

# Migrant Political Engagement and Voting from Abroad

*Insights from interviews with Polish and Romanian migrants in Barcelona and Oslo*



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**DIASPOLitic**

# Executive Summary: Ten Key Insights

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- Voting behaviour is not a binary variable in people's experience: Most migrants have voted, sometimes before migrating and sometimes from abroad. Very few vote always or never.
- The political dynamics in both countries of settlement and origin matter, but with considerable variation, not least depending on exposure to and engagement with political developments in each.
- Emigrants' right to vote is contested among diasporas: National belonging from abroad rubs against democratic legitimacy, while possible future return and economic interests also matter.
- Access and technicalities impact diaspora voting. Yet technical facilitation is less discussed, and perceived lack of political options to vote for appears to be a larger obstacle to actual voting.
- State-led campaigns to mobilise electoral turnout among diasporas mostly go unnoticed. Mobilisation rather happens through personal networks in the diaspora and transnationally.
- The impact of migration on migrants' political views varies. Often previously held views are kept, while some form new opinions on new issues. We saw no shift from right- to left-wing or vice-versa.
- Context matters: Living in Barcelona and Oslo as a migrant from Poland or Romania (and from specific regions) has different impacts. Having lived elsewhere before also plays a role.
- Voting (or abstaining) may not follow political views entirely. Migrants seek a best-fit among political parties, and voting "here" and "there" may diverge in terms of political views.
- Some migrants vote "by proxy": their vote does not reflect their views, but the views of family or friends in the country of origin. Migrants, as other voters, also engage in tactical voting.
- Migrants rarely felt that solutions in Norway or Spain ought to be transposed to Poland or Romania. Differences were seen as too large, and some things were seen as better in the contexts of origin.

# 1. Introduction

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In the current European context, both international migration from third countries outside the EU/EEA area and internal mobility within this geographic space are pervasive phenomena. While the pandemic illustrated the power of states to close borders, it also underscored the insurmountable reliance on labour crossing borders, whether to work in agriculture or to provide essential services, in many countries.

Politically, migration fuels contentious public debate. This is reflected in anti-immigrant mobilisation, as well as conflicts over large-scale out-migration, its demographic impacts, and the fear of so-called “brain drain” in many “sending” countries, including the Central and Eastern European members of the European Union (e.g. Bulgaria, Latvia, Poland or Romania).

In economic terms, both the work effort of migrants in countries of destination, and the remittances and power of migrant wages spent in countries of origin, also play a significant role.

In this report we present insights from interviews with Polish and Romanian migrants living in Barcelona and Oslo. These interviews were conducted as part of the DIASPOLitic project – “Understanding the Political Dynamics of Émigré Communities in an Era of European Democratic Backsliding” – funded by the Research Council of Norway, as a collaborative project led by the University of Oslo, working with SWPS University in Warsaw and the Peace Research Institute Oslo.

Our analytical focus on the political engagement of these EU migrant groups in their countries of origin – pondering the confluence of, on the one hand, mass emigration from countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and, on the other hand, the ongoing processes of democratic backsliding. How can the simultaneous impact of three trends be understood; i) of increasing numbers of migrants moving West in Europe; ii) of the rise of populism (also seen in many other parts of the world, including in North-West Europe); and iii) of what may arguably be described as the gradual erosion of institutions of democratic accountability in several Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries?

Whereas this can be approached at the macro level, in this report, we turn to the micro level, exploring a core puzzle in the study of international migration, namely: How and when does migration impact individuals in ways such that their ideals, values and outlooks change? While the fact that migration experiences change people is often cited among non-migrant relatives in contexts of origin, the impression in immigration contexts quite to the contrary often appears to be that migrants do not change sufficiently with their migration experiences and life in new societies. This illustrates the point that change in the context of migration is inherently hard to measure, yet no less real or significant, albeit non-linear, variable and often a matter of degree.

This critical puzzle of the relationship between migration and change is relevant at the individual level as well as at the macro level. Simultaneously, remaining at the individual level it is

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important to stress that understanding the dynamics at the individual level clearly also necessitates relating to other individuals close by and those more distant – “here” and “there” – in countries of origin and destination. Thus, the collective is at play, and often the nature of migrant – or diaspora – communities is seen to affect the ways in which migrants engage, not least politically, in countries of origin – perhaps also in countries of settlement.

The Report we present gives a comprehensive overview of the methodology, data gathered and the findings of the DIASPOLitic team in 80 semi-structured interviews with CEE migrants in Spain and Norway. Following a brief outline of our methodology, the two main sections of this Report detail first the ways in which Polish and Romanian migrants in Barcelona and Oslo compare their origin and destinations, in relation to issues of current political salience. Second, we turn to the question of migrants’ political engagement and diaspora voting specifically, and report on the findings from our interviews, highlighting similarities and differences between Polish and Romanian migrants, or between Barcelona and Oslo as contexts of destination.

The insights presented in this report summarise what we learnt from the 80 semi-structured interviews conducted in Barcelona and Oslo. Further analyses are forthcoming in publications from this research project – updates of which may be found on the project webpage: [diaspolitic.eu](http://diaspolitic.eu).

## 2. Methodology

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The report is based on a dataset of 80 semi-structured interviews with Polish and Romanian migrants living in Barcelona and Oslo. Each of the subgroups comprised 20 respondents. The interviews were conducted between January and April 2020: In the first part of the interview process, interviews were conducted face-to-face in both cities, while the second part of the interview process (from March 2020 onwards) was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. To complete the scheduled interviews in a safe way, these were conducted online by means of Skype video conversations. The interviews with Polish migrants were conducted in Polish, those with migrants from Romania in Romanian. Both the in-person and the online interviews were recorded, transcribed in full and translated into English.

The interview guide was a theme guide, co-developed by the authors of this report at the team's first workshop in January 2020. The theme guide was developed purposefully to address the project's research questions, exploring the political engagement of migrants from Central and Eastern Europe especially in their countries of origin. The theme guide also took into account the two migrant groups (Poles and Romanians) and the two-settlement context in focus (Barcelona, Spain and Oslo, Norway).

The theme guide consisted of nine sections: 1) Migration story; 2) Future and past – lifespan reflections; 3) Poland/Romania engaging their diasporas politically (voting and beyond); 4) Specifically, in relation to the most recent election (October 2019 Polish parliamentary elections or November 2019 Romanian presidential elections); 5) Perceptions of other migrants' voting behaviour (Poles/Romanians in Norway/Spain); 6) Perceptions of differences and similarities between Poland/Romania and Norway/Spain; 7) Migration as change; 8) Final comments; 9) Background information (structured basic demographic questions asked to all participants at the end of their interview, to aid comparison and monitor the sample composition in a systematic manner).

While a certain degree of freedom was given to the interviewers in relation to the order of the questions asked, all of the themes agreed in the guide were covered in all interviews. Under section 6) Perceptions of differences and similarities between Poland/Romania and Norway/Spain, we used a table outlining a range of 12 different social, political and economic themes. In some instances, this table was used in the interview setting, physically on paper, while in other instances the interviewers introduced the themes orally only (this also had to be adapted to the reality of Skype interviews). It was up to each participant to select as many or as few themes to discuss as they wanted to.

The interview transcripts were coded following a codebook developed once all the transcripts had been compiled. The codebook comprised eight main categories broadly mirroring the interview guide (migration history; personal reflections on the self; general comparisons and similarities between countries; political and socio-economic aspects of the countries of residence and origin; perception of diaspora mobilisation; personal political opinions; technicalities of voting;

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and “other”, which includes anecdotes, quotes, vignettes). Each of these categories consisted of a number of sub-categories which interview transcripts were coded to. In total, the code book included 72 codes (or themes).

The interviews were coded to all relevant themes, following a cross-thematic coding strategy, where each section of the interview was coded to all the relevant codes. Thus, reading all coded text on one of the 72 individual nodes, e.g., “future elections” or “travel to vote” or “reflections on migration” or “queues”, allows an overview of the frequency of simultaneous presence of other codes, as well as seeing which interviewees’ statements were present (e.g. migrants from Poland in Oslo, etc.). In relation to the table of themes for comparison, this coding strategy allowed us to see how prominent each theme is across the four sub-groups, and whether some themes are more salient among Poles or Romanians, or more salient among migrants resident in Oslo or Barcelona. After coding the full interview material, the authors reviewed the coded material, both exploring patterns between groups and between cities, and other key trends emerging, e.g., on voting behaviour or reflections about migration, for similarity, difference, contradictions, and overall patterns. While the sample of interviewees was not sufficient to claim that the findings are representative – i.e. they do not allow us to compare frequencies of certain views occurring – they are very useful in mapping migrant self-perceptions and justifications for different (non) political postures. In the DIASPOLitic project, the interview-based research conducted in Work Package 3 is paired with the quantitative study of migrants’ electoral behaviour in Work package 2 (see the project webpage for forthcoming publications: [diaspolitic.eu](http://diaspolitic.eu)). The names used with quotes in this Report are all pseudonyms.

