Strengthening citizens' rights in a Union of democratic change. EU citizenship report 2017

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The Committee on Petitions adopted the own-initiative report by Beatriz BECERRA BASTERRECHEA (ALDE, ES) on the EU Citizenship Report 2017: Strengthening Citizens' Rights in a Union of Democratic Change.

It began by recalling that EU citizenship and its related rights were initially introduced in 1992 by the Treaty of Maastricht and were further enhanced by the Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force in December 2009, as well as by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. It took note of the Commission's 2017 EU Citizenship Report, which contains an enumeration of new priorities by field of activity for the years ahead.

Challenges: Members remarked that the prospect of the **UK's withdrawal from the EU (Brexit)** has highlighted the importance of EU citizenship rights and their crucial role in the everyday lives of millions of EU citizens, and has **raised awareness in the EU about the potential loss of rights** entailed by Brexit on both sides, with special regard to the 3 million EU citizens resident in the UK and the 1.2 million UK citizens resident in the EU. They acknowledged that on the heels of events in the United Kingdom, the refugee humanitarian crisis, the devastating social and economic impact of austerity policies, the high levels of unemployment and poverty, and the rise in xenophobia and racism in the EU have undermined confidence in the EU system and the European project as a whole.

Information on rights: the report called on Member States to better inform EU citizens as to their rights and duties and to facilitate equal access to and equal respect for these rights both in their country of origin and in other Member States. It acknowledged the Commission's efforts to make **multiple information and assistance outlets** about the EU and the rights it confers on its citizens, such as the Europe Direct network, the Your Europe portal and the e-justice portal, and the proposed Single Digital Gateway available and more accessible, in order to better inform individuals exercising their rights as EU citizens.

Anti-discrimination: the committee expressed strong regret that for almost a decade now no significant progress has been made in the adoption of the EU-wide Anti-Discrimination Directive. It was of the view that the effectiveness of EU policies in the field of anti-discrimination should be increased and remaining obstacles removed. It stressed that discrimination due to sex, nationality, sexual orientation, age, language, ethnic origin must be eliminated. It also highlighted the topics of **gender equality** and **protection of minority rights.**

Participatory democracy: Members believed that the reform of the Electoral Act could be an opportunity for the Union to become more democratic, noting that this view is shared by thousands of Europeans. They asked the Commission to act on complaints regarding the exercise of the **right to vote in European and municipal elections**, to devise a concrete action plan for the introduction of **electronic voting in the European Parliament elections** starting at the earliest feasible date, and to make that system more widely available to all EU citizens. EU citizens who move to and reside in another Member State should have the possibility to exercise their right to vote in the national elections of their country of origin.

The report went on to call on European political parties to effectively tackle the problem of **falling voter turnout** and the **widening gap between citizens and the EU institutions**, and suggested that the introduction of transnational lists to fill a proportion of the seats in the European Parliament would be a positive contribution to fostering the notion of EU citizenship.

Members also proposed, with the aim of strengthening Union citizenship and the exercise of that citizenship, that the Commission should encourage local authorities to designate **councillors responsible for European affairs**, since this is the level that is closest to the citizens.

Free movement: Members called for specific measures for **removing obstacles to free movement.** They asked the Commission to regularly monitor the application of Directive 2004/38/EC and to take appropriate measures to remove potential obstacles to freedom of movement. Member States were urged to guarantee that their national legislation is sufficiently clear and detailed to ensure that the right of free movement of citizens and their families is respected, to proceed with the proper training of the competent national authorities in this respect.