

# Acquisition and loss of citizenship in EU Member States

## Key trends and issues

### SUMMARY

Access to citizenship status is an important prerequisite for enjoying rights and privileges, such as migration and political rights, as well as for developing a sense of identity and belonging. Since the establishment of Union citizenship, all persons who are nationals or citizens of an EU Member State enjoy the status of EU citizenship, which confers on them a number of additional rights and privileges. However, Member States retain full control over who can be recognised as a citizen.

Although the legal rules on the acquisition and loss of citizenship in the EU Member States remain fairly divergent, one can identify a number of key trends and issues. The need to integrate long-term immigrants has pushed EU countries to amend their citizenship laws. This often resulted in making citizenship both more liberal (lowering residence requirements and tolerating dual citizenship) and more restrictive (introducing integration clauses and citizenship tests). The surge in terrorist activities in the EU, which involve citizens, prompted several Member States to revise or reactivate citizenship provisions allowing for citizenship to be revoked.

Concerns about immigrants' integration, allegiance and belonging, as well as about the cultural and economic consequences of regional integration and globalisation are at the heart of recent debates about citizenship in Europe. As the Maltese case of investor citizenship shows, the issue of access to citizenship is no longer a matter that concerns Member States alone. The bundling of national and EU citizenship means that Member States have a certain responsibility towards each other when taking decisions over who to accept (or reject) as citizens.



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- Citizenship – a multidimensional concept
- Comparative overview
- EU citizenship 'for sale'
- Citizenship and immigrant integration
- Terrorism and deprivation of citizenship

## Citizenship – a multidimensional concept

Citizenship is a complex legal and socio-political concept with three major components: (1) legal status, (2) rights and obligations, and (3) national identity.<sup>1</sup>

Firstly, citizenship describes a legal bond between a person and a state. The power to regulate citizenship is an essential and exclusive attribute of state sovereignty, and international law imposes only a few limitations to the right of states to regulate citizenship, in particular with regard to the prohibition of statelessness and the arbitrary deprivation of citizenship.

Secondly, the status of citizenship implies a series of rights and obligations. The most important citizenship rights are the right to vote in and to stand in elections, the right to return to one's country of citizenship and the right to seek diplomatic protection while abroad. While a number of EU countries grant third-country nationals political rights in municipal elections, political rights in national elections remain a privilege reserved for citizens.<sup>2</sup> Voting in elections is compulsory for citizens in Belgium, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Greece.<sup>3</sup> EU citizens residing in another EU Member State have the right to vote and stand in the elections for the European Parliament.

Thirdly, citizenship is often associated with national identity. While the possession of a particular national (or ethnic) identity was a prerequisite of citizenship in the past, the last half century has witnessed a gradual liberalisation and decoupling of ethnicity and citizenship.<sup>4</sup> However, questions about national identity, citizenship and belonging have regained the spotlight in the context of recent debates about immigration and integration.<sup>5</sup>

### Citizenship and nationality

The terms 'citizenship' and 'nationality' are often used interchangeably to denote the legal bond between an individual and a state. While 'nationality' is the preferred legal term, 'citizenship' is used more broadly to describe the rights, duties, and practices linked to this formal status. In certain contexts, the term 'nationality' also denotes belonging to a national or ethnic community.

In the EU, 'Citizenship of the Union' was established by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1991 as an additional legal status enjoyed by 'every person holding the nationality of a Member State'.

## Comparative overview

### Acquisition of citizenship

Two major [modes of acquisition of citizenship](#) (nationality) exist: acquisition of citizenship at birth, either by descent (*jus sanguinis*) or by birth in the territory of a country (*jus soli*); and acquisition of citizenship through various naturalisation procedures.

