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# Making the most out of it? Chances and challenges of EU Citizenship Rights

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***Abstract***

*What are the chances and challenges of citizenship rights in the European Union (EU)? Instead of a purely theoretical assessment of EU citizenship, this paper explicitly draws attention to the citizens' perspective towards current challenges of EU citizenship. One of the key challenges seems not to be a lack of knowledge, but the feeling of being insufficiently informed about EU citizenship and citizen rights. Furthermore, the data show that chances and challenges, according to the voice of young EU citizens, take place at different levels and vary across member states. Hence, current challenges require tailor-made approaches in EU educational programs and projects to be appropriately addressed.*

***Keywords:*** *EU citizenship, rights, European Union, democratic quality, citizens' perspective, cross-national variation, citizenship education.*

## 1. EU Citizenship and Individual Rights in the EU

The main and guiding question for this paper is what the current challenges of EU citizenship are and what they mean for educational work in Europe. First I will define the meaning of EU citizenship in this paper and summarize the formal set-up of EU citizenship. Based on that, I will sketch three different perspectives on EU citizenship: namely, the analytical perspective of democratic theory, a practice oriented one derived from educational work, and a complementary one that puts citizens' reality into focus. Based on Flash EB data, I would like to devote some space depicting what citizens tell us about citizenship and its major challenges. The EB data are based on interviews with respondents mainly ages fifteen to nineteen, with the maximum of thirty years old. The remainder of the paper aims at merging the three perspectives and highlighting two important points that derive from taking the voice of citizens, the addressees of educational work, seriously into account when talking about current challenges.

EU citizenship has been formally included in all EU Treaties since the Treaty of Maastricht and was recently strengthened and slightly re-formulated in the Treaty of Lisbon. Certain individual rights can be found much earlier: one of the very first individual rights in the EU has been the right to free movement of workers, which was introduced in 1957, more than 20 years before the first direct election of the European Parliament in 1979. Since then individual rights have been continuously broadened and institutionalized (see Olsen, 2008). In this process, the EU created a new form of transnational citizen rights and introduced the legal status of EU citizenship in 1992.

In terms of the relationship between national and Union citizenship, the Treaty states, "Every national of a Member State shall be a Citizen of the Union" - it is automatically granted - and, "EU citizenship shall be additional to and not replace national citizenship" (Art.9TEU; Art.20TFEU). European Citizenship, automatically granted to nationals of EU member states, substantially challenges the traditional congruence between nationality, territory, and political community (see Kochenov, 2009; Shaw, 2010). Considering the nature of Union citizenship in relation to nationality, European citizenship does not supersede nationality but embeds nationals into a transnational framework of democracy (see Cheneval, 2008; Nicolaidis, 2004).

In terms of specific rights, we can distinguish between different types of individual rights that come with citizenship and are important for democratic legitimacy (see Héritier, 2003). In terms of their function, rights allow citizens to participate in the polity, for example, by giving them voting rights at the municipal and European level or to initiate a citizens' initiative, and allow them to secure transparency and accountability by, for example, giving them petition and complaining rights, or the right to initiate proceedings. Rights that explicitly protect citizen rights at the EU level are, for instance, the right to diplomatic protection. Rights that are connected to free movement, enabling transnational activities, are strongly related to non-discrimination and equality rules.

As the European (legal) integration is deepening voices complaining about a democratic deficit of the European Union (EU) are swelling (cf. Follesdall & Hix, 2006). It is a frequently stated argument that the EU's legitimacy crisis is caused by a lack of direct or at least indirect citizen participation, often referred as input legitimacy (see Scharpf, 1999). In the context of a weak link between individuals and the polity, citizen rights are both chances and challenges at the same.

## 2. Political Science, Citizenship Education, and Subjective Understandings

To locate current challenges we can draw on different analytical perspectives, each leading to different results of our examination. In the following paragraphs I will outline three perspectives as an analytical frame of the empirics: first, some important aspects of political theory; thereafter, some notes on the educational point of view; and, finally, a theoretical framing for the citizens' perspective. Looking at EU citizenship from different analytical angles could widen our awareness of particular important issues, for which significance at the individual level might be claimed but missing and vice versa. I will begin with some sentences on political theory.

### *2.1 Democratic Theory*

Citizenship is the formal link between an individual and the polity to which he or she belongs (cf. Magnette, 2005). Naturally, there is no academic consensus about what this means for EU citizenship or what this legal status should be; nor, is there unity about which standards EU citizenship should fulfill, respectively, or how we can appraise EU citizenship and its democratic quality.

