



European Youth Forum
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Contribution to the Consultation on the Green Paper on a European Citizens' Initiative

With the present contribution, the European Youth Forum would like to express its views on the development of concrete elements and procedures related to this newly established process. As the main European platform bringing together 99 National Youth Councils and International Youth Organisations from across Europe, and working to empower young people to participate actively in society to improve their own lives, the European Youth Forum sees the added value of the instrument of a citizens' initiative in strengthening the participation and overcoming the democratic deficit within the EU. However, in the process of developing the practical use of this tool, it needs to be ensured that its procedures and rules are transparent, accessible and user-friendly. In the opposite case, the European Youth Forum sees the danger of rendering the citizens' initiative impractical to use and of diminishing its value, which would be regrettable and would not contribute to the empowerment of citizens of the European Union to become more closely involved in EU affairs.

Below you will find the replies to questions posed in the Green Paper.

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

As the European Commission rightly points out in the Green Paper, a balance between representativity and accessibility of the procedure, must be struck. In view of other Treaty provisions which set the minimum threshold at one third of Member States, the European Youth Forum nevertheless believes that in the spirit of avoiding excessive restrictions on the Citizens' Initiatives seven Member States would be an appropriate threshold for a citizens' initiative to be deemed valid.

2. Minimum number of signatures per Member State

The threshold of the minimal number of signatures per Member State should be set in proportion of that country's population relative to the total population of the EU, and the proposed 0,2 % of citizens seems to correspond to the need to ensure fair apportionment.

However, provisions need to be put in place to determine until when the 0,2 % limit would be valid, i.e. at which size of EU population, taking into account future enlargements, this threshold would change, in order to avoid doubts and misunderstandings.

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

The minimum age for a citizen to be eligible to support a citizens' initiative should, in the view of the European Youth Forum, be set at the age of 16.

As the Green Paper rightly points out, setting the voting age at 18 would exclude Austrian voters between 16 and 18 years of age from participating in an important element of EU democracy. On the other hand, if national legislation would determine the age eligibility, the question would arise, whether Austrian citizens between 16 and 18 years of age would lose their right to participate in a citizens' initiative, in case they would reside in a Member State where voting age begins at 18, and would want to support it there.

In general, when it comes to political participation, the European Youth Forum believes that lowering the threshold to 16 years of age for participation in the citizens' initiative, would give a strong sign that the EU cares about the political culture of its citizens.¹ Allowing citizens with 16 to take part in citizens' initiatives would not only increase participation in democratic life, it would also contribute to better understanding of EU affairs among young people, it would give young people a sense of co-responsibility for the development of the European society, and, last but not least, it would contribute to maintaining a demographic balance between young people and adults, which is increasingly skewed in favour of older generations.

As to the additional administrative burden that is feared to arise, should the eligibility age be set at 16, the European Youth Forum believes this should not represent an obstacle. All citizens of a Member State are registered in the national databases, and even in countries with the voting age beginning at 18 years it should not be necessary that voters' lists would be the lists used when verifying the validity of signatures. Moreover, in any case, security measures should be put in place whereby every signatory's identity, including their age-related eligibility to sign an initiative, could be determined.

¹ Such means of increasing the awareness on EU issues among youth would complement the educational aspect contained in Article 165(2) of the Lisbon Treaty.

4. Form and wording of a citizens' initiative

A citizens' initiative should be clear and concise in wording, stating the subject matter, objectives, the added value of EU action in the area, and main beneficiaries, in case the proposal would target a specific group of the society.

It should be possible to add annexes detailing the nature of the proposal, but this should not be a requirement.

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

Collection, verification and authentication should remain at the national level. Those Member States that already have such procedures in place, should keep the same approach for the citizens' initiative, ensuring that some unified basic security measures are set, while not over-complicating the procedure. The Member States would be held responsible for the authenticity of the collected signatures.