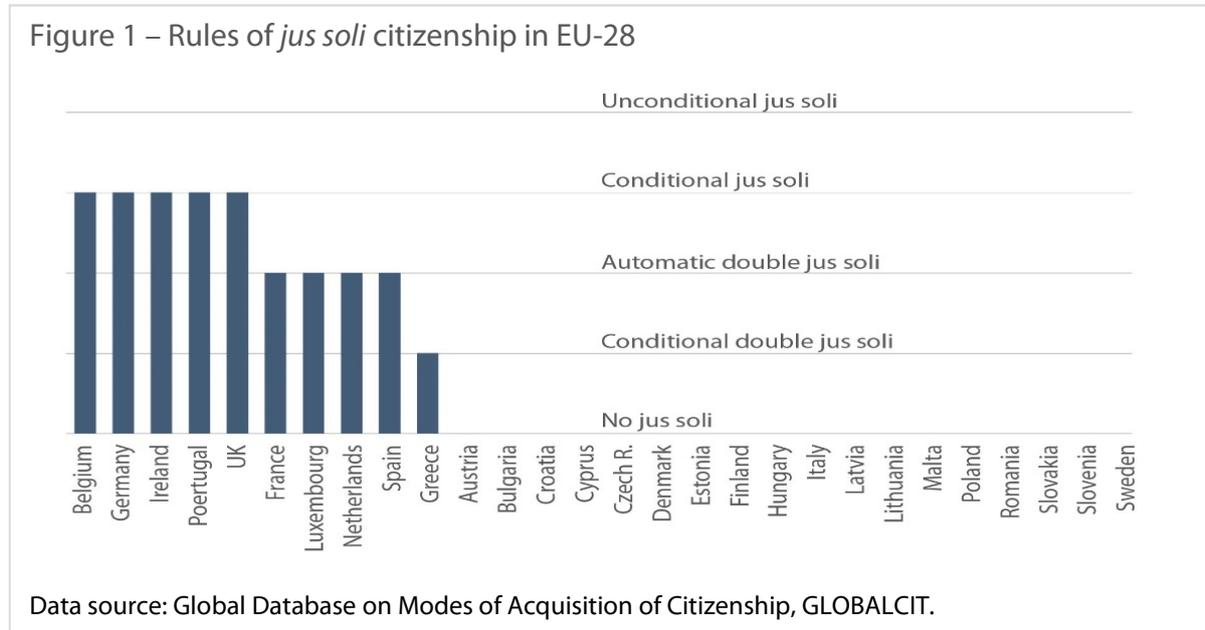
#### Acquisition of citizenship at birth

The vast majority of people in Europe (and the world) acquire citizenship at birth, most often through *jus sanguinis*. No country in the EU grants automatic and unconditional citizenship to children born in their territories to foreign citizens. The most common condition for *jus soli* is that parents should have resided in the country for a certain period of time before the child's birth. Five EU countries have such rules of conditional *jus soli* (see Figure 1). The minimum parental residence required ranges from 3 to 10 years: 10 years in Belgium, 8 years in Germany, 3 years in Ireland and Portugal, and, in the United Kingdom, a period that gives the parents the right to reside in the country.

In seven EU countries children born in the country to foreign citizens can acquire citizenship at birth if at least one of their parents was also born in the country (double *jus soli*). The acquisition of citizenship is automatic in France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, and conditional in Belgium (five years prior residence for parents) and Greece (permanent residence

status for parents). Belgium and Portugal both have rules of conditional *jus soli* and conditional double *jus soli*. Figure 1 illustrates the most inclusive rule of *jus soli* applicable in each EU country.

An additional restriction to *jus soli* is the prohibition of dual citizenship. In Austria and Spain, children of foreign citizens can acquire citizenship via *jus soli* only if they renounce any other foreign citizenship acquired at birth. Germany had a similar rule, but this was amended in 2014, when *jus soli* citizens were allowed to receive German citizenship if they lived and attended school in the country for a certain period of time.



Children of unknown parents in EU Member States, or who are otherwise stateless at birth are particularly vulnerable categories of persons, whose access to citizenship is considered a human right to be upheld by states. Failure of children born in a country to acquire citizenship is one of the major causes of [statelessness](#), which is counteracted by relatively strong international standards that protect the vulnerable. The 1961 United Nations [Convention](#) on the Reduction of Statelessness (Article 1 and Article 3) imposes an obligation on the country of birth to grant citizenship to children who are otherwise stateless at birth either automatically at birth or upon application. The 1997 [European Convention on Nationality](#) (ECN) (Article 6(2)) imposes an obligation on the country of birth to grant citizenship to minor children who are born on its territory and who do not acquire another citizenship at birth. According to the 1961 Convention (Article 2) and the ECN (Article 6(1)b), children found in a country, or of unknown parentage, should, in the absence of proof to the contrary, be considered to have been born on that territory to parents who are citizens of that country.

