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P8_TA(2017)0502

Deliberations of the Committee on Petitions 2016**European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2017 on the deliberations of the Committee on Petitions during the year 2016 (2017/2222(INI))**

(2018/C 369/14)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions on the outcome of the Committee on Petitions' deliberations,
 - having regard to the annual report of the European Ombudsman for the year 2016,
 - 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),
 - having regard to Article 228 of the TFEU,
 - 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, Articles 258 and 260 thereof,
 - having regard to Rules 52 and 216(7) of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Petitions (A8-0387/2017),
- A. whereas 1 569 petitions were received in 2016 — compared to 1 431 in 2015 — of which 1 110 petitions (70,8 %) were considered admissible;
- B. whereas there were 6 132 users of Parliament's Petitions Web Portal who supported one or several petitions in 2016, as compared to 902 in 2015, and whereas the number of supports per petitions and per user was 18 810 in 2016, as compared to 1 329 in 2015;
- C. whereas the number of petitions received is modest compared to the EU's total population; whereas the number indicates that a portion of EU citizens are aware, and make use, of the right to petition, and expect to draw the attention of the EU institutions to matters which they are concerned about and that fall within the scope of EU competences, through the petition procedure; whereas, however, greater efforts are needed to increase awareness of and to promote the right to petition the European Parliament;
- D. whereas the right to address a petition to the European Parliament offers EU citizens and residents the means to submit an official request directly to their representatives and this right should therefore be suitably protected and promoted; whereas this right is essential for ensuring the active participation of EU citizens and residents in the European Union's fields of activity;
- E. whereas the European Parliament has long been at the forefront of the development of the petitions process internationally and it still has the most open and transparent system in Europe, which allows, in particular, the full participation of petitioners in its activities;
- F. whereas the role of the committee in empowering European citizens is one of the essential characteristics that contributes to a reinforcement of the image and authority of Parliament in the eyes of the electorate, by allowing the institution to bring to account and better scrutinise the way in which EU law is implemented by the Member States and the other EU institutions;

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- G. whereas active participation is only possible on the basis of a democratic and transparent process of all EU institutions allowing Parliament and the Committee on Petitions to render its work citizen-friendly and meaningful;
- H. whereas those who submit and support petitions are engaged citizens, who in turn expect the EU institutions to bring added value in the resolution of their concerns; whereas failure to act adequately on the petitions is likely to result in frustration and consequently disaffection towards the Union;
- I. whereas it is noted that citizens often turn to the Committee on Petitions as a last resort when other bodies and institutions at regional and national levels are unable to resolve their concerns;
- J. whereas petitions enable Parliament to listen to and help solve problems affecting its citizens, and whereas the impact of EU legislation on the daily lives of people living in the EU should be assessed through said petitions;
- K. whereas an increase in citizens' direct participation in, and an improvement of the quality of, decision-making at EU level are possible only if they are underpinned by a democratic governance able to guarantee transparency, effective protection of fundamental rights and the inclusion of EU citizens' requests on the EU political agenda;
- L. whereas petitions are a useful source of information, among other things, with regard to detecting breaches of EU law and the shortcomings and inconsistencies of EU law in respect of the goal of ensuring that the fundamental rights of all citizens are fully protected;
- M. whereas petitions provide a vast range of important information in various areas of use to other parliamentary committees, also in relation to their legislative activities; whereas fulfilling the fundamental right to petition through an adequate treatment of petitions is a responsibility incumbent on Parliament as a whole;
- N. whereas each petition should be carefully assessed and dealt with, and whereas each petitioner has the right to receive a first reply from the Committee on Petitions that fully addresses the issues raised in full accordance with the right to good administration enshrined in Article 41 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union; whereas subsequent exchanges and replies are often needed as a result of the initial examination of petitions or the interaction with the Commission and national authorities as further follow-up to seek for solutions;
- O. whereas the criteria for the admissibility of petitions pursuant to Article 227 TFEU and Rule 215 of the Parliament's Rules of Procedure state that petitions shall satisfy the formal conditions governing admissibility, namely that a petitioner, who is a EU citizen or residing in the EU, is affected by a matter which comes within the European Union's fields of activity; whereas it is understood that these fields of activity go far beyond the mere aggregation of the EU's exclusive competences; whereas 459 petitions were declared inadmissible because they do not comply with the formal conditions;
- P. whereas, to ensure the efficient work of the Committee on Petitions, unfounded or inadmissible petitions should be closed and a justification given to the petitioner; whereas the procedure for dealing with petitions should always be based on the best interests of the petitioners;
- Q. whereas the specific interactive nature of the petition process itself and the core role citizens play therein renders each case unique and excludes a predetermined time frame; whereas such procedures require particular flexibility and public relations skills on the part of the administration;
- R. whereas a considerable number of petitions are discussed publicly in meetings of the Committee on Petitions; whereas petitioners have the right to present their petitions, and frequently fully take part in the discussion, thereby contributing actively to the work of the committee; whereas in 2016, 201 petitioners were present at the committee's deliberations, while 61 petitioners participated actively by taking the floor;