### 3. Our Respondents: An Overview

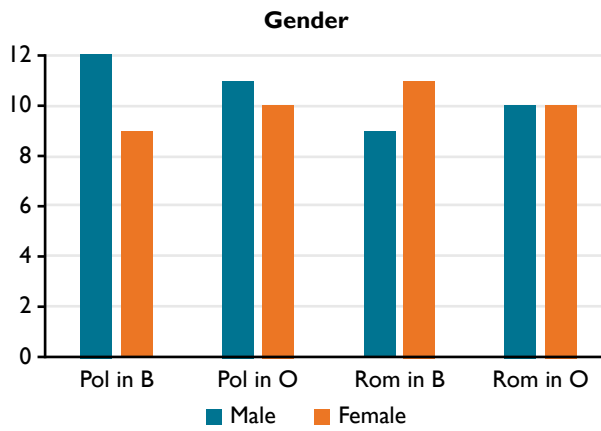


Figure 1: Gender of the respondents

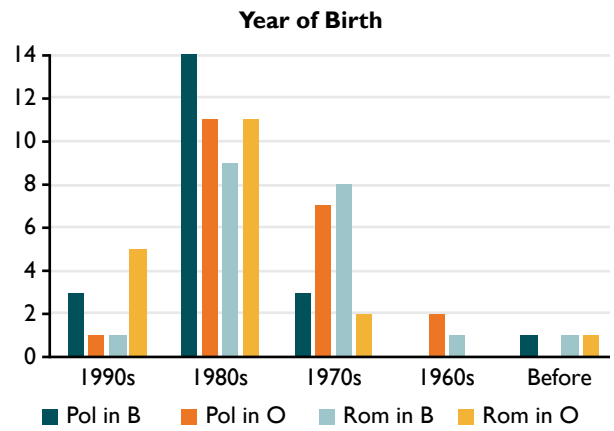


Figure 2: Year of birth of respondents

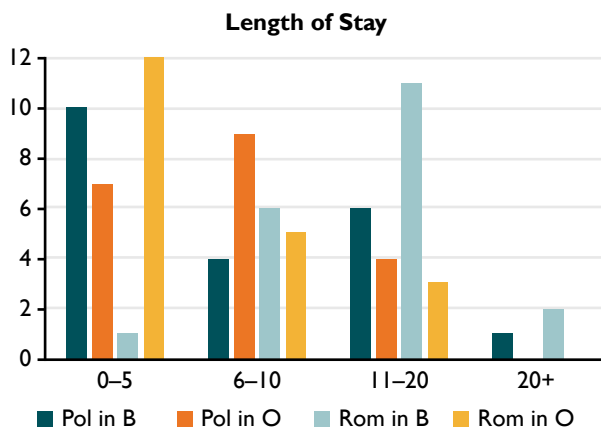


Figure 3: Length of stay in Spain and Norway, in years

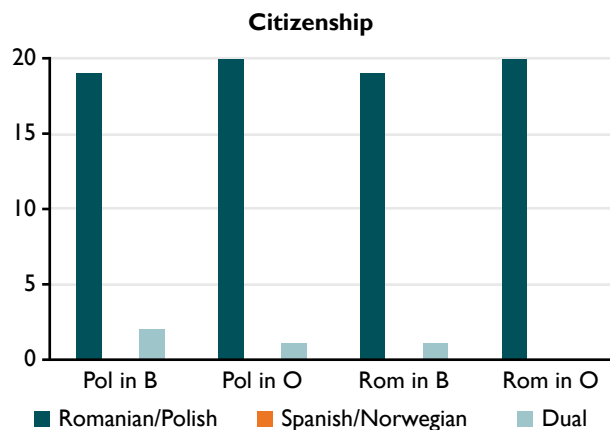


Figure 4: Citizenship of respondents

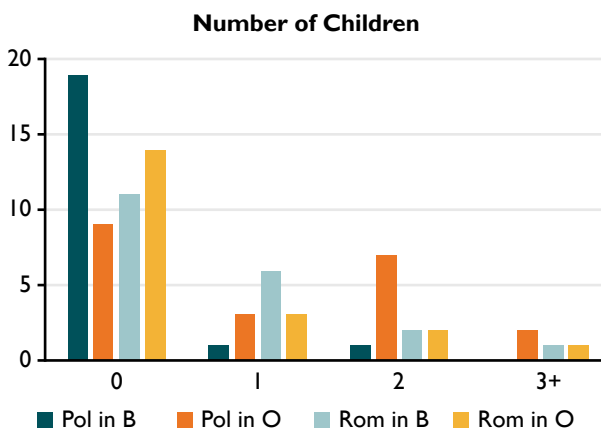


Figure 5: Number of children per respondent

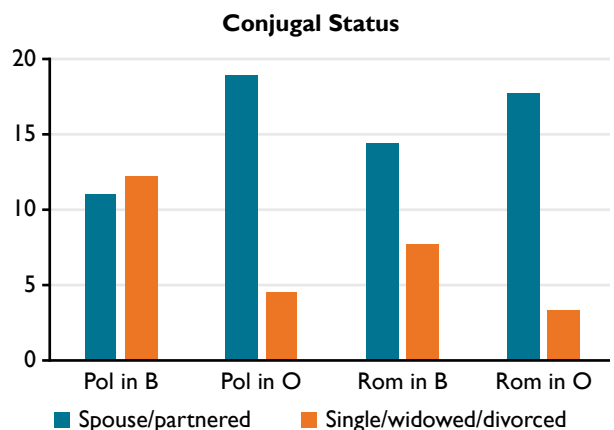


Figure 6: Conjugal status of respondents

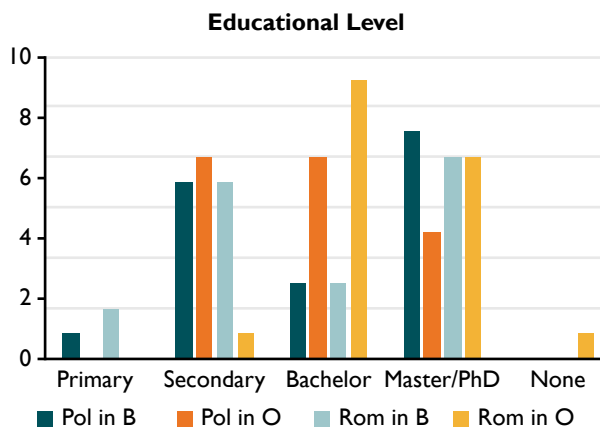


Figure 7: Educational level of respondents

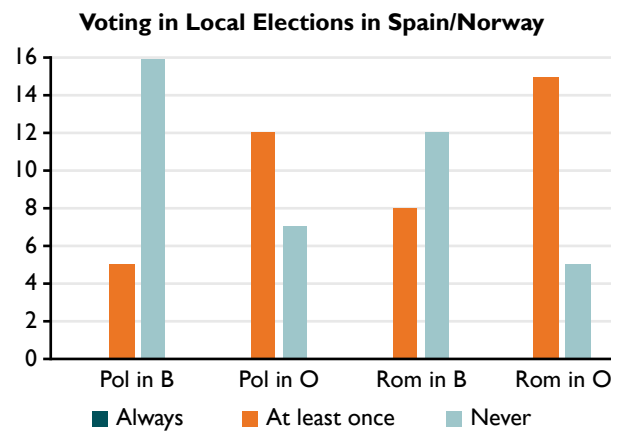


Figure 8: Frequency of voting in local elections

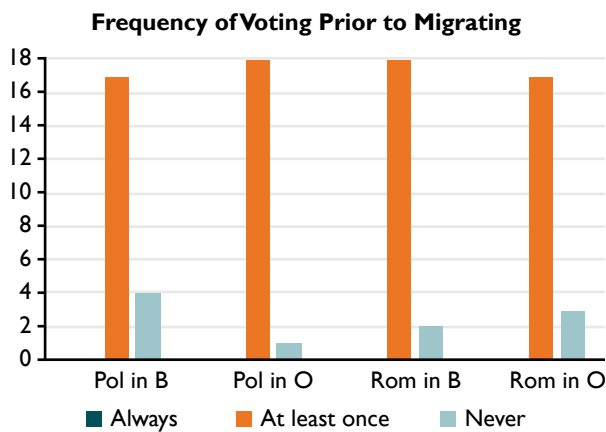


Figure 9: Frequency of voting prior to migrating

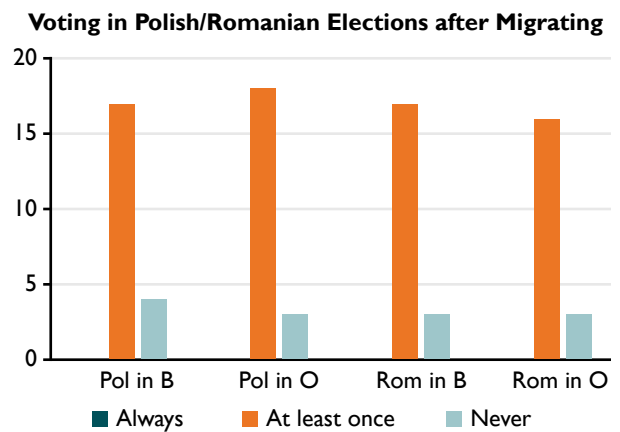


Figure 10: Frequency of voting from abroad

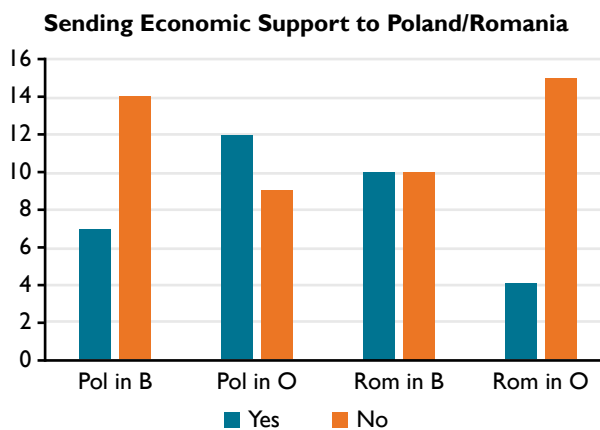


Figure 11: Regular sending of economic support

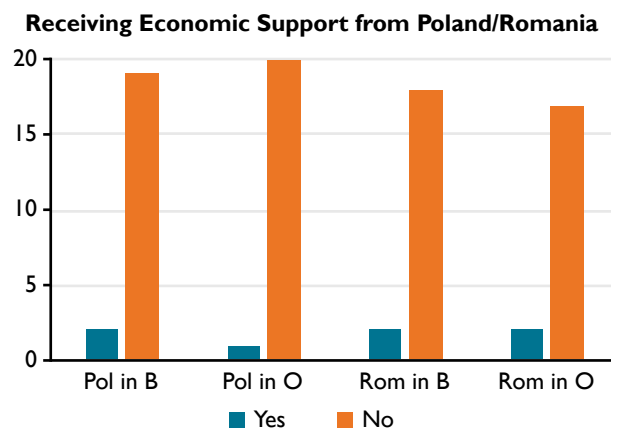


Figure 12: Regular receipt of economic support

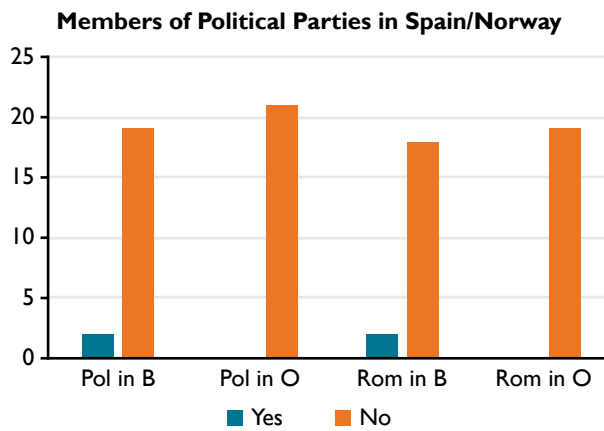


Figure 13: Membership of political parties in Spain/Nor

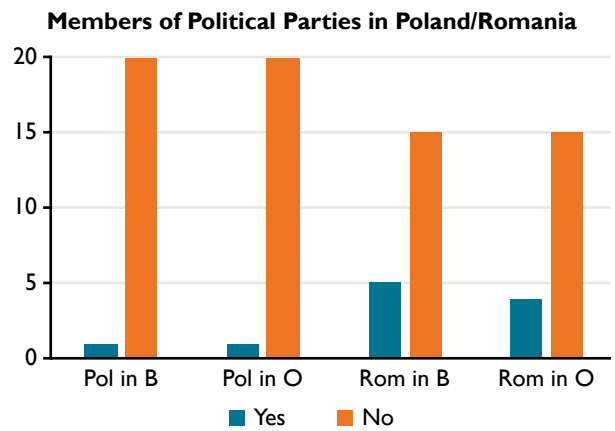


Figure 14: Membership of political parties in Pol/Rom

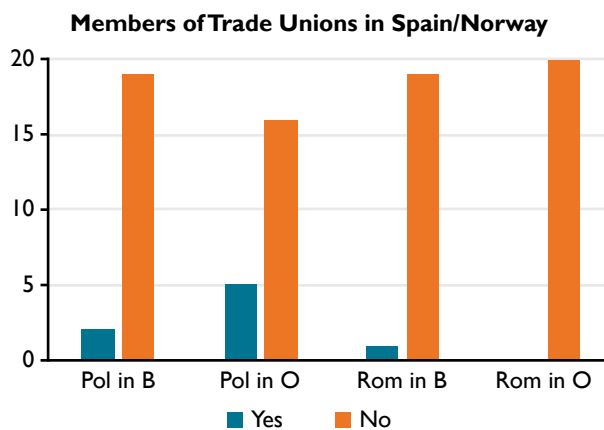


Figure 15: Membership of trade unions in Spain/Nor

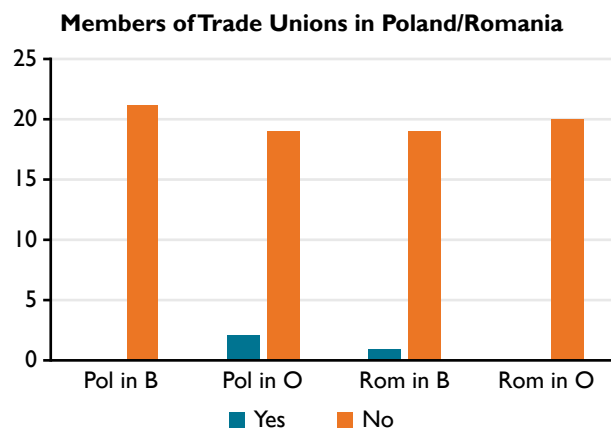


Figure 16: Membership of trade unions in Pol/Rom

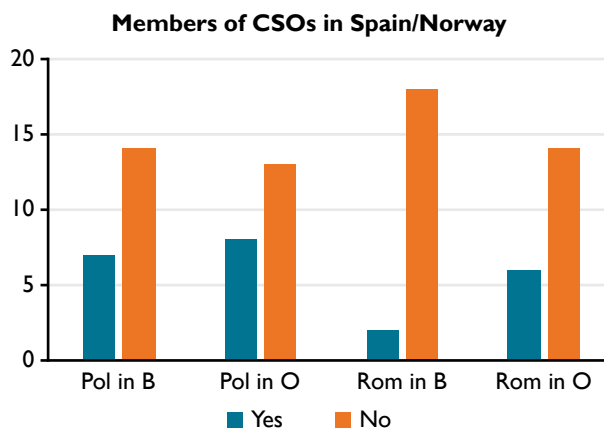


Figure 17: Membership of CSOs in Spain/Nor

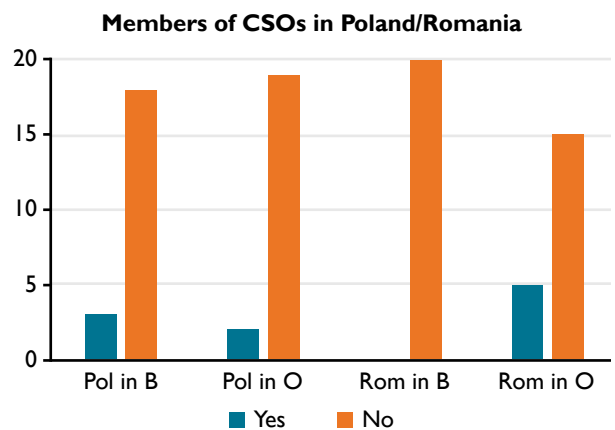


Figure 18: Membership of CSOs in Pol/Rom

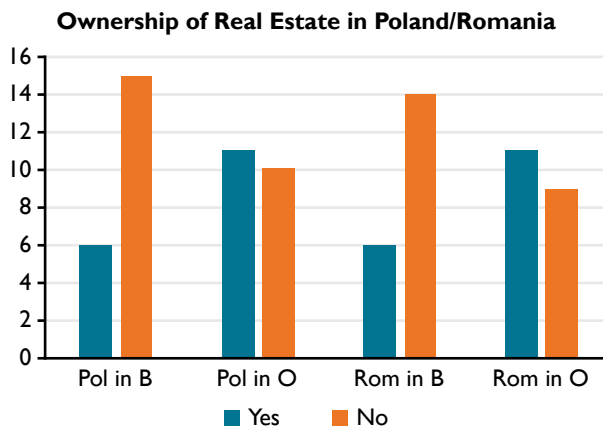


Figure 19: Ownership of real estate in Poland/Romania

## 4. Comparing Politically Salient Issues

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In our interviews each interviewee was asked to comment on select issues, in comparative terms – relating to their country of origin and the country of settlement. The questions were deliberately open-ended, where interviewees could choose which of the themes to spend more or less time on, and we did not super-impose definitions or understandings of the themes. Instead, the exercise was exploratory, aiming to gain insight into how interviewees comparatively commented on the different themes.

### 4.1. Corruption

The issue of corruption is considerably more discussed by Poles and Romanians in Barcelona than in Oslo. A certain degree of similarity is found among Poles in Barcelona and Oslo, as the majority in both groups perceive corruption to be on a similar level in Poland and Spain/Norway. Among Romanians, the majority of interviewees in both cities think that corruption is worse in Romania than in Spain or Norway. The fact that corruption was a topic discussed significantly more by respondents in Barcelona than in Oslo is itself an interesting finding.

Poles in Barcelona who say that corruption is more or less comparable in the two countries articulate their view in relation to politics and politicians, which are mostly associated with corruption on a general level, and as such, the level of corruption is seen to be the same here and there.

Among Romanians in Barcelona, the connection between politics or politicians and corruption is not as explicit or prevalent as among Poles. Most Romanians who argue that there is less corruption in Spain than in Romania argue that it is present both here and there, but the scale and magnitude are much smaller in Spain. Some also argue that Spain has significant corruption at the higher level, but bribery and corruption at a lower level are not as prevalent as in Romania (e.g. bribing as a standard practice to deal with public officials, as expressed by several respondents).

Fewer Poles in Oslo than in Barcelona talk about the issue of corruption, and the group is split more or less evenly between those who think it is minimal in Norway, and those who think it is on a comparable level in the two countries. Poles in Oslo make the politics-corruption connection more tenuously than Poles in Barcelona (they tend to point to the financial system and to big enterprises instead). Romanians in Oslo overall see the issue of corruption as noticeably worse in Romania than in Norway.

*“I think it’s a different corruption. In our country there’s this petty corruption, in hospitals, bribes, policemen and so on, whereas here this doesn’t exist, or almost doesn’t exist. It’s a system that works, but there’s corruption at a high level.”*

*(Maria, 41, Romanian in Barcelona)*



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## 4.2. Democracy

Democracy is one of the most popular themes discussed by the interviewees across the four groups. Falling into the category of democracy are also references to the offer and quality of political parties and political organisations, and how well or badly the state is perceived to work.

Most respondents think that democracy functions better in Spain or Norway than in Poland or Romania. None of the respondents in Oslo thinks that democracy functions better in Poland or Romania, whereas some respondents in Barcelona think democracy works better in Poland or Romania. Poles in Oslo are the group who think that the quality of democracy in the two countries is at least comparable or similar, more than any of the other groups. Conversely, Romanians in Barcelona are the group that, to the greatest extent, thinks that democracy in the country of settlement works better than in the country of origin.

