

Activities of the Committee on Petitions in 2010

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The Committee on Petitions adopted the own-initiative report by Willy MEYER on the activities of the Committee on Petitions in 2010.

It begins by hoping that Parliament and the Committee on Petitions will be actively involved in the development of the citizens' initiative with a view to ensuring enhanced transparency in the EU decision-making process, allowing citizens to suggest improvements, changes or additions to EU law, while seeking to prevent this public platform from being used solely for publicity purposes. Members feel that the Committee on Petitions is the most suitable one to follow up the European citizens' initiatives registered with the Commission. It calls for:

- citizens' initiatives which have not received a million signatures within the required time can be referred to Parliament's Committee on Petitions for more detailed discussion;
- the Committee on Petitions to be the committee representing the European Parliament at the Parliament and Commission public hearing of representatives who have gathered a million signatures for their citizens' initiatives, thus enabling the hearing to benefit from the committee's experience and legitimacy;

The committee takes note of the Commission's Declaration entitled 'Strategy for the effective implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights by the European Union' and considers that a genuine culture of fundamental rights must be developed in the EU institutions and in the Member States, in particular when they apply and implement EU law. It stresses, however, that, in spite of the large number of petitions concerning the rights contained in the Charter, the Commission consistently refuses, owing to a lack of legal instruments, to take action to prevent flagrant breaches of fundamental rights in the Member States.

Members note that petitions received in 2010 continued to focus on the environment, fundamental rights, the internal market and justice; adds that in geographical terms, the largest proportion of petitions referred to a specific Member State – Spain (16 %) – or the Union as a whole (16 %), followed by Germany, Italy and Romania. They stress the importance of cooperation between the Commission and the Member States, and deplore the negligence displayed by certain Member States in connection with the implementation and enforcement of European environmental legislation. The report states that the Commission should monitor compliance with and implementation of European environmental legislation more strictly at every point in the proceedings, and not only when a final ruling has been given. The report goes on to discuss the concern expressed by many petitioners at the EU's failure to ensure the effective implementation of the 2010 Biodiversity Action Plan.

Whilst acknowledging the important role that the Commission plays in the work of the Committee on Petitions, and welcoming the attendance at its meetings of various Commissioners, Members find it regrettable that the Commission has yet to address the Committee on Petitions' repeated calls to be kept informed of the progress of infringement proceedings relating to open petitions, since the monthly publication of Commission decisions on infringement proceedings does not represent an adequate response. They point out that, in many instances, petitions have uncovered problems related to the transposition and enforcement of European law, and they recognise that launching infringement proceedings does not necessarily provide citizens with immediate solutions to their problems. Members note, however, that there are other means of monitoring and applying pressure that could be used.

With regard to the Council, the committee welcomes the latter's presence at Petitions Committee meetings, but finds it regrettable that this does not translate into more active cooperation, which could break the stalemate on those petitions in respect of which Member State cooperation would prove decisive. It stresses that the participation and the close and systematic cooperation of the Member States is extremely important for the work of the Petitions Committee, and encourages Member States to play a proactive role in responding to petitions related to the implementation and enforcement of European law. Members feel that the Petitions Committee should forge closer working links with similar committees in Member States' national and regional parliaments. The committee should conduct fact-finding missions to promote mutual understanding of petitions on European issues, and vice versa, in order to gain an insight into the various working methods of national petitions committees so that the Petitions Committee of the European Parliament is in a position to take a conscious and farsighted decision when rejecting a petition on grounds of competence issues.

The report goes on to stress the need to bring greater transparency to the management of petitions: internally by giving Members direct access to petition files via the E-petition application, by simplifying the internal procedure and by close cooperation between the members, the Chair and the secretariat of the Committee on Petitions, and externally by establishing an interactive Web portal for petitioners. It calls for the creation of a dedicated Web portal for petitions, offering an interactive template for the recording thereof and providing information for citizens about Parliament's remit and what can be achieved by petitioning it, as well as links to alternative means of redress at European and national level and a comprehensive description of the EU's powers so as to eliminate confusion between the competences of the EU and those of the Member States.