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- S. whereas the information provided by citizens in petitions and during committee meetings — complemented by expertise provided by the Commission, the Member States or other bodies — is pivotal to the work of the committee;
- T. whereas the main subjects of concern raised in petitions in 2016 pertained to the internal market (in particular the provision of services and the free movement of people), fundamental rights (especially the rights of the child and of persons with disabilities), social affairs (working conditions), environmental issues (waste management, pollution and environmental protection) and the specific issue of Brexit (loss of acquired rights and the mandate of the referendum);
- U. whereas Parliament's Petitions Web Portal website, launched at the end of 2014, is operational; whereas 1 067 petitions (68 % of those received) were submitted via the web portal in 2016, as compared to 992 in 2015; whereas technical improvements have been made, including improvements to the search function, benefiting both users and portal administrators; whereas petition summaries are uploaded shortly after adoption; whereas the confidentiality settings and privacy statements have been revised, and a set of frequently asked questions (FAQs) have been introduced; whereas petition summaries from 2015 and 2016 were uploaded with the help of a new migration tool; whereas a search engine optimisation (SEO) process has been conducted; whereas a high number of individual support requests by users has been handled successfully; whereas further stages of the project are underway, enabling features such as the automatic electronic notification of the inclusion of each petition concerned in committee agendas together with its upcoming web-streaming link and also of the subsequent uploading of related minutes and videos of the relevant debates, for the benefit of both the petitioners and the supporters concerned;
- V. whereas the European Citizen's Initiative (ECI) is an important tool for strengthening citizens' participation in the EU political decision-making process that should be exploited fully in order to increase citizens' trust in the EU institutions and contribute to the construction of a genuine and inclusive European Union; whereas the legislative proposal put forward by the Commission on 13 September 2017 to review the current Regulation (EU) No 211/2011 on the ECI (COM(2017)0482) represents the launch of a very necessary process of revision in order to render this tool more accessible to and useful for EU citizens;
- W. whereas four fact-finding visits pursuant to Rule 216a of Parliament's Rules of Procedure were planned; whereas fact-finding visits represent a core tool for the Committee on Petitions, both in terms of providing a unique opportunity to gather information from different stakeholders on complex issues, and at the same time to help give tangible visibility to the work of Parliament among citizens in different corners of Europe; whereas two fact-finding visits took place, one to Spain following the reception of several petitions from EU citizens regarding possible infringements of the Water Framework Directive, and one to Slovakia on the use of EU structural funds in long-term residential centres for persons with disabilities; whereas two other planned fact-finding visits, one to Ireland and one to Italy, were cancelled;
- X. whereas the Committee on Petitions has responsibilities for relations with regard to the office of the European Ombudsman, which is responsible for investigating complaints from EU citizens about possible maladministration within EU institutions and bodies;
- Y. whereas Emily O'Reilly, the European Ombudsman, presented her Annual Report for 2015 to the Committee on Petitions at its meeting on 20 June 2016, and whereas the annual report of the Committee of Petitions, in turn, is partly based on the Ombudsman's annual report;
- Z. 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 of 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;
- AA. whereas 147 petitions received (whereof 120 in 2016) pertain to various issues — mainly the protection of citizen's rights — raised by the referendum in the United Kingdom on withdrawal from the European Union;