Most of the Poles in Oslo who think that democracy functions better in Norway mention issues of democratic backsliding in Poland, as well as campaigns plagued by hatred and lack of respect between factions: Conversely, Norway is seen as less aggressive and more humane. Politicians in Norway are also seen as more approachable, closer to the people and more accountable than in Poland. By contrast, those who think that democracy in Poland and Norway are on a comparable level tend to limit their argument to the fact that both countries run fair and free elections in which all citizens have a right to vote.

Fewer Poles in Barcelona than in Oslo consider democracy to be better in Spain than in Poland and they provide slightly different argumentation to Poles in Oslo. In fact, they note that in Barcelona there is considerable participation both in the elections and in demonstrations and protests. Similarly to Oslo, a few Poles in Barcelona notice that in Poland there are currently both a democratic backsliding and a more limited political choice than in Spain. Among the few Poles who consider democracy in the two countries to be on a similar level, they cite reasons of disillusionment with both systems and states.

Romanians overall reflect on democracy to a greater extent than Poles, and overwhelmingly argue that democracy functions better in Spain and Norway than in Romania. In particular, Romanians in Barcelona are the group that expresses the most opinions on the subject. The lines of argument used by Romanians in Barcelona can be summed up as four, and though there is some overlap with the reflections of Polish respondents, there are also noticeable differences: First, Spain is seen to have a more consolidated and well-functioning democracy, as it had more time than Romania to transition from a dictatorship (by contrast, references made by Poles to Poland's authoritarian past are largely missing). Second, Spain has a wider left-leaning tradition and political opportunities to engage, while in Romania there is stigmatisation of the left and of the welfare state: Adopting and supporting neoliberal politics is seen as the mainstream position in political circles. Third, Romania is

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perceived to be lacking civic, social and political education, with little political consciousness among people. People in Spain are also perceived to be better at participating and at debating because of what is seen by some as a more independent-thinking education system, while in Romania it is still rigid and uncritical. Fourth, politics in Romania is described as visceral, as pushing individualism and lacking trust to the extreme, as shaped by politicians fighting to cling on to power, and as a system arranged to manipulate democratic structures. Conversely, Spain is described as more stable, with politics done in a more humane way, in which politicians apologise for their mistakes, and democracy functions as a pursuit of a common goal and of sense of community. In addition, state institutions are perceived to work in a more competent way in Spain than in Romania.

Similarly to Romanians in Barcelona, Romanians in Oslo overall draw a comparison on democracy in favour of Norway along three lines of argument: First, political awareness and education among the public in Norway is seen as noticeably higher than in Romania, as people (even the youngest) are interested and talk about political issues they learn at school, and they participate in protests. Second, the tone of Norwegian politics is moderate and reasonable. Third, politicians and politics are done differently: They argue that in Norway there is transparency, politicians are perceived to care about the country and follow up on promises, without flouting their privilege.

As opposed to respondents in Barcelona, neither Poles nor Romanians in Oslo mention how left-wing political parties are absent in Romania or Poland.

*“Democracy is something I feel every day, from the perspective of living in Barcelona. It is not just going to vote once in a while. So this is the biggest difference in this matter. And living in Barcelona where the city is governed by the activists, it shows that you can become a mayor coming from “the street”. Most people don’t have such ambitions and I don’t either. But it is the feeling that the mayor is not a distant man in a suit. I feel the participation in democracy is completely different.”*

*(Agnieszka, 37, Pole in Barcelona)*

### **4.3. Freedom of speech**

No Romanians in Oslo talked about the theme of freedom of speech. Among the other groups, Romanians and Poles in Barcelona are evenly split between those who believe it is better in Spain, those who think it is better in Poland or Romania, and those who think freedom of speech is on a comparable level. Among Poles in Oslo, the sample is evenly split between those who think freedom of speech is better in Norway and those who think it is on a comparable level. None of the Polish respondents in Oslo think freedom of speech is better in Poland.

Among Poles in Barcelona, the perception that freedom of speech is greater in Spain is justified by the fact that the people of Barcelona protest against the government more visibly and

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participate in demonstrations to a greater extent than in Poland, and overall they see more freedom to criticise authorities without fear of censorship. This argument is also recurrent among Romanians in Barcelona, as they mention that people in Romania avoid manifesting publicly their discontent and criticising the authority: This is something some of the respondents attribute to a legacy of the country's communist past (though some also acknowledge the situation has been improving since the 1990s).

