

Maroš Šefčovič: The European Citizens' Initiative will take the EU outside of the 'Brussels beltway'

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Comment by Maroš Šefčovič, European Commission Vice-President for Inter-institutional Relations and Administration, given to Europe Gateway by the EC Representation in Bulgaria.

For the first time ever, members of the public will be able to call directly for new European laws, under a proposal being made today/on Wednesday by the European Commission.

From the moment I took up office in February, I have made it one of my priorities to put the so-called European Citizens' Initiative in place as soon as possible.

An innovation in the EU's new Lisbon Treaty, the Citizens' Initiative will introduce a whole new form of participatory democracy to the EU.

I am very excited about this idea, which I believe represents a real step forward in the democratic life of the Union.

It's a concrete example of what we talk about so often in Brussels: "bringing Europe closer to its citizens".

I also hope it will foster a lively cross-border debate about what we are doing in Brussels and lead to better rule-making inspired from the grass roots.

I hope that the European Parliament and the EU member countries in the Council can adopt our proposal by the end of the year, so that the first initiatives can start early in 2011.

Under our plans, members of the public could invite the European Commission to bring forward legislative proposals in areas where the Commission has the power to do so providing at least one million citizens from at least one third of EU Member States sign the initiative (i.e. 9 countries as things stand). To ensure that what we receive are genuine pan-European initiatives, our proposal suggests a minimum number of signatories from each country.

In drawing up our plan, I was determined to ensure that the procedures are simple, user-friendly and

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accessible to all, and not too bureaucratic.

It is crucial that this revolutionary new feature of the democratic process should be credible, should guarantee data protection and be immune from abuse or fraud.

And, as underlined by many people who took part in the consultation process on the initiative, there will be no restrictions on where and how people can sign up, whether it be in the street or online.

While the Commission maintains fully its right to bring forward EU legislation, we are very committed to taking citizens' initiatives very seriously.

Once the necessary signatures have been collected and verified and we have checked whether the idea falls within the powers of the EU, the Commission will have four months to decide how to proceed.

We could come forward with a proposal for legislation, follow up the issue by taking other measures such as carrying out a study, or we might decide that it is not appropriate to take any action.

Whatever we do, we will have to explain our reasoning in a publicly available report.

I'm pleased to say that the European Citizens' Initiative proposal is the result of a wide-ranging consultation process which garnered input from around 330 individuals, organisations and public authorities.

We have taken on board the good advice received and learnt from the experience of similar schemes operated in some of our Member States.

And we have also been encouraged by a resolution from the European Parliament giving enthusiastic support to the idea.

This initiative is all about taking the EU outside of the 'Brussels beltway' and giving it full democratic expression.

I'm looking forward very much to seeing the Citizens' Initiative in action and urge people to make use of this fascinating innovation.