Basically, one can summarize two major perspectives on citizenship within the theoretical discourse. One is that the foremost purpose of citizenship (and EU citizenship) is to protect individuals' rights and freedoms. Contrary to this liberal perspective, citizenship allows (and should guarantee) individuals to participate actively in a polity and make their voices heard by decision-makers.

Discourses about EU citizenship and the various attempts to assess EU citizenship vary widely among and within different academic disciplines. Correspondingly, there is not one but many answers to the question of the meaning of EU citizenship. In political science EU citizenship, on one side, is claimed to be more or less insignificant for citizens; in contrast, some see EU citizenship as an important step towards European identity or even a cosmopolitan citizenship.

Key questions are related to the level of salience of EU citizenship and its effects for future integration and identity building. Before coming back to the significance of key challenges from an academic perspective at the individual level, I would like to switch to another view on citizenship: one of citizenship education.

### *2.2 Citizenship Education*

As academia has not one viewpoint, citizenship education has not a single goal but several. Certainly an important one is the transfer of knowledge and awareness-raising for political issues. The idea that citizenship education should foster critical thinking and (self-) identity formation is widely shared. One idea of citizenship education and educational programs is to make citizens familiar with the structure of political opportunity that may obstruct or facilitate citizen activity. It is the institutional opportunities that enable and constraint citizens who would like to be active in the political system (Eisinger, 1973).

Obviously, key challenges of EU citizenship that become pivotal in this perspective differ from the ones frequently emphasized in academic discourses. Key questions that are commonly shared from both perspectives certainly include how much citizens care and know about EU citizenship. Additionally, deriving from the practice-oriented approach, how can educational programs be shaped to provide citizens whatever they need to act out their citizenship? Without knowing what the key challenges from an individual's point of view are, education programs run the risk of not sufficiently meeting the needs of their addressees. This paper seeks to enhance our understanding of individuals' needs in education programs by giving them a voice. Before that, I would like to draw attention to how the formal set-up of EU citizenship could be linked to citizens' perceptions.

### *2.3 Subjective Understandings*

The individuals' perspective could be understood as subjective understandings of EU citizenship that are based on the institutional opportunities of EU citizenship and, logically, mediated by knowledge. Subjective understandings can roughly be divided

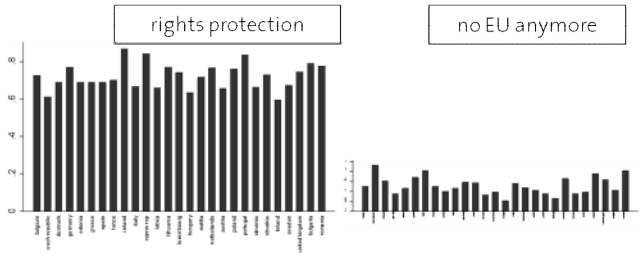
into three components, namely a cognitive, an instrumental, and an affective (or expressive) component.

First, cognitive citizenship refers to images of EU citizenship, so, it highlights aspects of what is important to be a good citizen (see van Deth, 2009). This is a crucial point for the overarching question of what constitute the current challenges of EU citizenship, as examining this component means increasing our understanding of what citizens perceive as critical. The second dimension, an instrumental citizenship understanding, points to the feeling of efficacy (see Gabriel, 1998). If citizenship is or should be about empowerment, how empowered do citizens perceive themselves to be? The third component links to political identification, or the degree to which citizens report the feeling of belonging to the political community. Taking a closer look at the affective component could help us estimate the potential of EU citizenship for building or strengthening an overarching identity.

## 3. Significance at the Individual Level, or, what Citizens' Tell Us about EU Citizenship

As mentioned in the introduction I would like to depict some empirics that shed light on the significance of the many questions that have risen so far at the individual level. Examining the individuals' perspective thoroughly hopefully gives us a clearer picture of what the key challenges of EU citizenship are. Simultaneously, it allows us to estimate the significance of the analytical perspectives of the academic and the practitioners' point of view at the individual level.
Starting with the question of what the significance of EU citizen rights is, I present first empirics based on Flash EB 202. Figure 1 shows that the share of persons agreeing that the EU is a good way to protect citizens' rights is surprisingly high, bearing the concerns of political science discourse in mind.

