



EU direct democracy: citizens' initiative rights should be clear, simple, and safe, say MEPs

The citizens' right to initiate EU laws should be clear, simple, and easily accessible to all EU citizens, and also provide them with certainty as to the law, said Constitutional Affairs Committee MEPs on Monday. They stressed the importance of this direct democracy instrument in a discussion with the EU Commissioner for Inter-institutional Relations and Administration, Maroš Šefčovič.

The proposed right of initiative would enable citizens to ask the European Commission to table a draft law, provided it is backed by at least one million citizens from one third of the EU Member States, including a minimum number of citizens in each Member State. The minimum age for taking part in such initiatives would be the same as that at which citizens may vote in European elections.

Citizens' initiative proposals would have to be registered on line, and all statements of support collected within one year of the date of registration. Once a proposal is signed by 300,000 citizens, the Commission will check its "admissibility" (i.e. that it falls within the EU's sphere of competence and complies with the EU treaties). If it passes this test, then when it reaches one million signatures, the Commission will examine it again, and decide within four months whether to approve the proposal.

Rights for real people

Citizens' initiative rights should not only be "simple", but "safe", i.e. provide them with certainty as to the law, said Enrique Guerrero (S&D, ES), adding that "how we handle frustration is one major problem if in the end those who participate most are not ordinary citizens but lobbies and other organisations".

Anneli Jäätteenmäki (ALDE, FI) agreed, voicing her fear that in practice, this right of initiative "could prove disappointing". She also called on the Commission to "avoid unnecessary bureaucracy". A "clear procedure for accepting citizens' initiatives" is vital, added Gerald Häfner (Greens/EFA, DE).

Commissioner Šefčovič acknowledged the "bureaucratic nature of the verification procedure" but said that "this is the only way to be sure that real people sign these proposals".

Minimum number of citizens per country

The Commission proposal would require each initiative to be supported by a minimum number of signatures per Member State. A threshold would be fixed for each Member State which is "degressively proportional" to its population. The minimum limit would be 4,500 signatures (for Malta, Estonia and Cyprus). In Germany, the biggest EU country, 72,000 signatures would be required.

"We looked into how the European Parliament works when we proposed this principle", explained Commissioner Šefčovič, adding that the aim is to ensure balanced participation by various countries.

Press release

Admissibility check

Andrew Duff (ALDE, UK), felt that the Commission should not have to wait until 300,000 signatures have been collected before checking whether a proposal falls within the EU's sphere of competence. However, Commissioner Šefčovič defended this proposal, stressing that "we need clear proof that there is a solid public support" before checking on admissibility.

"An independent legal entity, such as a committee of experts or the Court of Justice, should be responsible for this procedure", and not the Commission, argued Alain Lamassoure (EPP, FR).

Right to appeal

"Once expectations have been raised so high, this could prove explosive", warned Rafał Trzaskowski (EPP, PL), adding that "if an initiative is rejected by the Commission, this will create a huge political problem", since many people may then want to go to the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Maroš Šefčovič confirmed that, if an initiative is declared inadmissible, the person or group who has presented it will have the right to appeal to the ECJ.

The Constitutional Affairs Committee will appoint shortly a rapporteur for the citizens' initiative.

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