

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘The implementation of the Lisbon Treaty: participatory democracy and the citizens’ initiative (Article 11)’ (own-initiative opinion)

(2010/C 354/10)

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On 16 July 2009, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion on:

The implementation of the Lisbon Treaty: participatory democracy and the citizens’ initiative (Article 11 TEU).

The Subcommittee on *The implementation of the Lisbon Treaty: participatory democracy and the citizens’ initiative*, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 11 February 2010.

At its 461st plenary session held on 17 and 18 March 2010 (meeting of 17 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 163 votes to one with three abstentions.

1. Conclusions and Recommendations

1.1 The Committee considers that the provisions of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) on the democratic principles of the Union, in particular Article 11, are a milestone on the road to a people’s Europe that is real and feasible, where the public has genuine influence. However, the individual democratic processes need to be defined in such a way as to make them more binding and ensure they are backed up by the necessary structures.

1.2 With regard to horizontal civil dialogue (TEU Article 11(1)) and vertical civil dialogue (TEU Article 11(2)), the Committee calls for a clear definition of this instrument and rules governing its procedures and participants. It encourages the Commission – by analogy with the approach set out in TEU Article 11(4) – to begin a consultation process on civil dialogue by publishing a Green Paper and to put in place the necessary arrangements on the basis of the outcome.

1.3 The Committee underscores its willingness, expressed several times in the past, to contribute to the development of civil dialogue as a partner and intermediary and to build on its role as a forum for debate. The Committee is placing its network and infrastructure at the disposal of all EU bodies with a view to supporting civil dialogue with civil society organisations.

1.4 Article 11(3) of the TEU puts the Commission’s practice of consultation, already employed extensively to date, in the context of the newly-strengthened participatory pillar of the European democratic model. For this instrument, too, the Committee calls for clearer rules of procedure based on the principles of transparency, openness and representativeness.

1.5 The European Citizens’ Initiative introduced by TEU Article 11(4) enshrines, for the first time in history, a direct cross-border, transnational democratic procedure. The Committee warmly welcomes this new possibility and would like to make a tangible contribution to this historic first. It clarifies its point of view in respect of the specific implementing provisions that need to be put in place during 2010. These must ensure that:

- the public does not face any unnecessary obstacles when exercising opportunities to participate, as the Citizens’ Initiative is only an ‘agenda initiative’;
- clear rules and provisions make it easy for initiators to organise initiatives across 27 Member States, without coming up against unexpected national obstacles;
- where appropriate, initiators are given financial support once a given threshold has been reached.

1.6 The Committee is keen to play a pivotal role in a transnational democratic infrastructure in Europe and will play its part, as laid down in TEU Article 11, in a targeted, efficient manner. It also offers to act as an information helpdesk, support citizens’ initiatives where appropriate through an accompanying opinion, organise hearings on a successful initiative and, where applicable, back up the Commission’s evaluation by issuing an opinion.

2. Background

2.1 In December 2001, the heads of state or government, meeting in Laeken, agreed on a new method of drafting European treaties and decided to convene a 'Convention on the Future of Europe', whose composition⁽¹⁾ meant that it developed a considerable democratic dynamic. Subsequently, in June 2003, the Convention produced a text that made innovative proposals for greater transparency and participation.

2.2 After the 'Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe', drawn up by the Convention, failed to be ratified following the no-votes in the French and Dutch referendums, a revised EU Treaty was signed on 13 December 2007; it entered into force on 1 December 2009.

3. Introduction

3.1 The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty streamlines numerous procedures and makes them more transparent, defines competences more clearly, expands the rights of the European Parliament and raises the European Union's profile internally and externally.

3.2 As well as parliamentary (indirect) democracy⁽²⁾, the European democratic model is expanded and strengthened, but certainly not replaced, by participatory (direct) democracy being enshrined in the TEU.

3.3 Specifically, the provisions on participatory democracy relate to:

- horizontal civil dialogue;
- vertical civil dialogue;
- the Commission's existing consultation practices; and
- the new European Citizens' Initiative.

3.4 The nature of the EU Treaty means that the provisions of TEU Article 11 merely created a framework, and this now needs to be defined, fleshed out and put into practice with appropriate legal arrangements and it is up to the parties involved to bring it to life.

