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Stakeholder Hearing on the European Citizens' Initiative



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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Dear Mr López Garrido,
Dear Mr Häfner
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very glad that so many of you have been able to come to this hearing today.

I am also pleased that this event is being broadcast live over the internet and that, therefore, many people who could not be here today are, nevertheless, able to watch. This is very symbolic of the approach of the Citizens Initiative – an initiative that is all about taking the EU outside the "Brussels beltway", and giving it full democratic expression.

The broad public consultation that was launched by the Commission's Green Paper at the beginning of November was an invaluable contribution for me and for the Commission as a whole and I would like to thank you all for your invaluable contributions to the debate.

Let me start with a few words about the context of this debate.

The Treaty of Lisbon, which as you know entered into force on 1st December last year, adds a whole new dimension of participatory democracy to the European Union next to that of representative democracy, on which the Union is founded.

It recognizes the right for every citizen to participate in the democratic life of the Union.

And, for the first time, it gives them an innovative way to be able to exercise that right: The European Citizens' Initiative, which will be the first formal European "bottom-up" processor in the history of the EU.

With this new right, one million citizens from a range of countries will be able to come together and call directly on the Commission to take action on an issue that is important to them.

This means that the European Citizens' Initiative will give citizens a right, which mirrors that of the European Parliament and of the Council in asking the Commission to make proposals.

It will oblige the Commission, as a college, to give serious consideration to the demands made by one million citizens.

I, therefore, strongly believe that this new instrument will not only foster greater cross-border public debate about EU policy issues, by bringing citizens from a range of countries together in defending one specific issue.

It will also lead to an open and frank debate between citizens and the European Commission and I very much look forward to that.

Let me now come to the issue at stake.

Results of the consultation and issues for discussion

The public consultation has generated 323 responses to the Green Paper from a range of contributors: 159 individual citizens, 133 organisations and 31 public authorities.

This is an excellent result and shows that there is considerable interest across Europe for this new right.

I have also been very glad to see the interesting ideas and suggestions put forward by citizens and organizations alike as to how to make the Citizens' Initiative operational.

One of the key messages that comes across from the contributions is that citizens want this tool to be user friendly. They want it to be simple, straightforward, understandable and most of all accessible!

I could not agree more. This instrument needs to be used. We need to make it as easy as possible to use in order to foster a European public space, widen the sphere of public debate across Europe and bring the EU closer to the concerns of the citizens.

To ensure that the instrument is credible and that is not abused, we of course need to provide some verification requirements and most respondents understand and acknowledge that.

Coming now to the specific issues.

The key features of the Citizens' Initiative are enshrined in the new Treaty. The Treaty requires that a citizens' initiative should:

- have at least 1 million signatories, from a significant number of EU countries
- concern a policy area where the Commission has powers to act.
- and an issue for which people think an EU law is needed to implement the EU Treaties.

The purpose of the consultation and of this meeting is to discuss how to make these features operational and how to deal with a number of additional questions not covered directly in the Treaty, such as the minimum age to sign up to an initiative, the rules on collecting, verifying and authenticating signatures and how to ensure safe on-line collection of signatures.

These are all very important issues. We need to get it right from the outset.

Of course, at EU level, we have no experience to build upon. This is why we also count on experience with national or regional citizens' initiatives and I am very pleased that we will be able to discuss during this session a few examples of initiatives within the Member States both from the national authorities' perspective and from the civil society perspective.

The Green Paper raised 10 issues and posed a number of questions that the Commission considers need to be addressed and discussed before we go ahead and adopt a proposal.

I am not going to go into detail of each of these 10 issues. However, I would like to raise 2 issues for which specific challenges have been identified or where you have raised particular concerns.

Verification of signatures for an ECI

Firstly, I would like to raise the issue of verification of signatures. This is a central issue and has ramifications for most of the other issues.

In order to guarantee the legitimacy and credibility of citizens' initiatives, I hope we all agree that some provisions will need to be made so as to ensure appropriate verification of the signatories by national authorities.

The Commission believes that provisions should strike the right balance between ensuring that Member States carry out adequate and proportionate checks, avoiding unduly restrictive requirements upon citizens, and averting the risk of unnecessary burdens upon the relevant authorities.

We have noted that respondents broadly support the idea of having a common set of procedural requirements for the collection, verification and authentication of signatures to ensure a uniform process and the same conditions across the EU thus preserving the European-wide nature of the Citizens' Initiative.

Many of you quite rightly point out that it would make the instrument more difficult to use if promoters of an initiative would have to comply with up to 27 very different sets of rules across the EU.

It, therefore, seems clear that we need to ensure that citizens are subject to similar requirements regardless of their Member State. We will however also need to take into account certain specificities of national systems and procedures.

In addition, most respondents do not want any specific restrictions to be placed on how signatures are collected and would like EU citizens to be able to sign up to an initiative anywhere – for example in the street - regardless of the place where they live or come from.

What is more, as could have been expected, we have heard an almost unanimous call for allowing citizens to support initiatives on-line.

I fully agree that it appears difficult to imagine, in this day and age, to not provide for the possibility of supporting an initiative electronically.

Nevertheless, adequate security features will need to be provided for so as to ensure that these signatures are as genuine as those collected through other means and that the Member States can check them in a similar fashion as they must check physical signatures.

We are very grateful for the numerous ideas that have been put forward as to how this can be done, and we will look into these carefully.

Admissibility

I would like to come now to the second issue that has raised concerns among respondents, and that is the issue of admissibility of citizens' initiatives.

There is a broad tendency amongst respondents to consider that the admissibility of a citizens' initiative should be checked before all the signatures are collected in order to avoid a considerable waste of resources as well as frustration among citizens having signed up to successful but ultimately inadmissible initiatives.

Some go even further and also favour an option where the Commission from the outset should prevent the launching of initiatives that would be contrary to the values of the Union or the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

We also heard concerns from Member States about having to make use of scarce public resources in order to carry out checks for initiatives that ultimately would not be admissible.

Some have pointed out that this would be particularly problematic for initiatives that would go against the values of the Union and of their own constitution.

In contrast, others are against an ex-ante admissibility check in the name of freedom of expression and considering that the debate created across Europe by an initiative is more important than the immediate result.

They do not think it would be appropriate for the Commission to be able to prevent, from the outset, a public debate and campaign from taking place on a citizens' initiative even if it is not within the framework of its powers.

We also need to bear in mind the risk that a positive ex-ante admissibility decision would give a form of green light to initiatives. Although admissible on formal grounds the Commission might still find it unacceptable in substance.

As you see there are many different issues and viewpoints to consider.

On the next steps

The Commission did indicate its initial views on some of these issues in the Green Paper.

Nevertheless, the purpose of the consultation and of this meeting is to have an open debate on these issues and to hear the pros and cons of the various options so that the Commission can take a final position on these issues when preparing its legislative proposal.

We do not have the answers to everything and, therefore, your contributions are very important to us as we seek to finalise a proposal not long after Easter.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me thank, first of all the ES Presidency, represented by Secretary of State López Garrido, and the EP, represented by MEP Häfner, for their keen interest, ideas and strong support in this important subject. I can assure you that we all will work closely and intensively together to have a good legislative proposal adopted as soon as possible.

I would like to thank you all for being here today and I hope that we can have fruitful discussions.