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DRAFT REPORT

on the deliberations of the Committee on Petitions in 2020
(2021/2019(INI))

Committee on Petitions

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MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

on the deliberations of the Committee on Petitions in 2020 (2021/2019(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions on the deliberations of the Committee on Petitions,
 - having regard to Articles 10 and 11 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU),
 - having regard to Articles 24 and 227 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which reflect the importance the Treaty attaches to the right of EU citizens and residents to bring their concerns to the attention of Parliament,
 - having regard to Article 228 of the TFEU on the role and functions of the European Ombudsman,
 - having regard to Article 44 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union concerning the right to petition the European Parliament,
 - having regard to the provisions of the TFEU relating to the infringement procedure and, in particular, to Articles 258 and 260 thereof,
 - having regard to Rules 54 and 227(7) of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Petitions (A9- /2021),
- A. whereas in 2020, Parliament received 1 573 petitions, which represents an increase of 15.9 % as compared to the 1 357 petitions submitted in 2019 and an increase of 28.9 % as compared to the 1 220 petitions submitted in 2018;
- B. whereas in 2020, the number of users supporting one or more petitions on Parliament's Petitions Web Portal was 48 882, which represents a considerable rise as compared to the 28 076 users recorded in 2019; whereas the number of clicks in support of petitions also increased in 2020, reaching a total of 55 129;
- C. whereas the large number of petitions voicing citizens' concerns over the public health and socio-economic emergencies resulting from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly contributed to the rise in the number of petitions registered in 2020 in comparison with previous years; whereas 13.23 % of the petitions received in 2020 related to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- D. whereas the high number of petitions submitted in 2020 reveals that, in times of crisis, citizens rely significantly on the EU by directly addressing their concerns and complaints to their elected representatives at EU level;
- E. whereas, however, the overall number of petitions remains modest in relation to the

total population of the EU, revealing that efforts still need to be stepped up to increase citizens' awareness about their right to petition; whereas, in exercising the right to petition, citizens expect that the EU institutions will provide added value in finding a solution to their problems;

- F. whereas the criteria for the admissibility of petitions are laid down in Article 227 of the TFEU and Rule 226 of Parliament's Rules of Procedure, which require that petitions must be submitted by EU citizens or residents directly affected by matters falling within the EU's fields of activity;
- G. whereas, of the 1 573 petitions submitted in 2020, 392 were declared inadmissible and 51 were withdrawn; whereas the relatively high percentage (24.92 %) of inadmissible petitions in 2020 demonstrates that there is still a widespread lack of clarity about the scope and limits of the Union's areas of responsibility;
- H. whereas the right to petition the European Parliament is one of the fundamental rights of EU citizens; whereas the right to petition provides EU citizens and residents with an open, democratic and transparent mechanism to address their elected representatives directly and is therefore essential to enable citizens' active participation in the Union's fields of activity;
- I. whereas the right to petition offers Parliament the opportunity to enhance its responsiveness to complaints and concerns relating to the respect for EU fundamental rights and compliance with EU legislation in the Member States; whereas petitions are therefore a useful source of information on instances of misapplication or breaches of EU law and, thus, enable Parliament and other EU institutions to assess the transposition and application of EU law and its impact on the rights of EU citizens and residents;
- J. whereas Parliament has long been at the forefront of the development of the petitions process internationally and has the most open and transparent petitions process in Europe, allowing petitioners to participate fully in its activities;
- K. whereas the Committee on Petitions carefully examines and deals with each petition submitted to Parliament; whereas each petitioner has the right to receive a reply informing him or her about the decision on admissibility and follow-up actions taken by the committee within a reasonable period of time, in his or her own language or in the language used in the petition;
- L. whereas the activities of the Committee on Petitions are based on the input provided by petitioners; whereas the information submitted by petitioners in their petitions and at committee meetings, along with the Commission's assessment and the replies of the Member States and other bodies, are crucial for the work of the committee; whereas admissible petitions also provide valuable contributions to the work of the other parliamentary committees, given that they are forwarded by Committee on Petitions to other committees for an opinion or for information;
- M. whereas the Committee on Petitions attaches paramount importance to the examination and public discussion of petitions at its meetings; whereas petitioners have the right to present their petitions and frequently take the floor in the discussion, thereby actively

contributing to the work of the committee; whereas in 2020, the Committee on Petitions held 13 committee meetings, at which 116 petitions were discussed with 110 petitioners present, with 78 petitioners actively participating by taking the floor; whereas the lower number of petitions discussed at meetings in 2020 as compared to 2019 is explained by the reduced timeslots for committee meetings, especially from April to July, owing to the limited interpretation facilities as a consequence of Parliament's precautionary measures in the context of the pandemic;

- N. whereas the main subjects of concern raised in petitions submitted in 2020 relate to fundamental rights (in particular the impact of COVID-19 emergency measures on the rule of law and democracy, as well on the freedom of movement, the right to work, the right to information and the right to education), health (notably questions on the public health crisis resulting from the pandemic, ranging from the protection of citizens' health, including treatments and protective equipment, to the management of the health crisis in the Member States and the acquisition and distribution of vaccines), the environment (mostly mining activities and their impact on the environment, nuclear safety, air pollution and the deterioration of natural ecosystems), justice (notably issues related to access to justice or alleged procedural irregularities or concerns over the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary in the Member States, along with cross-border cases of child abduction and custody rights), education (in particular questions related to discriminatory access to education or contested national reform of the law on education), and the internal market (in particular questions relating to national travel restrictions in the context of the pandemic and their impact on the freedom of movement of persons within and outside the EU), in addition to many other areas of activity;
- O. whereas 79.7 % (1 254) of the petitions received in 2020 were submitted via Parliament's Petitions Web Portal, as compared to 73.9 % (1 003 petitions) in 2019, thus confirming that Parliament's Petitions Web Portal has become by far the most used channel for submitting citizens' petitions to the Parliament;
- P. whereas in 2020, the Petitions Web Portal was further developed into a more user-friendly, secure and accessible portal for citizens; whereas the frequently asked questions (FAQs) have been updated and a number of improvements on data protection have been made in order to implement the recommendations by the European Data Protection Supervisor and a new password recovery mechanism has been introduced; whereas the interconnection between the Petitions Web Portal, ePeti and PETIGREF has been further developed and work has been carried out to ensure the integration of external developments and Hermes; whereas a large number of individual support requests have been handled successfully;
- Q. whereas in 2020, the Committee on Petitions held just one fact-finding visit; whereas no other fact-finding visit could take place as a result of the decision by Parliament's President to cancel parliamentary events, including delegations, as one of the precautionary measures adopted to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and minimise health risks for Parliament's Members and staff;
- R. whereas under the Rules of Procedure, the Committee on Petitions is responsible for relations with the European Ombudsman, who investigates complaints about