⁽¹⁾ Alongside its president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and his two deputies, Giuliano Amato and Jean-Luc Dehaene, the Convention was made up of the following members:

- 15 representatives of the Heads of State or Government of the Member States;
- 13 representatives of the Heads of State or Government of the candidate countries;
- 30 members of Member States' national Parliaments;
- 26 members of candidate countries' national Parliaments;
- 16 members of the European Parliament;
- Two representatives of the European Commission.

There were also 13 observers from the EESC, the CoR, the social partners and the European ombudsman. The EESC observers were Göke Frerichs, Roger Briesch and Anne-Marie Sigmund.

⁽²⁾ Article 10 of the TEU stipulates that the 'functioning of the Union' is based on 'representative democracy'.

3.5 With regard to the European Citizens' Initiative, the Commission has already taken a sensible step and published a Green Paper⁽³⁾; following the consultation procedure, it will publish a proposal for a regulation implementing TEU Article 11(4). In doing so it is sending out a clear signal in favour of dialogue to prepare for implementation of the new instruments, taking particular account of those organised civil society stakeholders and members of the public from throughout the EU who will later be the initiators of the European Citizens' Initiative.

4. Lisbon Treaty – Article 11 of the TEU

4.1 Horizontal Civil Dialogue

Article 11(1) of the TEU: 'The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action.'

4.1.1 This provision provides a legal basis for horizontal 'civil dialogue', but does not define it more precisely. The Committee has already issued a number of opinions⁽⁴⁾ ⁽⁵⁾ ⁽⁶⁾ on civil dialogue and has stated that it is a key aspect of participation in the European democratic model. It has also repeatedly stated that it is willing to work as a platform and multiplier for this dialogue and to ensure the debate is public across Europe. In this context, the Committee has also on several occasions stated that it wishes and intends to contribute to the development of civil dialogue as a partner and intermediary. In this context, it is prepared to build on its role as a forum for debate and to provide practical support, for example by making its facilities available. The Committee attaches great importance to helping civil dialogue get the (European) audience it needs and develop into a truly interactive discussion.

4.1.2 The Committee once again stresses that this instrument of participatory democracy needs a clear definition and that the specific arrangements for its operation need to be laid down. For example, the representativeness criteria which the associations mentioned in this paragraph of the Treaty have to meet in order to take part in dialogue do require clarification. With respect to the issue of representativeness of civil society actors, too, the Committee has already pointed out⁽⁷⁾ how important it is to distinguish between quantitative (legitimate representation of the majority of those affected) and qualitative (proof of relevant expertise) representativeness. The Committee takes the view that the associations to be involved in dialogue must be representative in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

⁽³⁾ COM(2009) 622 final, 11.11.2009.

⁽⁴⁾ Opinion of 25.4.2001 on *Organised civil society and European governance: the Committee's contribution to the drafting of the White Paper* - OJ C 193, 10.7.2001.

⁽⁵⁾ Opinion of 14.2.2006 on *The representativeness of European civil society organisations in civil dialogue* - OJ C 88, 11.4.2006.

⁽⁶⁾ Exploratory opinion of 9.7.2008 on *A new European Social Action Programme* - OJ C 27, 3.2.2009 (points 7.6 and 7.7).

⁽⁷⁾ See footnote 5.

4.1.3 The legislator will also need to be more precise about what specific measures it deems necessary to meet the requirement of 'appropriate means' (see TEU Article 11(1)).

4.1.4 In this context, the Committee considers it important to point out the distinction between European civil dialogue and European social dialogue and warns against any confusion between these two concepts. Of course, European social dialogue is a pillar of qualified participation, but it is subject to specific rules concerning content, participation, procedures and impact. Its enshrinement in the Treaty reflects its importance.

4.2 Vertical civil dialogue

Article 11(2) of the TEU: 'The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.'

4.2.1 This paragraph takes account of vertical civil dialogue and obliges the EU's bodies to practise it regularly. The Committee has already expressed its views on this type of civil dialogue, too⁽⁸⁾, and calls on the Commission to set out the arrangements in more detail, both in terms of content and procedure.

4.2.2 Some time ago – in anticipation of this treaty provision – the European Parliament founded the 'Agora', thus creating an instrument for vertical civil dialogue.

