

Contribution to
Green Paper on a European Citizens' Initiative (COM(2009) 622 final)
Johanna Lütterfelds, Vienna, Austria, January 2010

Introduction

My name is Johanna Lütterfelds, I am currently based in Vienna and working for the Competence Centre Citizenship of the Viennese Adult Education Centres (Die Wiener Volkshochschulen GmbH). In this position we are trying to promote the concept of Active Citizenship within the Viennese Adult Education Centres. We try to achieve this through special training of our trainers and co-workers, specific information, awareness raising measures, and so on. Therefore I very much welcome the fact that finally there will be an instrument for European citizens to actively take part in how the European Union is being shaped. I am writing this statement as an individual person and not as spokesperson for the Viennese Adult Education Centres.

I believe that one of the biggest problems of the European Union at this point is that still a major part of its population is lacking a comprehensive understanding of what the European Union is doing for them. There is still no real emotional connection, no European identity – but without a clear identification of the population there cannot be a sustainable European Union. “Brussels” is still being seen as something abstract that has - in its bureaucratic character - somehow completely lost touch with the day to day reality experienced by every citizen. People fear that local problems and concerns are being overruled by a European Union regulation and that bigger nation states as well as single European politicians have taken over control.

So often – if asked – people utter a feeling of being lost within the European Union, because their vote is, in their perception, too weak in order to actually achieve something on a supranational level. Apart from this the often quoted democratic deficit of the European Union needs to finally be addressed.

Therefore, in order to re-empower European citizens, it has been urgent to enact an instrument every single individual can easily use to achieve something on a European level. For people to fully grasp that they are the sovereign of this political conglomerate it is of extreme importance to promote direct democratic tools and therefore acknowledge the fact that the citizens of the European Union in fact are the sovereign and not a detached bureaucratic class in far-away Brussels. This tool needs to fulfil the following requirements: it needs to be easily understood by everyone, barrier free, transparent, open to everyone and welcoming every single individual and concern.

Response

Based on these deliberations I would answer the questions asked by the Green Paper as follows:

Ad 1.

The Austrian Parliament decided today, the 29th of January, that six Member states is a sufficient number and I am in agreement with this decision. This would on the one hand be a good number in relation to citizens' consultations not having long traditions in some

countries, but on the other hand it would prevent consultations being captured by local initiatives that would concern only a very small number of member states.

A goal-oriented addition to the Europe-wide consultations could be the alternative model of a “smaller” consultation, restricted to a special geographic area, for example, when the concern of an initiative is solely focused on this special area. This would ensure that such initiatives would also get the chance to be put in front of the affected population.

Ad 2:

0,2% seem a reasonable percentage based on the fact that citizens’ consultations are a relatively new possibility for many people within the European Union. It also is an incentive for every individual to get involved because the well known argument of “my vote doesn’t count” is being overruled by this very low threshold.

Ad 3:

I believe that a common regulation concerning the minimum age required is not the best solution. Based on the fact that especially younger people have a problem with grasping the sense of the European Union and an even more rising disenchantment with politics among younger people I think it would be a clear signal in their direction to set the voting age at 16.

Ad 4:

In my point of view it is sufficient for an initiative to solely state the subject-matter and objectives of the proposal. This makes it more transparent, easy to handle and inclusive.

Ad 5:

As long as not a single individual is hindered from taking part in a consultation there is no reason to prohibit specific provisions at national level. If nation states and their populations are able to resort to traditional procedures, I think that the thresholds to actually taking part should be reduced.

The possibility of an online vote is the right step especially when you think about barrier-free access for everyone, but it can only be an additional variant and not the exclusive way to vote. Just as with e-governance there of course are some technical issues that need to be sorted out, but there are ways to ensure that security of the vote and authentication features are being guaranteed. If at this point the Commission feels that it does not have the competence to guarantee this it would be wiser to leave online voting to the future but it will have to face this problem very soon.

Ad 6:

A time limit of one year seems to be appropriate. This would ensure e.g. that non- and semi-professional actors and initiatives would have enough time to mobilize the population.

Ad 7:

The best way for transparency and a barrier-free access of citizens' consultations is to make it mandatory to register proposed initiatives on a public website. This website could also be a wonderful framework for e.g. public discussions, forums, politicians to take stands, etc.

Ad 8:

The provision of information on support and funding should be mandatory and publicly accessible. This would make transparent where such an initiative would come from ideologically, e.g. whether it is the move of a specific lobby or economic sector, etc. This information could be vital for citizens in order to make a well-informed decision concerning the initiative in question.

Ad 9:

A time limit of six months seems to be appropriate. If the Commission can plausibly argue that it needs more time (e.g. to conduct a thorough analysis) to come to a decision there might be exceptions, which in turn need to be clearly restricted to a maximum of one year.

Ad 10:

A time limit of one year would be a good way to prevent that initiatives would be used to hinder the Commission's work. On the other hand one year is not too long for a failed initiative to make a second attempt.

Conclusion

Let me again state how very glad I am that finally the European Union is providing institutionalized possibilities to assure that every single European citizen can actively take part in the society he or she lives in. I am very positive that this is not just a further step in the direction of European integration but also a wonderful move in the direction of the foundation of a European citizenship.