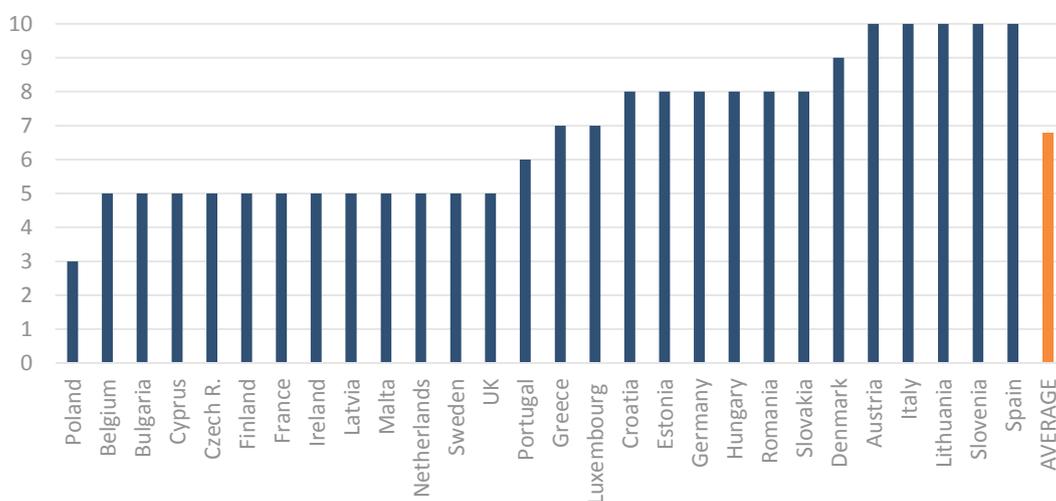
Several EU countries grant automatic citizenship to children who are born in the country and are otherwise stateless. However, strikingly, the citizenship laws of Cyprus and Romania do not provide for any special rule concerning this category of vulnerable persons. Formal protection against statelessness is stronger in the case of children found in the territory of a country. Cyprus is the only country in the EU that has no legal provision dealing with the acquisition of citizenship for this category of persons.

### Acquisition of citizenship after birth

Legal provisions regarding the acquisition of citizenship after birth on the basis of residence (naturalisation) are generally complex and cumbersome. We can distinguish between ordinary naturalisation – when the primary grounds of acquisition of citizenship is a certain period of residence in the country, and special naturalisation – when the acquisition of citizenship is based on other considerations, such as family links, ethno-cultural connections or special contributions.

The minimum period of residence required for naturalisation in EU countries ranges from 3 to 10 years (see Figure 2). It should be noted that this requirement is often qualified, meaning that only certain types of residence (permanent, continuous, etc.) may count for naturalisation purposes.

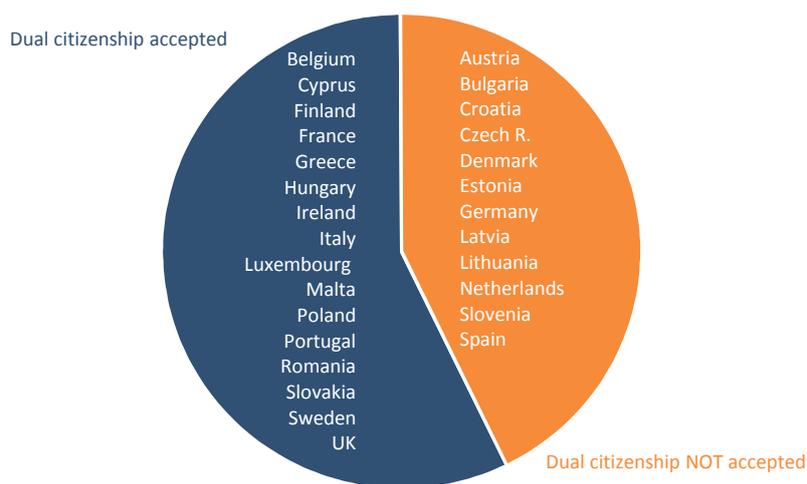
Figure 2 – Minimum period of residence required for naturalisation in EU-28 (years)



Data source: Global Database on Modes of Acquisition of Citizenship, GLOBALCIT.

A major contemporary citizenship trend is the increasing tolerance of dual citizenship.<sup>6</sup> Toleration of dual citizenship is a consequence of the general application of the principle of gender equality in citizenship matters, which generates dual citizenship for children of parents with different citizenship, and of a rethinking of citizens' military duties and expectations in the context of Western Europe's low security risks. However, 24 European countries continue to oblige naturalisation candidates to renounce any other citizenship in order to naturalise (see Figure 3).