4.2.3 As TEU Article 11(2) requires all the institutions and bodies to engage in dialogue with civil society, the Committee calls on all the European institutions, especially the Council, to make a statement as soon as possible on how they intend to implement this treaty article.

4.2.4 The Committee places its network and infrastructure at the disposal of all EU bodies, with a view to helping launch and/or supporting civil dialogue with civil society organisations.

4.3 Consultations by the European Commission

Article 11(3) of the TEU: 'The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent.'

4.3.1 This provision puts the Commission's practice of consultation, already employed extensively to date, in the context of the newly-strengthened participatory pillar of the

European democratic model. The Committee recalls⁽⁹⁾ ⁽¹⁰⁾ that this practice of consultation is fundamentally a key element of the 'European governance'⁽¹¹⁾ concept launched by the Commission in 2001. As a top-down measure, it only indirectly facilitates civil society action. The Committee also points out that 'consultation', a top-down measure, should be distinguished from 'participation', a civic right. The aspect of actively involving civil society organisations in a bottom-up process remains untouched by this measure.

4.3.2 The Committee is prepared, in line with its mandate, to support the European Commission whenever it wishes to carry out consultations beyond the usual online system, for example by organising joint hearings on specific topics or holding open consultations through stakeholder forums under the open space method.

4.3.3 However, consultation alone does not amount to genuine dialogue with civil society organisations. The Committee therefore calls on the Commission to overhaul and structure the way it has carried out consultations hitherto: Firstly, the time frame for consultations must be appropriate so that civil society organisations and the public really do have time to develop their answers and the consultation is not mere window-dressing. Secondly, the assessment process must be made more transparent. The Commission should be required to respond to submissions and explain its position as to why this or that suggestion was accepted or rejected, thus truly entering into dialogue. The Commission, for its part, should intensively consult with civil society organisations on these and other improvements.

4.4 The European Citizens' Initiative

Article 11(4) of the TEU: 'Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties.'

4.4.1 The Committee shares the view that this new European citizens' initiative has significance for European integration that goes way beyond the legal dimension and should be considered to be the first element of direct transnational democracy, although the wording of the provisions means that it is limited to EU citizens. The Committee would like to see third-country nationals permanently resident in the Union to be included when the Treaty is revised.

⁽⁸⁾ Opinion of 13.7.2000 on the Commission discussion paper The Commission and non-governmental organisations: building a stronger partnership, OJ C 268, 19.9.2000, and Opinion of 24.9.1999 on The role and contribution of civil society organisations in the building of Europe, OJ C 329, 17.11.1999.

⁽⁹⁾ Opinion of 25.4.2001 on Organised civil society and European governance: the Committee's contribution to the drafting of the White Paper - OJ C 193, 10.7.2001.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Opinion of 20.4.2002 on European Governance - a White Paper - OJ C 125, 27.5.2002.

⁽¹¹⁾ COM(2001) 428 final, 25.7.2001.

4.4.2 It should be stressed that the new European citizens' initiative is not a direct initiative such as those provided for in a number of Member States, which give rise to a binding referendum, but rather an 'agenda initiative' calling on the Commission to draw up legislation. It is a minority instrument that simply creates an opportunity to influence the political agenda. The right of legislative initiative remains with the Commission, and any legislative process that may follow will do so in accordance with the appropriate procedures.

4.4.3 Of course, this instrument needs certain rules and standards. However, as instruments for direct democracy at European level have yet to be created, the European citizens' initiative should be given a framework to develop progressively. The regulation implementing TEU Article 11(4) should set the lowest possible minimum standards and admission criteria for initiatives and leave room for discretion and interpretation in areas where there are no experiential data at EU level, as all the European Citizens' Initiative can do is to ensure that a particular topic is taken up in the Commission's action plan.

4.4.4 However, the Committee certainly does not share the view of the European Parliament⁽¹²⁾ that 'it is the political task of the Parliament to monitor the process of a citizens' initiative' and is opposed to the monitoring of a process in the pre-legislative area by the legislator. Such 'monitoring' would violate the principle of separation of powers; the Committee therefore calls for an independent 'advisory body' or a 'helpdesk' to be set up to support initiators when preparing and launching a European Citizens' Initiative so that obvious conflicts with the rules on admissibility and implementation can be avoided in most cases, even if they cannot be ruled out altogether.