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- AB. whereas the guidelines of the Committee on Petitions, adopted in January 2016 and implemented since, have brought clarity and structure to the work of the committee and to the processing of petitions;
- AC. whereas the overhaul of Parliament's Rules of Procedure (adopted in Plenary in December 2016) also entails changes to, and the clarification of, the petition procedure;
- AD. whereas a purely formalistic approach to the treatment of petitions in relation to environmental assessments jeopardises the proper implementation of EU environmental law in the Member States and the credibility of the Commission, which should carry out effective supervision to ensure that the fundamental rights of citizens are fully protected;
1. Highlights the vital role that the Committee on Petitions has to play as a contact point where EU citizens and residents can submit their complaints concerning infringements and shortcomings in the application of EU law in the Member States, and any gaps and inconsistencies in EU legislation; stresses the need to guarantee in full that the issues raised will be treated promptly, exhaustively, impartially and fairly by the institutions;
 2. Acknowledges that petitions are an important source of first-hand information, not just about violations and deficiencies in the application of EU law in the Member States, but also about potential loopholes in EU legislation as well as citizens' suggestions about new legislation that could be adopted, or possible improvements to the legislative texts in force;
 3. Recalls that petitions allow Parliament and other EU institutions to reconnect with EU citizens affected by the application of EU law at different administrative levels; considers that the ability to ensure transparency, direct citizen involvement, full protection of fundamental rights, a clear improvement in the response from the EU institutions in terms of addressing and resolving the problems brought to their attention by citizens, in addition to enhanced cooperation of EU institutions and other EU bodies with national, regional and local authorities, are a vital means of strengthening the democratic legitimacy and accountability of the Union's decision-making process;
 4. Confirms that the effective treatment of petitions challenges and, ultimately, enhances the capacity of both Commission and Parliament to react to and resolve problems related to the transposition and incorrect application of legislation; notes that the Commission considers the implementation of EU law as a priority, so that citizens can benefit from it in their everyday lives;
 5. Calls for the definition of a clear distinction between the status and rights of the petitioners and of their supporters in compliance with transparency principles;
 6. Continues to consider it a particular obligation to ensure that, where petitions are inadmissible or unfounded, no disproportionately long delay occurs before they are declared inadmissible or are closed; emphasises, in this context, the requirement that the inadmissibility or closure of petitions on account of being unfounded must be carefully justified vis-à-vis the petitioner;
 7. Acknowledges the impact of the effective application of EU law in strengthening the credibility of the EU institutions; recalls that the right to petition, enshrined in the Treaty of Lisbon, is an important element of European citizenship and a real litmus test for monitoring the application of EU law and identifying possible loopholes; calls on the Committee on Petitions to set up a regular meeting with its counterparts in the respective national contexts on important petitions in order to raise awareness of European citizens' concerns in the EU and in the Member States and to strengthen their rights further through better European law making and implementation; calls, therefore, for a strong commitment from all the authorities involved at national and European levels in handling and resolving petitions as a matter of priority;
 8. Reminds the Commission that petitions offer a unique means of referring situations where EU law is not respected and to investigate them with the help of the political scrutiny of the European Parliament; reminds the Commission that requests for assistance from the Committee on Petitions should be followed up properly, and reiterates its call on the Commission to improve the quality of its replies, including during committee meetings, in substance as well as depth, to

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ensure that the concerns of European citizens are addressed properly and in a transparent fashion; points out that the manner in which the problems highlighted in petitions are addressed has a vital impact on citizens, on whether respect for their right to petition enshrined in EU law is effective, and on their opinions of the EU institutions; insists that the Commission identify the means of enhancing cooperation with Member States' authorities when it comes to responding to inquiries regarding the implementation of, and compliance with, EU law;

9. Considers the fact that national courts have primary responsibility for ensuring the proper implementation of EU legislation in the Member States should by no means preclude a more proactive role by the Commission, in its capacity as guardian of the Treaties, when it comes to ensuring compliance with EU law, particularly in cases related to protection of the environment and public health where the precautionary principle should prevail;

10. Highlights the need for Council and Commission representatives of the highest possible rank to be present at meetings and hearings of the Committee on Petitions where the content of the issues discussed requires the involvement of the aforementioned institutions;

11. Calls on the Commission officials who are present at the meetings of the Committee on Petitions to be ready to engage in a proper dialogue with the petitioners and not limit themselves to reading the answer already established and sent out prior to the meeting;

12. Calls for inquiries to be made as to the possibility of the use of teleconferencing services; encourages the use of new audiovisual technologies to enable the petitioners to play a greater role in the work of the Committee by participating in real time in the consideration of their petition;