**Figure 1: Share of persons who agree with the statements that 'EU is a good way for rights protection' and 'in ten years time there won't be an EU any more'; cross-national comparison (Source Flash EB 202).**



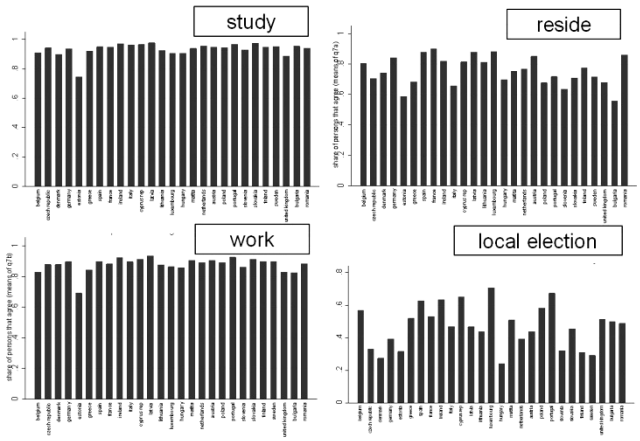

Country means are depicted; each of the variables takes the value '1' if a respondent agreed and '0' otherwise. The higher the bar the higher the level of agreement in a member state. The left bar chart scale ranges from 0.0 up to 0.8 (which is equal to 80 percent agreement). The right bar chart depicts support of the statement 'there won't be

an EU in ten years time'. Agreement with this statement could be taken as a strong indicator that salience or importance of EU citizenship is a key challenge. The levels of agreement are rather low in all countries (the scale titles range from 0.0 to 2.5, which equates to 25 percent support). Nearly one out of four respondents agree in the Czech Republic, whereas only one out of 20 agree in Hungary that there will not be an EU. Controlling for the relationship between educational background and the agreement with the statement that 'EU is a good way to protect citizens' rights' again shows differences across countries. For instance, in Italy the level of agreement is higher among the better educated, whereas in Finland the level of agreement is highest among those with low education.

But what do citizens have in mind when they think about EU citizenship? In the survey, the respondents were asked what it means to be an EU citizen. The data show say that the output-related rights, such as the rights to reside, to work, or to study, play a stronger role in all member states than input- or throughput-related rights. Furthermore, the political dimension within the EU citizenship understanding differs significantly across member states (see Figure 2 below).

Summarizing Figure 2, we might conclude that people have different understandings of what it means to be an EU citizen and EU citizens in all member states are aware of some benefits that come with EU citizenship. However, the significance of the political link between EU citizens and the EU seem to be rather low from the perspective of citizens. This mirrors the concerns of the political science discourse at the individual level.

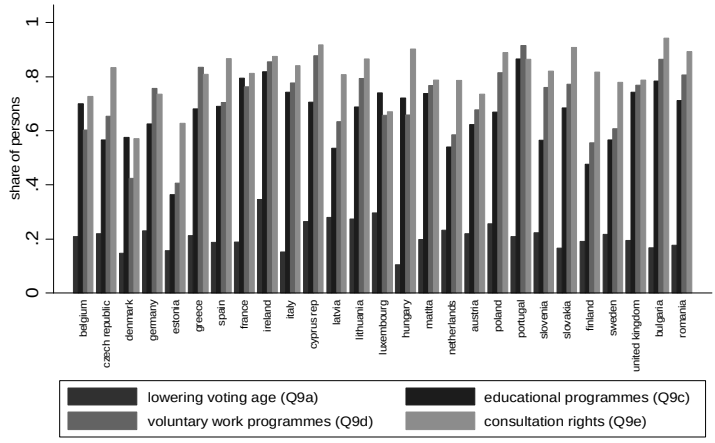
**Figure 2: EU citizenship understandings, cross-national comparison (Source Flash EB 202).**




But what do citizens suggest should be changed in order to strengthen their political link to the polity? Put differently, what do citizens themselves recognize as major challenges of EU citizenship? Respondents were asked what they think would help them 'to be more active as a citizen in society'. Figure 3 shows that very few persons indicate that

lowering the voting age (the dark grey lines) would help much, whereas all other suggestions, including compulsory education programs, voluntary work programs, and extended consultation rights are supported by from approximately 50 percent up to 90 percent of the respondents (a y-axis value of 0.5 equates to 50 percent of respondents agreeing with the statement).

