of voting for candidates in the host country. There was however little awareness about the right to stand as a candidate in the host country. 63% of survey respondents were aware of the right to vote for a candidate from Austria and only 24% were aware of their right to stand as a candidate in Austria in the 2019 EP elections. The majority of survey respondents who considered voting in EP

elections, had they decided to vote, would have voted for a home-country candidate; 25% would have opted for an Austrian candidate.<sup>7</sup>

The main obstacles identified by respondents to the survey and focus groups were different registration procedures in each EU member state, non-uniform registration deadlines, lack of notification by the responsible authorities, lack of appropriate information to make informed decision, and the language barriers in the host country, as all events, promotions, appearances, etc. take place only in that language, and finally, the lack of information about elections. Despite the participants' interest in the EU, there was a distinct lack of a deeper understanding of its complex political and governance system. Furthermore, applications, tools, platforms, and campaigns of the EU only reach people if they proactively involve themselves through different channels (EU relevant communities and social media channels). EU issues of high interest to the participants were the environment, education, youth policy, EU processes and decision making, access to information, and the simplification of democratic engagement across the EU. With regard to electronic voting, concerns about secrecy, security and trust were raised.

While a large proportion did not show any proactive interest in the Austrian political landscape, more than half indicated that they were interested in events related to the EP elections in Austria. The results also showed that participants tended to look for election information about candidates from their home country rather than from their host country. The channels that were particularly highlighted included official websites of political parties, host-/home-country media, and social media, notably Facebook and Instagram. It was also observed that student unions do not seem to play an active role in facilitating democratic participation of mobile students in Austria.

### 3.2 Estonia

The mapping exercises identified 2,170 mobile students from the EU studying in Estonia's three main universities - Tallinn University of Technology, Tallinn University, Tartu University - as of April 2019 (degree-seeking as well as exchange students). The actual number of all mobile students from the EU could have been slightly (but not significantly) higher, if it were to include other Estonian universities. Overall, as many as 188 mobile students responded to the survey, with 169 completing it by answering most of the total of 37 questions offered for answering. The overall response can be considered as a good one confirming the interest on the part of the mobile students in the issues raised by the survey. The respondents represented 25 EU countries. The mapping exercises also included the conduct of two focus groups in two main universities of Estonia, namely Tartu and Tallinn University. In total, nine participants took part in the focus groups.

The findings from the mapping exercises in Estonia demonstrate that most of survey respondents (75%) were aware of the right to vote for a candidate from Estonia

<sup>7</sup> No precise election data (e.g. sociodemographic data, percentage of mobile young people who actually made use of their active and passive right to vote, etc.) is legally recorded in Austria by the Ministry of the Interior or other statistical offices.

and 39% of all respondents were aware of their right to stand as a candidate in Estonia at the 2019 EP elections. Furthermore, focus group participants perceive the EU citizenship through the prism of its practical benefits (such as traveling and studying abroad) and stressed the complexity of the EU's political and governance system; the importance of political engagement was mentioned to a much lesser extent. Also, the significance of understanding the direct influence of the EU on everyday lives of its citizens was highlighted. Moreover, the majority of survey respondents who considered voting in the 2019 EP elections, if they decided to vote, they would have voted for a home country candidate and 24% would have opted for an Estonian candidate. Focus group discussions demonstrated similar results, indicating that home-country candidates are still the preferred choice.

When it comes to the most significant barriers to participation in EP elections in Estonia, findings from both the online survey as well as the focus groups indicate that the voting registration procedure (selected by almost half of all survey respondents), insufficient information in order to make an informed electoral choice and not knowing the Estonian language were among the most noteworthy. More specifically, even though almost all focus group participants received the application letter from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Estonia, some expressed uncertainty about certain aspects of the registration procedure.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, barriers and difficulties with registration procedures for voting for home-country candidates and the lack of clear information about the right to vote either for home- or host-country candidates were stressed. Language was emphasized as one of the crucial barriers to democratic engagement in the host country, as a certain level of proficiency is needed to make an informed electoral choice. It was also observed that student unions do not seem to play an active role in facilitating democratic participation and social integration of mobile students in Estonia.

## 4 Conclusions

Overall, the results of the pre-election mapping and interaction exercises, although specific to the project target group and the two EU member states where they were conducted, reflect the results of a survey carried out by the EP shortly after the elections in May 2019. [6] The findings also confirm the project assumptions outlined in Sect. 1.3 in the main. Respondents in both countries were well aware of and interested in the EP elections. This was confirmed by the EP survey, which reported the highest-ever degree of mobilization of young voters. [6] They were generally aware of their right to vote but much less aware about their right to stand as a candidate in an EU host

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<sup>8</sup> Citizens of the EU have the right to vote in local government (council) elections and in EP elections while residing in Estonia. A person must be of at least 18 years of age to be eligible to vote, except in local government (council) elections, where 16- and 17-year-olds have been given the right to vote. The procedure to register for voting in EP elections in Estonia in brief, is the following: the paper notice is sent by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Estonia to all EU citizens who have the right to vote in Estonia to their registered residency address. The notice includes the information letter as well as the application letter to be filled in and sent back to the Ministry in due time.

country. Generally, home-country bias was still prevalent among the target group. Engagement in the host country is strongly affected by language barriers and the expected/ actual length of stay is a key variable for political and social engagement in the host country. Administrative issues such as insufficient information about registration and voting procedures in the host country - and in the home country for eligible voters living abroad - constitute major barriers to participation in EP elections. While most young citizens are very interested in voting online, there are still lingering doubts and a lack of trust in the reliability of e-voting systems. Social and online media are important sources of information but not generally considered as a preferred forum for (political) discussion with peers. So far, EU communication efforts largely failed to reach this particular target group while national policy makers and key stakeholders do not seem to pay particular attention to the target group's needs.

The second project phase will include another set of mapping and interaction activities to deepen and validate the findings of the pre-election activities. One of the key challenges in this second project phase will be to provide different categories of mobile youth with targeted and regularly updated information about engagement opportunities at the EU level and in the host country. In order to support young mobile EU citizens in political participation processes digitally, information should be readily accessible based on a user-centric design and optimized for mobile devices.

**Acknowledgements.** The case studies are actions within the framework of a two-year project funded by the European Union (Empowerment of European Mobile Youth - EMY).

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