

Let Europeans vote

In the European Citizenship year, 13.6 million Europeans have their political rights limited by residing in another EU country.

By David Del Valle*

2013 is the year of the European citizens. It marks 20 years since the creation of European citizenship by the Maastricht Treaty that paved the way for the rights of Europeans. This was a major advance in European integration which allowed European citizens living in another EU country to vote in local and European elections. It was a milestone at the time but, today, has failed to forge a true European identity. No progress has been made since then and neither the voice nor, much less, voting citizens have influence over the decisions of the European institutions, nor in the 28 Member States of the European Union.

The current debate on the future of Europe should be open to citizens and encourage public participation if we do not want the concept of European citizenship remains a mere formal label, without any content.

Just when the European Parliament elections are around the corner next year, it is time to promote a Europe in which European citizens, regardless of where they reside, are well represented at all levels (local, regional, national, supranational) and with a leading role within a real common space without borders and with full freedom of movement.

That goes for giving European citizens the right to vote in all elections -local, regional, national, presidential (in some cases like in France) and European- in the EU country where they live. This right is connected with the principle of free movement in Europe, would encourage mobility within Europe and would represent a definitive boost to European integration. At the present time, 13.6 million Europeans – as many as the combined population in three European countries: Austria, Ireland and Luxembourg- who live in another EU country, according to Eurostat, have their political rights limited as they cannot vote in all elections in the countries where they pay their taxes and comply with all the obligations like other nationals but do not have the same rights.

Thus, for example, a Spanish residing in France could vote without losing his nationality in the French presidential election.

This would make more sense at a time when more and more people from different countries go to another country seeking new job opportunities. That is the case of Spain where in the last year the emigration to Germany has increased by 45 per cent.

In the same way, by the principle of reciprocity that is already applied in the United Kingdom and Ireland amongst them, a German or any other European

citizen could also exercise his right to vote in the national elections in Spain or in the UK.

As one European citizen residing in another EU country must respect the rules and comply with the obligations of the host country like a national why is he/she not going to have the same rights like any other national to choose with his/her vote for the national or regional representatives in the destination country? It is a contradiction to participate at the same level as nationals in the social, cultural, economic life, and pay their taxes like everyone else in the country that hosts them and that they are unable to participate in the same way in politics.

To make matters worse, in some countries like UK national citizens can get to lose even their right to vote in their own country if they have been living for 15 years in another country. The result: becoming a second-class citizen without any political rights either in his/her country of origin or in the destination country. Is this the Europe we want with first-class and second-class citizens?

The European Commission, in the words of her vice president, Viviane Reding, has acknowledged it: "European citizens living in other countries who cannot exercise their right to vote do not participate in the democratic life of the Union." Is it possible a full European integration without the active participation of citizens, without a true European identity?

To reverse this situation, the European Association without Borders has promoted the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) Let me Vote with the aim of developing the political dimension of the European project by strengthening the citizen's feeling of being a member of a community of destiny. To reduce the democratic deficit in Europe, the Initiative calls for European Union citizens residing in another Member State the right to vote in all political elections in their country of residence under the same conditions as nationals of that State.

This initiative needs a million signatures from at least one quarter of the Member States, that is to say from seven different countries, so that the European Commission can consider it and, where appropriate, take it to the European Parliament. In each state it will be necessary to collect as many signatures as the seats in the European Parliament that the country has multiplied by 750. The platform is collecting the signatures on the page <http://www.letmevote.eu>

This is a long process with different political sensitivities that will put the strength of the European Parliament to test. Article 25 of the Treaty (TFEU) provides that any such initiative must be approved unanimously by the Council and supported by Member States in national parliaments. To speed up the entire process, and in parallel to the collection of signatures, it is necessary to seek the support of the national parliamentary groups in each of the countries to

promote constitutional reforms that will enable this initiative to be adopted at a national level.

The Association of European without Borders and the different national committees of the ECI are already in talks with parliamentary groups and political parties in several countries such as France, UK, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Spain, among others to take the Initiative to their respective Parliaments to make it possible.

In France, for example, the deputy Jean-Christophe Lagarde, General Secretary of the centre-right UDI, has introduced a constitutional bill to claim the right for the European residents in France to vote in all elections including the presidential one. He has gone beyond by defending the right of eligibility for non-French EU citizens, so that they can stand for election, except in the case of the President's mandate.

Europe should not turn its back on this wave of European citizenship, especially at a time when popular and social movements across the continent are demanding more participation in the construction of the EU, a real representative and democratic EU. That was the spirit of the Lisbon Treaty when it gave the green light to European Citizens' Initiatives.

The citizens are raising their voices and, now more than ever, the EU needs to listen to their demands if the concept of European Citizenship has a real meaning. People are asking for a Europe where citizens can decide, have a say, a Europe built from below, attached to reality and away from the current prevailing model where the States, the institutions or, even worse, markets or rating agencies set the pace.

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