

EU COORDINATION COMMITTEE

Brussels, 29th January 2010

CONSULTATION: GREEN PAPER ON A EUROPEAN CITIZEN'S INITIATIVE

***COOPERATIVES EUROPE** – the European region of the International Co-operative Alliance – is the biggest membership organization in Europe promoting the co-operative model of enterprise for sustainable economic progress with social objectives. It represents a force for economic growth and social change of 163 million member co-operators owning 250.000 co-operative enterprises and giving jobs to 5,4 million European citizens.*

INTRODUCTION

COOPERATIVES EUROPE welcomes the European Commission's Green Paper on a European Citizen's Initiative. Opening a consultation procedure on the implementation of the article 11(4) of the Lisbon Treaty rather than immediately publishing a draft regulation represents a clear signal for all interested civil society stakeholders and citizens to be involved in drawing up the rules and the procedures for that initiative.

COOPERATIVES EUROPE, with its 163 million member co-operators is recognised as official partner in the CSO Liaison Group within the EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE and considers itself a key actor in civil dialogue. COOPERATIVES EUROPE is convinced that the application of article 11(4) is crucial to make citizens the real protagonists of Europe. However, the same attention should be given to the other paragraphs of the same article, which focus on the dialogue with civil society.

The EUROPEAN COMMISSION allows citizens to bring forward new policy initiatives. From COOPERATIVES EUROPE's point of view, citizens should be enabled to intervene not only in case of legislative vacuum, but also to react to COMMISSION's positions on determined issues.

COMMENTS

1. Minimum number of Member States from which citizens must come

COOPERATIVES EUROPE agrees with the what the EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT states in its resolution of 7 May 2009: the threshold should be fixed at one quarter of Member States. A higher limit would risk to discourage citizens from launching own initiatives.

2. Minimum number of signatures per Member State

COOPERATIVES EUROPE considers that fixing a rigid figure of 0.2% per Member State could be perceived as unreachable by citizens. A lower limit of 0.08% could be required, which would avoid discouraging citizens from starting an initiative without renouncing to the European flavour that the initiative must have: as a matter of fact the thresholds of 1 million signatures in one quarter of Member States would still be valid.

Such a flexible system is also justified by the fact that European citizens' initiatives does not result in binding decisions and does not trigger any binding referendum; they are able only to put an item on the agenda of the EUROPEAN COMMISSION.

3. Eligibility to support a citizens' initiative – minimum age

COOPERATIVES EUROPE agrees with the EU COMMISSION's proposal that in order to be eligible to support a European citizens' initiative, citizens must be of voting age for the European elections in their Member State of residence.

4. Form and wording of a citizens' initiative

COOPERATIVES EUROPE thinks that requiring that an initiative clearly states the subject-matter and objectives of the proposal on which the COMMISSION is invited to act would be sufficient and appropriate.

In the framework of the petition that COOPERATIVES EUROPE put in place, it clearly emerged that a complex or too technical text increases the distance perceived by citizens towards the initiative and towards the institutions.

Furthermore, requiring a draft legal act would automatically exclude smaller organisations from starting European citizens' initiatives: drafting a legal act requires competences and expertise on which only large and structure organisation can count.

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

COOPERATIVES EUROPE supports the COMMISSION's proposal to set a number of basic provisions at EU level including on the one hand certain minimum requirements for verification and authentication of signatures and on the other hand obligations for Members States to facilitate the collection process and remove unduly restrictive requirements upon citizens or unnecessary administrative burdens. This would avoid the feeling for citizens that their rights depend on the country in which they live.

Similarly, COOPERATIVES EUROPE encourages the possibility for EU citizens to support a citizens' initiative regardless of their country of residence. Online tools able to verify and authenticate signatures whilst protecting the citizens' personal data are an excellent option.

6. Time limit for the collection of signatures

In line with the EU COMMISSION's position, COOPERATIVES EUROPE thinks that one year is a justified limit for the collection of signatures; while a shorter period of time would make it difficult to carry out an initiative at European level, with a higher limit initiatives would run the risk to become obsolete or to lose their relevance.

7. Registration of proposed initiatives

COOPERATIVES EUROPE considers that a mandatory system of registration of proposed initiatives is essential both to set the time limits and to provide transparency to the initiatives. The registration should be carried out online through a website provided by the COMMISSION.

COOPERATIVES EUROPE agrees with the COMMISSION that it is up to initiators to check in advance that their initiatives are lawful and admissible. Nevertheless, COOPERATIVES EUROPE is convinced that the organisers of citizens' initiatives should have access to a helpdesk providing advice not only on procedural questions but also on substantive issues.

8. Requirements for organisers – Transparency and funding

In the registration stage, initiators of citizens' initiatives should provide full transparency on their support and funding. However, the COMMISSION has to guarantee that sensitive financial data are kept confidential.

9. Examination of citizens' initiatives by the Commission

COOPERATIVES EUROPE is strongly convinced that a time limit should be fixed for a COMMISSION'S reaction to any successfully completed European citizens' initiative; 6 months is considered a reasonable time limit to give the initiative adequate consideration.

However, COOPERATIVES EUROPE, in line with the position of the EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, thinks that within two months after the presentation of the citizens' initiative to the COMMISSION, the latter must give a justified declaration whether the presentation has been successful or not. In the following month, the COMMISSION should invite the initiative's organisers to a hearing and give them the opportunity to explain in detail the matters raised in the initiative. Finally the COMMISSION has three months to examine the initiative, and to set out its conclusions in a communication which would be made publicly available and notified to the EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT and the COUNCIL.

10. Initiatives on the same issue

COOPERATIVES EUROPE strongly disagrees with the introduction of rules to prevent the successive presentation of citizens' initiatives on the same issue: the free expression of citizens must prevail and the COMMISSION cannot be entitled to discard a topic gathering at least one million European citizens, even more if such a topic have been able to raise more than one citizens' initiative.

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