

# Salzburg Manifesto 2010: For a European Direct Democracy

Europe must become stronger - but it cannot do so without the strength of its citizens. That is why we are pleased and proud about the European Initiative as the new participatory citizens' right. This is the right tool for overcoming nationalism in Europe. Citizens now have a direct route to "Brussels" and have become co-shapers of the European integration process and of European policy making. The new instrument of the European Citizens' Initiative has an enormous potential.

As yet, however, the draft regulation proposed by the European Commission does not fully exploit this potential. Although the Commission has taken on board some worthy principles - seeking, for example, to secure a high level of public trust in the constitutional dignity of the initiative - it appears to accept that the instrument will not touch the everyday concerns of the citizens and that, for security reasons, participation by smaller and weaker initiative groups will be restricted.

If it does not improve its regulation, the Commission could thus risk wasting a huge opportunity for communicating with citizens - and of finding out more about the concerns and hopes of millions of ordinary people. Without significant improvement, the opportunity to generate an increased level of credibility for the Union could be missed.

It is not yet too late, however. As the Commission itself has clearly stated, and as its invitation to be involved in the process also shows, the time has come for those negotiations which should turn 'the better' into 'the best'.

Thus, on Europe Day, 2010, those of us professionals from civil society, politics, science and commerce who have come together for the European Citizens' Initiative Summit in Salzburg wish to make some suggestions and comments aimed at optimizing the regulation. In the opinion of those organisations coordinating the summit - the Austrian Institute for Legal Policy and the Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe - the regulation should endorse the following principles:

- *Those who wish to have a living initiative right must support and promote it, must give it support structures, must create advisory systems and set up public drop-in centres. The initiative right must not become a tool of privilege for wealthy persons and for others, such as members of large organisations, who are already able to involve themselves in the political process in other ways.*
- *Those who see the initiative not merely as an instrument for making individual corrective changes, but as a means of bringing about political climate change and as a new, deliberative kind of interaction in Europe - not only between the European citizens and the official structures of the Union, but also from citizen to citizen - must be interested in protecting and promoting these new efforts at communication which can further peace.*
- *The concrete results and forward steps in a European citizens' democracy are to be found in and through shared social learning processes and in the integration of cultural and political diversity. For this to come about, the above-mentioned support measures must be put in place.*
- *The Union should open itself up so far as is necessary to enable the greatest amount of political communication via the initiative system - rather than having the communication channel narrowed by restrictive access criteria.*

This type of open and constructive approach to implementing the principles of participatory democracy inscribed in the Lisbon Treaty has practical consequences for the regulation which will later enter into force.

**1) The European Citizens' Initiative needs more time.**

The recommended deadline of twelve months disadvantages weaker groups who need more time to get their message across transnationally and secure support for their proposal. In addition, the four-month-long process of checking the admissibility of the initiative proposal threatens to hinder the signature-collection process even before it has begun. That is why we suggest a deadline of 18 months for the collection of signatures.

**2) The entrance hurdle for the admissibility check is too high.**

The recommended hurdle of 300,000 signatures to activate an admissibility check creates a prohibitive hurdle for initiatives and for the member states responsible for the check. For practical reasons, therefore, an entrance hurdle of 50,000 signatures should be aimed at.

**3) The ID details required from signatories must not infringe personal integrity.**

The ID requirements for initiative signatories proposed in Annex III of the draft regulation provide for the passport number, identity card or social security number to be stated. This kind of requirement not only undermines the "secrecy of the vote", but is only indirectly related the right to support an initiative. Thus, in addition to the signatory's name, address, place of residence and birth date, only their nationality or, as the case may be, evidence of their national eligibility to vote should be required.

**4) The transnational requirement of the European Citizens' Initiative procedure should not be overburdened**

We support the principle, enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty, that support for a European Citizens' Initiative must come from a significant number of member states. We also support the model proposed by the Commission for fixed minimum numbers of signatures for each member state. However, in respect of the number of member states from which signatures must come we agree with the European Social and Economic Committee and the European Parliament's preparatory committee, both of which recommend one fourth of the total of member states i.e. at least seven, rather than the nine proposed by the Commission.

**5) Successful European Citizens' Initiatives should be able to present their case to the Commission in a public hearing.**

According to the draft regulation, upon completion of the signature collection and the signature check, the Commission allows itself a four-month period for the material assessment of the submitted legislative proposal. This period should not, however, be used only for internal handling but should also be used for dialogue with the initiators and the interested public. Therefore, during this assessment period, a public hearing should take place during which the initiative committee is able to present its view of things and discuss it with the Commission.

**6) The envisaged lack of an infrastructure for the first direct-democratic instrument at the transnational level is irresponsible.**

Just imagine if the European Parliament and those political parties represented therein were to have access to a joint website only once and the concerns of these institutions and actors were attended to by just one or two Union officials. And imagine if the EP were to have no translation services. In the case of the European Citizens' Initiative, a process which permits far more people to take part in European politics, the draft regulation allows for only two officials and one web platform. This is irresponsible! The Commission must therefore create a specific ECI budget and a specification sheet for a supportive infrastructure so that the potential of the new instrument can be exploited.

It is now the responsibility of the Council and Parliament to make sure that the seeds sown in the Lisbon Treaty will grow into a rich crop. The Union should be aware of what it itself stands to gain when, out of their own initiative, citizens place their hopes in the Union and in this way, for the first time, think beyond their own nation states. People who are listened to and feel understood, even when they do not fully succeed in having their issue adopted, will never tend towards political extremism and will begin to identify themselves with Europe. Conversely, those who listen and try to understand will remain flexible and in touch with reality and will be less likely to become detached and rigid in their attitudes.

In the coming months we will concentrate hard on making a substantial contribution to providing a supportive infrastructure for the start of the practical application of the European Citizens' Initiative Right. This infrastructure will be built up with the cooperation of public and private actors and professionals and will have the task of;

- **documenting** all the activities and developments around the European Citizens' Initiative Right;
- **informing** potential users and participants about the use of the initiative tool;
- **educating** actors in politics, media, science, administration and civil society to support and promote the initiative tool in a sensitive and careful way;
- **advising** interested citizens and civil society organisations about the use of the instrument.

As the central point of access for these activities we are creating the web portal [www.initiativeoffice.eu](http://www.initiativeoffice.eu) and we invite all interested Europeans to make their own contribution to the democratizing of European democracy.

Austrian Institute for European Legal Policy  
Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe  
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*For more information about the 2010 European Citizens' Initiative Summit and the establishment of the ECI Office please contact the Austrian Institute for European Legal Policy ([www.legalpolicy.eu](http://www.legalpolicy.eu), +43 662 84 39 80) or the Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe ([www.iri-europe.org](http://www.iri-europe.org), +49 6421 176 80 14)*