

Expert-Statement Pass Egal Wahl by SOS Mitmensch Dr. Giacomo Solano

„In many European countries, foreign citizens are not involved, consulted or informed about local civil society and public life. Indeed, political participation is often the weakest area of integration policy. In particular, migrants often have limited local voting rights only. Within the EU, thirteen countries – including Austria – do not grant the right to vote in local elections to non-EU citizens. Such policies not only exclude migrants from voting, but also exclude them from civil society in general. But this does not have to be the case.

In Finland, for example, foreign citizens are encouraged to participate in the decisions that concern their daily lives. Newcomers enjoy basic political liberties and democratic inclusion in their city and region. Non-EU migrants in Finland have the right to vote and stand in local elections after residing in the country for two years. Under such inclusive policies, migrants are more likely to participate by voting in elections, contributing to political groups and parties and joining protests. Over time, migrants develop similar levels of political engagement, trust and satisfaction as the general public.

In addition, given that non-citizens have limited voting rights, an obstacle to political participation is represented by restrictive naturalisation policies. Removing the obstacles to citizenship that migrants face would significantly increase their political participation. Unfortunately, nationality policies are a major area of weakness in most European countries, especially in Austria, the Baltics and Eastern Europe. Among the restrictive and unfavourable naturalisation requirements in Austria are those relating to language, ‘good character’, income and costs as well as a citizenship test. Other European countries, such as Portugal and Sweden, provide an easier and clearer path towards citizenship.“

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The expert statement was written and published in course of the „Pass Egal Wahl“ campaign by the Austrian NGO „SOS Mitmensch“. The campaign is concerned with the 1,4 Million people of voting age, who are excluded from the right to vote – they live in Austria, but can’t vote only because of their missing Austrian citizenship. Democracy thrives on participation, not exclusion, which is why SOS Mitmensch organizes the “Pass Egal Wahl” (what translates to „passport doesn’t matter election). Further information: www.passegalwahl.at.