

ESU – European Students' Union

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Reaction of the European Students' Union to the Green Paper a European Citizens' Initiative

The European Students' Union (ESU), the umbrella organization of 45 national unions of students from 37 countries in Europe, strongly supports the European citizens' initiative introduced by the Lisbon Treaty. ESU believes this will strengthen the democratic foundations of the European Union as well as strengthen the European dimension in policies.

The European Commission has asked for comments on their work on making the citizens' initiative a reality and we at ESU are very pleased to get the chance to do so. Here the questions put forward in the Green Paper on a Citizens' Initiative are answered one at a time:

1. Do you consider that one third of the total number of Member States would constitute a "significant number of Member States" as required by the Treaty? If not, what threshold would you consider appropriate, and why?

In ESU's opinion the wording "significant number of member states" does not mean that the bar has to be set as high as a third of the states. We feel that a quarter, as suggested by the European Parliament, is sufficient.

2. Do you consider that 0.2% of the total population of each Member State is an appropriate threshold? If not, do you have other proposals in this regard in order to achieve the aim of ensuring that a citizens' initiative is genuinely representative of a Union interest?

While 0.2% is in the smallest states, a very small number of people, the demand of a million signatures all-in-all in a significant number of member states ensures that the participation of citizens from larger states will always be needed. In that light ESU feels the 0.2% mark should be considered sufficient.

3. Should the minimum age required to support a European citizens' initiative be linked to the voting age for the European Parliament elections in each Member State? If not, what other option would you consider appropriate, and why?

Yes, the minimum age to support a citizens' initiative should be the same as for European Parliament elections.

4. Would it be sufficient and appropriate to require that an initiative clearly state the subjectmatter and objectives of the proposal on which the Commission is invited to act? What other requirements, if any, should be set out as to the form and wording of a citizens' initiative?

In the interests of openness, ESU feels that the requirements for the text of the initiative should be as low as possible. If demands are made for something, like draft legal documents are needed, it may severely restrict the citizens in putting forward initiatives. Therefore ESU agrees that stating the subject matter and objectives of the proposal should be considered sufficient. The European Commission should also issue guidelines on how to best create an citizens' initiative so

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that it can be the most effective and likely to have the desired effects once signatures have been collected.

5. Do you think that there should be a common set of procedural requirements for the collection, verification and authentication of signatures by Member States' authorities at EU level? To what extent should Member States be able to put in place specific provisions at national level? Are specific procedures needed in order to ensure that EU citizens can support a citizens' initiative regardless of their country of residence? Should citizens be able to support a citizens' initiative online? If so, what security and authentication features should be foreseen?

Procedural equality can only enhance the objectiveness of the Citizens' Initiative. However enough attention to the specific cultural or geographical aspects of a country has to be guaranteed. A general procedural equality with some discretionary powers for the national level is a feasible option for ESU.

There should indeed be a procedure that allows EU citizens to exchange and support various initiatives among each other. This again will contribute to the active debate and coherence of the European citizens.

An online application would be one of the means that ease the access to support and exchange initiatives. Having authentication features is merely a technical aspect, but the European Students' Union thinks some flexibility towards authentication is needed to enhance the citizens' contribution to different initiatives.

6. Should a time limit for the collection of signatures be fixed? If so, would you consider that one year would be an appropriate time-limit?

ESU agrees that a year is an acceptable time-limit.

7. Do you think that a mandatory system of registration of proposed initiatives is necessary? If so, do you agree that this could be done through a specific website provided by the European Commission?

Mandatory registration of citizens' initiatives is necessary if there are to be time limits on signature collection. One way good option for such registration is through a central website run by the European Commission. However, in the interest of openness, it would also be necessary to allow for other means of registration, for example via post or through government agencies at national levels.

8. What specific requirements should be imposed upon the organisers of an initiative in order to ensure transparency and democratic accountability? Do you agree that organisers should be required to provide information on the support and funding that they have received for an initiative?

In ESUs opinion it is very important that there are no limits on which individuals or groups can put forward initiatives. Citizens' initiatives can be seen as an opportunity for the still fledgeling pan-European civil society to take a more active part in shaping the future of the continent. This must be encouraged by all means possible.

Having stringent rules on information about funding could deter some groups from putting forward new initiatives simply because of the added bureaucracy. Despite this, ESU feels that there must be some regulations in place about the disclosure of funding related to campaigns run in order to get initiatives signed. It mustnot be possible for those who campaign for an initiative to hide any agenda or conflict of interests possibly involved.

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9. Should a time limit be foreseen for the Commission to examine a citizens' initiative?

For the sake of transparency the European Commission should be required to react in some way shortly after an initiative has been submitted with the appropriate number of signatures. In addition ESU feels that the European Parliament committees should also be able to officially comment on the initiatives that relate to their policy area. ESU believes two months should be sufficient. This would not mean that the Commission would need to take action in such a short time, but rather that it should put forward a statement about how it intends to move forward with the initiative. To ensure that action is eventually taken ESU supports an additional timelimit, of one year, for the Commission to take action. ESU also feels that there should be a special procedure if issues are considered urgent with a shorter time limit for taking action. This time limit could be 2 months, like the reaction time for other initiatives.

10. Is it appropriate to introduce rules to prevent the successive presentation of citizens' initiatives on the same issue? If so, would this best be done by introducing some sort of disincentives - or time limits?

Such rules would not only be unnecessary but go against the aims of the citizens' initiative itself. If there is will to launch a similar initiative after it has failed for the first time there should be nothing to prohibit that. Prohibiting that would be to the detriment of the openness of the procedure.

The overall opinion of ESU is that possibilities for putting forward citizens' initiatives should be as open as possible. All individuals and organizations should be able to put forward citizens' initiatives and collect signatures with a minimum of bureaucratic hassle. This is necessary to ensure true openness in the procedures Furthermore rules on how to register initiatives and how signatures are to be collected should be transparent and simple and be formulated in such a way as not to discourage anybody from going forward with an initiative.

ESU hopes that this new possibility will be used actively. We feel that the European Commission should put their full weight behind this and encourage the submission of initiatives by starting an awareness raising campaign on the possibility of putting forward initiatives. ESU hopes this will be to further mobilize European students and help make them active citizens and participants in democratic processes. For this reason, ESU feels that an awareness raising campaign on the citizens' initiative should be particularly aimed at the younger generations which are often largely left out of politics and are more likely than most groups to benefit from this new option.