13. Disagrees with the Commission's recurrent interpretation of the 27th annual report on monitoring the application of European Union law (2009), on the basis of which it is allegedly entitled to close files on which no formal step towards infringement proceedings has yet been taken, or to suspend active infringement proceedings in cases in progress before a national court; recalls that in paragraph 11 of its annual resolution of 15 December 2016 ⁽¹⁾ on the activities of the Committee on Petitions, Parliament reaffirmed its disagreement with the Commission's original approach in the aforementioned report, as already expressed in its resolution of 14 September 2011 ⁽²⁾, where, particularly in paragraphs 1, 23 and 32, the Commission was requested to step up its efforts to ensure consistent implementation of EU legislation, within its capacities, and to make use of infringement mechanisms independently of the existence of judicial proceedings at national level;

14. Notes with concern, referring to the Commission's annual report of 6 July 2017 on monitoring the application of European Union law in 2016 (COM(2017)0370), the considerable increase — by 21 % — in open infringement cases compared to the previous year; calls on the Commission to follow up on Parliament's calls to share information on the state of play of ongoing infringement procedures; highlights the important role of petitions in identifying poor implementation or late transposition of European law; reminds the Commission that the Committee on Petitions is committed to respond to citizens' expectations in a timely and responsible manner, while ensuring the democratic scrutiny and proper application of EU law;

15. Asks the Commission to provide precise statistics concerning the number of petitions that led to the initiation of an EU Pilot or infringement proceedings; asks, furthermore, to receive reports on cases relating to proceedings and/or procedures under way and the documents exchanged in the course of the EU Pilot and infringement procedures once these have been closed by way of applying the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, in order to facilitate structured dialogue and reduce the timeframe for settling disputes; calls on the Commission to discuss these reports with the Committee on Petitions proactively, involving the Vice-President responsible for the application of law and simplification;

16. Urges the Commission to use its powers stemming from its role as guardian of the Treaties properly, as such a role is of the utmost importance to the functioning of the EU with regard to the citizens and the European legislators; calls for a timely handling of the infringement proceedings in order to put an end to situations where EU law is not respected without delay;

⁽¹⁾ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2016)0512.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 51 E, 22.2.2013, p. 66.

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17. Considers cooperation with other parliamentary committees essential; refers, in this regard, to the adoption of the Committee on Petitions guidelines, which spell out the principle of establishing a petitions network with the other committees; welcomes the fact that the guidelines for such a network have been adopted; draws attention to the questionnaire submitted to all committees with a view to understanding better their procedures for dealing with petitions submitted for opinion or information; notes with satisfaction that the first network meeting at staff level took place in 2016 and at Members' level twice in 2017; takes positive note of the progress made in the coordination between the Committee on Petitions and other committees and the thematic breakdown of policy areas in each committee concerned that will allow for a better follow-up on the petitions sent to other committees; calls for the reinforcement of the PETI network with the objective of streamlining petitions in ongoing legislative work; recommends that staff of the Members of the European Parliament should be offered specific guidance on the right to petition to enable them to better assist constituents interested in pursuing the process;

18. Deplores the fact that the Charter of Fundamental Rights only applies in Member States when implementing EU law; reiterates the fact that many citizens have found its implementation to be unclear and unsatisfactory; regrets that the Court of Justice of the European Union has interpreted Article 51 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in a cautious way, yet allowing for the scope of application of the Charter to be expanded to include national provisions that implement EU law, as well as those that ensure effective application of EU provisions; considers that the expectations of most of EU citizens in relation to the rights conferred by the Charter go far beyond their current scope of application; stresses that a too narrow or incoherent interpretation of Article 51 alienates citizens from the EU; urges the Commission to take steps to ensure that the interpretation of the scope of Article 51 is as coherent and wide as possible; welcomes the introduction by the Fundamental Rights Agency of an interactive tool providing easy access to information on which authority to address in each of the Member States with inquiries regarding fundamental rights;

19. Notes the anxiety of petitioners concerned about their future rights following the referendum in the United Kingdom on withdrawal from the European Union which was evident in a large number of petitions concerning the United Kingdom; recalls its resolution of 5 April 2017 ⁽¹⁾ by which Parliament underlines that the withdrawal agreement can only be concluded with its consent and its requirement for the fair treatment of EU-27 citizens living or having lived in the United Kingdom and of United Kingdom citizens living or having lived in the EU-27, and is of the opinion that their respective rights and interests must be given full priority in the negotiations; notes the unresolved concerns about voting rights and the disenfranchisement of UK citizens living elsewhere in the EU for over 15 years; recalls that the Committee on Petitions has been playing an active role in defending the rights of EU and British citizens by contributing to Parliament's resolutions of 5 April 2017 and of 3 October 2017 ⁽²⁾ on the state of play of the negotiations with the United Kingdom following its notification to withdraw from the EU as well as by commissioning a study on the impact of Brexit in relation to the right to petition and on the competences, responsibilities and activities of the Committee on Petitions and by examining the petitions dealing with Brexit and the rights of citizens in its meeting on 21 June 2017; supports the Commission's commitment to fully guarantee the rights of European citizens residing in the United Kingdom during the Brexit negotiations and following its exit from the EU, and calls on the Commission to guarantee the full acquired rights for UK citizens residing in the rest of the European Union to ensure that citizens are not used as bargaining chips or see their rights eroded as a result of the negotiations;

