Implementation of the Treaty provisions related to the EU citizenship

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The Committee on Constitutional Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Maite PAGAZAURTUNDÚA RUIZ (ALDE, ES) on the implementation of the Treaty provisions related to EU citizenship.

In accordance with Article 9 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) and Article 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), every person who holds the nationality of a Member State is a citizen of the Union. Union citizenship is additional to the national citizenship without substituting it, and is made up of a combination of rights and duties that are associated to those conferred by the citizenship of a Member State.

The EU has had difficulties in facing numerous crises with important socioeconomic consequences which have led to the emergence of populist and nationalist ideologies based on exclusive identities and supremacist criteria which contradict European values. The unsatisfactory management of the various crises has increased citizens' disappointment in some of the results of the EU integration project.

Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that EU citizenship is regarded as a cherished privilege among citizens, including by restoring confidence in the EU project, giving primacy to the promotion of all citizens' rights, including civil, political and social rights among others, improving the quality of democracy within the Union, the practical enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms and the opportunity for every citizen to participate in the democratic life of the Union, while providing for a greater involvement of civil society in decision-making and implementation processes.

Moreover, the prospect of Brexit has highlighted the importance of EU citizenship rights, especially among young Europeans, and their role in the lives of millions of EU citizens, and has also raised awareness in the EU concerning the potential loss of such rights on both sides.

Political rights

Members expressed concern at the trend to decline in voter turnout in both national and European Parliament elections, especially among young people. They are convinced that the strengthening of the EU public sphere and the full implementation of European citizenship have the potential to help reverse that decline by increasing citizens' sense of belonging to a European community and boosting representative democracy.

They stressed that the development of EU curricula in educational systems should be a priority for continuing to build on the potential of EU citizenship.

Freedom of movement

While welcoming the benefits that free movement brings to EU citizens and the Member States' economies, the report underlined the problem of the absence of information or the provision of incorrect or confusing information on visa requirements for family members or on residence rights. They insisted that Member States should ensure the removal of unnecessary barriers to the right of entry/residence, in particular for third-country nationals who are family members of EU citizens.

Members are also concerned about the difficulties encountered by citizens in getting their professional qualifications recognised across Europe and the discrimination in finding employment, in accessing various services such as renting a car or an apartment or certain banking services, and in the fields of education and taxation.

The loss of electoral rights arising from residence in another Member State could discourage citizens from moving to another Member State.

Recommendations

The Commission is called on to:

- extend rights in order to allow EU citizens to choose whether to vote in their Member State of nationality or of residence and that this be extended to include all elections, in line with the constitutional possibilities of each Member State;

- develop and implement e-democracy tools, such as online platforms, to involve citizens more directly in EU democratic life, thus fostering their engagement;

- step up the promotion of democratic participation by intensifying its dialogue with citizens, enhancing citizens' understanding of the role of EU legislation in their daily lives, and underlining their right to vote in and stand for election at local, national and European level;

- come forward with a proposal enhancing the role of Europe Direct offices;

- come forward with a proposal for the implementation of Parliament's recommendations on an EU mechanism on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

European Citizens Initiative and political parties

Members considered that the revision of the legal framework governing the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) presents an opportunity to enhance citizens' participation in EU policy making by rendering the instrument less bureaucratic and more accessible.

They also recalled the contribution of political parties at European level to 'forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of the citizens of the Union'. Therefore, they called for individual citizens of the EU to be given the opportunity to apply directly for membership in political parties at European level.

They underlined that better and more focused information on European policies and on the impact of EU legislation on citizens' daily lives would improve the turnout in the European elections.

Lastly, the report proposed to the Member States that they establish a European public holiday on 9 May in order to reinforce a European feeling of belonging and create space for civic movements and activities.