

Committee guide: PETI providing a voice to EU citizens

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Opinion

Parliament's petitions committee strives to address citizens' concerns and foster constructive dialogue, writes Pál Csáky.



Pál Csáky | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

The petitions committee is responsible for direct contact and dialogue with European citizens. It can serve also as a barometer for MEPs, presenting the actual concerns of citizens from all over Europe.

The committee, with the support of my political group (EPP) has also managed to handle the huge backlog of petitions. These 'sleeping beauties', as some of my more experienced colleagues call them, remained open and unanswered from the previous terms.

Dealing with these was a very important first step, positively affecting our work and allowing us to have more time for new petitions. This way, we have been able to focus on new queries from citizens.

It's difficult to cite one or two topics on which we achieved a result and were able to address citizens' concerns. If you could follow one of our committee meetings, you would see how diverse our agenda is. What I can say for certain is that we will continue to give the opportunity to the citizens to have their voices heard on issues which are relevant for our European coexistence.

Petitions cover a huge variety of European topics, from child welfare to environmental issues, to citizenship rights and free movement.

There are also topics relevant to the actual political situation; however, upcoming elections in France or Germany do not have a huge impact on our committee.

As soon as the Brexit referendum result was announced, our committee received an impressive number of petitions from EU citizens working or studying in the UK. They contacted us individually or in groups about alleged violations of their rights. Therefore, we will be following the negotiations closely.

The committee supports the European citizens' initiative mechanism. Together with the constitutional affairs committee, we will draft a report to open the Commission's eyes and make this incredible instrument work. A common hearing will be organised to deepen the exchange with stakeholders and citizens on this topic.

Other challenges include improving our problem solving skills and answering citizens' requests, something I believe we are well on our way to achieving.

In March, the PETI network held its first meeting, connecting with members from all the legislative committees in order to improve the visibility of our work and to highlight the importance of our concerns.

Some years ago, the committee set up an easy-to-use electronic system for petitioning, thanks to which we can reach more citizens. After registering, citizens can submit, support or follow other petitions.

Our committee meetings are web streamed, as are the other committees'.

We are often on the ground thanks to our fact-finding visits. To me, the most important thing is to speak with people about their rights whenever possible, both in Brussels and back in my constituency.

The right to petition is granted by EU citizenship. However, knowledge surrounding this right could stand to improve, especially in central Europe. Fewer petitions from one country do not mean that its citizens have less concerns or questions. Rather, this is indicative of a lack of information on how to reach the EU.

Many citizens want us to listen to them on Brexit. But we shouldn't just listen - we must also propose European solutions.

The committee's main role consists in helping to identify problems with the implementation of EU law and to improve EU legislation by taking into account citizens' everyday experiences (emerging from EU legislation).

The committee prepares reports and opinions only in selected areas. Every year, the committee presents its annual activity report and looks at the ombudsman's annual report. These are both on track regardless of Brexit. Our fact-finding missions also conclude with a report.

And, hearings organised by the committee can result in a short resolution on a specific issue. We also assist on other issues raised by the other committees, through an opinion or a common report.

Our agenda is set around citizens and their life in the EU, therefore I am confident we will not be lacking projects in the months or years to come.

About the author

Pál Csáky (EPP, SK) is a Vice-Chair of Parliament's petitions committee

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