Among the respondents that think freedom of speech is better in Poland or Romania, very different reasons are provided as justification to this point: The main reason is the reference to the adoption and implementation of the so-called "*ley mordaza*" ("gag-law"), which targets people who openly criticise the Spanish royal family and the country's state authorities. Some of the respondents are also afraid that in Spain there is too much political correctness, which is seen as a hindrance to freedom of speech.

Polish respondents in Oslo are evenly split between those who argue that the situation is better in Norway and those who think the situation is on a comparable level in Norway and Poland. Those who perceive freedom of speech to be better in Norway maintain that it is in fact abused, threatened, manipulated, or there is none at all in Poland, whereas Norway is praised for balanced debates and opinions. Those who consider the situation to be similar in Norway and Poland think that on paper the right to free expression is guaranteed in both countries, though some limitations may exist.

*"I think the situation in Poland currently is difficult, and really against what I believe is freedom – it's against freedom of speech and democracy. This couldn't happen in Norway."*

*(Maja, 52, Pole in Oslo)*

#### **4.4. Religion**

Respondents were given the chance to discuss and compare their experience of religion and religious freedom in Spain or Norway and Poland or Romania.

Romanians and Poles in Barcelona mostly tend to describe religion and religious freedom as better in Barcelona than in Romania or Poland: However, there are more Poles who consider religious freedom in Spain as similar or comparable to Poland than Romanians do. Conversely, Poles in Oslo are nearly evenly split between those who think that religious freedom is better in Norway and those who argue that Norway and Poland are simply too different to draw a comparison. Only a few Romanians in Oslo talked about religious freedom. Apart from one Romanian respondent in Oslo, no other respondent thinks that religious freedom is better in Poland or Romania than in Norway.

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Poles in Barcelona who argue that religious freedom is better in Spain mostly mention tolerance and respect for other religions, more openness among Christians and the fact that freedom of belief is guaranteed and protected. Among those who think the two countries are similar, two arguments are brought forward: On the one hand, the fact that freedom of religion is equally enshrined in both countries and, on the other hand, there is a perception of the influential presence of the Catholic Church in both societies. Some respondents perceive the Catholic Church to be less pervasive in Spanish than in Polish society, while others see it just as pervasive.

Among Romanians in Barcelona, a considerable majority argues that the resurgence of the Orthodox Church in Romanian society is detrimental, as it carries conservative values and little tolerance for non-Orthodox denominations. This thought is reflected in a general agreement that the role and presence of the Catholic Church in Spain is increasingly smaller, and that Spain is perceived as more open, tolerant and accepting than Romania.

In Oslo, Romanian respondents see Norway as a country where secularisation has advanced more than in other countries. One of them sees it as a positive aspect, as they argue that all religions tend to be more accepting, tolerant and open. On the contrary, Norway's secularisation is seen as a detriment by two respondents who maintain that Norway has become too tolerant.

The arguments used by Polish respondents in Oslo who think that the two countries are too different to be compared revolve around the difference between the Catholic and the Lutheran worldviews and spiritualities: more individualistic, anti-dogmatic and lived in the private sphere in Norway, as opposed to the importance played by the church in Polish society and its influence on the state. Among the five Poles in Oslo that argue that religious freedom is better in Norway, the arguments are centred around the full separation of church and state, and the lack of influence of the church on state affairs. An oft-cited difference between Norway and Poland is the relationship between the church and the schools, as respondents notice that the teaching of religion in Norwegian schools includes all religions, while in Poland it is centred on the Catholic doctrine. While religion is a voluntary subject, in some schools atheist or non-Catholic pupils may feel stigmatised or excluded for not taking the subject.

Abuse, manipulation, fanaticism and stigmatisation are terms recurringly used to describe both the Catholic Church in Poland and the Orthodox Church in Romania, as opposed to the Norwegian and Spanish contexts.

*“Religion in Romania? There aren't many options to reject religion in Romania, meaning that you're a bit forced to believe in a certain Orthodox system, right? [...] While in Spain, you are not forced to believe in anything.”*

*(Alexandru, 43, Romanian in Barcelona)*

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## 4.5. Sexual minorities

The rights of sexual minorities is one of the most discussed topics among Poles in both Barcelona and Oslo, while it is not as much discussed by Romanian respondents. Nonetheless, the sample is nearly unanimous in considering Spain and Norway to be better at protecting the rights of sexual minorities than Poland and Romania: No respondent thinks that the situation is better in Poland or Romania.

Polish respondents in Barcelona mostly refer to two aspects when they argue for why Spain does better than Poland on this topic: First, most respondents refer to Spanish society's widespread social acceptance, tolerance and respect, and second, that Spain has better legal protections and rights enshrined in the law. There are important nuances in the answers given: Some mention that the situation for LGBTQ+ people is probably different in rural and urban Spain, while others point to the fact that despite the predominantly Catholic nature of the two countries, Spanish society is more tolerant and accepting of sexual minorities. Interestingly, also respondents who describe themselves as conservative believe that the rights of LGBTQ+ people in Spain are better protected than in Poland. Poles in Oslo also agree that the situation for sexual minorities is considerably better in Norway than in Poland. As in Barcelona, respondents refer to Norway as a country that is more open and accepting of sexual minorities, and that, overall, the legal system offers better protection and rights. Several Polish respondents argue that Poland should learn from Spain or Norway on this issue.

The issue of rights of sexual minorities is less salient among Romanians than Poles. In Barcelona respondents are critical of Romanian society as they consider it generally unwelcoming of any minorities, and that sexual minorities are made invisible. Some respondents make also critical references to Romanian intellectual elites who still hold homophobic views, despite having being exposed to "western" societies and values. Respondents in Oslo describe Norway to be much more accepting, and positive remarks are made in regard to the fact that children learn about sexual minorities from the early years in school, something seen as lacking in Romania.

*"Of course the rights of sexual minorities, that's something related to gender equality. I won't even say anything on this, because it's obvious, it's obvious to everyone who knows what is happening in Poland. Zones "free" from LGBT, that's simply shameful, it's a disgrace... and I don't talk to anyone about it here because I'm simply ashamed. And that's that."*

*(Aleksandra, 52, Pole in Oslo)*

## 4.6. Welfare

When reflecting on welfare the majority of respondents in all the groups think that Spain and Norway have a more generous and accessible welfare system than Poland and Romania.

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However, a few of the Polish respondents believe that the welfare system in Poland is either comparable or even better than in Spain or Norway: In fact, the recent improvement in welfare provision in Poland is seen as a factor making it comparable to Spain's welfare provision. Recent improvements in welfare provision in Poland are also noticed by a few of the Poles in Oslo who think Norway and Poland have comparable welfare provision systems.

However, most of the respondents across the four groups think that welfare provision is better in Spain and Norway. Romanians and Poles in Barcelona express similar opinions: They note that unemployment benefits are greater in Spain, that Spain offers longer paternity leave, higher sick leave and more income support for people with low-income, and that Spain has a much better functioning health system. In relation to the health system, what is positive about Spain is that the Spanish system is described as free, public and good, prescriptions for chronic diseases are automatically renewed and refunded, and hospitals are better staffed.

The arguments used by Romanians and Poles in Oslo are also similar to those used by the respondents in Barcelona. The welfare system in Norway is described as generous, quick and accessible, focused on the people's needs, and designed to care, respect and help. Conversely, the welfare state in Poland is described as only theoretically generous, but it still leaves many workers without unemployment benefits and state support. The health system is also perceived to function better than in Poland and Romania. Peculiar to the respondents in Norway (as opposed to those in Spain) is the recognition that the higher taxes paid by residents in Norway contribute to a system of state support and public welfare that functions (transport, health system, kindergartens, green spaces).

*“There is a lot of insecurity from the Romanian government. You could actually expect to hear them say “we are sorry but starting next month there is no money left for the pension fund” [...] Well that would never happen here, they never leave people when they are in need.”*

*(Crina, 48, Romanian in Oslo)*

#### **4.7. Gender equality**

The issue of gender equality is discussed considerably more by respondents in Barcelona than in Oslo. Respondents in Oslo are nearly unanimous in saying that gender equality is better in Norway than in Poland or Romania: Also among Romanians in Barcelona the overall opinion is that gender equality is better in Spain than in Romania. There is less consensus among Polish respondents in Barcelona, only half of whom believe gender equality is better in Spain than in Poland.

Though with nuance (e.g. women's condition in Poland and Romania is slowly improving, and that in Norway still exist barriers to gender equality), both Polish and Romanian respondents in

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Oslo see gender equality as stronger in Norway and how societies in Poland and Romania are still dominated by men: Women are often expected to fulfil certain roles and stereotypes especially at home, while in Norway they are more independent. The respondents also note that welfare (paternal leave, abortion, contraception, birth care), balance of family roles and responsibilities, and women's access to labour are all greater in Norway than in Poland or Romania.

The picture painted by Romanian respondents in Barcelona is more complex. There is acknowledgment that violence against women is practised and socially accepted in Romanian society: Educating women and men is seen as necessary to change society, given that Romanian women are seen to lack awareness of their rights and of their inequality. What is different about the situation in Spain is that though there are social challenges to gender equality, there is a perception of more awareness and visibility of women's issues, whereas gender equality is an issue that is not talked about in Romania. As argued in regard to sexual minorities, several respondents acknowledge that the situation may differ between rural and urban Spain. Some Romanian respondents, however, also acknowledge that debates about feminism and gender equality are also starting to develop in Romanian society. The situation in Spain is described as exemplary under certain aspects: Spain offers more programmes supporting victims of violence and abuse, and a more generous welfare system (rights, benefits, child support). Romania, on the contrary, is described as providing few rights, with women having less power and a more limited access to the labour market than in Spain.

These views are mirrored by the Polish respondents in Barcelona who believe gender equality is better in Spain. They argue in fact that women are perceived to be more emancipated and how there is more awareness of the issue in Spanish society than in the Polish one. Some reflect on the fact that attitudes in the Spanish countryside may be different than in the big cities, and some even reflect on the fact that the debate on gender equality is starting to gain traction in Poland, too. Conversely, some of the respondents in Barcelona argue that women's emancipation and the feminist movement in Spain has gone too far.

Some of the Polish and Romanian respondents in Barcelona made reference to the dictatorial past of Poland and Romania as well as Spain. They contrast the egalitarian principle that in the two communist countries women were able to take up jobs traditionally considered as manly (e.g. bus drivers), at a time when the fascist dictatorship in Spain offered women very few forms of employment. They argue that as a result of these dynamics, women in Spain have struggled more to access the job market, but they also have developed a stronger women's emancipation movement than in Romania or Poland.

*“If we talk about Romania, there the situation is absolutely dramatic, so it is tragic. We are just beginning to understand what this thing means, what this discussion means. That is, the discussion about feminism and women's rights is still a peripheral discussion*

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*in the Romanian political discourse. Those who bring it up are considered hysterical. [...] We do not perceive the severity of the crisis. We are just beginning to be exposed to it and it will take years for us to understand it and assume that things can be better than they are.”*

*(Marius, 43, Romanian in Barcelona)*

## **4.8. Immigration**

The topic of immigration also includes reflections on ethnic minorities (especially among Romanian respondents, who often give their opinions on how Romania relates to its minorities such as Roma, Hungarians, Jews and Germans).