**Figure 3: Level of agreement that suggestions would help an individual become a more active citizen (Source Flash EB 202)**

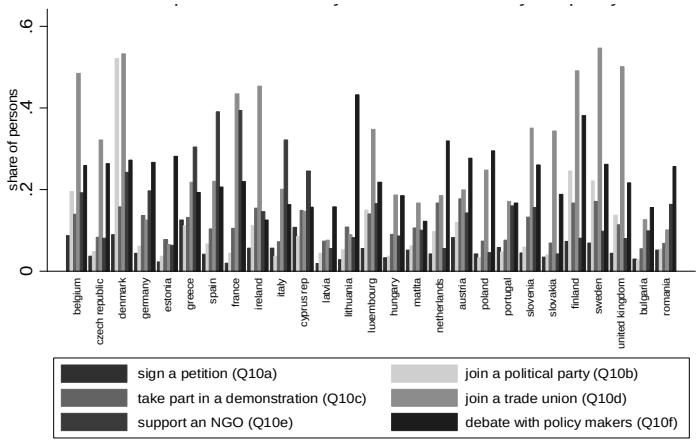



Mostly, the suggestion to introduce compulsory educational programs goes together with the suggestion to encourage voluntary work. However, we find substantial cross-national variation. For instance, in Estonia approximately half of the respondents indicated that none of the options mentioned would help, while only three percent in Portugal responded this way. Furthermore, in Denmark three percent indicate that an educational program (and no additional voluntary work programs) would help, which is approximately twice as many as those indicating the reverse (voluntary work programs with no educational programs). In turn, in Cyprus and Slovenia respondents indicated approximately three times more often that only additional voluntary work programs would help compared to those who suggest compulsory educational programs.

Figure 4 summarizes citizens' answers to the question 'what is most important to ensure your voice is heard by the policy makers' (the y-scale of 0.6 equates to 60 percent agreement) among the respondents in the respective member states. Without going into detail here, it shows huge variation in what citizens suggest to be the most effective strategy to be heard, from joining a political party, to supporting NGOs or debating with policy makers.

According to the educational point of view knowledge is emphasized as the key challenge of EU citizenship. In which way does this perspective correspond to the individuals' perceptions?

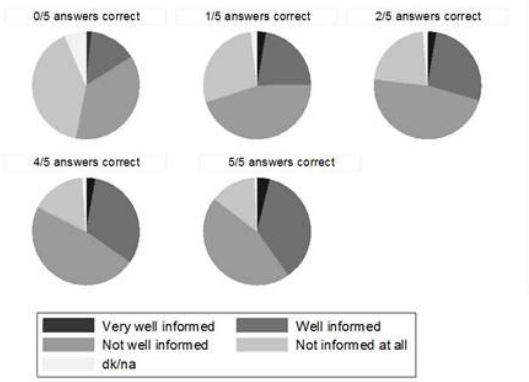
**Figure 4: Level of agreement that suggestions would help to be heard by decision-makers (Source Flash EB 202)**




Given the fact that many respondents indicated that compulsory educational programs could help them engage more in EU citizenship, this indeed points to the fact that knowledge about EU citizenship and the rights attached could be a big challenge. In 2002, on average, about one-third of the respondents indicated that they have never heard the term - as many as those who indicated that they know what it means (see Flash EB 133). In 2010, almost half of the respondents had heard about EU citizenship and stated that they know what it means. Seventeen percent had never heard the term, and approximately one-third had heard about it but were not sure about its meaning (see Flash EB 294). So in terms of knowledge there seems to be an increasing share of persons who have not only heard about EU citizenship, but state that they know what it means.

In addition to knowledge about the status of EU citizenship in general terms, both the political science perspective and the educational point of view highlight the importance of the rights attached to the status. Citizens in turn can only perceive efficacy or act out their rights if they do feel informed about them. Figure 5 shows the share of persons who feel very well (well / not well/ not at all) informed about their rights as EU citizens dependent of their de facto knowledge.

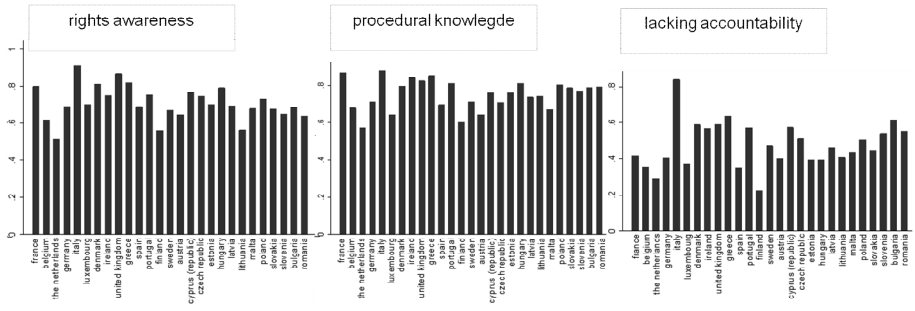
**Figure 5: Share of persons who feel very well / well / not well / not at all informed about their EU citizenship rights (Source Flash EB 133 and Flash EB 294).**