4.4.5 In the same report, the Parliament quite rightly refers to the need to distinguish between petitions, which should be addressed to the Parliament, and citizens' initiatives, which are to be addressed to the Commission as a request. With this in mind, a clear distinction should be drawn between these two bottom-up participatory instruments' procedures and requirements.

4.4.6 The European Citizens' Initiative as an instrument of direct democracy is also an effective means of starting transnational deliberative processes. The public, which is currently rather disengaged from 'political Europe', can now get involved with specific initiatives and goals. The more they are invited and encouraged to participate in the initiative without having to face unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles, the sooner people will stop thinking of themselves as spectators of incomprehensible decisions and move from being on the sidelines of the European polity to being at its centre. Such a process, set in motion step by step, which fosters debate on issues of European magnitude, will automatically lead to the formation of a European consciousness and a sense of European public awareness.

4.4.7 It must be pointed out that the substance of a European citizens' initiative self-evidently must not violate the Treaty or the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. However, just as extremist groups (ab)use the available channels of opinion-forming in the indirect/parliamentary process for their own purposes, the same could happen in the direct/civic process. This is a serious, fundamental challenge for any democracy, but is also its greatest advantage over undemocratic systems. A modern representative democracy built on both indirect and direct pillars must be capable of discussing uncomfortable and even extremist views in an open, transparent manner.

4.5 *European Commission Green Paper on a European Citizens' Initiative*

4.5.1 Although the Committee has not been directly involved in the now-completed consultation procedure, it would like - in anticipation of the proposed regulations being discussed in Parliament and the Council - to make an informed contribution to the opinion-forming process and has set out its views below on the issues addressed in the Green Paper.

4.6 *Minimum number of Member States of which signatories must be nationals*

4.6.1 The Committee shares the Commission's opinion that the threshold should be determined on the basis of objective criteria. It does not agree with the Commission that a minimum of one third of Member States, i.e. nine states, are needed in order to ensure that the Union's interest is adequately represented; neither does it share, however, the opinion held by some organisations that as few as four Member States would be sufficient.

4.6.2 Rather, the Committee agrees with the European Parliament that one quarter of Member States - currently seven states - would be an appropriate threshold. This figure was reached with reference to Article 76 of the TFEU, which provides for acts relating to administrative cooperation on police and judicial cooperation and on cooperation in criminal matters undertaken on the initiative of a quarter of the Member States. The Committee considers this to be the appropriate reference for ensuring that citizens' initiatives have a truly European dimension.

4.7 *Minimum number of signatures per Member State*

4.7.1 As the Lisbon Treaty refers only to a 'significant number of Member States', it would also be an option not to specify a minimum number of participants per country. However, given the Treaty's repeated references to the double majority, the Committee shares the Commission's view that it would be contrary to the spirit of the Treaty not to require a minimum number of participants per Member State.

⁽¹²⁾ European Parliament resolution of 7.5.2009, rapporteur: Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann (T6-0389/2009).

4.7.2 Instead of laying down a rigid figure of 0.2 % per Member State, the Committee recommends using a sliding scale, which could provide a useful balance between the states. For example, a fixed lower limit of 0.08 % ⁽¹³⁾ could be required in order for the signatures from a Member State to be counted, and a citizens' initiative must, of course, have 1 million signatures in total. These two criteria in combination will automatically strike a balance that also does justice to the Treaty's focus on representativeness and a genuine European interest.

4.7.3 The Committee feels that a flexible system such as this, which would facilitate implementation, is likewise justified given that, in the end, the European Citizens' Initiative does not result in a binding decision, but is simply a 'request' to the Commission.

4.8 Eligibility to sign a citizens' initiative

4.8.1 The Committee shares the Commission's view that, in order to avoid unnecessary administrative burdens, eligibility to participate in a citizens' initiative should be based on participants' eligibility to vote in the European Parliament elections in their countries of residence. Despite being sympathetic to the idea of involving young people (for example by reducing the minimum age to 16), this departure from the rules used to determine eligibility for voting in European parliamentary elections would make it disproportionately difficult to check the signatures, as almost all countries would have to set up duplicate electoral registers.