Respondents in Barcelona talked about immigration more than respondents in Oslo. Among both Romanians and Poles in Barcelona, a noticeable majority of respondents say that migration policies and management, and people’s attitudes, are better in Barcelona and Spain than in Poland and Romania. The reasons given by the Poles who consider immigration to be better in Barcelona than in Poland are connected to the openness of the city to ethnic minorities, its diversity, and multiculturalism, as opposed to Poland’s homogeneity: Spain is perceived to be better at integrating migrants, at giving them rights and at welcoming them. Negative traits associated with Poland include the fact that it has few immigrants, yet they are feared: The campaign of fear is seen to be led by the government, and it leads to no opportunity to learn about different cultures. There are contrasting views on the current trend towards immigration in Poland: Some of the respondents think Poland is starting to open up, while others think that Poland is becoming increasingly critical of immigrants, especially Ukrainian ones. However, there are respondents in Barcelona who think that immigration is better in Poland on the basis that there is less of it. Barcelona’s multiculturalism is seen by some as problematic.

In contrast, immigration is not a salient topic among Poles in Oslo, and, while none of the respondents thinks that it is better in Poland, the sample is evenly split between those who think immigration in Poland and Norway is similar, and those who believe it is better in Oslo. Those who believe that migration in Oslo is better mention that it is a very diverse city, open and tolerant, as Norway as a whole is seen as very pro-migration, as opposed to Poland’s anti-migration stance. Norway is accepting and supportive, it is argued to integrate migrants and, though it is now using migration for political scoring, the overall situation is still much more humane than in Poland. As noticed in Barcelona, some of the Polish respondents in Oslo also think that Poland is slowly becoming more accepting and open to migration, while others believe migrants (especially Ukrainians) are still completely abandoned by the state.

In contrast to Poles, Romanians in Barcelona frame the issue of immigration in slightly different terms: Romania is described as lacking civil rights for migrants and minorities and

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disrespecting these populations, and some respondents go so far as to say that Roma people are better protected in Spain than in Romania. Romania is in fact perceived to be conservative, closed to migration, and a few describe it as racist. In line with what some of the Polish respondents in Barcelona said, Romania is seen to have little to no immigration, yet there is a general opposition to it. Barcelona is perceived to be diverse, more tolerant and a place where the anti-migrant rhetoric has not been normalised. However, some perceive issues in the Spanish reality too: Barcelona and other big cities in Spain are considered to be probably more open than other places in Spain, and there are indeed some issues with acceptance, e.g. segregation of migrants' children in public schools and hardening attitudes towards Romanians as a result of a few isolated cases of petty crime among Roma minorities. Those who are critical of immigration in Spain tend to be critical of immigration overall, as they argue that ethnic minorities and migrants are better protected by the state, whether it is Romania or Spain, than non-migrant populations.

Among Romanians in Oslo, the sample is split between those who think the situation is better in Norway and those who think it is better in Romania. Those who prefer the situation in Norway argue that Norway is seen to have a strategy to target immigration, meaning that efforts are made towards inclusion, that the state proactively seeks ethnic diversity, and that migrants integrate better than in other Western countries. However, Romanians in Oslo are the group that has the highest number of respondents who prefer their country of origin (as opposed to their country of residence) when it comes to immigration. Two arguments are brought forward: On the one hand, they are critical of Norway's everyday nationalism and of how Norwegians are uninterested in other cultures, while, on the other hand, they worry about the segregation of ethnic minorities in Oslo, which, they argue, does not feature in Romania.

*“From what I see, we remain quite racist in Romania. [In Barcelona] a bit less, but we still see... Now [...] the fact that we have here a far-right party, it was unthinkable a few years ago. I thought we were over that. But no, reactionary discourses can arise anywhere. So yeah, to begin with, I'd say Spain is much further in terms of minorities' rights, they're better protected here, but everything can come and go.”*

*(Maria, 41, Romanian in Barcelona)*

#### **4.9. Work opportunities and living standards**

References to work opportunities and living standards (including access to housing, salaries and cost of living) are made by approximately the same number of respondents across the four different groups. The noticeable difference is, however, that most Romanians and Poles in Oslo consider work opportunities and living standards to be better in Norway than in Romania and Poland, while Romanians and Poles in Barcelona are evenly split between those who think the situation is better in Barcelona, and those who think it is better in Poland and Romania.

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The majority of Poles in Oslo argue that in Norway there is better quality of life and of work, better and more opportunities, and better work relationship between employers and employees. Additionally, the differences in salaries between top and bottom earners are noticed to be smaller than in Poland. Material conditions, food, housing (including student housing) and salaries are also described to be better in Norway.

Arguments put forward by Romanians in Oslo as for why Norway is considered better mirror the arguments made by Poles in Oslo. Work opportunities and conditions are considered to be better in Norway, taxes are higher but used better, the quality of services is better, there is more transparency and honesty in business, and the differences in salaries between the top-paid and bottom-paid jobs are a lot smaller than in Romania. Echoing considerations made in relation to welfare, the Norwegian state is argued to be more generous, to protect the poor better. Salaries in Norway are higher, work schedules are respected and there is collaboration between trade unions and employers. In addition to a generally better quality of life, Norway is described to have better economic stability and advantageous retirement plans.

Poles in Barcelona who argue that the situation is better there than in Poland say that Spain has more working opportunities and it is easier to find a job even without the necessary experience. Work conditions are described to be better, and salaries in Spain are higher. Judgements on the availability of work opportunities seem to draw mostly on the respondents' personal experience: In fact, there are respondents who argue that Poland has more work opportunities available, and it is easier to find a job even without qualifications. In addition, Spain is seen to be still struggling to recover from the 2008 financial crisis, and a few recognise that Barcelona is an unaffordable place to live in.

Also among Romanians in Barcelona there is an almost even split between those who think Spain is better and those who think Romania. The reasons for preferring either are, however, quite different: Access to affordable housing is a much more pressing issue for Romanians than Poles. Despite Barcelona being an expensive city to live in, a few argue that the overall situation is nonetheless better than in Romania, where salaries are too low to allow purchase of houses, and where there is shortage of properties. However, the fact that Barcelona is such an unaffordable city is mentioned as a reason for why Romania is better by nearly all the respondents who prefer Romania's living standards. In terms of living standards, some respondents maintain that salaries in Spain allow for lower living standards than salaries in Romania, while a few recognise that salaries in Spain are not much higher than in Romania (especially teachers and public servants).

*“You have to think how your taxes are being used. I think that was one of my biggest disappointments back in Romania, looking at my taxes, which everyone has to pay and I’m ok with that, but I would like them to be more productive.”*

*(Mihai, 28, Romanian in Oslo)*

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## 4.10. Quality of life and people's attitudes

This section outlines respondents' perceptions of their quality of life, of their social relations, and the differences and similarities between societies in the countries of origin and of residence. While most of the respondents in Barcelona have a preference for life in Spain, the picture in Oslo is more nuanced, as most of the respondents see Norwegian society as simply too different to be able to make comparisons.

Spanish people are described by Poles in Barcelona as kinder, more open and welcoming of people of all origins, laid-back and relaxed: Many of the respondents use the country's openness to migrants as an example of this attitude, as opposed to Poland, which is instead described as historically closed off and hostile. People in Spain are also perceived to be less materialistic and less attached to money than people in Poland. Spanish society is perceived to be more equal and more trustworthy than Polish society. Several utilise expressions such as "stiff" and "show-off" to describe Poland. However some respondents add nuance to this picture, by recognising that deep social divisions exist also in Spanish society, and some even claim that Spanish people overall are not very interested in learning about new cultures.

Some arguments articulated by Poles in Barcelona are mirrored in the Romanian respondents' answers, too: Romanian society is described as individualistic, lacking collective thinking and solidarity, tense and frustrated. Conversely, Spain is described as more relaxed, friendlier, more organised, more flexible and responsible. As for the case of Poles, some respondents recognise that rural and urban Spain may be different. Others notice a similarity between the two societies, which is rooted in the common Latin heritage.

Respondents in Oslo are more split than in Barcelona. However, the arguments used by Poles to describe both Norway and Poland are very similar to those used by Poles in Barcelona to describe Spain and Poland: In fact, Poland is described as individualistic, lacking collective thinking, homogeneous, xenophobic, and, again, a show-off society. Norway, on the contrary, is seen as more relaxed, happier, more community-driven. Those who are more critical of Norway recognise that it is a country difficult to navigate and to relate to.

For Romanian respondents, the majority prefer Norway to Romania, but most think the two countries are simply too different to make a comparison. Those who prefer Norway describe the country as one where people are cohesive, humanitarian, communitarian and empathetic: Quality of life in Norway allows a healthier and happier lifestyle than in Romania. Romania is instead seen as lacking cooperation as people struggle to find common ground to support the country. Among Romanians who prefer Romania to Norway, there are references to how difficult it is to socialise. Overall, most respondents note how different Romania and Norway are: Norwegians are often described as cold, and Romanians as warm, but both traits come with pros and cons. Norwegians are seen by

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some as unwilling to learn about and to open to new cultures, but are seen as independent and respectful, while Romanians are seen as hard-working and adaptable, but also loud and irrational.

*“I also moved to Spain because of my longing for social capital. That functioning in society and cooperation are very important to me. I love to take part in projects in which new people join and things move forward. And Polish isolation is psychologically hard for me. So I chose Spain because of its social capital.”*

*(Agnieszka, 37, Pole in Barcelona)*

## 4.11. Education

Many respondents discussed the issue of education, from kindergarten level to higher education. Some of them build their reflections on their own personal experience of the educational systems in different countries, as parents of children, or as former university students themselves.

Poles in Barcelona who discussed this issue are almost unanimous in thinking that the educational system is better in Poland than in Spain. In relation to schools, they believe that Polish schools prepare pupils better than Spanish schools (though some acknowledge that Polish schools may miss some of the values taught in Spanish schools, e.g. teamwork and soft skills). In relation to higher education and universities, respondents note that Poland has a more practical approach, as opposed to the more theoretical approach of Spanish universities, and that Poland's socialist past has enabled a system of mass education and guaranteed access to free higher education. Spain, on the contrary, is criticised for imposing high tuition fees, and for having recently driven cuts to higher education.

The majority of Romanians in Barcelona who reflected on education also think that the system is better in Romania than in Spain. Among those who express an opinion on the universities, the arguments brought forward are similar to those made by Polish respondents: Romania's socialist past guaranteed access to free, public education that would provide quality, meritocracy, and state support for the poorest. Romanians also lament the deterioration in access and quality of Spanish universities and notice how tuition fees are high and how students receive little to no support from the state. In relation to schools, respondents argue that it is taken less seriously by pupils in Spain because it is less strict, and it allows too much freedom and independence: On the contrary, Romania is seen as more demanding of pupils.

There are however some Romanians in Barcelona who argue that education is better in Spain than in Romania: Higher education is seen by some as better because it is perceived to be less theoretical and more practical. Those who prefer schools in Spain argue that it is because learning is based on pleasure, initiative, interaction and games, while Romania focuses on notions. A few respondents recognise that the educational system in Romania tends to fail Roma children, as they have higher drop-out rates than the non-Roma population.

