Engaging with citizens: the right to petition, the right to refer to the European Ombudsman and the European Citizens' Initiative

2020/2275(INI) - 03/02/2022 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Petitions adopted an own-initiative report by Marie-Pierre VEDRENNE (Renew Europe, FR) on engaging with citizens: the right to petition, the right to refer to the European Ombudsman and the European Citizens' Initiative.

The right to petition

The report pointed out that the right to petition is the oldest instrument involving the direct participation of citizens at EU level and that it is the easiest and most direct way for citizens to contact the EU institutions. It recalled that the number of received petitions vis-à-vis the EU population remains modest and that significant differences exist between Member States, regions and languages when it comes to exercising the right to petition.

Regretting that the Commission refusing to take action on issues raised in individual petitions constitutes a breach of the current EU Treaties' provisions, Members called on the Commission to revise its current strategic approach in handling petitions in a timely manner, as it results in leaving untreated, inter alia, issues concerning serious violations of EU law detrimental to the protection of citizens' rights.

They urged Parliament and the Commission to adopt a **binding interinstitutional agreement** on the handling of petitions in order to ensure a clear, predictable and transparent legal framework aimed at consistently implementing the right to petition established in the EU Treaties and effectively protecting citizens' fundamental rights.

More information should be provided to citizens on the right to petition and EU institutions should provide clear information regarding the right to petition and to systematically encourage recourse to this instrument.

The report suggested that the position of the Committee on Petitions should be strengthened within Parliament and in its interinstitutional relations, as it is the only committee that communicates directly with citizens. Members called for more staff and resources to be allocated to the Committee on Petitions, given the extent of its work.

Members also called for the Petitions Web Portal to be improved to make it more visible to the public, more user-friendly, easier and more intuitive to navigate and accessible to all citizens, especially to persons with disabilities.

The function of the European Ombudsman

The report stressed that citizens' complaints to the Ombudsman represent an essential element of participatory democracy and of the legitimacy of the Union's decision-making process. Members specifically called on the Ombudsman to look more closely at the manner in which EU funds and the EU budget are spent. They also strongly believe that the Ombudsman should be allocated an increased budget, providing her with the necessary resources to effectively handle the increased workload and to continue to work competently at the service of European citizens.

The report congratulated the Ombudsman on the remarkable work she has done on the accessibility of EU documents and called on her to continue her efforts in this direction because timely access to documents in the EU's 24 official languages is essential to ensure the proper engagement of citizens and civil society in the decision-making process.

The European Citizens' Initiative

The report emphasised that the initiative represents an exceptional opportunity for the citizens of the Union to identify and to put the issues or matters that they are concerned by onto the European political agenda, to articulate their aspirations and to call for the EU to act and legislate, and that its use must be encouraged and supported by all available means.

Members called on the Commission to:

- show genuine consideration and commitment to meeting citizens' expectations in relation to valid ECIs;

- carry out a thorough assessment of the proposals of each valid ECI, and to comply fully with its legal obligation to set out its reasons for taking or not taking action, which it should do in a clear, comprehensible and detailed manner.

The report recalled Parliament's obligation to assess each valid ECI and called for its role to be further enhanced and for its links with civil society organisations to be enhanced with regard to specific valid ECIs and their implementation by the Commission.

Members believe that in the specific cases in which the Commission fails to publish its intentions within the given deadline or set outs in a communication that it intends not to take action on an ECI which has met the procedural requirements, Parliament could decide to follow up on the ECI with a **legislative own-initiative report** (INL). The Commission should commit to submitting a **legislative proposal** following Parliament's adoption of any such INL.

Conclusions

The report made the following conclusions regarding the three participatory instruments:

- the establishment and promotion of a large-scale, one-stop, accessible interinstitutional EU citizens' website (and application, which should be easy to use) to provide information on all the rights and democratic instruments that enable the public to participate directly in and influence decision-making at EU level is called for;

- public awareness of the instruments should be raised, particularly among **young people**, to ensure that they become effective and useful tools for democratic participation;

- all the European institutions should maximise their communication efforts at local, regional and national level to ensure that as many citizens as possible know about and are encouraged to participate and be engaged in the three instruments.