

Annual report of the activities of the Committee on Petitions 2012

2013/2013(INI) - 10/10/2013 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 446 votes to 35 with 43 abstentions, a resolution on the activities of the Committee on Petitions 2012.

In 2012 the Committee on Petitions registered 1 986 petitions, mostly referring to the themes of fundamental rights, the environment the internal market, and economic and social crisis.

1 406 petitions were declared admissible, and of those 853 were forwarded to the Commission for further investigation and 580 petitions were declared inadmissible.

The highest number of petitions referred to the EU as a whole (27.3 %), followed by Spanish (15.0 %), German (12.5 %) and Italian (8.6 %) cases.

Fundamental rights: fundamental rights remained a key subject of the petitions submitted, notably raising issues related to the rights of persons with disabilities, childrens rights, property rights, the right of free movement, including the portability of social security entitlements, without encountering any form of discrimination on any grounds, the protection of freedom of expression and privacy, freedom of association, and the right of access to documents and information.

Parliament called on Member States to apply correctly and respect those rights as set out in the Treaty and called on the Commission to take the necessary measures to oblige non-compliant Member States to close the gap between national laws and the fundamental rights of EU citizens.

An amendment adopted in plenary underlined the need to give special attention to the right to historical memory and the rights to truth, justice and redress for families which suffered under Franco's dictatorship, as well as to the right of Spain's abducted children to know the identity of their biological parents.

Discrimination: the resolution drew attention to persisting discrimination against citizens on the grounds of religion or belief, disability, belonging to a minority group, age or sexual orientation. It warned, in particular, that the Roma population across the EU continues to face obstacles to inclusion and called on the Commission to facilitate intergovernmental cooperation in this area, to provide adequate funding for the implementation of national strategies for Roma inclusion.

Citizens rights: Members noted that citizens in the European Union continue to face barriers within the internal market, notably while exercising their freedom of movement as individuals, as providers and consumers of goods and services and as workers, such as, for instance, in the case of Romanian and Bulgarian workers who continue to face restrictions on the labour market in some Member States.

Parliament called on Member States to ensure freedom of movement for all EU citizens and their families, on the basis of the principles of mutual recognition, equality, non-discrimination, dignity and respect for private and family life.

Members also welcomed the Petitions Committee's conclusions from the fact-finding visit to Berlin on youth and family welfare matters, particularly in cross-border custody cases. They noted, however, based on the continuing inflow of petitions of this nature, that it is clear the issue of cross-border custody cases is ongoing.

Environment: Members pointed to the numerous petitions submitted on waste management, on water, on the possible dangers of nuclear energy and genetic engineering, on protected species, and on the assessment of the impact of projects and activities on the environment and on public health, such as shale gas extraction by means of fracking.

The Commission is called upon to:

- adopt a precautionary and preventive approach when assessing projects with a potential negative environmental or public health impact;
- strengthen the environmental legislative framework on the environment and combating climate change;
- take action to ensure that the Member States understand that water is a public good;
- (stringently apply precautionary principle in respect of the use of biotechnology and nanotechnology in products that could seriously affect the health of consumers.

Parliament also stressed the need to regulate coastal protection effectively, but noted that the coastal law is not consistent with the objectives sought, since the former is affecting historic heritage and traditional communities.

Information and citizen participation: the Eurobarometer of public opinion indicated that only 36 % of EU citizens consider themselves well informed about their rights and only 24 % felt well informed about what they can do if their rights are not respected. The resolution stressed the need for:

- improved access to information and the need to put in place a more practical and visible petitions web portal by the end of 2013;
- making the petition procedure more efficient, transparent, and impartial so that the handling of petitions stands up to judicial review even at a procedural level;
- more precise, written, procedural rules in relation to the preparation, implementation and evaluation of visits, ensuring on the one hand that all members of a fact-finding visit have the right to present the facts from their point of view while, on the other hand, guaranteeing all Committee Members the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process concerning the conclusions and recommendations to be drawn by the Committee on Petitions.

Members believed that the role and responsibilities of the Petitions Committee would be best performed, and its visibility, efficiency, accountability and transparency best enhanced, by improving its means for bringing issues of importance to European citizens to plenary, and upgrading its abilities to call witnesses, conduct investigations and organise hearings.

Lastly, Parliament stated its concern about the obstacles that have emerged during the first months of the practical application of the European Citizens' Initiative. It called on the Commission to consider seriously bringing forward the date of the review prescribed in Article 22 of Regulation (EU) No 211/2011.