

# Strengthening the role and impact of petitions as an instrument of participatory democracy <sup>1</sup>

*Lessons learnt from a citizens' perspective  
10 years after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty*

## ABSTRACT

This study, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the [Committee on Petitions](#), evaluates the state of play of the right of petition ten years after the inclusion of the principle of participatory democracy in the EU treaties. After contextualising the right of petition within the broader EU participatory infrastructure, it provides a set of recommendations aimed at unleashing its democratic potential while overcoming its major structural limitations.

## Background

Petitioning represents the **oldest, most accessible, permanent and general-purpose participatory mechanism for any individual who intends to enter into contact with the EU institutions**. As such, [the right to petition](#) provides EU citizens and residents with a [simple means](#) of contacting the European institutions with complaints or requests for action, often in relation to "orphan" or "dormant" issues that fail to get the attention and action of other European Parliament committees or EU institutions, in particular concerning problems related to the application of EU law at the national and local level.<sup>2</sup>

The right to petition plays **important different and complementary functions**, from administrative and political oversight over the EU Commission and the Member States to legislative agenda-setting, while offering a unique mechanism of representation for individuals and minorities – such as non-EU citizens, migrants and minors – who currently lack such representation.

There are, however, still some major **structural issues** over effectively ensuring the exercise of the right to petition and the full realisation of its multiple democratic functions within the current EU participatory infrastructure. It does so at time the EU undergoes a major democratic exercise – the Conference on the Future of Europe – that, for the first time since 2007, may lead to institutional reform and put to test democratic innovations, such as citizens' assemblies at the transnational level.

<sup>1</sup> Full study in English: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/694837/IPOL\\_STU\(2021\)694837\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/694837/IPOL_STU(2021)694837_EN.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See also [Achievements of the Committee on Petitions during the 2014-2019 parliamentary term and challenges for the future](#), Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, DG IPOL, 2019.



## Recommendations

Against this background, this study identifies and systematises the EU petition system's major flaws – focusing on its design, accountability and actual practice – in order to provide a set of **recommendations** on how to strengthen the role and impact of the right of petition as the privileged instrument of EU participatory democracy.

First, the right of petition, like any other EU participatory channels, remains largely unknown, and little used. To overcome this limited literacy, this study recommends providing newly registered petitions with **greater publicity and visibility**, and, more broadly, to embrace a **pro-active** communication and offer material support to petitioners.

The second structural flow is the fragmentation of the EU participatory infrastructure, stemming from the scattered creation of its various participatory instruments across time. As a result, the right to petition has been overshadowed by specialised channels, such as the right to complain to the European Ombudsman – or to the EU Commission – as well as the right to register a European Citizen Initiative (ECI). To overcome such a fragmentation, the study suggests setting up a **single-entry point into the EU participatory infrastructure** to guide users when trying to engage with the EU.

Another major limitation to the right of petition is its structural dependency on third-party cooperation, notably that by the EU Commission as well as other parliamentary committees and Member States. To incentivise cooperation, the study recommends **raising the political profile** of pending petitions by relying more often on fact-finding, questioning, own initiative reports, temporary committees of inquiry as well as intergroups, joint committee proceedings and joint rapporteurship.

Finally, it advances the idea of **strategically relying on the European Ombudsman** – through the lodging of MEP's complaints against the Commission – to improve the Commission's cooperation with PETI in handling petitions. Indeed, should the Commission fail to motivate a request for information submitted by the PETI Committee, the Ombudsman could find – as it did in the past in relation to complaints – maladministration on the part of the Commission by failing to provide the petitioner and/or PETI Committee with sufficient reasons for its decision to take no further action on the case.

Last, but not least, the final structural limitation of the right of petition is PETI Committee's limited capacity and, more broadly, the 'attractiveness problem' it faces within the Parliament itself, both among MEPs and staff. On this point, the study recommends **enhancing** not only the **capacity and resources of the PETI Committee**, but also to embrace a more **proactive** approach to make its work more attractive both internally and outside world, by drawing inspiration from the work of the office of the EU Ombudsman.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that a fully functioning petition system, operating within a more accessible, intelligible and integrated EU participatory infrastructure, could provide a permanent and credible bottom-up cooperation and **link between citizens and the EU capable of addressing the current gap** existing between them, which is one of the issues at the heart of the Conference on the Future of Europe's *raison d'être*.

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