maladministration within the institutions and bodies of the EU; whereas the current European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, presented her Annual Report for 2019 to the Committee on Petitions at its meeting of 3 September 2020;

- S. whereas the Committee on Petitions is a member of the European Network of Ombudsmen, which also includes the European Ombudsman, national and regional ombudsmen and similar bodies in the Member States, the candidate countries and other European Economic Area countries, and which aims to promote the exchange of information about EU law and policy, and to share best practices;
1. Emphasises the fundamental role of the Committee on Petitions in protecting and promoting the rights of EU citizens and residents by ensuring that petitioners' concerns and complaints are examined in a timely and effective manner and that they are resolved, wherever possible, through an open, democratic and transparent petitions process;
 2. Reiterates the importance of a continuous public debate on the Union's fields of activity in order to ensure that citizens are correctly informed about the scope of the Union's competences and the different levels of decision-making; calls, in this regard, for broader awareness raising campaigns, through the active involvement of the press and communications services, to help increase citizens' knowledge about their right to petition, as well as the scope and limits of the Union's responsibilities, with a view to reducing the number of inadmissible petitions;
 3. Points out that petitions constitute a unique opportunity for Parliament and the other EU institutions to directly connect with EU citizens and maintain a regular dialogue with them, particularly in cases where they are affected by the misapplication or breach of EU law; stresses the need for enhanced cooperation between the EU institutions and national, regional and local authorities on inquiries regarding the implementation of and compliance with EU law; believes that such cooperation is crucial to address and resolve citizens' concerns over the application of EU law and contributes to strengthening the democratic legitimacy and accountability of the Union; calls, therefore, for the more active participation of Member States' representatives in committee meetings and for swifter responses to the requests for clarification or information sent by the Committee on Petitions to the national authorities;
 4. Recalls that petitions contribute considerably to the Commission's role as guardian of the Treaties; stresses that reinforced cooperation between the Committee on Petitions and the Commission and timely answers from the Commission are essential to ensure the successful treatment of petitions; reiterates its call on the Commission for regular updates on developments in infringement proceedings and for access to relevant Commission documents on infringements and EU pilot procedures which have been closed;
 5. Calls on the Commission to assess whether national authorities are taking the necessary measures to respond to citizens' concerns as expressed in their petitions where cases of systemic failure in compliance with EU law occur;
 6. Recalls that cooperation with other committees in Parliament is essential for the accurate and comprehensive treatment of petitions; notes that in 2020, 56 petitions were

sent to other committees for opinion and 385 for information; welcomes the fact that 40 opinions and 60 acknowledgements of taking petitions into consideration in their work were received from other committees; recalls that petitioners are informed of the decisions to request opinions from other committees for the treatment of their petitions; calls on parliamentary committees to step up their efforts to actively contribute to the examination of petitions – by proving their expertise – and thus enable Parliament to respond more swiftly and comprehensively to citizens’ concerns; regrets that the PETI Network could not meet in 2020;

7. Believes that the petitions network is a useful tool for facilitating the follow-up of petitions in parliamentary and legislative work; trusts that regular meetings of the petitions network are crucial in order to strengthen cooperation between parliamentary committees through the exchange of information and sharing of best practices among the network’s members;
8. Draws attention to its resolution of 17 December 2020 on the deliberations of the Committee on Petitions during 2019¹;
9. Underlines that despite the reduced timeslots for committee meetings in 2020 owing to Parliament’s precautionary measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19 within its premises and the consequent reduced interpretation facilities, the Committee on Petitions has expressed its opinion on important issues raised in petitions by contributing to a significant number of parliamentary reports, notably on the conclusion of the Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community², on Monitoring the Application of EU Law 2017 and 2018³, on the Recommendations on the negotiations for a new partnership with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland⁴, on the Situation of Fundamental Rights in the European Union - Annual Report for the years 2018-2019⁵, on Reducing inequalities with a special focus on in-work poverty⁶, on Turkey – Annual progress report 2019⁷, and on the implementation of Council Directive 2000/78/EC establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation in light of the UNCRPD⁸; appreciates the activity of the Secretariat of the Committee on Petitions in general and, in particular, during the pandemic, as the working conditions became more complex;
10. Draws attention to the large number of petitions on COVID-19 that the Committee on Petitions examined and replied to in 2020, mostly by using its urgency procedure; stresses that most of these petitions called for the protection of citizens’ health against the spread of the virus, including questions on treatments, protective equipment and on the acquisition and distribution of vaccines, as well as for the assessment of the management of the health crisis in the Member States; recalls, also, that many

¹ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0383.

² Opinion adopted on 21 January 2020.

³ Opinion adopted on 19 February 2020.

⁴ Opinion adopted on 30 April 2020.

⁵ Opinion adopted on 7 September 2020.

⁶ Opinion adopted on 7 September 2020.

⁷ Opinion adopted on 29 October 2020.