Controlling for the de facto knowledge of the respondents (right-hand pie charts) shows that the share of persons who 'feel not at all informed' decreases and the share of persons who 'feel very well informed' increases the more the respondents in fact know about EU citizenship. However, independent of the level of knowledge only a few feel very well informed and more than one third feel not well informed at all. Summarizing the empirics on knowledge about EU citizenship and the rights attached, one can say a lack of knowledge does not seem to be the challenge. Instead, the lack of feeling informed seems to be a big issue.

As a crosscheck, I analyzed the answers of young respondents when asked what would make them feel more confident to act out or defend their rights. Respondents state their agreement with three suggested challenges, namely, a lack of rights awareness, the lack of knowing whom to address and how to act out rights, and the concern of getting no answer from officials.

**Figure 6: EU citizens' challenges to act out EU citizen rights (Source Flash EB 235)**




The first graph illustrates that the share of persons who mention a lack of rights awareness as a potential problem differs over countries. On average, 75 percent indicated

that, even if they knew about their rights, they do not know how to go about utilizing them and who to contact. In contrast, less than 50 percent indicate that it might be a significant problem that public authorities would not respond to their concerns (the outlier here is Italy). Within the next section I will reflect upon central aspects in the light of, first, current challenges of EU citizenship, and, second, the potential of educational work.

**4. Readings of the Story**

The paper started with giving an overview of the existing framework of individual rights in the EU and the way individuals can make use of them. From an analytical point of view, I highlighted some aspects of the political science discourse and remind us of major objectives in educational practice. To control for the significance of EU citizenship challenges at the individual level, the paper draws on individual survey data between 2002 and 2010 to highlight important aspects of citizens' perspective. Combining an institutional and an individual perspective allows us to reflect upon the analytical perspectives of where current challenges exist in the light of citizens' reality.

The next paragraph summarizes some thoughts on current challenges at the institutional level, before turning to the ones named by EU citizens. So far, EU citizenship rights are mainly output-oriented and seem to lack strong rights for political accountability. At the macro level, the rights scarf on the surface and, until today, cannot establish strong links of accountability. At the same time, the scope of individual rights in the EU depends not only on the EU's legal framework, but in addition relies strongly on the national constitutions. Taking the opting out of Poland from the Charter of Fundamental Rights as an example, one has to ask the question how fundamental individual rights are when they rely on the agreement and compliance of the governments that may violate the rights of individuals. Thus, while the EU rights grant individuals many rights that are related to free movement and non-discrimination, the political accountability of EU citizenship is underdeveloped. At the same time, the multilevel construction of EU citizenship increases the complexity of the legal framework. Both aspects could be seen as explanatory factors for weaker links in political terms between the individuals and the polity.

The challenge of complexity seems to play a major role for EU citizens themselves. Drawing on the survey data, the level of actual knowledge among young EU citizens is not as bad as frequently suggested. The framework of EU citizenship is quite familiar; specific rights are less familiar. Nevertheless, EU citizens do not feel sufficiently informed. In terms of political theory and democratic quality, it is noteworthy that the awareness of output-oriented rights is significantly higher than the awareness of input- or throughput-orientated rights. However, EU citizens ask for more educational programs and procedural knowledge of how to act out EU citizenship.

This paper is not meant to be a recipe for democratic EU citizenship, or for effective education programs; however, it seeks to increase awareness for chances and challenges of EU citizenship that are relevant for both academic research and educational practice. It seems to be a simple but often neglected message that one should take individuals'

perspective on EU citizenship and its challenges seriously. I do not aim to answer the question 'Making the most out of it?' but note that 'the most' may mean very different things in different countries and contexts.

The empirics show that cross-national variation even remains when checking for educational background and other individual characteristics. Simultaneously, this message somehow modifies the claim to take citizens perspective seriously as it reminds us that 'the' EU citizens' perspective does not exist. Thereby, it leads us back to the formal set-up of EU citizenship; as EU citizenship is based on nationality, EU citizens' understandings seem to be strongly affected by the national context of citizens' lives.

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