
Published at: 20-04-2008



Welcome to the new broadcast in the series [Now – interacting with the European Parliament.](#) Today we bring to you examples that illustrate ways in which our voice, the voice of citizens, will be more audible in Brussels . This will become possible due to the extended powers of the European Parliament under the Treaty of Lisbon. Its ratification by national parliaments is underway in EU member countries.

The year 2009 will be of particular importance to the European Parliament. On the one hand, this will be the year of the Lisbon Treaty enforcement. On the other hand in 2009 we European citizens will be electing our deputies in the new European Parliament. “Imagine that your future deputy in the European Parliament is listening to you. What would you ask him to do during the new EP mandate? This question we put to two Bulgarian citizens. Here are their answers:

“At any rate I would urge him or her to deal with consumer protection”; Tzvetan Tzvetanov says. “I believe there is a lot to do in Bulgaria in this sphere. I think that future MEPs should also work on issues concerning labor contracts and relations, as there are a few things that have to be amended. Also, somebody has to work in countering the mafia of developers with their illegal construction projects. Maybe information about their actions has not reached outside Bulgaria or has done so on only a limited scale. However, what is clear is that they threaten to inflict heavy environmental damage on our country”;

“I think that it is high time for the EU to enforce a total and universal smoking ban in all public places”; Assia Chaneva contends. “There is a lot of work ahead too in policies supporting handicapped people. This is of particular relevance to Bulgaria where so little has been done so far. Handicapped people in this country come across difficulties and obstacles everywhere – from the unfriendly urban environment to finding a job. I would demand a common European policy and legislation supporting such people.”

Can issues such as the ones that trouble Tzvetan and Assia be addressed to the European Parliament, considered and then answered? We talked to Dushana Zdravkova, Bulgarian MEP from GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) Party, who is deputy chairperson of the Committee on Petitions in the European Parliament. “Any citizen of the European Union is free to lay a petition or complaint to the Committee on Petitions on any issue within the EU sphere of activity. In many of the cases the Committee on Petitions has been addressed on issues pertaining to national legislation or to its enforcement. In that case the petitions are declared not submissible”; she explains and adds:

Very often we get petitions on environmental issues. One such petition is Petition № 0745 from 2007 on behalf of Balkani Wildlife Society about the failure of the Bulgarian state to live up to commitments under Natura 2000 environmental network. The petition was declared admissible, because it claims that there is violation of Directive 9243 for the preservation of natural habitats of the wild flora and fauna. We are currently waiting for information from the European Commission to be able to consider this issue. The European Parliament and its Committee on Petitions embody citizen control that spreads further to the work of the European Commission as well. Very often during our sittings, when we are disenchanted with the feedback from the European Commission, we demand more information or more precise information. The Committee on Petitions is assigned with studying facts from the standpoint of the institution that belongs to the citizens; with coordinating the discussion of the problem with the European Commission, and when violations are too serious and the petition is of great public relevance, like for instance the Polish petition about the bird route Via Baltica, then it may urge the European Commission to start a penal procedure. In this particular case a road has been built going across a nesting territory. Meeting the Committee on Petitions Poland's Transport Minister explained how the road had been built and why requirements had been neglected. Now we will urge the EC to initiate proceedings against the Polish state for failing to comply with its responsibility. There is a similar case in Wales – the municipal authorities have been asked why they have failed to inform citizens properly about the construction of an oil pipeline in close proximity of a residential area. There is another method of action when petitioners submit complaints. It is the so-called fact-finding mission. A working group appointed by the Committee on Petitions goes on a mission to the respective country and gets acquainted on the spot with the claims of petitioners and with the stance of state bodies and institutions. After that a detailed report is prepared and presented to the Committee on Petitions. The Committee then takes a stand on the petition. All those mechanisms seek not so much to identify culprits, but rather to exert pressure on institutions and thus make them do their job more properly.

In the context of the EU efforts to get closer to its citizens and their problems, we talked to Sir Robert Atkins, British conservative MEP and member of the Committee on Petitions at the European Parliament.

«We get quite a lot of petitions on environmental matters. I am sure you will be familiar with the Baltic States pipeline, which is being proposed – the gas pipeline coming from Russia right down the way through the Baltic Sea down to Germany. That's an environmental issue, a particularly large one. But we also get lots of smaller ones from people complaining about roads being built, or about the quality of water, quality of air, habitat directives and so on. So quite a lot of environment. We get a very large number, increasingly so, from people complaining that their accreditation in terms of academic achievements or training achievements are not recognized in other member states. So that if you get a degree at a university in Bulgaria, it isn't recognized in Greece, or it isn't recognized in the UK – those sorts of problems arise quite a lot. We get numbers of petitions relating to lobby groups who feel that the issue they are concerned about is not getting the attention of the Commission that it ought to do. Those are the largest three, but frankly, we get petitions about almost everything under the sun and we have to address them and try to persuade the Commission to deal with them. I think on balance academic qualifications and the environment are the two biggest issues».

We asked Sir Robert Atkins for some figures reflecting the efficiency of the Petitions Committee work.

“By and large, if a petition comes to us, then we do act and get a resolution, not necessarily of course a resolution that always pleases the petitioner. But we are able to close the petition for one reason or another in I would say 95%. In terms of the time scale, we are constantly dissatisfied with the time it takes to deal with these petitions. We think the Commission takes far too long. A petition takes three months from the moment it is laid to when the Committee considers it, and that’s because of the bureaucracy of processing and checking on the Commission’s responsibility, checking whether it ismissible and so on. Three months is just about the right sort of time frame. If it is not, we can push it as an emergency, but it’s three months from tabling the petitions to the Committee considering it. But from there on it can be anything from a month to years, if there are complications and delays and infringement proceedings being taken by the Commission or if it goes to the European Court of Justice, or whatever. And, of course, if it is a matter going through the judicial process in a member state, then we can’t act at all until the judicial process is complete”.