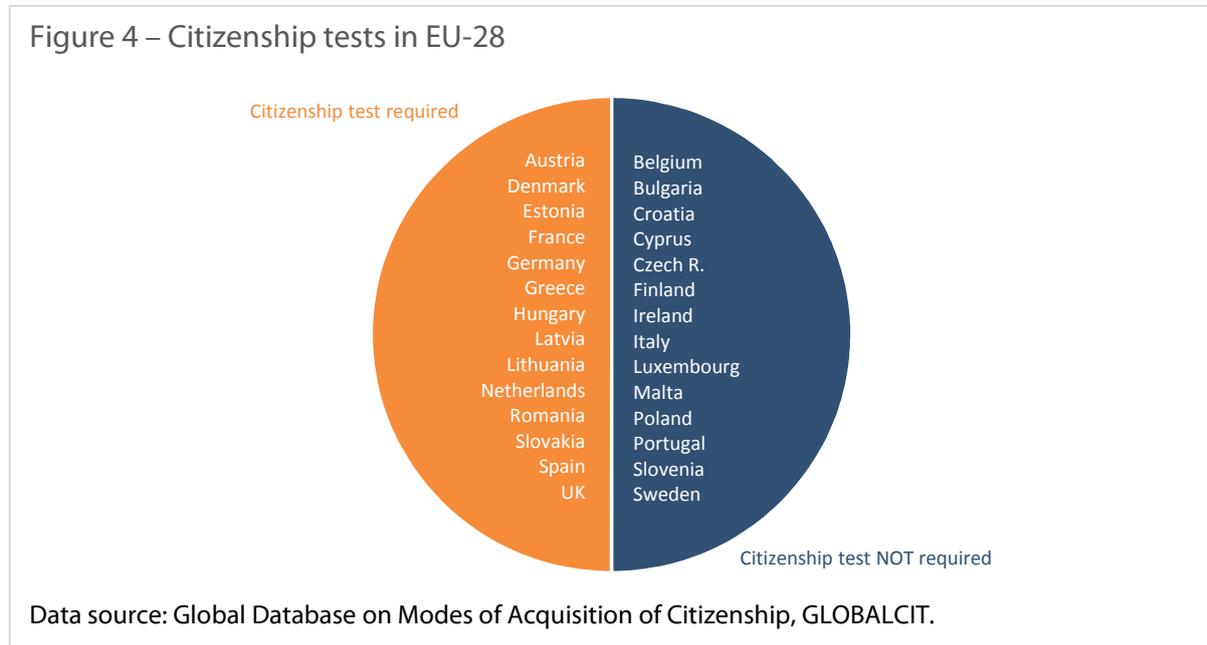
Figure 3 – Dual citizenship in naturalisation in EU-28



Data source: Global Database on Modes of Acquisition of Citizenship, GLOBALCIT.

Most EU countries' citizenship laws include provisions requiring naturalisation applicants to prove that they possess certain knowledge (language ability, knowledge of the constitution and the country), possess evidence of appropriate behaviour (criminal and employment records), or display certain dispositions and commitments (willingness to integrate, loyalty). This is largely a recent development indicating a more general reversal of an integration paradigm, in which citizenship is

no longer a prerequisite of integration but the coronation of a completed integration process.<sup>7</sup> Standardised tests to assess applicants' knowledge about the country, its legal and constitutional system, as well as more general attitudes and views on key cultural issues are used in half of the EU Member States (see Figure 4). However, the knowledge assessment procedure may differ in certain countries, depending on the applicant's circumstances.



The situation of recognised refugees is particularly precarious with regard to access to citizenship. The 1951 United Nations [Convention](#) relating to the Status of Refugees (Article 34) and the European Convention on Nationality (Article 6(4) in conjunction with Article 16) obliges states to provide for special acquisition procedures or for facilitated naturalisation for recognised refugees. This preferential treatment should also apply to stateless persons and persons with undetermined citizenship.

Seven EU countries do not have special provisions for the acquisition of citizenship by recognised refugees (see Table 1). Recognised refugees have an entitlement to naturalisation (as opposed to access to discretionary naturalisation) in only six EU countries. The facilitation offered to refugees varies across Member States. Whereas five countries (Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Lithuania and Luxembourg) remove the residential conditions altogether, other countries (but not all) provide for a reduced period of minimum residence in the case of recognised refugees.