⁸ Opinion adopted on 3 December 2020.

petitioners raised concerns over the impact of national emergency measures, including lockdowns, on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, calling into question travel and work restrictions, obstacles to the freedom of movement within the Schengen area, as well as the management of cancelled flights and trips during the pandemic;

11. Is seriously concerned about the public health and socio-economic damages caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; welcomes the excellent work done by the Committee on Petitions which, by voicing citizens' concerns over the public health and socio-economic crises related to the COVID-19 pandemic, contributed to ensuring Parliament's responsiveness to citizens' needs and expectations as regards the Union's capacity to address such a global challenge; draws attention, in this regard, to the important follow-up actions taken by the Committee on Petitions to respond to the issues raised in COVID-19-related petitions, which lead to the adoption in plenary of the resolutions on the Schengen system and measures taken during the COVID-19 crisis⁹, on the rights of persons with intellectual disabilities and their families in the COVID-19 crisis¹⁰ and on tackling homelessness rates in the EU¹¹;
12. Stresses the important contribution made by the Committee on Petitions to the protection of children's rights, as revealed by its treatment of a number of petitions on parental child abduction in Japan; points, in this regard, to the resolution on the international and domestic parental abduction of EU children in Japan, the motion for which was adopted by the Committee on Petitions on 16 June 2020, adopted in plenary on 8 July 2020¹²;
13. Draws attention to the hearing of 29 October 2020 on 'Union citizenship: Empowerment, Inclusion, Participation', which the Committee on Petitions held jointly with the Committee on Legal Affairs, the Committee on Constitutional Affairs and the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs; considers that this event represented a significant contribution by Parliament to the Commission's 2020 EU Citizenship report;
14. Takes note that, along with fundamental rights, health was the main area of concern for petitioners in 2020; while recognising that health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic were at the centre of the Committee on Petitions' work, draws attention to the resolution on additional funding for biomedical research on Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, the motion for which was adopted by the committee on 30 April 2020, adopted in plenary on 18 June 2020¹³; recalls that Parliament's resolution has been highly welcomed by the scientific and patients' communities; reiterates, in this regard, its call for coordinated and enhanced research efforts and for additional funding to support progress in research in order to address the human and socio-economic consequences of the growing number of individuals living and working with long-term disabling and chronic conditions;
15. Notes that environmental issues remained an area of serious concern for petitioners in

⁹ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0315.

¹⁰ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0183.

¹¹ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0314.

¹² Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0182.

¹³ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0140.

2020; regrets that environmental rules are not always correctly implemented in the Member States, as described in numerous petitions raising complaints about air pollution, the deterioration of natural ecosystems, nuclear safety and the impact of mining activities on the environment; stresses the importance of delivering on EU citizens' expectations on the protection of the environment; urges, therefore, the Commission, together with the Member States, to ensure the correct implementation of EU legislation in this field;

16. Welcomes the specific role of protection played by the Committee on Petitions within the EU in the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; points to the committee's important ongoing work in connection with petitions concerning issues on disabilities; notes that the number of petitions on disability almost doubled in 2020 in comparison with the previous year; stresses that discrimination and access to education and employment remain among the main challenges faced by persons with disabilities;
17. Recalls that in 2020, the Committee on Petitions paid specific attention to the discussion of petitions on the difficulties faced by people with intellectual disabilities and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding access to health services, personal assistance and contact with families and carers; welcomes the outcome of the Committee on Petitions' annual workshop on the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities – 'The new Disability Strategy' – which took place at the committee meeting of 28 October 2020;
18. Recalls that relations with the European Ombudsman are one of the responsibilities conferred by Parliament's Rules of Procedure on the Committee on Petitions; welcomes Parliament's constructive cooperation with the European Ombudsman, as well as its involvement in the European Network of Ombudsmen; acknowledges the European Ombudsman's regular contributions to the work of the Committee on Petitions throughout the year; firmly believes that the Union's institutions, bodies and agencies must ensure consistent and effective follow-up to the recommendations of the Ombudsman;
19. Underlines that the Petitions Web Portal is an essential tool for ensuring a smooth, efficient and transparent petitions process; welcomes, in this regard, the improvements on data protection and on the security features which have made the portal more user-friendly and secure for citizens; stresses that efforts must be continued to make the portal more accessible to persons with disabilities, including by enabling the tabling of petitions in national sign languages;
20. Instructs its President to forward this resolution and the report of the Committee on Petitions to the Council, the Commission, the European Ombudsman, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, and the Member States' committees on petitions, national ombudsmen or similar competent bodies.

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

Pursuant to Rule 227 (7) of the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament, the Committee on Petitions shall report annually on the outcome of its deliberations. The report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the work carried out by the committee in 2020 and includes a statistical analysis of the petitions received and processed as well as a stocktaking of other parliamentary activities such as the adoption of reports and opinions, the organisation of hearings and the committee's relations with other EU institutions. It is worth recalling that the core work of the Committee on Petitions generates from the right to petition the European Parliament exercised by EU citizens and residents under Article 227 TFEU and is not directly linked to the work programme of the Commission.

In 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency measures adopted across the European Union to respond to an unprecedented public health crisis and its economic and social consequences have posed significant challenges for parliamentary democracy.

From the onset of the pandemic, the European Parliament took a series of unprecedented measures aiming at ensuring Parliament's core functions, while avoiding health risks for its Members and staff. For this purpose, since March 2020, the President has issued several decisions requiring, *inter alia*, the cancellation of events and visits in Parliament's premises in all three places of work, including delegations and committee hearings, while preserving the operational capacity of Parliament's governing bodies, plenary, ordinary and extraordinary committee meetings. Core activities were reduced, but maintained to ensure that the institution's legislative, budgetary and scrutiny functions could be carried out.

In order to enable Members to participate in parliamentary activities from their home countries, Parliament's services deployed major efforts to develop digital remote meeting and voting systems, specifically adapted to the open, dynamic and multilingual Parliament's environment. These remote procedures were first used during the extraordinary plenary session on 26 March 2020 - when Parliament approved crucial EU support measures to tackle the pandemic - and have been used since then while being progressively upgraded and improved.

