

Conference of Speakers of European Union Parliaments

Nicosia, 21-23 April 2013

Session II: Bringing citizens closer to the European Union

Background Paper

Introduction

The year 2013 has been designated as the “European Year of Citizens”, thus marking the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the European Union Citizenship under the Maastricht Treaty. However, surveys show that European citizens are not fully aware of the concept of Union citizenship and the rights deriving from it. Therefore, they may not enjoy these rights, namely: the right to move and reside freely within the EU, to vote and to stand as candidates in European and municipal elections, to enjoy protection by the diplomatic or consular authorities of any member state in a third country, to exercise the right of petition before the European Parliament, to apply to the European Ombudsman, to address the institutions of the Union, to enjoy free movement of goods and services, consumer protection, public health, equal treatment, social protection and the new right of the European Citizens’ Initiative granted to them by the Treaty of Lisbon.

Furthermore, the ongoing crisis and the efforts towards a deeper European integration underline the need for a strong democratic legitimacy, reducing the democratic deficit and bridging the gap between the EU decision making procedures and the Union citizens. The Union must indeed put the citizens in the heart of its policies and hear their voice.

The European Citizens’ Initiative established under the Lisbon Treaty, allowing at least one million citizens from a significant number of member states to ask the European Commission to present a proposal in its areas of responsibility, constitutes a unique opportunity for the citizens to be directly involved in the decision making process. It must be ensured, however, that this new right granted to the citizens shall not remain a mere declaration, but it shall be effectively applied in practice. To this end, national Parliaments and the European Parliament could explore ways to facilitate the exercise of the right by the citizens, without impinging on the substance of the initiative or the work of the organisers of the said initiative. Moreover, the Union and its member states need to further enhance their efforts to fully inform the citizens on their rights, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to encourage their active

participation, bringing them in this way closer to the EU. This effort, of course, inevitably requires the active involvement of both the national Parliaments and the European Parliament, that constitute the bodies representing the will of the people.

Electoral rights of EU citizens

The right of EU citizens to vote and to stand as candidates in municipal and European elections in the member state in which they reside is considered pivotal, as it is a key element of strengthening participatory democracy in the EU. Raising awareness with regard to the electoral rights of EU citizens will further develop their sense of belonging to the EU, thus bringing them closer to the European Institutions and the decision making at the EU level.

National Parliaments and the European Parliament, expressing the political will of the people, can play a key role in the efforts to raise voter turnout in European elections, by exchanging views and best practices on how to achieve this task. Furthermore, they could organise several activities, explaining the benefits of active participation in EU public affairs, as well as the importance of EU decision making in citizens' everyday life.

National Parliaments and EU matters

National Parliaments could act as facilitators of debates concerning EU matters, both at the national level and at an interparliamentary level. For instance, a national Parliament could initiate a debate on a specific EU matter that is of concern to its citizens, before its sectoral committees, with the participation of NGOs or other organized groups of society, or in the plenary, which will identify the main themes of the matter at hand. The outcome of the initial debate could then be communicated to the general public through the media, and the new electronic social networking forums, calling them to express their opinion on the matter. The views expressed could then constitute the basis for further discussion within the national Parliament which could culminate into a resolution or a submission of its views to the government.

National Parliaments could, in parallel, exchange views and opinions with other national Parliaments and the European Parliament within the framework of interparliamentary cooperation, which would provide further impetus to the discussion and raise awareness on the matter across the EU. Such an exchange of information between national Parliament officials could, for example, take place with the use of the IPEX forum.

It is very important that the debate should culminate in concrete results. Therefore, it is instrumental that national Parliaments, which have the means and power to influence and

shape EU matters, remain a key player in these discussions; the dissemination of information to the public at large should aim at bringing citizens closer to EU matters and at providing them with a substantive opportunity to express their opinion, and not at transferring the debate in other forums where the opinions expressed by the citizens could possibly remain in obscurity.

Citizens and Parliaments in times of economic crisis

The European Union and particularly the Eurozone are undergoing an acute economic and financial crisis. In such adverse circumstances, it is essential to offer citizens hope that the Union can address their predicament effectively, with a social and humanitarian face. What matters most is not just the welfare of economic indicators and financial parameters, but the well-being and dignity of ordinary people. If, as in the case of Cyprus, a bailout leads in fact to utter disregard of the rights of citizens, a deepening of the crisis and a huge deterioration of the standard of living, then citizens will not only be brought closer to the European Union, but will, in fact, feel completely alienated.

The role of the media

In the light of the above, it becomes clear that the role of the media is crucial with regard to the dissemination of information on citizens' rights and on ways of their active involvement in EU public affairs. This role was also highlighted in the conclusions of the last Conference of Speakers in Warsaw, where it was stated that "...the media should play a crucial role in the functioning of parliamentary democracy, where the free press was the best guarantee of a free parliament, and where each MP's freedom of speech was a fundamental principle". Also, as the Speaker of the House of Representatives of Belgium, Mr. André Flahaut rightly pointed out in Warsaw, 75% of the population are active on social networks. This clearly indicates the significance of the involvement of the media as key factors of communication between Parliaments and the public. Parliaments should make better use of both audiovisual means (television/radio) and the internet (social networks) in order to achieve the task of bridging the gap between EU policies and the citizens. The specific proposals that were put forward during the last Conference of Speakers provide a strong basis for further developments in this respect.

Enhancement of transparency

Transparency constitutes the cornerstone of democracy, therefore, the enhancement of transparency in the decision making processes, both at the European and national level, will attain the objective of bringing citizens closer to the Union. In the Conclusions of the previous Conference of Speakers, held in Warsaw on 20-21 April 2012, the importance of ensuring

maximum transparency and the most accurate and timely information on parliamentary activities through the provision of the relevant data online in freely accessible ways and formats was stressed. In an effort to further enhance transparency, in the Meeting of Secretaries General held in Nicosia on 10-11 February 2013, the Secretaries General unanimously adopted the proposal of the Secretary General of the German Bundestag to request the Speakers to address to the European Commission the interest of national Parliaments to make the complete range of its COM documents available to them via IPEX. This proposal further enhances transparency, hence democracy, as it provides national Parliaments with an insight to the decision making in the Council, to which they currently have no direct information from the European Commission.

Raising awareness on EU matters

Other possible ways of bringing citizens closer to the Union may include the following:

- Awareness raising campaigns covered by the media;
- Campaigns targeted at specific interest groups (businesses, Small and Medium Enterprises, Trade Unions, professional bodies);
- organising events (public debates, conferences, hearings) aiming at informing EU citizens on their rights and giving them the opportunity to express their views, as well as sharing ideas with regard to issues of their concern that need to be regulated;
- Exchange of information and best practices between the Union, national and local authorities and public and civil societies.