Table 1 – Rules of naturalisation for recognised refugees in EU-28

Country	Procedure	Residence (years)	Other conditions
Austria	Entitlement	6	Yes
Belgium	-	-	-
Bulgaria	Discretionary	3	Yes
Croatia	-	-	-
Cyprus	-	-	-
Czech Republic	Discretionary	0	Yes
Denmark	Discretionary	8	Yes
Estonia	-	-	-

Finland	Discretionary	4	Yes
France	Discretionary	0	Yes
Germany	Entitlement	8	Yes
Greece	Discretionary	3	No
Hungary	Entitlement	3	Yes
Ireland	Discretionary	0	No
Italy	Discretionary	5	Yes
Latvia	-	-	-
Lithuania	Discretionary	0	Yes
Luxembourg	Discretionary	0	Yes
Malta	-	-	-
Netherlands	Entitlement	5	Yes
Poland	Entitlement	2	Yes
Portugal	-	-	-
Romania	Discretionary	4	Yes
Slovakia	Discretionary	4	Yes
Slovenia	Discretionary	5	Yes
Spain	Entitlement	5	Yes
Sweden	Discretionary	4	Yes
UK	Discretionary	3	Yes

Data source: Global Database on Modes of Acquisition of Citizenship, GLOBALCIT.

## Loss of citizenship

Citizenship of a country can be lost in various ways. Loss of citizenship follows two general modes: voluntary loss – following an individual request to renounce citizenship; and involuntary loss – when citizenship elapses *ex lege* or is withdrawn by the state.

### Voluntary loss of citizenship

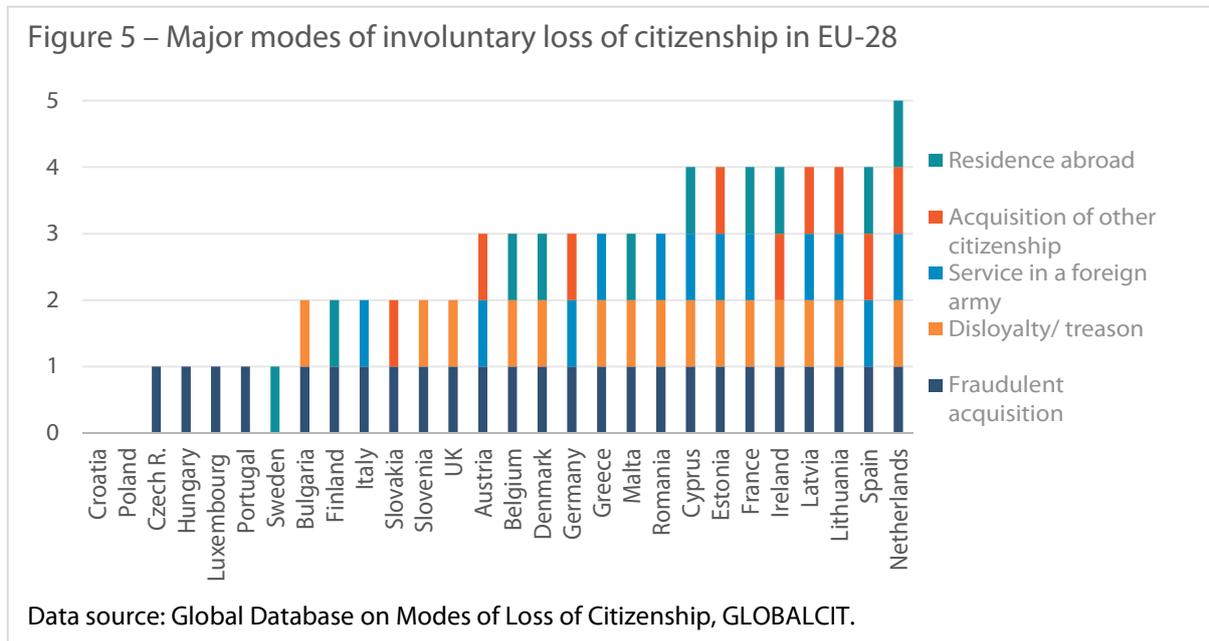
All EU countries allow for the voluntary loss of citizenship. In line with international norms on avoiding statelessness, all countries make the renunciation of citizenship conditional upon the possession of another citizenship.

In Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary and Ireland only persons who reside outside the country can renounce citizenship. In Austria, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia (for residents), persons cannot renounce citizenship if they face ongoing criminal charges or convictions. Failure to complete obligatory military service is an explicit grounds for refusing requests for release from citizenship in Austria, Croatia (for residents), Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Lithuania and Slovenia (for residents).

## Involuntary loss of citizenship

Citizenship laws provide for a variety of grounds for the involuntary loss of citizenship. The most important of these are: maintaining residence abroad, voluntarily acquiring another citizenship, taking up service in a foreign army or rendering services to foreign countries, committing acts of disloyalty or treason, and acquiring citizenship fraudulently.