Under these exceptional circumstances, the Committee on Petitions not only swiftly adapted to this new way of working but did also play a key role in ensuring Parliament's prompt response to citizens' increasing concerns over the pandemic and its severe economic, social and democratic consequences.

Firstly, on 2 April 2020, the Committee on Petitions' Coordinators decided to adapt the committee's ordinary procedure for the treatment of petitions in order to enable citizens to keep submitting petitions and receive the committee's decisions on admissibility and follow-up actions at the usual pace. For this purpose, Coordinators decided to increase the recourse to written procedures to deal with and vote on the contested recommendations as well as to announce the results thereof. Secondly, Coordinators decided to treat petitions on COVID-19 by the urgency procedure and to discuss them in priority.

For this purpose, following the revision of Parliament's working calendar, the committee held an extraordinary meeting on 30 April 2020 to discuss citizens' concerns over the outbreak of COVID-19 raised in a large number of petitions submitted to Parliament. At this meeting, the committee also held its first vote by remote procedure for the adoption of the Draft Opinion on Recommendations on the negotiations for a new partnership with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Draft Motion for a Resolution on additional funding for biomedical research on Myalgic Encephalomyelitis.

In addition, all committee meetings from 30 April to 2nd July 2020 were fully devoted to the consideration of petitions raising questions on the management of the COVID-19 health crisis and on the impact of national emergency measures on fundamental rights. The format of all these meetings until September was two-hour slots with *interactio* and limited interpretation owing to the reduced capacity of the available interpretation infrastructure. Committee meetings took place in Parliament's premises, with the remote participation of petitioners, the representatives of the European Commission and most Members.

Finally, it is worth recalling that at their meeting on 13 July 2020, Coordinators agreed to discontinue the urgency procedure and follow the ordinary procedure for any new COVID-19 petitions received, considering the slight decrease in the number of petitions on this issue. Also, as of September 2020, the timeslots for ordinary committee meetings increased to four two-hour meetings per month.

Statistical analysis of petitions received in 2020 compared to 2019

According to the statistics, the European Parliament received 1 573 petitions in 2020 which represents an increase by 15.9% compared to the 1 357 petitions submitted in 2019 and by 28.9% compared to the 1 220 petitions registered in 2018. The large number of petitions on COVID-19 significantly contributed to such a rise in the petitions' flow registered in 2020 in comparison with 2019 and 2018.

Users of the Petitions Web Portal have the possibility to support petitions. In 2020, 48 882 users acted as supporters as compared to 28 076 in 2019. It follows, that in 2020 the number of users supporting petitions in the web portal increased considerably in comparison with the previous year.

In 2020, 48 petitions were co-signed by more than one citizen. Of the 48 petitions signed by more than one citizen, 8 were signed by more than 1000 citizens and 2 by more than 10 000 citizens.

Format of petitions

In 2020, almost 80% of the petitions were submitted via the Petitions Web Portal while 20% of petitions were submitted by post. The figures in the two tables reveal that in 2020 the number of petitions submitted via the Petitions Web Portal increased by 25% in comparison with 2019. It also raised by 45,3% compared to 2018, when 863 petitions were submitted via

the Portal, thus confirming that the Petitions Web Portal has become by far the most used channel for submitting citizens' petitions to the European Parliament.

2020

Petition Format	Number of petitions	%
Petitions portal	1254	79.7
Letter	319	20.2

2019

Petition Format	Number of petitions	%
Petitions portal	1003	73.9
Letter	354	26.1

Status of petitions per calendar year¹⁴

The following table shows the status of petitions from 2003 to 2020. It can be noted that in 2020, the majority of petitions were closed within a year after being received and examined by the committee. As a result of the comparison with the data on the status of petitions included in the annual reports from 2010 to 2019, it can be concluded that the majority of petitions are closed within a year after being received and examined. Very small percentages (from 0.3 % to 13.1%) of petitions from 2004 to 2015 remain open. Most of these open petitions relate to environmental issues and ongoing infringement proceedings before the Court of Justice of the European Union or to issues that members of the committee want to follow closely.

Status of petitions					
Year	Number of petitions	Open procedure		Closed procedure	
2020	1 573	652	41.4%	896	57.0%
2019	1 357	363	26.8%	994	73.2%
2018	1 220	299	24.5%	921	75.5%
2017	1 271	256	20.1%	1 015	79.9%
2016	1 569	478	30.5%	1 091	69.5%
2015	1 431	187	13.1%	1 244	86.9%
2014	2 715	225	8.3%	2 490	91.7%
2013	2 891	296	10.2%	2 595	89.8%
2012	1 986	125	6.3%	1 861	93.7%
2011	1 414	71	5.0%	1 343	95.0%
2010	1 656	37	2.2%	1 619	97.8%
2009	1 924	14	0.7%	1 910	99.3%
2008	1 886	19	1.0%	1 867	99.0%
2007	1 506	23	1.5%	1 483	98.5%
2006	1 021	4	0.4%	1 017	99.6%
2005	1 016	3	0.3%	1 013	99.7%
2004	1 002	3	0.3%	999	99.7%

¹⁴ The statistics on the status of petitions have been downloaded on 19 May 2021.

2003	1 315	0	0%	1 315	100.0%
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Outcome of petitions¹⁵

2020

Outcome of petitions	Number	%
Admissible and Closed	478	30.39%
Admissible and Open	652	41.45%
Inadmissible	392	24.92%
Withdrawn	51	3.24%
Sent to EC for opinion	794	52.90%
Sent for opinion to other bodies	44	2.93%
Sent for information to other bodies	663	44.17%

2019

Outcome of petitions	Number	%
Admissible and Closed	575	42.37%
Admissible and Open	363	26.75%
Inadmissible	406	29.9%
Withdrawn	13	0.9%
Sent to EC for opinion	557	48.27%
Sent for opinion to other bodies	43	3.73%
Sent for information to other bodies	554	48.01%

¹⁵ The statistics on the outcome of petitions have been downloaded on 19 May 2021.