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Arguments put forward by Poles in Oslo are somewhat similar to those expressed by Romanians in Barcelona, but, in contrast to Barcelona, almost all the respondents prefer Norway's educational system to that of Poland. In terms of universities, what is appreciated is the close student-professor contact and how the learning style is not by heart, as it is in Poland. In terms of schools, those who prefer Norwegian schools mention a more humane and less competitive approach to teaching, a better teacher-student relationship that values and respects children's ideas, and that encourages logic and critical thinking instead of focusing on notions. Social skills in Norwegian schools are given more importance, while children in Poland are seen as overworked, exhausted and lacking the same formative experience of pupils in Norway.

Also among Romanians in Oslo the majority of respondents prefer the Norwegian system. More references to kindergartens are made than in any of the other groups: In particular, the positives of Norwegian kindergartens are that they are easy to access and that the children-per-teacher ratio is small. A positive aspect of Norwegian schools is that they are free and that books are free. Alternative schools (e.g. Montessori and Waldorf) in Norway are not as exclusive as in Romania. The level of independence with which children are raised is also appreciated.

*“That education in Poland is good... Good meaning kids pass the tests with a better score, but they aren't educated about values and how to work together in a group. It is strongly based on knowledge but not at all on soft skills. That time is not wasted on group work because it can be done faster individually. There is a colossal difference. Here schools find it important to teach the values. That doesn't exist in Poland.”*

*(Agnieszka, 37, Pole in Barcelona)*

#### **4.12. Environmental protection**

The issue of environmental protection is mostly discussed by Poles in Barcelona and Oslo, while it is nearly absent in the responses of Romanian respondents (only one Romanian in Barcelona discusses this theme).

Among Poles in Barcelona, respondents are split between those who think Spain is better at protecting the environment and those who think Poland and Spain are on a similar level. Among those who believe Spain scores better than Poland on this issue, several have the impression that Spain has a more conscious debate about the environment, while Poland is only starting now to talk about the issue. Other respondents point out that animal rights in Poland are abysmal; and others argue that waste management in Spain is better. There are also respondents who are disappointed about the state of environmental protection in both Spain and Poland, while others notice that Poland is slowly getting better at modernising sewage systems and waste management.

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Among Poles in Oslo, eight of them think Norway does better than Poland at protecting the environment: Only a few think that Norway and Poland are as bad as each other, though in different areas (Poland for waste management, and Norway for pollution through flights and fishing). Poles in Oslo recognise also that Poland is still developing economically, and its energy is largely coal-derived, while Norway almost fully depends on renewable energy: The effects on the quality of the air and health are visible and noticeable. Poland is also argued to be bad at forest clearance, waste burning and carbon emissions through transport and heating. Norway is described by many to have a completely different relationship with nature, with people more conscious and participating in climate demonstrations as of recently. On an individual level, respondents note that Norwegians can afford to have an environmentally friendly lifestyle (e.g. electric cars), while in Poland people do not have that luxury, and are forced to choose the cheapest option, which is often the least environmentally friendly.

*“In Poland, the politicians don’t believe that the climate is changing, and they laugh at it. In Norway, you really talk about it, about recycling, about everything. It’s very... people are really engaged with it. There are electric cars, you close off streets so you can’t drive there... something is getting done. Young people are also conscious.”*

*(Maja, 52, Pole in Oslo)*

## 5. Diasporas and Political Participation

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### 5.1. Should diasporas have the right to vote in Polish and Romanian elections?

When reflecting on whether diasporas should vote for elections in the country of origin, only a few Poles in Barcelona are in strong agreement or disagreement. Most respondents have conflicting views, but agree overall that it should be easier and faster to be able to vote in the country of residence, rather than in the country of origin. However, as long as the right to vote in the countries of residence is not possible, they consider that voting in their country of origin is better than nothing.

Among the few who are strongly in favour of voting from abroad for national elections, a recurring justification is an idea of Polishness, citizenship, national identity and, to a lesser extent, familial and economic connections to Poland. A possible return to Poland in the future is also a motivating factor for some to vote for national elections from abroad.

In contrast to Barcelona, Poles in Oslo are considerably more in favour of granting the diaspora the right to vote in Polish elections, citing citizenship, identity and Polishness as key factors. Only a few express doubts about the sense or the fairness of voting from abroad after long-term emigration, but still understand the desire to help family and friends by voting. A couple of Poles in Oslo argue similarly to what some Poles in Barcelona expressed, i.e. that as long as voting in Norwegian national elections is not allowed, at least it is good to exercise the right for Polish elections: voting somewhere is better than not voting at all.

The Romanian samples in Barcelona and Oslo show both some key differences, but also some similarities with the Polish samples. The main difference between Romanians and Poles is that Romanians are noticeably less likely to use Romanianness as a justification for voting. At the same time, Romanian identity and “Romanian homeland” go mostly unmentioned. Instead, Romanians prefer to articulate their opinion on the right to vote from abroad along the lines of citizenship and constitutional rights. In contrast to Poles, among Romanians in Barcelona and Oslo only one respondent says that the diaspora should lose the right to vote in national elections. Oppositely, the near totality of Romanian respondents are convinced that the right to vote for diaspora is tied to ideas of nationality and to a constitutional right to vote for all Romanians.

As seen among the Polish samples, reasons connected to familial and economic interests, and a possible return to Romania in the future, are present but to a lesser extent. Another similarity between Poles and Romanians is that some respondents would prefer to vote in national elections where they live, but since that is not possible, at least voting in Romanian elections is better than not being able to vote at all.

*“I think it is normal for the diaspora to have the right to vote because they are citizens of that country, but morally speaking I only think it is ok to vote if you are thinking of going back to your country or if you still have a family back there and you are thinking*

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*about their well-being. If you are completely separated from that society, then I don't understand why you want to keep influencing their lives if you don't want anything to do with that country anymore."*

*(Ion, 34, Romanian in Oslo)*

## **5.2. Why do individuals choose to vote?**

There is no noticeable difference between Romanians and Poles in Barcelona and Oslo regarding why they decide to vote in Romanian and Polish national elections. The most often mentioned reasons to participate are: a wish to fulfil democratic duties, even in the absence of candidates worthy of voting for (spoiling the ballot or voting blank are recurrent choices across the samples); being used to always voting; a wish to give the parliamentary oppositions a stronger mandate; a wish to vote against the ruling parties or coalitions and/or against political agendas, which often takes the form of tactical voting; the wish to support personally known or likeable candidates, political activists or to generally support certain parties' manifestos; and, to a lesser extent, a wish to invest in the future by supporting a political programme that would facilitate the return of the diaspora.

In terms of reasons for not voting, the overall picture is more nuanced, with similarities and differences between Poles and Romanians. Since the improvement in voting facilities in the 2019 presidential elections, no Romanian mentions queues as a reason for not voting: Some mention it, however, as a reason for being unable to vote in previous elections. Only one Pole in Barcelona mentions queues as a reason for not voting. Most of the Poles who did not vote in the 2019 parliamentary elections argue that they did not vote because of technical reasons (they failed or forgot to register), while most Romanians that did not vote lament a general lack of choice and a general undeservingness of the candidates. This is an interesting finding, because, as discussed above, most Romanians argue that the diaspora should maintain their right to vote: Many Romanians in our samples believe in the fairness of having a right to vote, but do not exercise it because of contingent reasons, like a lack of choice, especially on the left.

Other practical reasons for abstaining include: work and lack of time to vote, especially for those who are employed in occupations that require Sunday shifts, e.g. tourism (especially among Poles and Romanians in Barcelona); sickness; absence due to travels; and geographical distance from polling stations (especially among the samples in Oslo).

*"We believe that our vote will not change anything. This is how 20 million people think, and nothing, in fact, ever changes. I always try to mobilise people. Because, really, once a year you can go out and do something for your fatherland. We live in times when it's important to pressure the politicians to make them feel they represent us and they are for us, not the other way round."*

*(Julia, 30, Pole in Oslo)*

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### 5.3. How do the practical modes of voting matter?

In the interviews we asked the respondents to describe how voting worked in practice in the last elections, which in practice meant the 2019 parliamentary elections in Poland and the 2019 presidential elections in Romania. Technicalities of voting included the registration process, the possibility of voting by mail, the location and distance of polling stations and the length of queues. It should also be noted that the two countries vary in terms of how and where migrant votes count. In Poland, all non-resident voters vote within the Warsaw I district, alongside the residents of downtown Warsaw. The list there often has party leaders and Prime Minister candidates, but the diaspora vote is only a small fraction of the results in this populous district. However, migrant votes also count into the overall result for all parties which can boost their electoral performance nationally. In Romania, on the other hand, there are specific seats in the Parliament reserved for the diaspora vote, and there are candidates running on agendas which tend to relate to diaspora issues. Here too the diaspora votes also add to the overall results, so the outcomes are not as different as they may seem at first glance. This difference was not prominent in our interviews because Romanian migrants were asked to reflect on the previous presidential rather than parliamentary election.

Travelling to vote emerges as the greatest challenge among both Romanians and Poles in Oslo and Barcelona. In fact, though some respondents say that they drove for hours in order to cast the vote, there are also others that lament the long distance, which, often coupled with queues, makes it considerably less appealing to go to vote. Both in Barcelona and Oslo some interviewees complain about the location of the polling stations in the city centres, which is seen as impractical given that most migrants live in the peripheries, hence far from the polling stations. A potential solution indicated by some is to allow the vote by post or online, though some are also worried that their vote could get lost.

Two separate issues specifically affect the Romanian and the Polish samples: postal voting for Romanians, and the constituency for Poles. Though Romania allows the diaspora to vote by post (while Poland does not), only two Romanians in our sample voted by post, both of whom are in Oslo. Everybody else that voted did so in person, mostly at embassies or consulates. As for Poles, few lament a lack of organisation or difficulties in the registration process, but some point at the issue of the parliamentary constituency as a potentially negative factor affecting the vote. In fact, the votes from Poles abroad are counted in the Warsaw constituency, to which those who are not originally from the capital have little connection to the candidates there.

Queues are also a recurring theme in the technicalities of voting, especially among Romanians. In fact, after the disorganisation of previous electoral contests, in which most stood in line outside of polling stations between 3 and 9 hours, without eventually being able to vote, Romanians were provided in 2019 with many more available options in terms of polling stations, and none of

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our interviewees complain about queues in the latest presidential election. A number of Romanian respondents in Oslo state that they feel encouraged and even more motivated to vote when they see or wait in the queue at the polling station.

The issue of queues is less prominent among Poles.

*“[The 2019 presidential elections] were the first real elections, that is the first time when there was no queue, and I came to vote and solved everything in two minutes. Now, I do not claim to say that I have to necessarily vote in two minutes, but one thing is to wait for five, ten minutes, maybe half an hour, and another is to wait for ten hours and then stay out [of the polling station].”*

*(Madalin, 33, Romanian in Barcelona)*

#### **5.4. How is migration perceived to impact migrants’ own voting behaviour?**

Asked to reflect on whether migration has changed political opinions, perspectives and behaviour, respondents offer a complex picture.

Among Poles there is a very marked difference between Oslo and Barcelona. Only a few Poles in Barcelona think that living there does not influence their voting behaviour and political opinions. The opposite is in fact true: A noticeable majority of Poles in Barcelona think that exposure to Spanish society and politics has a strong influence on their political perceptions, for example by confronting solutions to problems that could also be applied to the Polish context. Some even mention the fact that they have been ideologically pulled to the left socially and/or economically: However, there are also a few respondents who have adopted more conservative and nationalist positions, namely as a result of the exposure to either the perceived excesses of tolerance towards migrants in the city, or to the perceived anti-Polish propaganda present in Spanish media.