20. Points to the important ongoing work carried out by the Committee on Petitions in connection with petitions pertaining to issues on disabilities, and underlines the willingness of the committee to continue its support for efforts to strengthen the rights of persons with disabilities; calls for the European institutions to lead by example on this subject and to ensure that implementation measures by the national authorities comply fully and consistently with EU legislation and with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD); emphasises that a fact-finding visit to Slovakia took place on 22 and 23 September 2016 to gather information on the issue of the use of investments in institutions for persons with disabilities and recommended that the Commission look into the current situation; emphasises the need to improve the political participation of persons with disabilities, in particular in preparation for the next European elections, as well as to recognise the right to vote of all persons with disabilities in accordance with Articles 12 and 29 of the CRPD;

⁽¹⁾ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2017)0102.

⁽²⁾ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2017)0361.

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21. Reiterates the committee's work to support the ratification and swift implementation of the 2013 Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired or Otherwise Print Disabled; stresses the relevance, in this regard, of its short resolution of 3 February 2016 ⁽¹⁾ on the ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty, which called for a swift reaction from all parties concerned in order to unblock the long-standing situation with a view to facilitating ratification at EU level; notes that Parliament and the Council have reached an agreement on the Commission's legislative proposals on the implementation of the Marrakesh Treaty (COM(2016)0595 and COM(2016)0596), which have become binding ⁽²⁾;

22. Draws attention to two annual reports, the Annual Report on all the committee's activities in 2015 ⁽³⁾ and the Annual Report on the European Ombudsman's work in 2015 ⁽⁴⁾, and to several opinions by the committee, such as on cross-border recognition of adoptions ⁽⁵⁾, on EU options for improving access to medicines ⁽⁶⁾, on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with special regard to the concluding observations of the UN CRPD Committee ⁽⁷⁾, on monitoring the application of Union Law: 2014 Annual Report ⁽⁸⁾ and on the situation of fundamental rights in the European Union in 2015 ⁽⁹⁾;

23. Points to the committee's support of the European Citizens' Initiative; notes the Commission's proposal for a revision of the regulation with a view to increasing its importance as a tool for democratic participation; regrets that the Commission failed to duly take into account the recent work on a non-legislative resolution on the ECI, in particular the opinion of the Committee on Petitions, thereby also failing to fully respect the interinstitutional agreement; urges the Commission to take account of the opinion of the Committee on Petitions during the upcoming legislative procedure in order to achieve the full and effective involvement of EU citizens in the EU decision-making process through the ECI;

24. Regrets that the Commission has not exercised its powers of control in a resolute manner in order to prevent the placing on the single market of pollutant, diesel-powered cars that contribute significantly to the release of NO₂ into the atmosphere over the limit values, and that do not comply with EU rules on the type-approval and emissions of passenger and light commercial vehicles; points out that this aspect forms an integral part of the concerns of citizens, who have exercised their right to petition to call for effective protection of human health, the environment and consumer rights;

25. Stresses that transparency and public access to the documents of the EU institutions should be the rule in order to ensure the highest levels of protection of the democratic rights of citizens; takes the view that a proposal to amend Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001 in this regard should promptly be put forward;

26. Emphasises Parliament's strong collaboration with the European Ombudsman, as well as its involvement in the European Network of Ombudsmen; underlines the excellent relations within the institutional framework between the Ombudsman and the Committee on Petitions; appreciates in particular the Ombudsman's regular contributions to the work of the committee throughout the year; underlines the Ombudsman's crucial role in helping to improve decision-making processes and administration at EU level, which should, as soon as possible, be made fully transparent, impartial and fit for protecting citizens' rights effectively and efficiently; supports the current Ombudsman's work in the different fields of her competence, including her own-initiative and strategic inquiries which are of benefit not only in terms of good administration, but also in terms of the better democratic functioning of the Union; welcomes the initiatives taken by the European Ombudsman to better benefit from the network's potential and to strengthen its visibility;

⁽¹⁾ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2016)0037.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 242, 20.9.2017, p. 1 and p. 6.