4.9 Form and wording of a citizens' initiative

4.9.1 Here, too, the Committee thinks that very rigid requirements in terms of form would be inappropriate; the formal requirements necessary for official petitions should apply and certain minimum requirements should be set (see also 4.13). The content of the initiative and the requested decision should be presented clearly and unambiguously. It must always be clear what someone is supporting when they sign a European Citizens' Initiative.

4.10 Requirements for the collection, verification and authentication of signatures

4.10.1 There is no reason not to establish common procedural rules or standards for collection, verification and authentication at EU level that differ from national law, as the European Citizens' Initiative is a (new) transnational participatory instrument.

4.10.2 All methods of signature collection that allow for identity checks should be authorised. It should be possible to collect signatures both via an online portal and in public. In the Committee's view, conditions such as requiring national authorities or a notary to confirm the authenticity of signatures

present an unreasonable obstacle. However, alongside identity checks, it must also be ensured that the initiative's supporters have signed freely and independently. With this in mind, procedures need to be put in place for electronic signature collection in particular.

4.10.3 Name, address and date of birth, together with a verification email in the case of online collection, are adequate data for security and authentication purposes. The aim must be to guarantee that no initiative complying with the minimum requirements for signature collection laid down in the regulation is unexpectedly confronted with other, additional obstacles in any EU country. The signatures of Europeans living abroad should be assigned to their country of residence.

4.10.4 Signatures should be verified by the Member States; this could perfectly well be achieved as part of the sample checks customary in some EU Member States.

4.11 Time limit for signature collection

4.11.1 Experience with citizens' initiatives in the run-up to the Lisbon Treaty has shown that launching an initiative can be a time-consuming process; the Committee therefore considers the one-year time limit proposed by the Commission to be too short, and would recommend 18 months. In view of the aforementioned fact that initiatives do after all set in motion a process towards the creation of a genuine sense of European public awareness, going beyond their specific aim, it would, in the Committee's opinion, be regrettable were such a process to be prevented from reaching a positive outcome - with all the associated social and legal implications - due to a relatively short time limit of one year.

4.12 Registration of proposed initiatives

4.12.1 The Committee agrees with the Commission that it is up to initiators themselves to check in advance that their initiatives are lawful and admissible. It should be possible to register initiatives using a website run by the Commission, which would also gather information on their content so that the public could keep up to date on ongoing initiatives.

4.12.2 In this context, the Committee calls on the Commission to provide an online signature collection tool on the European Citizens' Initiative website that is to be set up. In addition, that website could also be used as a discussion forum about the various initiatives and thus help secure public access to the debate.

4.12.3 Nonetheless, the Committee feels that initiators of citizens' initiatives should also have access to a contact point providing advice not only on procedural questions but also on substantive issues. The Committee is willing to act as a 'helpdesk' here.

⁽¹³⁾ This percentage is based on the minimum requirement of 0.08% for a citizens' initiative in Italy.

4.12.4 Consideration might be given to a system of yellow and red cards that would indicate at an early stage to initiators of a citizens' initiative that their initiative might not be admissible, either due to formal criteria, such as the matter being outside the Commission's competence, or due to a clear violation of fundamental rights.

4.13 *Requirements for organisers – transparency and funding*

4.13.1 In the Committee's opinion, the initiators of an initiative should provide the following information:

- initiative committee and its external representatives,
- any supporters,
- financing plan,
- overview of human resources and structures.

4.13.2 The Committee finds the Commission's statement that no provision is made for public support or funding for citizens' initiatives to be completely unacceptable, particularly the claim that this is the only way of guaranteeing the independence of such initiatives. The European Commission funds the structures and the work of many effective non-governmental organisations, and it would be quite unwarranted to assume that these civil society players were therefore dependent on the Commission because they were partly funded by it. Moreover, the logical consequence of the Commission's approach would be that only large organisations with financially strong supporters would even be in a position to consider a European citizens' initiative.

4.13.3 The Committee therefore suggests that the EU provide funding assistance once an initial milestone, for example 50 000 signatures from three Member States, has been reached, in order to exclude hopeless or frivolous campaigns. Here, too, the proposed system of yellow and red cards could play a role.

