

Brussels, 12 December 2003

OPINION

of the
Committee of the Regions

of 20 November 2003

on the

Proposal for a Council decision establishing a Community action programme to promote active European citizenship (civic participation)

COM(2003) 276 final – 2003/0116 (CNS)

and the

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on measures to be taken by Member States to ensure participation of all citizens of the Union to the 2004 elections to the European Parliament in an enlarged Union

COM(2003) 174 final

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

HAVING REGARD TO the proposal for a Council decision establishing a Community action programme to promote active European citizenship (civic participation), COM(2003) 276 final – 2003/0116 (CNS);

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on measures to be taken by Member States to ensure participation of all citizens of the Union to the 2004 elections to the European Parliament in an enlarged Union COM(2003) 174 final;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of the European Commission of 8 August 2003 to

consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of its President of 8 April 2003 to instruct its Commission for Constitutional Affairs and European Governance to draw up an opinion on this subject;

HAVING REGARD TO the draft treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe presented to the President of the European Council in Rome on 18 July 2003 (CONV 850/03) which includes the text of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union proclaimed by the European Council at Nice on 7 December 2000;

HAVING REGARD TO the Article 19(2) of the Treaty establishing the European Community on the right to vote and to stand in elections to the EP;

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission on the application of Directive 93/109/EC to the June 1999 elections to the European Parliament - Right of Union citizens residing in a Member State of which they are not nationals to vote and stand in elections to the European Parliament COM(2000) 843 final;

HAVING REGARD TO the Third report on citizenship of the Union (COM(2001) 506 final) and the report of the European Parliament on it (C5-0656/2001);

HAVING REGARD TO the report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the application of Directive 94/80/EC on the right to vote and to stand as a candidate on municipal elections;

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 21 November 2002 on the *Third Report from the Commission on Citizenship of the Union and a Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the application of Directive 94/80/EC on the right to vote and to stand as a candidate on municipal elections* (CdR 121/2002 fin¹);

HAVING REGARD TO the White Paper on European Governance (COM(2001) 428 final);

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 13 March 2002 on the *White Paper on European Governance* and the *Communication on a new framework for cooperation on activities concerning the information and communication policy of the European Union* (CdR 103/2001 fin²);

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 3 July 2003 on the *Follow-up to the White Paper on European governance* (CdR 19/2003 fin³);

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 21 November 2002 on the *Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social*

Committee and the Committee of the Regions on an information and communication strategy for the European Union – COM(2002) 350 final (CdR 124/2002 fin⁴);

HAVING REGARD TO its draft opinion (CdR 170/2003 rev. 1) adopted on 26 September 2003 by its Commission for Constitutional Affairs and European Governance (Rapporteur: **Mr Vesey**, Member of Cavan County Council, Member of the Border Regional Authority (IE-EA),

1) **WHEREAS** bringing citizens closer to the European Union and its institutions involving them in participatory democracy both legitimate European Integration and creates a sense of belonging to the EU;

2) **WHEREAS** as a result of accession of ten new Member States the elections to the European Parliament for the period from 2004 to 2009 will take place in a Union of 25 Member States;

3) **WHEREAS** the official date for accession has been set for 1 May 2004 and the polling days in the elections to the European Parliament are from 10 June to 13 June 2004;

4) **WHEREAS** the acceding States are expected to transpose the Directive 93/109/EC taking the necessary measures for the arrangements concerning the elections to the European Parliament in 2004;

5) **WHEREAS** the primary task of any European citizenship programme is to directly or indirectly serve to make citizens aware of the European dimension of their citizenship including their right to vote and stand as a candidate in elections of the European Parliament, especially as the Union expands to 25 Member States in 2004.

adopted unanimously the following opinion at its 52th plenary session, held on 19-20 November 2003 (meeting of 20 November)

1. **The Committee of the Regions' views**

Community action programme to promote active European citizenship

The Committee of the Regions

1. **welcomes** the proposal for a decision to establish a Community action programme to promote active European citizenship;
2. **is of the view** that the EU has a responsibility to its citizens to make them aware of the European dimension of their citizenship;

1.3. **is convinced** that for the Union to be democratic and in touch with ordinary people's concerns it must in language that is clear and easily understood, communicate more with citizens and make them more aware of their rights and responsibilities. In this way the EU citizen will be engaged in the public debate which will in turn convince them that the EU does take account of their interests and concerns (hopes and aspirations).