⁽³⁾ Opinion adopted on 30 November 2016.

⁽⁴⁾ Opinion adopted on 11 November 2016.

⁽⁵⁾ Opinion adopted on 21 April 2016.

⁽⁶⁾ Opinion adopted on 15 November 2016.

⁽⁷⁾ Opinion adopted on 27 April 2016.

⁽⁸⁾ Opinion adopted on 22 April 2016.

⁽⁹⁾ Opinion adopted on 12 October 2016.

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27. Welcomes the Award for Good Administration launched by the office of the European Ombudsman in 2016 as a way to recognise staff members, agencies and bodies of EU institutions engaged in promoting good administration while performing their everyday duties; calls for the current Code of Good Administrative Behaviour to be upgraded into a binding regulation, including, among other aspects, concrete provisions to prevent conflicts of interest at all levels within EU institutions, agencies and bodies;

28. Stresses the wide range of subjects raised in the petitions filed, from the internal market, justice, energy and transport to fundamental rights, health, environmental law, disability and animal welfare, and on the various implications of Brexit on citizens; underlines the increase by 10 % in the number of petitions received in 2016 (1 569) and calls for the European institutions to adequately staff the services in charge of handling petitions, notably the secretariat of the Committee on Petitions;

29. Calls on the Commission to ensure that comprehensive analyses are conducted of the compliance with EU law of environmental assessments carried out by Member States, with regard to permission granted for infrastructure projects in relation to which citizens, through their petitions, have highlighted serious risks to human health and the environment; insists on the importance of these analyses and possible derived actions by the Commission being performed on a proactive ex ante basis in order to prevent irreversible environmental degradation, in line with the precautionary principle;

30. Draws attention to numerous petitions on the practices of child welfare authorities and the protection of children's rights, particularly with cross-border implications; acknowledges the work done by the committee's working group on child welfare; draws attention to the short motion for resolution on 'Protecting the best interest of the child (across borders) in Europe' adopted in March 2016; takes note of the proposal to recast the Brussels IIa Regulation on jurisdiction, the recognition and enforcement of decisions in matrimonial matters and the matters of parental responsibility, and on international child abduction, and notes that a large number of issues raised in petitions, such as those related to the procedures and practices specifically followed by the relevant authorities in the Member States in child-related decisions with cross-border implications, and the efficacy of return proceedings following international parental child abduction, need to be examined thoroughly with a view to resolving the existing difficulties;

31. Highlights the consistently high number of petitions concerning animal welfare and reiterates its regret over the delay which has built up in the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2012-2015; considers it vital to launch a new strategy at EU level to bridge all the existing gaps and ensure full and effective protection of animal welfare through a clear and comprehensive legislative framework that fully meets the requirements of Article 13 TFEU;

32. Regrets that no significant progress has been made in the case concerning the electoral rights of non-citizens in Estonia and Latvia, following petition No 0747/2016; stresses that any unnecessary delays may cause distrust in the European institutions;

33. Stresses the important role of the SOLVIT network, which provides a means for citizens and enterprises to address concerns about possible breaches of EU law by public authorities in other Member States; calls on the Commission, and on the Member States themselves, to promote SOLVIT in order to make it more helpful and visible to citizens; welcomes, in this regard, the Action Plan to reinforce the SOLVIT network published by the Commission in May 2017; calls on the Commission to ensure the swift implementation of this Action Plan and to report back to Parliament on its results;

34. Points to the improvements made to the Petitions Web Portal; underlines the need for further technical improvements to the web portal to ensure that the Committee on Petitions is fully prepared to deal with unexpected situations, such as a sudden increase in the number of petitions submitted; considers the ongoing technical development, and enhanced technical capacity, of the portal as essential for a smooth petition process; underlines the importance of the portal as an easily accessible communication gateway for citizens and petitioners, also for users of mobile devices and for persons with disabilities; looks forward to the prompt implementation of the remaining phases of the project, which will allow for an enhanced interactive experience and increased real-time information for petitioners and those supporting petitions;

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35. Calls for a more focused and active press and communications service and a more active social media presence, making the work of the committee more responsive to public concerns;

36. Instructs its President to forward this resolution and the report of the Committee on Petitions to the Council, the Commission, the European Ombudsman and the governments and parliaments of the Member States, their committees on petitions and their national ombudsmen or similar competent bodies.