The tables show that the percentage of petitions declared inadmissible in 2020 is slightly lower than the percentage of petitions, which were declared inadmissible in 2019. Lower is also the percentage of admissible petitions (30.39 %), which were closed immediately by providing information to the petitioner in 2020, as compared to the 42.37 % in 2019. It follows that more petitions (41.45%) have been kept open in 2020 as compared to 2019, when 26.75% of petitions are maintained open.

It is also to be noted that in 2020, more than half of the admissible petitions were sent to the Commission for opinion.

Finally, the percentage of petitions sent to other bodies for opinion remains very similar in both years.

Number of petitions by country

The following two tables illustrate in numbers and in percentage terms changes of petitions by country from 2019 to 2020. A large number of petitions submitted in both years concern the EU. It means that these petitions either raise EU-wide issues or call for common measures to be implemented throughout the EU. Petitions concerning the EU may also relate to one or more Member States and are therefore registered under both the EU and the concerned Member State(s). This explains why the sum of the petitions concerning the EU and of those only related to Member States exceeds the total number of petitions submitted in 2019 and 2020.

Additionally, it is worth stressing that the nine countries mostly concerned by petitions remained the same in both years with the only exception of France. In 2020, the number of petitions concerning France almost halved in comparison with 2019 (21 petitions in 2020 as compared to 40 petitions in 2019). In addition, the order of the most concerned countries changed considerably. The majority of petitions submitted in 2020 concern Spain with a significant increase by 72.6% in comparison with 2019. On the contrary, the number of petitions related to Germany and Italy decreased respectively by 15.3% and 33% in comparison with 2019.

Another remarkable difference concerns the United Kingdom. In 2020, the committee received 38 petitions concerning the UK, which is less than a half of the UK petitions received in 2019. By contrast, petitions concerning Poland significantly increased in 2020 (89 petitions) compared to the 51 petitions submitted in 2019.

As regards the countries featuring at the bottom of the list, Slovenia and Estonia remain the least countries concerned in both years.

2020

Concerned Country	Petitions	%
European Union	642	33.1
Spain	283	14.6
Germany	172	8.9
Poland	89	4.6
Italy	69	3.6
Romania	56	2.9
Bulgaria	42	2.2
United Kingdom	38	2.0
Greece	29	1.5
Austria	23	1.2
Other EU countries	187	9.3
Non-EU countries	130	6.7

2019

Concerned Country	Petitions	%
European Union	599	34.6
Germany	203	11.7
Spain	164	9.5
Italy	103	5.9
United Kingdom	90	5.2
Romania	80	4.6
Bulgaria	52	3.0
Poland	51	2.9
Greece	46	2.7
France	40	2.3
Other EU countries	218	12.6
Non-EU countries	86	5.0

Languages of petitions

In 2020 and in 2019, petitions were submitted in 22 of the official languages of the European Union. German and English remain the most used languages in both years. In addition, the tables illustrate that German, English, Spanish and Italian languages account for almost 3/4 (76.5% - 71.8%) of the petitions received in both years.

Danish, Maltese and Slovenian were the least used languages in 2020 while in 2019 it were Slovak, Latvian and Slovenian.

2020

Petition Language	Number of petitions	%
German	386	24.5
English	379	24.1
Spanish	334	21.2
Italian	106	6.7
Polish	76	4.8
Romanian	52	3.3
French	37	2.3
Others	203	12.9
Total	1 573	100

2019

Petition Language	Number of petitions	%
German	337	24.8
English	331	24.4
Spanish	183	13.5
Italian	123	9.1
Romanian	60	4.4
Polish	56	4.1
French	53	3.9
Others	214	15.8
Total	1 357	100

Nationality of petitioners

As regards nationality, petitions submitted by German citizens represent the highest number in both years with an increase by 17.1% in 2020.

In addition, the tables below show a considerable rise in the number of petitions submitted by Spanish and Polish nationals in 2020 in comparison with the previous year. More specifically, in 2020 petitions by Spanish and Polish citizens increased respectively by 83.1% and by 45.8%.

By contrast, the number of petitions by British citizens decreased by more than a half in 2020 (56.8%). As in 2019, the main questions raised by British petitioners in 2020 concern the loss of EU citizenship and related rights as well as the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement.

2020

Prime petitioner nationality	Number of petitions	%
Germany	404	13.8
Spain	368	12.5
Italy	127	4.3
Poland	105	3.6
Romania	89	3.0
Bulgaria	47	1.6
Greece	45	1.5
Finland	40	1.4
United Kingdom	38	1.3
Other EU nationalities	262	8.8
Non-EU nationalities	51	1.7

2019

Prime petitioner nationality	Number of petitions	%
Germany	345	25.4
Spain	201	14.8
Italy	139	10.2
Romania	97	7.1
United Kingdom	88	6.5
Poland	72	5.3
Greece	55	4.0
Bulgaria	52	3.8
France	51	3.8
Other EU nationalities	231	17.1
Non-EU nationalities	28	2.0

Main subjects of petitions

The tables below include the top ten petition themes. From the tables it can be concluded that fundamental rights and environment rank high in both 2020 and 2019.

However, in 2020 the number of petitions raising concerns over health and fundamental rights increased significantly. Without any doubt, the major increase concerns health. More specifically, in 2020 the committee received 221 petitions on health as compared to the 97 petitions registered under the same theme in 2019. The number more than doubled in 2020, which is mainly due to the large number of petitions on COVID-19. In this respect, it is worth recalling that more than half of the petitions on health are related to the public health emergency triggered by the outbreak and spread of COVID-19 (122 out of 221).

As far as fundamental rights are concerned, in 2020 the number of petitions on this topic raised by 41.8 % as compared to 2019. It is also interesting to note that in 2020, 72 petitions out of the 268 petitions registered under the theme of fundamental rights raise concerns over the impact of national COVID-19-related emergency measures on citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms, including the freedom of movement, the right to work, the right of access to information and the right to education.