With the exception of four respondents who think that having migrated to Oslo may have influenced their political opinions, the vast majority of Poles in Oslo are convinced that being in Oslo has little to no influence. The reasons cited by them are: a perceived “low level of integration and assimilation” among Poles; a general lack of interest in politics, and an even smaller interest in Norwegian political affairs; and a strong attachment to Poland in terms of economic investments, vision of short-term migration to Norway and family members living in Poland. From our interviews it emerges that Poles in Oslo perceive the rest of the diaspora to be here more temporarily than what Poles in Barcelona perceive the Polish diaspora there to be. The reasons for moving to Oslo and Barcelona are perceived to be quite different, and that can influence people’s political participation and behaviour: In fact, many among the Poles in Barcelona argue that the impression of Barcelona as a dynamic and progressive city trumps economic reasons for moving there, while Poles in Oslo cite job opportunities and personal economic improvement as the key reason for moving there.

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Only a couple of Romanian respondents in Oslo answered this question. One of them is sceptical about the idea of living in Oslo having an influence on the political behaviour of the Romanian diaspora, while the other mentions similar concerns expressed by Poles in Oslo, i.e. a general lack of interest and participation for local political affairs among Romanian migrants. However, the difference between Romanians and Poles in Barcelona is remarkable: Fewer Romanians are convinced that living in Barcelona has an effect on the diaspora's voting behaviour. In fact, the sample is split in half between those who agree with this proposition and those who disagree. Romanians believe to a lesser extent than Poles that the solutions adopted in Barcelona can be translated or adapted in the context of origin, and fewer respondents than among Poles admitted to have become more left-leaning since their move to Barcelona (though no one admits to have become more right-leaning).

Only two respondents (both in Barcelona, one Pole and one Romanian) in the whole sample argued that it is European affairs that matter the most in terms of influencing the diaspora's political behaviour.

*“I think that the Norwegian debates don't have an impact at all. Let's not hide the fact that the majority of people who vote are simply workers who are working and are strengthening the Polish economy and they have houses in Poland and they have family in Poland. I think that they are dedicated and always go vote and never watch Norwegian TV and don't integrate at all, so to speak, with the Norwegian society. And I think that's the largest portion of people who vote, that's what I think.”*

*(Mikolaj, 36, Pole in Oslo)*

## **5.5. Why do diasporas vote in origin country elections?**

In the interview we asked the respondents to share their opinion on why the diaspora votes and on why they vote the way they do.

The breadth of responses among Poles in Barcelona is noticeable: It is a recurring theme among respondents that, since Polish migrants are exposed to the city's left-leaning character, they find it hard to sympathise with the rhetoric of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party and of the other Polish right-wing parties. In addition to that, Poles in Barcelona identify some key traits that feature the city's diaspora: It is young, educated, more “European” than diasporas in other cities and countries. Many point to the fact that social welfare schemes implemented by PiS (the 500 PLN child benefit, the 13th pension payment etc.) have little to no influence on the lives of Poles in Barcelona, meaning that they are able to make more informed, grounded and less emotive and interest-driven decisions than Poles in Poland. As addressed by the question on personal political behaviour, many respondents argue that other people too have a key priority of ousting the ruling parties, which means they are driven to vote tactically, or for the “lesser evil”. However, there

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are also people pointing at a diversity of voters and the fact that PiS voters exist also in Barcelona, though they are less visible and vocal than in other contexts.

This is an interesting fact, because one of the respondents in Oslo argues that right-wing supporters are very vocal and seem to dominate the scene, though there exist also many in the diaspora who have more centrist or left-leaning opinions. The difference between Poles in Oslo and Barcelona is otherwise evident: Most of the Polish respondents in Oslo argue that Polish debates and politics have a bigger effect on the diaspora's political behaviour than being exposed to the Oslo environment: Respondents further argue that they see most of the Polish diaspora in Oslo as not integrated (or unwilling to integrate), hence only following Polish debates and media. Most respondents maintain that the diaspora tends to vote the same way as before leaving, which is mainly ascribable to family values, region of origin, social networks, economic standings, education, media followed and exposure to social media. Most Poles in Oslo are still perceived to be only temporarily in the city, so their desire to be part of Norwegian society is minimal.

Polish respondents in Oslo reflect on the demographic composition of the diaspora in the city. As with the respondents in Barcelona, many respondents notice that the diaspora in Oslo is formed by a many young people (especially men), but there is a key difference between the two cities: Young people who arrive in Oslo tend to come to the city not because they have a strong interest in Oslo, but because of its economic advantages, whereas people migrating to Barcelona are perceived to do so mostly because of the city environment. Young, male Polish migrants in Oslo are described as very unhappy with the situation in Poland, but instead of supporting left-wing alternatives to the ruling coalition, they tend to prefer the populist right-wing opposition because of the parties' anti-system stance. The young voters who support centrist and the left-wing alternatives are seen by some respondents as being inspired by European and Norwegian values.

Contrary to Barcelona, Poles in Oslo perceive Poland's social welfare programmes as key determiners of voting behaviour. Poland's influence on Poles seems to be much stronger among the Oslo diaspora than among the Barcelona diaspora.

Turning to the Romanian samples, there are noticeable differences with the Polish samples, but differences between Romanians in Barcelona and Oslo are few. Among Romanians in Barcelona, they make almost no reference to the openness of the city, hence being in Spain or Barcelona is seen to have very little influence on the voting behaviour of the Romanian diaspora. The same argument is also brought forward by Romanians in Oslo. The vast majority of Romanian respondents in Oslo and Barcelona think the diaspora votes above all for change, and they feel empowered to directly affect the destiny of their country by voting. Most people also cite family reasons, friends and the possibility of returning in the future as drivers of voting behaviour among the diaspora. As seen among Polish respondents, some of the Romanians respondents think that Romanians in Norway are not so much ideologically driven, but tend to vote against parties

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associated with corruption instead. In addition, a few believe that being exposed to an environment like the Norwegian one, which is not as plagued by corruption as Romania, can have an effect on political behaviour.

Most respondents agree that the majority of Romanian voters lean to the right, either because of individualistic, entrepreneurial and capitalistic tendencies among young generations, or because they have had good experiences of liberal politicians in the past (e.g. Traian Băsescu and Klaus Iohannis). A key difference between Romanians and Poles is that there is a general consensus among Romanians that people vote enthusiastically and they do so for the liberal options in particular. Interestingly, Romanians refer to generational divides in a way that Poles do not: Respondents tend to consider that the political behaviour of older generations and pre-1989 migrants is still affected by the socialist-antisocialist ideological divide, while younger generations are not considered to be influenced by that debate, while generally regarding liberal and right-leaning options as the only plausible ones.

*“The politically active diaspora is generally the recent date diaspora, the same people are practical, that is, they have not fundamentally transformed after they moved to Spain, they are the same people, as they were there and they are here, they are somehow more open in a certain way, but not fundamentally different. [...] The diaspora, in general, acted as a change factor, so I think that’s the fundamental difference. I don’t think the diaspora has a prevailing political orientation. They are not more progressive or conservative, or they are not more liberal or leftist: From this perspective, the diaspora reproduces quite exactly what is happening in the country.”*

*(Marius, 43, Romanian in Barcelona)*

## **5.6. Why do diasporas not vote in origin country elections?**

The respondents were also asked to reflect on why members of the diasporas decide not to participate in national elections.

Poles in Barcelona and Oslo provide very similar arguments. A clear majority of respondents identify a mixture of powerlessness and discouragement towards the electoral and political system in Poland as a whole as a key reason for not voting. Some respondents mention that those who do not vote from abroad are also very likely not to have voted prior to their emigration, citing a lack of political education in the family, or, as in the case of two respondents in Oslo, a lack of patriotic ideals. Indifference, disappointment with the political system or with previously voted parties/candidates, a perceived lack of change, and a lack of choice are also mentioned as factors discouraging the diaspora vote. Frequent are also reflections pointing at the geographical, temporal and psychological distance from Poland, and the fact that it is possible that those who do not vote do not plan to return to Poland anyway. Distance from Polish affairs is perceived to be a

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discouraging factor, too. Three interviewees in Oslo cite practical and structural concerns: lack of clear information from the embassy; difficulties in the registration process; distance from polling stations; and the fact that workers may be overworked and unwilling to spend their time off work standing in queues.

Romanians in Barcelona and Oslo argue very similarly to Poles. Weak ties to Romania, lack of care for Romanian affairs and no plans for future return migration are identified as key factors discouraging the vote. In contrast to Polish respondents, the feeling of powerlessness and lack of trust in candidates or political platforms does not feature as the main concern. Instead, in line with the Polish respondents, lack of choice, representation and information on the voting process are cited as key reasons for not voting. Compared to Poles, however, more Romanians witnessed a general increase of participation in the 2019 presidential election than in previous ones. A lack of family democratic education, a greater interest in affairs in Spain/Norway and the impression that those not voting from abroad are also those who did not vote prior to emigrating are also explanations provided by Romanian respondents. As for Polish respondents, logistics and distance from polling stations feature as important factors both in Oslo and Barcelona, while disappointment with previously supported candidates or parties, and at the lack of choice and the undeservingness of candidates, are also perceived as a possible explanation for members of the diaspora not voting.

*“Why? For various reasons, maybe they aren’t interested in politics. Maybe they left and they want to leave it all behind them. Maybe they don’t know how to vote. Maybe they don’t have a mind for it. Maybe they are prioritising other things. Maybe they just are not interested in politics. I also think that the people who do not vote in Poland are also the people who do not vote abroad.”*

*(Natalia, 35, Pole in Oslo)*

## **5.7. What factors could improve the diaspora turnout?**

Asked to consider what factors could encourage the diaspora to vote, there is some overlap between the answers given by Romanian and Polish respondents, with little difference between Barcelona and Oslo.

The single most cited factor that could encourage participation is the political message crafted by politicians and political parties: Politicians personally visiting the diaspora, offering concrete solutions to relevant issues or reaching out to potential voters with campaigns, and embassies and consulates running active information strategies are all identified as potentially encouraging factors. A few respondents indicate that helping the return of the diaspora by offering tangible solutions can be a motivating factor, too. A few respondents indicate that previous mobilisation in the home countries around key issues (e.g. abortion and reproductive rights, democracy,

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environmental protection) has helped the mobilisation of diasporas, too. Many respondents reflect on the role of educating people from an early age about the importance of participation and democracy, instilling from a young age the idea that voting is an important act of citizenship.

A particularly important aspect for Polish respondents, especially in Barcelona, is the idea of framing the voting as acts of identity, Polishness, a patriotic message of caring for Poland regardless of where you are in the world. Prominent among Romanians is the argument that having a better and wider political choice would help mobilise the diaspora (this is in contrast not cited by any of the Polish respondents).

There are also references to practical issues to overcome existing barriers: for example, voting online, being sent email reminders from embassies and consulates, the possibility to book a specific time and place for voting, more places to vote, and postal voting, or a combination of these, are all mentioned as possible solutions.