4.14 *Examination of successful citizens' initiatives by the Commission*

4.14.1 The Committee considers the six-month time frame proposed by the Commission to be an absolute upper limit, and supports the two-stage approach proposed in the European Parliament's resolution (two months to assess the formal criteria and three months to reach a decision on the content)⁽¹⁴⁾. The Commission should make this internal decision-making process as transparent as possible.

4.14.2 Once a successful citizens' initiative has been submitted, its legal admissibility should be definitively checked.

4.14.3 During the Commission's political evaluation phase, the Committee will organise hearings – possibly involving the

Parliament and the Council Presidency – at which organisers could present their initiatives to the Commission. The EESC could, if appropriate, also complement this process by issuing an exploratory or own-initiative opinion.

4.14.4 The acceptance, partial acceptance or rejection of the initiative by the Commission should be explained to the initiators publicly and in detail. In the event of rejection, the Commission should publish a formal decision, which should be subject to appeal before the ECJ.

4.15 *Initiatives on the same issue*

4.15.1 The Committee considers that it will then be up to initiators to launch an initiative on a similar topic if they wish. It is worth reiterating that the new European citizens' initiative is an 'agenda initiative'. The Committee therefore sees no reason to incorporate bans or obstacles.

4.16 *Additional remarks*

4.16.1 The Committee takes the view that the Commission should have the text translated into all the official languages for the organisers of a citizens' initiative that has already found 50 000 supporters from three Member States.

5. **Concluding remarks**

5.1 The Committee considers that the provisions on the democratic principles of the Union, in particular TEU Article 11, are a milestone on the road to a people's Europe that is real and feasible, where the public has genuine influence. However, the individual democratic processes need to be defined in such a way as to make them more binding and ensure they are backed up by the necessary structures.

5.2 The Committee therefore calls on the Commission to publish, following the Green Paper on the European Citizens' Initiative, a Green Paper on civil dialogue, which would cover the practical implementation of Articles 11(1) and 11(2), consider existing practice, define procedures and principles more precisely, evaluate them and, together with civil society organisations, make improvements, in particular by creating clearly defined structures. In this context, too, the Committee reiterates its willingness to get involved under the terms of its mandate.

5.3 It also calls on the other institutions to explain how they intend to implement the new treaty provisions in practice.

5.4 Article 11(4) takes us into uncharted democratic territory, even in worldwide terms. For the first time in the history of democracy, citizens of several countries have a transnational right of participation.

⁽¹⁴⁾ This should be done in a similar way to the procedure for European Parliament initiatives referred to in Article 225 TFEU; see European Parliament resolution of 9 February 2010 on a revised Framework Agreement between the European Parliament and the Commission for the next legislative term (P7-TA-2010-0009).

5.5 This new democratic right has huge potential. Its purpose is to strengthen representative democracy in Europe. It directly consolidates the participatory element of the European democratic model. Indirectly, however, it could contribute to a stronger, more integrated EU and public access to EU-wide debate, as well as helping the public identify with the EU more strongly. Precisely because Europe is so big and so diverse, it is important to ensure that every citizen, including those with limited means or who do not belong to large, established organisations, is able to make use of all democratic instruments available. In other words, exercising the tools of democracy should not be conditional on having hefty financial resources.

5.6 The Committee, which the Lisbon Treaty has confirmed in its role as a consultative body supporting the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, will continue to carry out its principal tasks and issue opinions within the framework of the responsibilities assigned to it in the Treaty. It will play its role as a bridge by becoming an even more pivotal part of a comprehensive democratic infrastructure at European level.

5.7 In the interests of ensuring that its activities support the aforementioned EU institutions as effectively as possible and of optimising its working methods, it also proposes, in the context of the European Citizens' Initiative:

- to draft an opinion on citizens' initiatives formally accepted by the Commission within the assessment deadline;
- where appropriate, to draft an opinion in support of an ongoing citizens' initiative;
- to arrange hearings on successful initiatives (with organisers, the Commission, Parliament and the Council);
- to set up an information helpdesk (as a contact point for the public on procedural questions and such like); and
- to provide back-up information (publication of a handbook on participatory democracy, conferences on practical implementation, etc.).

Brussels, 17 March 2010.

*The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee*
Mario SEPI
