



Comité européen des associations d'intérêt général - European Council for Non-Profit Organisations

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Response by CEDAG to the European Commission Consultation on the Green Paper on a European Citizens' Initiative

Introduction

CEDAG, the European Council for non-profit organizations, was founded in 1989. Its members are national and regional umbrella bodies active in the areas of civil dialogue and social policy. Active citizenship is one key area of interest for the members of CEDAG and CEDAG has over the years been active in this field. Within the CEDAG membership several members are actively working in the development of structures for cooperation between civil society organizations or framework agreements between civil society and the public authorities to facilitate citizen's involvement and influence in society. Many of CEDAG's members are overarching or sector-wide umbrellas and CEDAG is mainly managed by its national members. This allows a quicker and more direct link to the national implementation of EU policy initiatives and in return concrete examples and input of the effects of EU policy on the local, regional and national level. CEDAG is neither linked to any political party or trade union, nor to any religion, nor to any public or private institution.

Responses to questions raised in the Green Paper

General comments

CEDAG welcomes the proposed Citizens' Initiative en in the Lisbon Treaty. CEDAG also welcomes this initiative from the European Commission to launch a broad consultation on the implementation of this very important initiative.

However, CEDAG would like to stress that it is important that the other elements of Article 11 in the Lisbon Treaty are treated in a similar fashion as the Citizen's Initiative. These other elements may in fact be even more relevant for citizen's organizations.

CEDAG also recognizes that, while the basis for the Citizens' Initiative are Citizens of the European Union, it is also important to highlight that there are in addition a great number of citizens of third countries who have been residing in the EU for a long time. Therefore CEDAG would like to call on the European Commission to explore options how to give these individuals equal opportunities exercise this initiative as well.

1. Minimum number of Member States

The Treaty requires that the signatories of a Citizens' Initiative come from a "significant number of Member States" in order to ensure that the initiative is sufficiently representative of a Union interest. In the Green Paper the European Commission suggest various options ranging from a majority of Member States to a quarter. CEDAG would like to highlight that it is important to avoid creating obstacles; instead the initiative would win on setting the limit at the lowest level of Member States suggested to encourage citizens to take advantage of the opportunity the Citizens' Initiative provides. CEDAG therefore support the option suggested in the Green Paper with the least number of Member States required which is one quarter.

2. Minimum number of signatures per Member States

According to the Treaty a Citizens' Initiative must be supported by at least one million signatures. As suggested in the Green Paper, CEDAG supports the option suggesting a threshold based on a proportion of the population of each Member States to treat all Member States equal despite size. CEDAG consequently support the 0.2% suggested in the Green Paper.

However, CEDAG would also like highlight to the Commission that they should look at a combination of measurements to ensure the representativeness of Union interest. Consider that a majority of smaller Member States (9 Member States which equals a quarter), initiates an initiative. For this group which represents a "significant number of Member States" it would be difficult (if not impossible) to collect 1,000,000 signatures. CEDAG would like to call on the Commission to reflect on this potential issue and explore further options.

3. Eligibility to support a Citizens' Initiative – minimum age

The Green Paper suggests that the minimum age required to support a European Citizens' Initiative should be voting age, which is 18 for all Member States except Austria where it is 16. Since it is important to follow existing national law CEDAG would like to agree with the suggested option in the Green Paper to link the Citizens' Initiative to the legal voting age for the European Parliament in each Member State.

4. Form and wording of Citizens' Initiatives

In order to make the Citizens' Initiative as inclusive as possible for all citizens, CEDAG feel it is important to make it a simple and user-friendly tool and not require a draft legal act. CEDAG therefore support the Green Paper suggestion that a Citizens' Initiative should clearly state the subject matter and objectives of the proposal on which the Commission is invited to act. Any other pertinent information should be able to be attached to the initiative as annexes.

5. Requirements for the collection, verification and authentication of signatures

As previously stated CEDAG's view is that the format for the Citizens' initiative should be a simple and user-friendly tool and strive towards avoiding a complex and heavy administrative system for the Member States and the European Commission. CEDAG feels that there should be a common system for all Member States to ensure equal opportunities for citizens to participate.

Consequently CEDAG would like to suggest using an online system where the initiatives are posted. On this web site citizens can sign the initiative they chose to support using their unique user name and personal pass word. This "Citizens' Initiative Web Site" would be hosted and managed by the European Commission. However, since all citizens do not have access to Internet, alternative methods for signing electronically need to be developed in parallel. One option could be Member States facilitating the opportunity to sign the initiatives online at the European Commission offices in the Member States or at similar meeting points in the government offices or at the Europe Direct offices. These electronic signing tools would in addition need to be complemented with other non-electronic options, be it lists collected and entered digitally.

Answering to the European Commission' specific questions in the Green Paper; CEDAG supports the common set of procedural requirements for the collection, verification and authentication of signatures preferable online complemented with alternative methods. However CEDAG does not support Member States setting up specific provisions since there needs to be equal procedures in all Member States. In addition CEDAG supports that EU citizen's should be able to participate regardless of their country of residence but ensuring they only support the initiative once.

6. Time limit for the collecting of signatures

Developing an initiative and collecting one million signatures across Member States is clearly a cumbersome process and will probably be structured in various ways. In addition, the topics may vary from more current or popular topics where citizens may react quickly to a recent event to long and more complex topics or processes where part of the process is to build awareness, inform and engage citizens. Therefore CEDAG feel setting a time limit would limit the full effect of the Citizens' Initiative or if a time period is needed it must be for several years.

7. Registration of a proposed initiative

As CEDAG previously suggested under Question 5, CEDAG supports the development of a specifically dedicated web site provided by the European Commission. As previously stated, CEDAG would recommend that the initiatives are posted on this specifically dedicated web site hosted and managed by the European Commission. We like to stress that this is valid weather there is a time limit set or not. The web site would offer opportunity to access current initiatives, to track the progress of individual initiatives, to sign the initiative online, to read background documents, to access links and get information on who is behind the initiative. Weather is should be mandatory or not is a different point. CEDAG would rather like to suggest that is recommended by the European Commission to post the initiative on the web site since it would be easier to manage.

8. Requirements for organisers – Transparency and funding

CEDAG supports the need for transparency and democratic accountability. Therefore CEDAG support that the initiators of an initiative state details of the organisation or individuals behinds the initiative, details of who is financially supporting the initiative with amounts, any links or support from political parties, business actors or other key actors.

9. Examination of Citizens' Initiatives by the Commission

This is a crucial step of the process of the Citizen's Initiative, what happens after the one million signatures have been collected? This step needs to include the European Commission's examination and feedback on the initiative but also how the European Commission will act on the initiative, how the European Parliament and other stakeholders will be approached and involved, how the initiative will be developed further and other consequent process steps. As stated in the Green Paper it would be in line with good administrative practice that the European Commission responds in a timely manner. As a result CEDAG would like to suggest that from the time one million signatures are collected the European Commission starts examine the initiative and prepare a reply including the steps mentioned above. CEDAG feels that a reasonable time frame for this reply would be 6 months.

10. Initiatives on the same issue

CEDAG feels that the European Commission should not be selecting, combining or excluding initiatives. Instead the European Commission could facilitate and suggest coalition building where there are similar initiatives.

CEDAG would also like to note that initiatives may appear to be similar but that they probably aren't identical. They may, after careful investigation, reflect different views, approaches or perspectives on the same topic. If the web site works properly there may be an opportunity for the initiators of the initiatives to contact each other and build coalitions to launch a joint initiative thereby combining an initiative on the same issue.