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European Year of Citizens

EU must show that Citizens matter in 2013

Next year marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of Union citizenship under the Maastricht Treaty. This should be a time to celebrate the freedoms that we are entitled to as EU citizens and that we often take for granted; freedoms such as the right to move and reside freely in another Member State, the right to vote in European and local elections in the EU country we live in and the right of individuals to petition the European Parliament.

Yet in many countries, people are often unaware of these rights and unsure of how they can benefit from them. Indeed, a 2010 survey revealed that almost half of EU citizens felt that they were not well informed of their rights, and that 57% were unaware of the term 'citizen of the European Union'. It is important to understand that the European dimension is an addition, not a replacement for whatever rights citizens have in their EU country of origin.

This week, the European Parliament voted to make 2013 the European Year of Citizens, confirming a call it made back in 2010. This special 12-month initiative will be used as a tool to better inform citizens across all 27 member states, in particular young people, of the unique rights granted to them as an EU citizen. The activities organised for the year will also focus on explaining the rights linked to moving and living in other EU countries, such as the portability of state pensions and social security rights and access to cross-border healthcare and schemes such as Erasmus, which allows young people to study abroad. It is crucial that these fundamental rights are understood, as for many citizens, this is seen as a key indicator of equality within an EU setting.

The European Year of Citizens should not concentrate only on informing citizens of their existing rights, but it should also give citizens the possibility to express their concerns and their ideas on new rights that they see necessary. The ongoing economic crisis has given many people the sense that they are on the sharp end of decisions made by grey, faceless bureaucrats who have little understanding of the realities of their lives. The new European Citizens Initiative is a tentative step in the right direction by giving people the right to propose new legislation, but an outcome of next year should be a clear Citizens Charter which would codify existing rights and be a basis for discussing what is missing - such as mutual recognition of civil partnerships or same-sex marriage, or the safeguards still needed in the event of arrest in another EU country or a code of "good" consultation.

Ultimately, the EU owes much more to its citizens than just a year. What we should really be aiming towards is a Europe where citizens are genuinely and actively involved in the decision making process, and

really feel as though their voices are heard. Article 10 (3) of the Lisbon Treaty contains a promise, giving every EU citizen “the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union”. In 2013 the European Institutions and Member States have to make it clear how they intend to put this right into practice.

Young people are already making use of the right to challenge and change EU legislation on important matters. Green MEP Jean Lambert recently lent her support to a written declaration proposed by teenagers across Europe and Plan UK which calls on European decision makers to engage directly and meaningfully with young people on climate change. Many people, not only the young, feel powerless to change anything and switch off from important global challenges. This is why we need to find new ways to engage with young people on the issues that matter to them and ensure that the European Parliament starts listening to their voices. The European Year of Citizens could help foster and encourage this active participation in our young people.

Finally, if such EU years are to continue, the Council must ensure that initiatives are properly resourced so that a wide range of diverse organisations can really participate and feel that they are being heard. With only 20 months to go before the European elections, the meagre amount of money set aside for Year of the Citizens – just €1 million - can reinforce the view that citizens don’t really matter. Member States and EU Institutions must tackle this feeling of distance by working together towards common goals- increasing people's understanding of the rights they already have so they can use them and to engage in genuine discussion about how to develop the idea of European citizenship.

- Watch Jean's plenary speech

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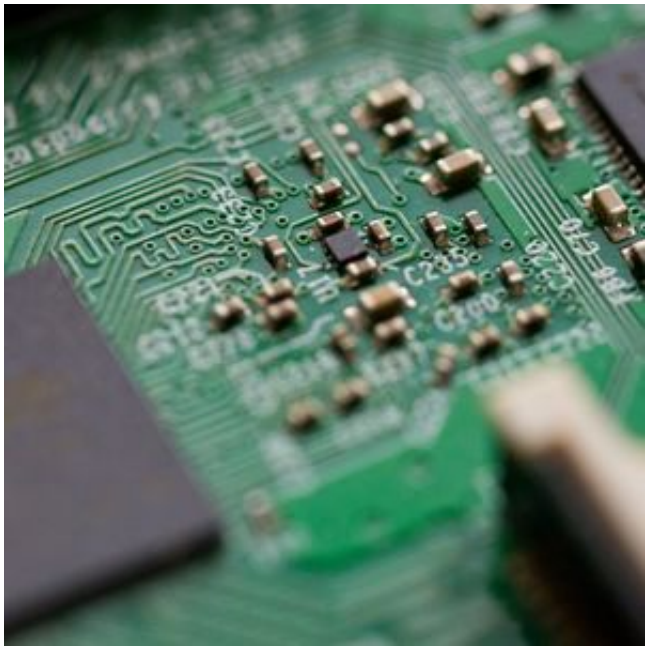


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