



Submission on proposals to modernise the Electoral Registration Process

Forum Polonia Ireland welcomes initiative of Minister of State for Local Government and Electoral Reform, John Paul Phelan, T.D. on initiating discussion on reforming the current electoral registration process.

We strongly believe that there is an urgent need to implement a system which matches the need of modern Irish society and lower barriers faced by migrants who wish to engage more in local communities. There are many important services where electronic technology and internet comes to help; thus, it is surprising that current registering process for local elections do not rely on such resources, and instead is complicated and often is an obstacle for engagement in social and political life of the Island, especially for migrants and naturalised Irish citizens.

We truly hope that this can be changed and simple, easy to navigate on-line process to register for local election could be put in place. At the same time we are of the view that the data gathered during such registration should be limited to what is strictly necessary, and the purpose of gathering such data should be clearly explained as well as who would have access to it and what could be subsequently disclosed.

General information:

Forum Polonia Ireland has been involved in a number of voter registration and pro-turn out campaigns which aimed to encourage Poles in Ireland to get involved in local election, both as voters and as candidates. Within the last ten years we run "Give your voice" campaign 2008/2009 (local elections), "Vote! You are at home!" 2013-2014 – both were educational and pro-turn out campaigns, and both were national, where a number of different Polish community organisations, Polish schools and priests from Polish parishes got involved, not to mention Polish media outlets based in Ireland. There were meetings, trainings, public discussions etc. In 2016 we run a shadowing project where Polish local leaders were shadowing Dublin City Councillors ("Local Leaders 2016"). Throughout that project we organised four two-day long trainings sessions. We were also involved in research projects on mobile citizens' engagement in local politics and Irish political parties engagement with migrants. Throughout all the above initiative we gained significant experience in issues faced by migrants in Ireland, especially by Poles, and learned about the barriers they encounter when it comes to be more politically engaged.

Migrants in Ireland are allowed to vote and stand for local election, as long as they have lived here for more than six months. Despite this, migrant communities remain invisible and



currently do not have sufficient representation in the local authorities, civil service and other State owned institutions.

As a consequence, migrants are, in fact, excluded from an important part of the electoral process what negatively affect their civic and political integration.

Forum Polonia Ireland would like to make the following suggestions:

- **Simplification of the voter registration process and unification of various voter registration forms.**

In the context where a large percentage of the population has no place in the political system, there is a need for a proactive approach to immigrant political incorporation.

Based on our experience and various researches Forum Polonia conducted with various partners, it was clear that one of the significant problem was a difficult process to register for local election. Many immigrants are discouraged from registering to vote due to a relatively complicated registration processes that includes having to visit a Garda station in order to get a registration form stamped. All these necessary steps from obtaining a relevant form, filling it, bringing it to the Garda station, to sending it to the Council clearly does not encourage to register to vote.

Although, there is a simpler process for registration into draft Register by filling the different form (RFA1) and sending it to Council, but that had to be done usually 8 months prior to any election, when rarely people are focused on it.

- **Data Protection**

The data gathered during such registration should be limited to what is strictly necessary, and the purpose of gathering such data should be clearly explained as well as who would have access to it and what could be disclosed, if anything has to be disclosed as under the current regime. If other data is to be collected beyond what could be perceived as necessary, there must be a legitimate aim to do so and such data should be carefully protected

- **Implementation of the online registration form**

Filling up the registration form on the Internet for the most part of our society would be very convenience, especially when we are thinking about people with disability (12% of population), parents with dependent children, people limited by live places. According to CSO it is estimated that, in 2017, 89% of households have access to the internet at home. 95% of individuals in the 18-29 years age group used the internet within the last 3 months, compared with 48% of individuals in the 60-74 years age category. It is still great opportunity for potential voters to register before elections.

- **Unification of Registers (Register of Electors and the Supplementary Register) into one Register of Electors.**

Two types of Registers cause unnecessary confusion for many, therefore we suggest having one main Register which would include details of all voters regardless of the date of their registration.

- **Automatic addition of naturalised Irish citizens to the Register of Electors.**

Voter registration of naturalised Irish citizens shall take place once their application for naturalisation is approved and they shall receive written confirmation of this as well as Voter information pack with all relevant information about the Irish political, electoral and voting system when collecting their new Irish passport.

- **Simplification of European voter registration**

In Census 2011, non-Irish-born residents accounted for 17% of the population. There were approximately 122,585 Polish people living in Ireland (2.7% of the population), making it the largest national minority. Polish is the second most frequently spoken language in Ireland.

The most recent Census carried out in 2016 shows that there is not much change – Poles remains the largest minority and their language is the second most frequently spoken one. However, what is truly significant is that there is still 122 thousand Poles in Ireland (Census 2016 shows figure of 122 515). It could mean that it is a visible sign that although classed as mobile citizens of European Union, they are here to stay. In the forthcoming European Election all those Poles could decide that they wish to cast their votes to choose Polish candidates who run in their country. In order to do so, they can register for Polish European elections via simple on-line registration process, which was prepared by Polish Government and is in operation for the last number of years.

- **Voter awareness campaigns.**

Promotion of active citizenship shall take place on local and national level and local authorities shall take a proactive role in providing trainings and information to people of migrant background. A special Voter info toolkit which would include graphic explanation of the electoral and voting system in the relevant publications and information materials shall be made available for New Irish communities across the country.