It would be of added value if an analysis of the existing procedures would be made by the European Commission or an independent body before the citizens' initiative begins to function, in order to establish the minimal common criteria, which those Member States without such procedures in place, would need to include. At the same time, a booklet of good practices could be produced, as a measure to invite Member States to gradually harmonise at least the basic elements of collection, verification and authentication.

For EU citizens residing in a Member State other than their country of citizenship, there should be a possibility to sign an initiative in their country of residence, similarly as they have the right to vote in the elections to the European Parliament. However, possibilities for signing the initiative in their country of citizenship or residence, or at an embassy, should also be put in place: an obligatory physical presence in the country of citizenship in order to sign an initiative would represent a disproportionately high obstacle. Consequently, measures ensuring that everyone can only sign an initiative once, should be guaranteed.

In order to ensure that the process of gathering signatures is as smooth and simple as possible, avoiding excessive difficulties on the side of the citizens, the possibility to submit signatures online should be ensured in all Member States of the EU; it would likely also ease the process of verification of signatures for the authorities. Although traditional forms of collecting signatures are well established in the majority of Member States, the procedure needs to be updated in line with the fast developments of an increasingly e-society and with the aim of bringing EU affairs closer to more people. Especially for youth, who are the most advanced users of online tools, such a channel would doubtless boost their participation and consequently contribute to their awareness about European affairs.

A citizen's signature should be checked in the Member State in which it was made, and in this sense it would also fall in the quota of that Member State.

6. Time limit for the collection of signatures

The European Youth Forum believes that a time limit should be set for the collection of signatures to ensure that an initiative does not lose its momentum and that the validity of the proposal is kept.

The time range of one year seems to be an appropriate one.

7. Registration of proposed initiatives

The proposed initiatives should be registered at one designated website prepared by the European Commission. The registration on the website would serve, however, to ensure transparency and overview of the different proposals. As of the date of publication on the website, the one-year time limit would begin to run.

Another question to be addressed at this point is whether the European Commission would ensure the translation of the initiatives into all official languages of the EU, when putting them on the website, or whether this would be the task of the initiator.

8. Requirements for organisers - Transparency and funding

The organisers should be required to provide information on their organisation's basic elements (aims of the organisation, membership, structures) and funding for the initiative.

9. Examination of citizens' initiatives by the Commission

Whilst understanding that examining an initiative can take a considerable amount of time, the European Commission should nevertheless be given fixed time limits to respond. However, when accepting an initiative, the European Commission should be obliged to establish and publish a timeline by which it foresees to finish examining the initiative. This timeline should be prepared within 21 days after accepting an initiative, and published on the website, and should not be unreasonably long. Six months seems to be a reasonable period.

10. Initiatives on the same issue

To ensure that initiatives on the same issue are not launched repetitively, it might be good to introduce some disincentives. However, prohibiting an initiative on the basis of it being largely the same as a previous one, would require that an independent body evaluate and argument such a decision. In the view of the European Youth Forum this body should not be the European Commission itself.

For initiatives with the exact same content matter, a certain time limit could be set, before it could be launched again, but the time limit should not exceed one year.

Need for consultation on how to organise the dialogue with civil society organisations, as provided by article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty

In addition to the concrete responses above, the European Youth Forum calls on the European Commission to launch a public consultation on how to implement the first part of the Lisbon Treaty article 11 on civil dialogue. This process would also be used to assess existing mechanisms of consultation with the aim of ensuring that both parts of the article are properly implemented.

The European Youth Forum would like to stress that the right to petition is not the only new instrument related to participatory democracy that the Treaty of Lisbon introduces into EU decision making processes. The first part of article 11 (which regards civil dialogue) requires *all* EU institutions to implement new mechanisms of *dialogue* with civil society (as opposed to consultations, run by the European Commission as it is the case now). Given that the European Commission has not revised its procedures to dialogue with citizens for almost a decade, we believe it is time for the European Commission to discuss with civil society organisations how this new mechanisms of dialogue should take place in the future between EU institutions and organised civil society.