By contrast, in 2020 petitions on environment and justice decreased by respectively by 20.6% and 17.9%.

2020

2019

Top 10 Petition themes	Number of petitions	%
Fundamental Rights	268	11.1
Health	221	9.2
Environment	200	8.3
Justice	151	6.3
Education & Culture	104	4.3
Internal Market	99	4.1
Transport	79	3.3
Employment	68	2.8
Social Affairs	60	2.5
Property & Restitution	13	0.5

Top 10 Petition themes	Number of petitions	%
Environment	252	12.2
Fundamental Rights	189	9.2
Justice	184	8.9
Health	97	4.7
Transport	90	4.4
Internal Market	90	4.4
Employment	79	3.8
Education & Culture	62	3.0
Social Affairs	45	2.2
Property & Restitution	33	1.6

Petitions Web Portal

The Petitions Web Portal, established at the end of 2014, has been further improved in order to make it more user friendly, more secure and more accessible for citizens.

In 2020, important technical upgrades have been made enabling users to have an improved experience with the web portal. Firstly, two releases of the web portal took place, namely in August and in November 2020, which included a number of corrections and evolutions mostly focused on fixing security vulnerabilities. Secondly, the frequently asked questions (FAQs) have been updated and new screenshots have been added. In addition, a number of improvements on data protection have been made in order to implement the recommendations by the European Data Protection Supervisor and a new password recovery mechanism has been introduced. Moreover, the interconnection between the Petitions Web Portal, ePeti and PETIGREF has been further developed, which entailed an extensive revamp of the user interface. Finally, work has been carried out to ensure the integration of external developments and of Hermes.

All these improvements and updates have been presented and discussed at the meeting of the Petitions Portal Steering Committee, which took place on 16 October 2020.

Relations with the Commission

The Commission remains the natural partner of the Committee on Petitions in processing petitions as the responsible EU institution for ensuring the implementation of and compliance with EU law. The committee and the Commission have a well-established and consistently maintained level of cooperation. The main contact point in the Commission is the Secretariat-

General, which coordinates the distribution of petitions to the relevant Commission's services and transmits the Commission's replies to the secretariat of the committee. While the Commission has stepped up its efforts to provide timely responses, the committee believes that the Commission should be more actively involved in the work of the Committee on Petitions in order to ensure that petitioners receive a precise response to their requests and complaints regarding the implementation of EU law.

Additionally, the committee reiterates its calls for regular updates on developments in infringement proceedings and for transparency and access to documents in relation to infringement and EU pilot procedures, which relate to open petitions. Finally, the committee remains critical as regards the Commission's new enforcement policy announced in its 2016 communication entitled 'EU Law: Better Results through Better Application' (C(2016)8600), which aims to direct citizens to the national level when complaints or petitions do not raise issues of wider principle or systematic failure to comply with EU law. In this regard, the committee considers that the Commission should check whether national authorities take the necessary steps to respond to citizens' concerns as expressed in their petitions.

In 2020, considering the reduced timeslots for committee meetings and activities owing to Parliament's precautionary measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, the Conference of Committee Chairs exceptionally decided (on 3 April 2020) that committees could hold exchanges of views with the Commission in a written format.

As a result of this decision, on 21 April 2020, the Chair of the committee sent a letter to Commission's Vice-President, Maroš Šefčovič, which included a list of questions mainly inquiring about the Commission's envisaged measures to address the health, economic and social crises resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, about the Commission's involvement in the committee's work and its approach to petitions not raising systemic breaches of EU law as well as a series of interinstitutional questions ranging from the Conference on the Future of Europe to transparency obligations in the Council. Taking into account the replies submitted by the Commission's Vice-President, on 7 May 2020, the committee adopted its key messages for Parliament's summary report in the framework of the structured dialogue.

In addition, as part of the annual cycle of the structured dialogue the Committee on Petitions welcomed the remote participation of Vice-President, Maroš Šefčovič, at its meeting on 3 December 2020. The purpose of this exercise was to follow up on the written procedure conducted in April and May 2020 and discuss the relevant initiatives that are part of the new Commission's Work Programme, and in particular on the delivery of the headline ambition 'A New Push for European Democracy.' The Commissioner saluted the fruitful cooperation with the Committee on Petitions and highlighted some of the most significant points of the Commission's Work Programme.

Finally, on 2 December 2020, the committee held an exchange of views with Ms Salla Saastamoinen, Acting Director General of the Commission's Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, on the results of the monitoring exercise of COVID-19 measures introduced by the Member States.

Relations with the Council

Members of the Council's Secretariat occasionally attend the meetings of the Committee on Petitions. Regrettably, in 2020, Council's participation in debates has been very limited. In this respect, the committee considers that a more active cooperation with Member States would be necessary to unblock those petitions requiring prompt responses and reactions from the national authorities. Nevertheless, the committee acknowledges the efforts by some Member States to actively contribute to the discussion on respective petitions in committee meetings. In this regard, it is worth recalling the participation of the Permanent Representation of Slovakia in the discussion on petition No 0194/2020 on alleged corruption in Slovakia at the committee meeting on 10 November 2020.

Relations with the European Ombudsman

The Committee on Petitions has maintained constructive working relations with the office of the European Ombudsman.

In 2020, the Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, presented her *Annual Report 2019* at the committee's meeting on 3 September 2020. In this occasion, the Ombudsman thanked Parliament for her re-election and emphasised the special relationship with the Committee on Petitions. She also made a brief presentation on the progress of her work over the past year, gave examples of individual cases solved by her institution and took note of progress made by institutions in improving administrative practices. Moreover, the Ombudsman welcomed the overwhelming support by Parliament to the European Ombudsman's Special Report concerning the accountability of the Council and the transparency of its legislative process.