All EU countries, except for Croatia, Poland and Sweden, provide for the withdrawal of citizenship in cases of discovered fraud in the acquisition of citizenship (see Figure 5). In 12 EU countries, persons can be deprived of citizenship if they take service in a foreign army. Prolonged residence abroad is grounds for the involuntary loss of citizenship in 10 EU countries. However, in Cyprus, Ireland and Malta, this applies only to naturalised citizens, whereas in Belgium, Denmark, Spain and Sweden it only concerns citizens who were born abroad. The acquisition of another citizenship can lead to the withdrawal of citizenship in nine EU countries: Austria, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Spain.



In 15 EU countries, citizenship can be revoked on grounds of treason or disloyalty. The actions covered by these grounds include: committing serious crimes against the country (Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark and the Netherlands); acting against a country's constitutional order and institutions (Denmark, Estonia, France, Latvia and Lithuania); showing disloyalty by act or speech (Cyprus, Malta and Ireland); and, more generally, acting against national interests (Greece, France, Romania, Slovenia and the UK). In Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, France, Ireland, Lithuania and Malta, these grounds for revocation apply only to naturalised citizens. Involvement in terrorist activities are explicitly mentioned as reasons for withdrawal of citizenship in France and the Netherlands.

## Key issues

### EU citizenship 'for sale'

EU citizenship was established in 1991 by the Treaty on European Union in order to promote European values and identity. The Treaty confers on EU citizens a set of rights, such as the right of free movement, the right of diplomatic protection, the right to vote in and stand for elections to the European Parliament.<sup>8</sup> Some of these rights can be exercised only when moving from one Member State to another. EU citizenship depends strictly on national citizenship, since EU citizens are only those who already hold the citizenship of an EU Member State. This dependence was questioned in

a recent [citizens' initiative](#) seeking to 'ensure that, following the withdrawal of a Member State in accordance with Article 50 TEU, the citizens of that country can continue to benefit from similar rights to those which they enjoyed whilst that country was a Member State' (awaiting Commission verification).

Member States reserve the right to regulate the acquisition and loss of national citizenship in ways that reflect their interests and identities. However, although the EU has no legal competences in the area of acquisition or loss of national (and thus EU) citizenship, the European Court of Justice ([ECJ](#)) has gradually broadened the scope of EU citizenship in relation to national citizenship by imposing certain limits to the power of Member States to regulate national citizenship.<sup>9</sup> In the *Zhu and Chen case*, the ECJ underlined circumstances in which the basic rights of EU citizenship need to be asserted against, or independently to, the status of national citizenship. In this case, the ECJ granted a non-EU citizen the right to stay on the territory of a Member State in order to provide care for a minor EU citizen. In the *Rottman case*, the ECJ maintained that EU Member States should exercise their right to regulate their national citizenship 'having due regard to Community law'. The Court stated that the loss of EU citizenship falls 'by reason of its nature and its consequences, within the ambit of European Union law' and thus invited national courts to apply a proportionality test to establish whether that loss of citizenship was justified. In its [Opinion](#) on the *Rottman* case, Advocate General Maduro argued that national citizenship rules can, in certain circumstances, breach the Member States' duty of loyal and sincere cooperation.

Many citizenship laws in the EU have provisions for the exceptional naturalisation of persons with special talents, extraordinary achievements, or who bring significant contributions to the state. This channel is often used to naturalise sportspersons or artists, and occasionally, investors and the wealthy. Bulgaria, Cyprus, Malta and Romania have developed specific investor citizenship programmes, comparable to those of the island states of Antigua and Bermuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and the Commonwealth of Dominica.<sup>10</sup> Cyprus introduced its investor citizenship scheme in May 2013 in the context of a severe economic crisis that prompted its international bailout. The scheme aimed, on the one hand, to attract much needed capital – it offered citizenship in exchange of an investment of at least €5 million in the country – and, on the other hand, to compensate foreign investors who lost their investments (at least €3 million) due to governmental measures targeting the crisis. Apart from these financial contributions, the applicants were required to have a clean criminal record and to have visited Cyprus at least once.

In October 2013, the Maltese government adopted a decision to allow persons who invest at least €650 000 euros in the country to obtain quick access to Maltese citizenship. The scheme did not require the investors to take up residence in Malta or to comply with any other naturalisation conditions. For example, the investor citizenship programmes of Bulgaria and Romania require applicants, among other conditions, to reside in the country (one year in Bulgaria and four years in Romania). Following criticism from the European Parliament and the European Commission, Malta later amended its scheme to introduce a residential requirement (one year).

