



Homeless People Excluded from Citizenship, Not Allowed to Participate in European Citizens' Initiatives

2013 is the European Year of Citizens. It marks the 20th anniversary of the inclusion of Union citizenship in the Treaties of the European Union. The European Union purports to want to increase and facilitate citizens' involvement in society. However, a significant number of Europeans, among them homeless people, are excluded from accessing the benefits of their citizenship, including the newly-launched European Citizens Initiatives.

Any person holding the nationality of an EU Member State is automatically an EU citizen. EU provides all EU citizens with an additional set of rights that are guaranteed by the EU treaties. EU citizenship and citizens' rights are important for the guarantee of individuals' fundamental rights, enabling everyone to receive equal treatment and participate in democratic life in the EU.

The absence of a home can bar the access to many basic concepts of citizenship and participation in society. Because they do not have a permanent address and can thus not be recorded on their country's electoral register, the right to vote and therefore participate in civic life is denied many homeless people. As the European Commission states, "full participation of EU citizens in the democratic life of the EU at all levels is the very essence of Union citizenship," and the inability to make their voice heard excludes homeless people from full participation in citizenship.

An example of a platform to make one's voice heard, the European Commission European Citizenship Initiative, is not available to homeless people. The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), a so-called 'tool for participatory democracy' purports to allow "one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of EU countries to call directly on the European Commission to bring forward an initiative of interest to them within the framework of its powers."

The ECI website claims that "All EU citizens [...] old enough to vote in the European Parliament elections [...] can sign a citizens' initiative." Unfortunately, this is not true. Homeless people, despite being citizens of European Member States, are excluded from taking part in an ECI in 14 out of 27 countries.¹ In order to sign a petition launched under the ECI framework, signatories must have proof of a permanent address. In all countries, they need proof of identity. What is more, homeless people without a postal address or an e-mail address cannot be on the steering committee of an ECI. Only a small minority of homeless people are able to use the address of the shelter they are staying in as a permanent address. Those who sleep rough of course do not have a permanent address. Sleeping rough and even living in a shelter or other non-permanent structure makes it very difficult to hold on to belongings, including identity documents, which can be stolen. Homeless people are thus not allowed to participate in a Citizens' Initiative and are therefore not equal to their fellow citizens who can make their voice heard through this platform.

"Citizens are and must be at the heart of European integration" says the European Commission's 2013 European Citizenship report. As homeless people are excluded from talking part, this statement is not reflected in the conditions for signing a European Citizens' Initiative.

FEANTSA Director Freek Spinnewijn hopes that this situation be rectified before the end of the European Year for Citizens. The ECI has the potential to be a tool in supporting progress on tackling homelessness in Europe: for example it could be used to urge the European institutions to follow up on the European Parliament call for an EU homelessness strategy. However, this opportunity is currently unavailable as homeless people are excluded from taking part in the ECI.

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Notes for Editors:

1. FEANTSA is the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless. It is an umbrella of not-for-profit organisations which participate in or contribute to the fight against homelessness in Europe. www.feantsa.org
2. European Commission 2013 Citizenship Report http://ec.europa.eu/justice/citizen/files/2013eucitizenshipreport_en.pdf
3. See the conditions for signing an ECI here <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/how-to-signup>
4. European Parliament Resolution on an EU Homelessness Strategy <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P7-TA-2010-0499&language=EN>

¹ At the time of writing (August 2013), the list had not been updated to include Croatia.