Relations with the European Court of Auditors

Over recent years, the Committee on Petitions has built constructive working relations with the European Court of Auditors (ECA) and has actively contributed to its annual work programmes.

In 2020, the Committee on Petitions submitted the following proposals as input to the 2021 ECA work programme: - "Assessment of the use of the EU funds and programmes to fight against poverty within the EU"; - "Animal Welfare during transport - Does the EU respect animal welfare during transport?".

Additionally, in a letter of 11 May 2020, ECA's President offered committees the possibility to submit additional suggestions to the ECA Work Programme 2021 to cover issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, the Committee on Petitions submitted a number of supplementary proposals, including the assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean, on the freedom of movement for cross-border and migrant workers and on gender violence during confinement as well as the assessment of needs and procurement of goods and services paid for by EU funds with regard to COVID-19 projects.

Finally, on 20 January 2020, the Committee on Petitions heard the presentation of ECA Special Report No 14/2019: 'Have your say!': Commission's public consultations engage citizens, but fall short of outreach activities' by its Rapporteur Ms Annemie Turtelboom.

Relations with other EU bodies

On 19 February 2020, the Committee on Petitions heard the presentation of the European Economic and Social Committee's Report on 'The real right of persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections' (Information report) by its Rapporteur, Krzysztof Pater.

Fact-finding visits

In 2020, the Committee on Petitions held a fact-finding mission on enforcement procedures of the civil code of procedure and the alleged use of abusive clauses in Bulgaria, which took place on 24-26 February 2020. The draft report on the Fact-finding Visit to Bulgaria was considered at the committee meeting on 10 November 2020.

Although in January 2020, the Coordinators decided that the committee should carry out two fact finding visits in the second half 2020, namely to visit a German Youth Welfare Office (*Jugendamt*) and the Basque region in Spain, the organisation of these missions was interrupted following the decision by Parliament's President to cancel parliamentary events, including delegations, as one of the precautionary measures adopted to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and minimise health risks for its Members and staff. Because of this decision, no other fact-finding mission took place in 2020.

Public Hearings

As mentioned in the introductory remarks, the organisation of hearings was cancelled at least during the first semester 2020 as a precautionary measure to contain the spread of COVID-19 within Parliament's premises. This decision explains the very limited number of hearings organised in 2020.

More specifically, on 29 October 2020, the Committee on Petitions held jointly with the Committees on Legal Affairs, on Constitutional affairs and on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs a public hearing on "*Union citizenship: Empowerment, Inclusion, Participation*". The event represented Parliament's contribution to the Commission's 2020 EU Citizenship report and a forum for discussion of the results of the public consultation on EU citizenship rights, carried out by the Commission between July-October 2020. The hearing focused on Union citizenship as a tangible value for citizens on the ground, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, and on fostering inclusiveness in democratic processes and citizens' empowerment. Finally, the debate considered future avenues for simplifying and strengthening EU citizenship rights, promoting EU citizenship's values and citizens' democratic participation while drawing lessons learnt from the management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key issues

- *COVID-19 and health*

Citizens suffering from the health and socio-economic emergencies resulting from the outbreak of COVID-19 addressed their concerns to Parliament via its natural citizens' portal, notably the Committee on Petitions. In 2020, the committee received, examined and replied to 209 petitions on COVID-19.

It may be worth stressing that 122 petitions out of these petitions raise questions on public health, ranging from the protection of citizens' health against the spread of the virus, including on treatments and protective equipment, to the management of the health crisis in the Member States and to the acquisition and distribution of vaccines.

On the contrary, 72 petitions out of the petitions on COVID-19 are more focused on the impact of national emergency measures, including lock-downs, on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights. In particular, travel and work restrictions rank high in the list of citizens' concerns. Other major issues raised by petitioners relate to transport, in particular to the management of cancelled flights and trips during the pandemic and to the compensation mechanisms.

As mentioned in the introductory remarks, at its meetings from April to July 2020, the committee discussed as a priority the following major citizens' concerns over the spread of COVID-19 and its implications: - reforming and empowering the EU to better address global challenges and expanding EU financial instruments; - the management of cancelled flights and trips by airline carriers and travel agencies during the COVID-19 outbreak; - the impact of the measures taken during the COVID-19 crisis on the Schengen system; - vaccination against COVID-19; - the difficult situation of homeless people in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic; - the protection of refugees and local residents on the Aegean islands from COVID-19; - travel restrictions imposed by certain Member States; - the impact of COVID-19 on the rights of people with intellectual disabilities.

As regards the outcome decided by the Committee, it is worth recalling that in 2020, 135 petitions on COVID-19 remained open while 74 were closed. Most importantly, as follow-up actions, the committee also adopted a *Motion for a Resolution on the Schengen system and measures taken during the COVID-19 crisis*, a *Motion for a Resolution on the rights of persons with intellectual disabilities and their families in the COVID-19 crisis* and a *Motion for a Resolution on tackling homelessness rates in the European Union*.

Finally, it is worth recalling that in the context of health, the committee adopted an important and highly awaited *Motion for a Resolution on additional funding for biomedical research on Myalgic Encephalomyelitis*, which was particularly welcomed by the scientific and patients' communities.

- *Fundamental Rights*

In 2020, the committee discussed a high number of petitions on fundamental rights, including on the impact of COVID-19 emergency measures on the rule of law and democracy as well on the freedom of movement, right to work, right to information and right to education. In this regard, the committee paid specific attention to citizens' concerns over national travel restrictions and their impact on the Schengen system. In this context, the committee adopted the above-mentioned *Motion for a Resolution on the Schengen system and measures taken during the COVID-19 crisis*. As a follow-up of the discussion of a petition denouncing the difficult situation of over 4 million homeless people in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee also adopted a *Motion for a Resolution on tackling homelessness rates in the European Union*.