Exchanging citizenship for money seems to go against a well-established idea that citizenship should be based on a 'genuine link'. As defined by the International Court of Justice ([ICJ](#)) in the *Nottebohm case* (1955), citizenship is 'a legal bond having as its basis a social fact of attachment, a genuine connection of existence, interests, and sentiments, together with the existence of reciprocal rights and duties'. Apart from normative considerations,<sup>11</sup> investor citizenship raises a series of practical concerns about tax evasion, corruption, extradition and security. The practice has been tainted by a number of scandals. For example, in 2009, an Austrian politician promised facilitated citizenship to a Russian investor in exchange for €5 million (a share of which was to be donated to the politician's party). In 2011, Cyprus granted citizenship to Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of President Bashar al-Assad, only to revoke it in 2012.

The Maltese case has a clear European dimension, because Malta deliberately sought to sell its citizenship as a package together with the, arguably more valuable, status of EU citizenship. While

some [commenters](#) claimed that the Maltese policy did not breach the EU law, others argued that selling EU citizenship was incompatible with the associative obligations of Member States. Indeed, the general EU legal principles of sincere or loyal cooperation require Member States to assist each other in carrying out tasks that flow from the Treaties and to 'refrain from any measure which could jeopardise the attainment of the Union's objectives' (Article 4(3) TEU).

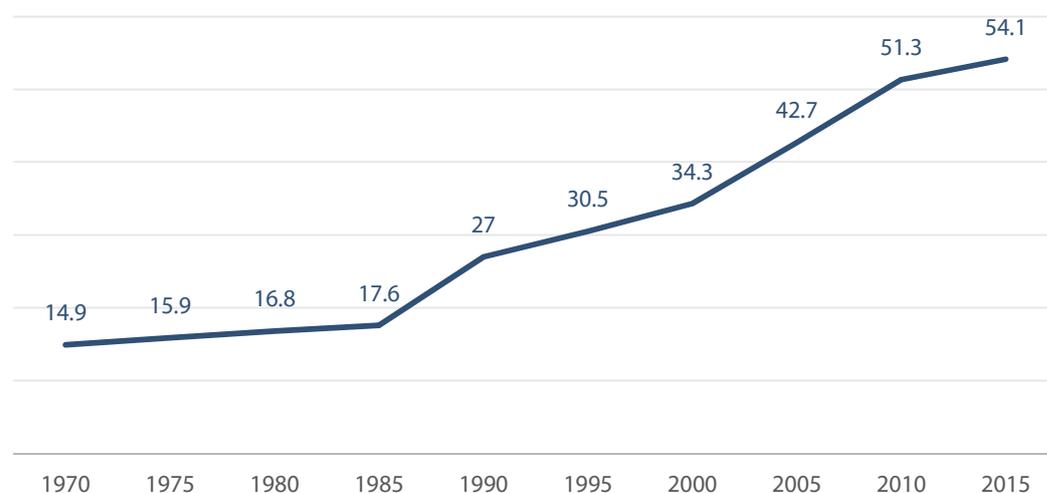
In a [resolution](#) adopted in January 2014, the European Parliament expressed its concern that the 'outright sale of EU citizenship undermines the mutual trust upon which the Union is built'. It maintained that 'EU citizenship implies the holding of a stake in the Union' and this 'should never become a tradable commodity'. In its [answer to a parliamentary question](#), in March 2014, the European Commission states that Member States should 'use their prerogatives to award citizenship in a spirit of sincere cooperation with the other Member States and the EU' and that 'investor citizenship schemes providing for the possibility to obtain naturalisation in return for investment alone do not meet the minimum requirement of a genuine link to the country'.

The Maltese affair and the unprecedented political reactions at the EU level have provided an opportunity to re-examine the relationship between EU and national citizenship and to bring forward the principle of sincere cooperation in citizenship matters. However, as [Carrera](#) argued,<sup>12</sup> by framing EU citizenship in terms of a genuine rather than formal link, the EU may indirectly encourage Member States to misuse the idea of genuine link in order to legitimise nationalistic and exclusionary citizenship policies.

## Citizenship and immigrant integration

Europe has long been a continent of emigration rather than immigration. Large-scale immigration into Europe began after the Second World War as a consequence of decolonisation and of economic reconstruction.<sup>13</sup> Although several north-west European countries, such as Germany and France, put specific immigration programmes in place to attract the desired workforce, most post-war immigration into Europe was spontaneous and unregulated. The general expectation in the receiving countries was that immigration was temporary and that immigrants would return to their countries when their labour was no longer needed. However, this expectation proved to be misguided. Although restrictions to immigration were imposed in the 1970s, following the economic stagnation caused by the oil crisis, the number of immigrants continued to rise. A new wave of immigration occurred after 1990, following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the launching of eastern EU enlargement.