What problems are the members of the Committee on Petitions faced with most often, and how can its work improve?

«The problems we have are largely that the petition burden is growing, particularly since we now have an increased number of member states, so we are getting petitions from all over the EU. One, we do not have the resources to meet the demand, that is, in terms of people and finance – so we need to do something about that. Secondly, the respective member state government and permanent representation based here in Brussels, do not always react swiftly, or need not even react at all to some of the queries that we raise on behalf of aggrieved citizens. And thirdly, the Commission itself that has the overall responsibility to investigate the petitions that we deem admissible and that therefore require a response, aren’t always as quick as we would wish them to be. So, in summary, it is resources, both finance and people; it is a more ready understanding by member state governments of the need to respond; and thirdly, that the Commission should react more quickly».

Talking to Radio Bulgaria, the Leader of ALDE, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe in the European Parliament Graham Watson outlines a few spheres, in which the influence of the European Parliament will become stronger in the new mandate.

«At present all of the spending under the agricultural policy is dealt with purely by the heads of state and government. Under the new arrangements the European parliament will have a say at how money is spent. What that means is that we will have a far better value for the taxpayer by looking critically at how taxpayers’ money is distributed around and within the member states. I can think of many other areas as well, in particular, the new treaty gives a right to initiative to citizens. And if you have one million people signing a petition it is incumbent upon the authorities to look at that petition and take decisions».

To what extent will the European Parliament be able to live up to the expectations of its voters?

«Well, I’m afraid, the EP is like any other parliament or indeed like any other business, or any government department. We have 25% of the people, who work very hard under any circumstances; we

have 25% of the people, who do as little as they can possibly get away with; and we have the people in the middle, who – if they are given good leadership, will work hard as well. And I think all I can say that it is a great honor to lead a political group ALDE, where we have a higher percentage of the hard workers than perhaps some other groups».

What topics will gain priority among EU citizens in the new mandate of the European Parliament?
Graham Watson has consulted the latest opinion polls:

«The opinion polls tell us that people want the EP to deal essentially with three things. Two of them are what you would call the big issues of our world – they are climate change and terrorism. But the third is an issue, which I think, is directly relevant to every individual citizen, and it’s the issue of consumer protection. There is no doubt that the EU has made very, very substantial moves forward in ensuring that everything that’s on sale from food to toys to electrical equipment, is safe for the people buying it. And I pay tribute to Commissioner Kuneva, the Bulgarian Commissioner who is in charge of consumer protection, for the magnificent work that she has done in this area».

From 1 July 2008 till end-2008 France takes over the EU presidency. This is a major challenge for that country, since during its presidency the preparation will be carried out for the Treaty of Lisbon enforcement. Our reporter talked to Etienne de Poncins, French Ambassador to Sofia.

«In fact this will be the 12th French EU presidency, as we have been members since the Union emerged. This will be a key development for my country, which is working hard to function in this position in a most responsible way given that expectations from the French presidency are great. We will lay the emphasis on issues that are directly relevant to the European citizens, including immigration. This is a problem that worries our fellow citizens and in this respect France is going to make serious measures. We will also give priority attention to the environment where legislation stipulates for certain measures. They will be prepared during the French EU presidency. Other priorities will include defence and foreign policy. Last but not least, our priority will be the finalization and preparation for the implementation in practice of the Treaty of Lisbon, which is to take effect on 1 January 2009. Its ambition is to allow Europe to become more efficient, more transparent and to function better. Now we are already 27 member states with 500 million residents. So, we are quite a powerful community, because we are united and therefore we need institutions that function well and are transparent. The Treaty of Lisbon will enforce many institutional changes aimed at the better functioning of the so-called EU engine».

Despite that however European citizens tend to be rather unenthusiastic about the European Parliament. How to make them more involved and get them to vote during EP elections in 2009?

«It’s a pity that people are apathetic about the EP, because the Lisbon Treaty in particular will change the European Parliament powers. The Parliament jointly with member states will adopt European legislation enforced in Bulgaria and everywhere else across the Union. This is a functioning parliament with real power, working hard, and the decisions it makes are of paramount importance. They have a direct impact on the daily lives of our fellow citizens. Maybe these elections should become more

politicized, that is, more European-like, so that Bulgarians with their votes for example, could be satisfied with their contribution into the better functioning of the European Union. Let me explain. It would be good, if European parties take part in the election campaign. In this way people will become aware that if for instance, leftwing parties gain an upper hand, this would impact on EU policies, and respectively on their lives. EP elections are still treated from a national or regional perspective and little attention is given to universal European problems. EP elections do not impact strongly on Bulgaria's political life, however, they contribute to the improvement or change of the political balance within the European Union

This has been all for today. Next time we will highlight the new role of national parliaments in our common European home.

Dear listeners, this program is broadcast by Radio Bulgaria, RFI – Romania and Yvelines Radio, France, media partners under the project Now – Interacting with the European Parliament, carried out by the European Institute, the Center for Policy Modernization and Gateway EUROPE.

Your questions, suggestions and comments are welcome to our office, as well as at our e-mail address info@europe.bg

For more details, look up the new web portal <http://parliament.europe.bg>

***Written by Daniela Konstantinova, Maya Pelovska, Veneta Nikolova and Diana Hristakieva
Translated by Daniela Konstantinova***