In addition, the Committee paid paramount attention to children's rights. In this respect, it examined a series of petitions on parental child abduction in Japan, which claimed that Japan does not comply with its obligations under the 1980 Hague Convention and the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In this context, the committee also heard Ms Ewa Kopacz, Parliament's Coordinator on children's rights. As a follow-up action, the Committee adopted on 16 June 2020 a *Motion for a Resolution on international and domestic parental abduction of EU children in Japan*.

Moreover, on 7 September 2020, the committee adopted an *opinion on the Report on the Situation of Fundamental Rights in the European Union - Annual Report for the years 2018-2019* and on *opinion on the Report on reducing inequalities with a special focus on in-work poverty*.

Finally, on 29 October 2020, the Committee on Petitions held jointly with the Committees on Legal Affairs, on Constitutional affairs and on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs the above mentioned *public hearing on "Union citizenship: Empowerment, Inclusion, Participation"*.

- *Environmental issues*

In 2020, the committee paid paramount attention to citizens' concerns over the protection of the environment, which were debated in all committee meetings with the exception of those meetings between April and July fully devoted to the consideration of petitions on COVID-19.

The committee dealt mostly with the following issues: mining activities and their impact on the environment, nuclear safety, air pollution and the deterioration of natural ecosystems. While petitions on mining were discussed at several committee meetings in 2020, at its meeting in February, the committee examined a series of petitions on nuclear power plants in various Member States, including Germany, Bulgaria and Greece and a number of petitions

highlighting the pollution and deterioration of the ecosystem in the Mar Menor lagoon in Murcia, Spain.

Finally, Members also discussed petitions raising the issue of toxic substances and chemical residues present in the Baltic Sea, generated by dumped World War II weapons.

- *Disability issues*

The Committee on Petitions plays a specific protection role as regards compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) within the policymaking and legislative actions at EU level. Within this responsibility, the committee deals with petitions on disability issues. It is worth stressing that in 2020 the number of petitions on disability almost doubled in comparison with 2019 (20 in 2020 and 12 in 2019). In 2020, the committee continued examining petitions on disability revealing that the main challenges remain discrimination, access to education and employment as well as inclusion.

For instance, the committee heard a petition signalling the difficulties faced by people with intellectual disabilities and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in what concerns access to health services, personal assistance and contacts with families and carers. In this regard, it also adopted the above-mentioned *Motion for a Resolution on the rights of persons with intellectual disabilities and their families in the COVID-19 crisis*.

Additionally, the Committee on Petitions examined petition No 1056/2016 on a topic tightly connected to its activity, namely the tabling of petitions to the European Parliament in national sign languages used in the EU. The petition, submitted on behalf of the association European Union of the Deaf, argued that deaf sign language users should also have the right to communicate in their own sign language, on an equal basis with other petitioners who are able to submit their petitions in their preferred EU language. The petitioner referred to the provisions of the UNCRPD and the Charter of Fundamental Rights and concluded that the EU institutions should be front-runners with regard to accessibility in Europe. As a follow-up, the committee decided to foresee the implementation of the measures providing petitioners with the right to communicate in their own sign language and called on the Committee on Constitutional Affairs to assess whether a revision of Parliament's Rules of Procedure is required in order to make the implementation possible. To this aim, an inter-DG task force on sign language was set up at administrative level in October 2020.

Moreover, at its meeting of 19 February 2020, the committee heard the presentation of the European Economic and Social Committee's *Report on 'The real right of persons with disabilities to vote in European Parliament elections'* (Information report).

On 2nd December 2020, the committee also adopted an *opinion on the Report on the implementation of Council Directive 2000/78/EC establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation in light of the UNCRPD*.

Finally, on 28 October 2020, the Committee on Petitions hosted its *annual workshop on the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities - “The new Disability Strategy,”* organized by the Policy Department on Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs. The workshop hosted an exchange of views on the New 2020-2030 Disability Strategy. The event provided the occasion to examine the different aspects to be covered by the new Disability Strategy and to gather suggestions and coordinate action among the different participants.

Reports, Motions for Resolutions and Opinions

Apart from January and February meetings, the timeslots for PETI meetings were reduced first to two-hour slots and then to four two-hour meetings per month. Despite the reduced timeslots for committee meetings, the Committee on Petitions worked at an intense and accelerated pace to adopt a considerable number of parliamentary files.

In addition to its *Annual Report on the deliberations of the Committee on Petitions during 2019* (2020/2044 (INI)), the committee adopted the following Motions for Resolutions:

- Motion for a Resolution on additional funding for biomedical research on Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (2020/2580 (RSP)) (30 April 2020);
- Motion for a Resolution on international and domestic parental abduction of EU children in Japan (2020/2621 (RSP)) (16 June 2020);
- Motion for a Resolution on the rights of persons with intellectual disabilities and their families in the COVID-19 crisis (2020/2680 (RSP)) (16 June 2020);
- Motion for a Resolution on the Schengen system and measures taken during the COVID-19 crisis (2020/2801 (RSP)) (10 November 2020);
- Motion for a Resolution on tackling homelessness rates in the European Union (2020/2802(RSP)) (10 November 2020).

Finally, the committee adopted the following opinions:

- Opinion in form of a letter on the Council Decision on the conclusion of the Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community (2018/0427(NLE)) (21 January 2020);
- Opinion to the Report on Monitoring the Application of EU Law 2017 and 2018 (2019/2132(INI)) (19 February 2020);
- Opinion on Recommendations on the negotiations for a new partnership with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (2020/2023 (INI)) (30 April 2020);
- Opinion on the Report on the Situation of Fundamental Rights in the European Union

- Annual Report for the years 2018-2019 (2019/2199(INI)) (7 September 2020);
- Opinion on the Report on Reducing inequalities with a special focus on in-work poverty (2019/2188(INI)) (7 September 2020);
- Opinion on the Turkey – Annual progress report 2019 (2019/2176(INI)) (29 October 2020);
- Opinion on the Report on the implementation of Council Directive 2000/78/EC establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation in light of the UNCRPD (2020/2086(INI)) (3 December 2020).