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## **European Citizenship Initiative: CoR and EESC to stimulate pan-European civic participation**

**On the eve of the official launch of the European Citizens' Initiative, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee co-organised today a conference to discuss the impact of this new participatory instrument on civil society and at the local level, as well as the role both Committees and their members can play in the process. As privileged intermediates between the EU institutions and the actors in the field, they expressed their commitment to fully exercise their responsibility in acting as communicators, enablers and supporters of EU institutions to promote and foster the use of this mechanism.**

**Introducing the Conference, Committee of the Regions (CoR) President Mercedes Bresso and Staffan Nilsson, President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), emphasized the responsibility of both institutions to create a positive snowball effect for the successful implementation of the ECI and to make it an instrument of constructive dialogue between EU institutions, national, regional and local levels of governance, as well as civil society and citizens.**

**"The ECI is an instrument close to the heart of the CoR. We want to ensure its success in order to make it a tool to reduce the gap between the Brussels epicentre and the daily reality of the EU citizens in their specific national, regional and local context", said Mrs Bresso. She further underlined the role that the institution intends to play in promoting and evaluating ECIs: "Our Committee can first of all raise awareness about the ECI and spread information about how it works, also through the activities of its members in their cities and regions, and make the link between citizens of different countries at local and regional level. We could also take part in the evaluation phase of successful citizens' initiatives by 'decentralising' parts of the process in order to reach out to Europe's regions and cities".**

**Staffan Nilsson was keen to stress that he believes "in the collective wisdom of European citizens emerging from this democratic participatory practice. To secure a successful implementation of the Citizens' initiative instrument, we see ourselves mainly contributing as communicators, facilitator and, when needed, as a mentor. What we want is to allow for a forum for dialogue and participation, a forum which could enable European citizens to use their civic competence and prepare the way for the re-legitimation of a strong democratic Europe".**

The EESC and the CoR also expressed their commitment to support the European Parliament and the European Commission to convert successful initiatives into real policy and legislation. In this perspective, they intend to organise an "ECI Day" on a yearly basis to allow initiators of ECIs to share experiences and inputs on particular initiatives and lead to a permanent exchange of information that can be useful to all stakeholders.

Also addressing the conference, Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, European Commissioner for Interinstitutional Relations and Administration, said: "Both the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee have privileged access on the ground to the people that we really want to target directly with ECIs – the citizens of Europe. I am delighted by the opportunity this conference provides to discuss the roles that local and regional government and organised civil society can play in the development of ECIs."

Georgios Papastamkos, Vice-President of the European Parliament underlined the fact that the ECI represents an innovative Union's instrument of high expectations for the European public opinion that will contribute to the creation of a "European public sphere". "The citizens of the 27 Member States are not only invited but also challenged to develop a quasi-legislative pre-initiative, thus hammering their European identity in a more direct and tangible manner", he said.

Under the title "*European Citizens' Initiative: time to act! Perspective from civil society and local/regional authorities*", the conference gathered representatives from civil society organisations, local and regional authorities, EU institutions, and academics. It also presented the audience with recent concrete initiatives and best practices in the field of participatory democracy at local level.

The CoR and the EESC have been supporting the ECI from the very beginning, while being actively involved in the preparation of the ECI legislation so as to ensure that the rules for its implementation were clear and accessible to all citizens. The two Committees are determined to act as enablers so that citizens and their associations can network and debate to formulate and put forward their initiatives.

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is one of the major innovations of the Treaty of Lisbon, aimed at increasing direct democracy in the EU. The initiative enables one million EU citizens, who are nationals of at least one quarter of the Member States, to call directly on the European Commission to propose a legal act in an area within the competences of the EU.

The Regulation establishing the ECI will enter into force on 1 April 2012, from which moment onward citizens may start organising initiatives, at first by registering them with the European Commission.

**To mark the start of the ECI, the joint Conference organised today was meant to inform local/regional stakeholders and civil society about the ECI and its upcoming implementation, as well as the impact of participatory democracy at the local level. The aim was also to further explore the respective role of the CoR and the EESC in**

**engaging citizens to use this instrument as a means of reinforced civic participation in the EU.**

### **The Committee of the Regions**

**The Committee of the Regions is the EU's assembly of regional and local representatives. The mission of its 344 members from all 27 EU Member States is to involve regional and local authorities and the communities they represent in the EU's decision-making process and to inform them about EU policies. The European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council are obliged to consult the Committee in policy areas affecting regions and cities. It can appeal to the EU Court of Justice if its rights are infringed or it believes that an EU law violates the subsidiarity principle or fails to respect regional or local powers.**

### **The European Economic and Social Committee**

**Committed to European integration, the EESC contributes to strengthening the democratic legitimacy and effectiveness of the European Union by enabling civil society organisations from the Member States to express their views at European level. The EESC gives representatives of Europe's socio-occupational interest groups, and others, a formal platform to express their points of views on EU issues. Its opinions are forwarded to the larger institutions - the Council, the Commission and the European Parliament. It thus has a key role to play in the Union's decision-making process**

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