Annual report on the activity of the Petitions Committee 2009

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the deliberations of the Committee on Petitions during the year 2009. It recalls that the number of petitions received by Parliament in 2009 was slightly higher than that recorded in 2008 (i.e. 1924 compared with 1849), and the growing trend for petitions to be submitted electronically was confirmed (about 65% were received in this form in 2009 as against 60% in 2008). It welcomes the smooth transition to the new parliamentary term and notes that much of work of the Committee on Petitions, unlike that of other parliamentary committees, was carried over into the new term because examination of a considerable number of petitions had not been completed. It also welcomes the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty and is confident that Parliament will be closely involved in the **development of the new citizens' initiative**, urging the Commission to establish comprehensible implementing rules which identify clearly the roles and obligations of the institutions involved in the examination and decision-making processes. Members point out that Parliament has received campaign-type petitions bearing more than one million signatures and insists on the need to ensure that citizens are made fully aware of the distinction between this type of petition and the citizens' initiative. They consider that EU citizens should benefit from the same level of transparency from the Commission whether they make a formal complaint or submit a petition to Parliament and call on the Commission, once again, to ensure that greater recognition is given to the petitions process and to its role in bringing to light breaches of European legislation, in respect of which infringement proceedings are subsequently launched.

Whilst welcoming the steps taken by the Commission to streamline the existing public assistance services by regrouping the various relevant webpages (such as those of SOLVIT and ECC-Net) under the Your EU Rights chapter on the main EU website, the resolution points out that Parliament has repeatedly called on the Commission to develop a system for clearly signposting the various complaints mechanisms available to citizens. It believes that further steps are needed, with the ultimate aim of converting theYour EU Rights webpage into a user-friendly, online one-stop shop.

With regard to the substantive work of the committee Parliament notes the following:

- the importance of the work of petitioners and of its Committee on Petitions for the protection of the Union's environment, welcoming the initiative of the committee in ordering a study on the application of the Habitats Directive, in anticipation of the International Year of Biodiversity;
- the Commission must intervene at an early stage whenever petitions signal potential damage to specially protected areas, by reminding the national authorities concerned of their commitments to ensure the integrity of sites classified as Natura 2000 under EC Directive 92/43 (Habitats) and, where necessary, by taking preventive measures to ensure compliance with European legislation;
- more and more petitions are highlighting the problems encountered by citizens who exercise their right to free movement, and refer to the excessive length of time taken by host Member States in delivering residence permits to third-country family members, and to difficulties in exercising voting rights and having qualifications recognised;
- its previous calls on the Commission to put forward practical proposals to extend consumer protection against unfair commercial practices to small businesses, as the Committee continues to receive petitions from victims of business-directory scams;
- the central role that the Commission plays in the work of the Committee on Petitions, recognising the efforts made by the Commission to improve its overall response time to the Committee's requests for investigations so that cases reported by citizens can be resolved as quickly as possible;

- Members regret that the Commission has yet to address the Committee's repeated calls for official and regular updates on the progress of **infringement proceedings relating to open petitions**. The monthly publication of Commission decisions on infringement proceedings, although praiseworthy in terms of transparency does not represent an adequate answer to such requests. Since tracking down infringement proceedings by following the Commission's press releases and matching them to certain petitions would unnecessarily waste the Committee's time and resources, especially in the case of horizontal infringements, Members ask that the Commission inform the Petitions Committee of any relevant infringement proceedings.

Parliament encourages the creation of a **portal offering a multi-stage interactive template for petitions**, which could inform citizens about what can be achieved by submitting petitions to Parliament and about Parliament's remit, and could include links to alternative means of redress at European and national level. Whilst acknowledging that implementing such an initiative would not be cost-free, Members urge the relevant administrative services to work with the Committee on Petitions to find the most suitable solutions, as such a portal will be of paramount importance not only in improving contact between Parliament and EU citizens but also in reducing the number of inadmissible petitions.

Parliament stresses that closer cooperation with the Member States is extremely important for the work of the Petitions Committee, and that one way of achieving this could be through more intensive cooperation with the national parliaments especially in the context of the Lisbon Treaty.