*“If I were to take my own case, the answer would probably be more options, I mean right now I am facing a choice between a neoliberal right and a corrupted left – I don’t have anything to vote for.”*

*(Teodora, 35, Romanian in Barcelona)*

## **5.8. Does the right to vote “here” influence voting “there”?**

The picture emerging from the answers to the question about whether having the right to vote in local elections in Barcelona and Oslo influences mobilisation for participation in elections in Poland or Romania is mixed. Overall, there are only a few respondents who are fully convinced that being able to vote in Barcelona or Oslo constitutes a clear incentive for voting also in Romania or Poland. But the opposite is also true, i.e. there are very few respondents who think that there is absolutely no link between the two. Most respondents are somewhere in the middle, with many unsure.

The key arguments used by those who think that there are no connections between voting in local elections at residence and voting in national elections at home include: first, the fact that voting in Barcelona or Oslo should not be a migrant’s business, as it should only be a matter for the citizens of the country of residence (even at local level). Second, if connections with Poland and Romania are still strong and people are more concerned about issues at origin, rather than at residence, then the right to vote in Spain and Norway is unlikely to be exercised and even more unlikely to have an influence on the voting behaviour in Polish and Romanian elections. Third, migrants who have plans to return to Poland and Romania some time in the future are perceived to be uninterested in political affairs in Barcelona and Oslo, hence they do not exercise their right to vote there. A fourth factor, identified by a few Poles in Oslo, points to the fact that local

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political parties fail to reach out to the diaspora and there is an overall lack of Polish elected representatives or candidates.

Conversely, the key arguments provided by those who think that voting in local elections in Barcelona and Oslo is connected to voting in Poland and Romania are: first, the idea that political participation is something that someone does regardless of where they are, pointing thus at civic and democratic personal education. In fact, many argue that the opposite is true, i.e. that if one is likely to vote in Poland or Romania, then they are also likely to engage politically abroad. Second, the exposure to a different way of doing politics, to a broader political offer, and to the accountability of elected officials in Barcelona and Oslo is seen as a potential factor inspiring the diaspora to vote for national elections in Romania and Poland. Third, and relevant for the respondents in Barcelona, since the level of politicisation in the city is almost inescapable, everyone at some point is touched by it, affecting the way people think about politics at origin.

However, the majority of respondents are unsure about whether the two things are connected. Most arguments relate to the personal interest in politics at the individual level, the length of stay in the city of residence, and whether people feel they belong to and are members of the political community at residence.

Interestingly, we can see from the interviews that participation in local elections is higher among both Poles and Romanians in Oslo than in Barcelona. All the respondents in Oslo knew they have a right to vote in local elections, and only a few decided not to vote, while nearly a quarter of respondents in Barcelona did not know they had a right to vote prior to the interview or to the latest round of local elections in 2019.

*“Of course, yes, it is a process of civic participation, experiencing a democratic process functional or more functional than in Romania, you get to perceive politics differently from how Romania does. [...] [In Barcelona] it is easier to realise that you, as a voter, can put pressure on your elected officials because they will come again to ask for your vote; that didn't happen in Romania or it has just started to happen but with a gap of 20 years.”*

*(Teo, 51, Romanian in Barcelona)*

## **5.9. Which factors contribute to mobilisation?**

In terms of mobilising factors, the most striking finding is that no interviewee mentions having seen official governmental campaigns to encourage the vote and the mobilisation of the diasporas: Almost half of the respondents (mostly Poles, and, to a lesser extent Romanians especially in Oslo) say they had not noticed any official campaign at all. Some respondents recall social media campaigns encouraging mobilisation, but they cannot remember whether they were official

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government posts or not. Many Poles attribute this lack of visibility to the fact that they know the ruling coalition does not want the diaspora to get involved.

Generally, there are few differences between Poles and Romanians. The most noticeable difference is that Romanians tend to have witnessed mobilising efforts from official channels to a slightly higher extent than Poles, but they question the real purpose of this mobilisation: Many in fact think of it as superficial, a PR stunt, with no real interest in actually bringing the people to polling stations, as no real incentive for migrants to return is provided. Romanians perceive mobilising efforts from official channels as a way to win the diaspora vote, as its weight is now recognised as pivotal for deciding election results. Rather, Romanian respondents see the diaspora able and willing to mobilise independently of governmental efforts to a greater extent than Poles.

Most of the mobilisation efforts are described by both Poles and Romanians as happening on a peer-to-peer basis, through social media platforms, Whatsapp, Facebook groups, Instagram posts, and personal networks. Opposition parties (both in Poland and Romania, as of 2019) were seen to be key mobilisers either on social media or personally through some of the candidates and the networks they have in Oslo and Barcelona.

*“Not a campaign, only women on a WhatsApp group were posting about how to register and how to vote. They weren’t agitating... Maybe they were prompting to vote because this is our country, even if we aren’t there. So, this is the only thing.”*

*(Agnieszka, 37, Pole in Barcelona)*

### **5.10. Did migration change your views?**

Asked to reflect on whether migration has changed the respondents’ political views, the emerging picture shows a high degree of complexity. The majority of respondents consider that migration has changed their views in a number of different ways. Respondents from across the whole sample are included in this group, with Romanians and Poles in Barcelona slightly more represented than respondents in Oslo.

Respondents argue that they have become more open, trusting of other people and relaxed than prior to migration. Many respondents see themselves as having been personally enriched by meeting people with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and they have become more tolerant, open and aware of people with different perspectives and beliefs. The exposure to different socio-political realities, environments and systems in Spain and Norway (and, for many respondents, other countries too) is argued to have affected the way they position themselves politically and their viewpoints. Some informants also make reference to the fact that they can look at Polish and Romanian affairs from a distance, making it possible to make more informed and less

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emotive decisions than if they had otherwise stayed in Poland and Romania. A few respondents point at having studied and worked abroad as factors influencing the way they think politically.

Conversely, among those who believe that migration has had no impact on their views, the most recurrent explanation is that how people have been socialised prior to migration is a more important factor than migration itself: In fact, they argue that views and opinions were already formed before leaving Poland or Romania. They maintain however that it may be possible that migration reinforced the previously held beliefs: Conservative or progressive values may have been enhanced, but no one has radically changed their views. Other respondents do not see migration as the factor influencing change in personal beliefs, but age, as they argue that people tend to change perspectives and beliefs through the process of maturation.

*“Migration was one of the factors. Yes, it opens your eyes, you meet people from around the world. You look at different situations in different countries from various perspectives [...] that’s great. I know it would be impossible, but Erasmus should be mandatory in not wealthy countries like Poland. At least one semester abroad should be mandatory for all. Because that really changes people’s approach to the world, and it opens people to other cultures, languages and perspectives of seeing the world.”*

*(Czesław, 37, Pole in Barcelona)*

## **5.II. Would you have voted the same way if you had stayed in Poland/Romania?**

The vast majority of the respondents affirm that they would not have voted differently if they had not emigrated from Poland and Romania. This is especially true for Poles in Oslo and Barcelona, and for Romanians in Oslo. Conversely, most Romanians in Barcelona are unsure whether they would have voted differently or not. In any case, the number of respondents who think they would have voted differently if they had not emigrated is lowest across all the four groups.

Among the respondents who say they would have voted differently, the arguments used partly centre on exposure to a more cosmopolitan, diverse and progressive environment in Barcelona and Oslo. Another argument used by some of the respondents is that they would not have voted at all if they had stayed in Romania or Poland because of a lack of trust in politicians and politics in general: However, since moving abroad, they were able to see a different kind of politics and have become more interested in the political choice available in Poland and Romania.

However, as mentioned, the great majority of respondents (across all groups) do not believe they would have voted differently if they had not migrated. The single most used argument points to the fact that socialisation and forming of political opinions prior to migration has more to say in people’s political behaviour than exposure to new environments. While asserting this, a number

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of respondents add that migration may have contributed to reinforcing previously held ideas, i.e. that those who were already liberal, left-leaning or right-leaning have cemented their views and have become even more liberal, left-leaning or right-leaning.

Most of the respondents who are unsure argue that it is too difficult to say because the political environments in Poland and Romania are too different from those in Spain and Norway, while others argue that their material conditions (e.g. employment, job security, economic security) would have been different if they had not migrated, hence they would have voted (or not) according to their social status. Others note that priorities and interests indeed change both when you move to a different country, and in the course of a lifetime, arguing thus that a combination of age and contingent factors have a greater impact on voting behaviour than migration per se.

Those who have never voted and have never been interested in politics are still uninterested in politics and do not vote.

*“Why would it be different? I vote based on my convictions, not my home address.”*

*(Adam, 34, Pole in Oslo)*

## Further Reading

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If you are interested in issues related to migrant political engagement with their homeland, see other publications from the DIASPOLitic Team:

- Szulecki, Kacper; Davide Bertelli; Marta Bivand Erdal; Anatolie Coşciug; Angelina Kussy; Gabriella Mikiewicz & Corina Tulbure (2021) ‘To vote or not to vote? Migrant electoral (dis)engagement in an enlarged Europe’, *Migration Studies*, Online First.
- Mikiewicz, Gabriella; Anatolie Coşciug; Kacper Szulecki; Corina Tulbure; Marta Bivand Erdal; Davide Bertelli & Angelina Kussy (2021) ‘Migration and political (non-)participation in origin countries: Romanians and Poles in Oslo and Barcelona’, *Routed Magazine*, 14 February. Available at: [www.routedmagazine.com/pol-participation-origin](http://www.routedmagazine.com/pol-participation-origin). (Also available in Polish and Romanian).
- Szulecki, Kacper (2020) ‘Illiberal Remittances. Is Mass Migration and the Demise of the Myth of the West Fuelling Populism in CEE?’, *Aspen Review Central Europe*, 1/2020, March. Available at: [www.aspen.review/article/2020/illiberal-remittances-mass-migration-demise-myth-west-fueling-populism-cee](http://www.aspen.review/article/2020/illiberal-remittances-mass-migration-demise-myth-west-fueling-populism-cee).

For updates on new project publications, follow [www.diaspolitic.eu](http://www.diaspolitic.eu) and Twitter @diaspolitic.

We also recommend publications by members of our Advisory Board:

- Koinova, Maria (2021) *Diaspora Entrepreneurs and Contested States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ciornei, Irina & Eva Østergaard-Nielsen (2020) ‘Transnational turnout. Determinants of emigrant voting in home country elections’, *Political Geography* 78, 102145.
- Østergaard-Nielsen, Eva; Irina Ciornei & Jean-Michel Lafleur (2019) ‘Why do parties support emigrant voting rights?’ *European Political Science Review* 11(3): 377–394.

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# Migrant Political Engagement and Voting from Abroad

*Insights from interviews with Polish and Romanian migrants in Barcelona and Oslo*

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In this report, we present insights from interviews with Polish and Romanian migrants living in Barcelona and Oslo. These interviews were conducted as part of the DIASPOLitic project “Understanding the Political Dynamics of Émigré Communities in an Era of European Democratic Backsliding”. The project is funded by the Research Council of Norway and led by the University of Oslo, in collaboration with SWPS University in Warsaw and the

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).

Our analytical focus is the political engagement of EU migrant groups in their countries of origin – pondering the confluence of, on the one hand, mass emigration from countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and, on the other hand, the ongoing processes of democratic backsliding. Whereas this can be approached at the macro level, in this report, we turn to the micro level, exploring

a core puzzle in the study of international migration: namely, how and when does migration impact individuals in ways such that their ideals, values and outlooks change?

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