Figure 6 – Migrant population in EU-28 (millions)



Data source: World Bank.

As the experience of traditional countries of immigration (such as the USA and Canada) shows, *jus soli* citizenship plays an important integrative function because it ensures the automatic inclusion of children of immigrants into the body of citizens. However, despite the fact that many countries in Europe host significant numbers of immigrants, none of them has unconditional *jus soli* citizenship. In fact, several European countries with strong *jus soli* traditions, such as the United Kingdom and Ireland, have adopted more conditional rules of *jus soli* in response to post-colonial immigration and to the extension of the EU freedom of movement.

The pressure to integrate immigrants in western Europe has pushed countries to lower the barriers to naturalisation and to accept dual citizenship. However, against the background of increased international migration, economic globalisation and supranational integration, citizenship in Europe has become more contested and politicised<sup>14</sup> and citizenship laws are increasingly used to test the integration of immigrants and to reinforce official versions of national identity.<sup>15</sup>

The arrival in Europe of more than one million refugees and immigrants in 2015 alone is set to affect, in the long-term, the citizenship regimes of European countries. Due to the geographical location of the conflict zones, the frontline countries dealing with the inflows in central and eastern Europe have little experience with immigration or refugee accommodation. As [Bauböck and Tripkovic](#) argue, the reluctance to accept new refugees and immigrants is likely to negatively affect the newcomers' capacity and willingness to integrate.<sup>16</sup>

In April 2009, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on a common immigration policy for Europe, which supports migrants' cultural integration as a process covering country of origin and host country cultures. In another [resolution](#), in January 2016, the European Parliament encouraged access to artistic education for all, including migrants, and their participation in cultural life and decisions in this domain, together with host communities. In addition, in September 2017, the European Parliament adopted a [Resolution](#) on the New skills agenda for Europe, the [non-legislative proposal](#) presented by the European Commission on June 2016.

## Terrorism and deprivation of citizenship

Recent terrorist attacks on European soil and the subsequent intensification of security concerns among citizens and policy-makers have pushed a number of states to reactivate and expand legal provisions on deprivation of citizenship in order to deter, punish and discredit terrorists.

The United Kingdom gradually [expanded](#) the grounds for deprivation of citizenship. Whereas before 2006, deprivation of citizenship was triggered by acting against the UK's 'vital interest', after 2006 the Secretary of State can withdraw citizenship if this is 'conducive to the public good'. According to the UK [Home Office](#), between 2006 and 2014, 27 deprivation orders were issued on grounds that they were conducive to the public good. In [K2 v UK](#), the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the UK did not violate the right to private and family life when stripping K2 of UK citizenship.

In response to the terrorist attacks on Paris in November 2015, the French president [proposed](#) a revision of the constitution to allow the government to withdraw citizenship from French citizens by birth if they engaged in terrorist activities. The legality and constitutionality of the measure were disputed and led to the resignation of Justice Minister [Christiane Taubira](#) in January 2016. The proposal was later abandoned. A similar proposal was discussed and rejected in [Sweden](#) in January 2016.

Following the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris in January 2015, the Belgian government proposed a 12-point antiterrorism package, which included a provision to [remove the Belgian citizenship](#) of naturalised dual nationals who have been sentenced to more than five years in prison for a terrorism offence. The law was [passed and took effect](#) in July 2015. Citizenship can only be removed by a judge and not a minister or civil servant.

Defenders of citizenship deprivation argue that withdrawing citizenship from those who pose imminent and existential threats to the state 'strengthens citizenship by reaffirming the conditions

on which it is based'.<sup>17</sup> Critics respond, however, that the practice weakens citizenship because it makes it 'contingent on citizens' performance' and also 'enhances the discretionary and arbitrary power of the executive, at the expense of all citizens, and of citizenship itself'.<sup>18</sup>

One of the major legal objections against citizenship deprivation is the duty of states to prevent statelessness. This legal constraint explains why most deprivation provisions only concern dual citizens. However, making the citizenship of dual citizens less secure than that of single-nationality citizens raises questions about citizenship equality. In a similar way, distinguishing between naturalised citizens and native citizens for the purpose of citizenship deprivation leads to the creation of different classes of citizens.<sup>19</sup> There are also serious doubts about the effectiveness of citizenship deprivation as an instrument to combat terrorism,<sup>20</sup> given that other means (such as criminal sanctions and withdrawing mobility rights) could serve this purpose better.

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