

The EU now needs a fully-fledged #EUCitizenCommissioner



A Romanian man carries an EU flag as people protest against the amendments of the laws of justice, in front of the government headquarters in Bucharest, Romania, 24 February 2019. [Robert Ghement/EPA/EFE]

We should never forget that democracy is not just about voting: citizens also want their voices heard between elections, write Roger Casale and Verena Ringler.

Roger Casale is the Founder and General Secretary of New Europeans, Vice-President of Europe's People's Forum and Vice-President of the European Civic Forum.

Verena Ringler has had a distinguished career at the interface between the EU institutions and EU citizens. She is the founder of www.europeancommons.eu.

The President-elect of the European Commission appears to have understood that we are at a critical juncture when it comes to the need to reset the relationship between the EU and European citizens.

We should celebrate the record 51% turn-out in the European elections (for the EU of 28 member states). At the same time, we should never forget that democracy is not just about voting. Citizens also want their voices heard between elections.

For that to happen, there needs to be a game-changing development that comes from within the EU institutions themselves.

In a bold move which has caught the imagination of New Europeans and pro-European civil society platforms such as Alliance4Europe and Europe's Peoples' Forum, we call for the creation of a #EUCitizenCommissioner.

The EU needs to recognize that its relationship with citizens represents both its weakest link but also its greatest potential asset. If we are to really feel the benefit of the huge and virtually untapped resource that is European civil society we need to do things differently in Europe.

An EU Citizen Commissioner is needed to build a proper, functioning 'single market' for the non-profit sector, with the legal and financial elements in place to protect and grow the sector.

The EU needs the participation of its citizens like never before. They are the best barometer the EU has to test the strength of its policy proposals.

Decision-makers should also recognize that they need to draw much more on the "wisdom of the crowd" to frame policy than is currently the case.

And they need to do so in a way that is much more meaningful than just providing commentary on what has already been decided in Brussels.

Too often, citizen participation is couched in terms of consultation on policy responses that have already been decided on.

Instead, policymakers need to work with citizens from a much earlier stage of the process.

An #EUCitizensCommissioner would allow the EU to tap into the huge potential of European civil society.

Methodologies for doing this have been tried and tested but they are not being

used by the EU to frame policy.

Take for example the success of the Copenhagen Traffic Improvement Plan which has led to the Danish capital becoming Europe's number one city for cycle use.

This was not the result of protests, blockades and burning tires in the streets

It came about through careful planning over many years, in which citizens and civil society groups (including the Danish cyclists association) were closely involved over in the gathering of data and the formulation and testing of policy.

This kind of best practice initiative creates legitimacy, generates consent and produces better outcomes. It needs to become standard practice across many other areas of EU policy-making.

Over the summer, New Europeans will be consulting on initiatives aimed at strengthening the relationship between EU citizens and the EU institutions.

We aim to gauge support for an #EUCitizenCommissioner before reporting to MEPs from the Citizens' Rights Friendship Group of the European Parliament at the Parliament's next plenary session in Strasbourg this September.

We strongly believe that the time is now for the European Union to press the reset button in terms of how it frames the relationship with citizens.

A series of citizens' assemblies which could feed into a Future of Europe Conference as proposed by Ursula von der Leyen simply does not cut it.

The new President of the European Commission needs to go much further and embrace new models of engagement and participation which unlock the potential of citizens.

The EU needs to learn to trust its citizens. A culture change is needed. The appointment of an #EUCitizensCommissioner would be a very good start.

In the meantime, you can send your views on the proposal to New Europeans at bureau@neweuropeans.net.

Source:

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/opinion/the-eu-now-needs-a-fully-fledged-eucitizencommissioner/>

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