1.4 **stresses** the connection between active European citizenship and voter turnout at European Parliament elections;

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1.5 **welcomes** the communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the application of Directive 93/109/EC to the June 2004 elections to the European Parliament;

1.6 **agrees** with the Commission in stressing the importance of full legal and practical implementation of Directive 93/109/EC on the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in elections to the European Parliament for citizens of the Union residing in a Member State of which they are not nationals;

1.7 **underlines** that early planning is essential to ensure that all non-national European citizens can vote or stand for election to the European Parliament in 2004;

1.8 **trusts** that that States and acceding States will take note of the conclusions of the Communication from the Commission on the application of Directive 93/109/EC to the June 1999 elections to the European Parliament COM(2000) 843 final with the view of addressing the problems identified;

1.9 **welcomes** the commitment made to date by Member States to inform non-national EU citizens of their voting rights by direct correspondence, where it is economic to do so;

1.10 **suggests** that national, regional and local authorities be called on to play a more active role in identifying and informing non-nationals of the procedure for registration and voting entitlements;

2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

Community action programme to promote active European citizenship

2.1 **urges** the Council to adopt this decision to ensure that this act enters into force as from the financial year 2004 and not halt the positive ongoing work carried out under the existing budget lines, town twinning etc.;

2.2 **urges** that every effort is made to create public awareness of the work of the existing groups which promote active citizenship;

2.3 **calls for** the EU website to have a link to such groups and that the reports, deliberations, findings and other details of relevance be accessible through the link;

2.4 **agrees** with the proposal that provision should be made for the geographic coverage of the programme to extend to Member States but **recommends** that the budget be enlarged by at least €50 million over the 5-year period of the programme to cover the future member states as this period is unique to the formation of impressions of European citizenship in the future new member states;

2.5 **urges** that the details of the grants, application forms and any other accompanying documentation which is made available at the time of "Calls for Proposals" is "user friendly" and can be easily understood.

Recommendation 1

Article 1 – (Programme objective)

<i>Text proposed by the Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
<p>1. This Decision establishes a Community action programme to support bodies working in the field of active European citizenship and to promote actions in this field.</p> <p>The programme shall have the following objectives:</p> <p>a) to promote the values and objectives of the European Union;</p> <p>b) to bring citizens closer to the European Union and its institutions;</p> <p>c) to involve citizens closely in reflection and discussion on the construction of the European Union;</p> <p>d) to intensify links and exchanges between citizens from the countries participating in the programme, notably by way of town-twinning arrangements;</p> <p>e) to stimulate initiatives by the bodies engaged in the promotion of active and participatory citizenship.</p>	<p>1. This Decision establishes a Community action programme to support bodies working in the field of active European citizenship and to promote actions in this field.</p> <p>The programme shall have the following objectives:</p> <p>a) to promote the values and objectives of the European Union;</p> <p>b) to bring citizens closer to the European Union and its institutions;</p> <p>c) to involve citizens closely in reflection and discussion on the construction of the European Union;</p> <p><u>d) to inform young people in particular of their European citizenship</u></p> <p>d <u>e</u>) to intensify links and exchanges between citizens from the countries participating in the programme, notably by way of town-twinning arrangements;</p> <p>e <u>f</u>) to stimulate initiatives by the bodies engaged in the promotion of active and participatory citizenship.</p>

Reason

The Laeken Declaration annexed to the conclusions of the European Council of 14 and 15 December 2001 asserts that one of the basic challenges to be resolved by the European Union is “how to bring citizens, and primarily the young, closer to the European design and the European institutions”. It should, therefore, be an objective of the programme to inform young people of their European Citizenship. Within the programme, priority should be given to encouraging the development of actions to achieve this objective.

Recommendation 2

General amendment

Replace

<i>Text proposed by the Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
municipalities	municipalities local and regional authorities

Reason

A number of Member States do not have municipalities as a level of Governance. The European Commission White Paper on Governance refers to the role of Local and Regional Authorities. It is considered, therefore, that the designations – "Local and Regional Authorities" – encompasses all levels of sub-Member State Governance and, therefore, these designations should be used.

Recommendation 3

New article to insert after article 3

<i>Text proposed by the Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
	<u>Article 3 (awareness-raising)</u> <u>Due to the specificity of the target users of this programme, special efforts are made to ensure that there is a high level of awareness of the existence of this programme by the European Commission and Member States</u>

Reason

Recent statements by the European Council, Commission and Parliament stress the need to promote active European Citizenship. The Commission's White Paper on Governance stresses the principle of Citizen Participation in devising and carrying out policy, of involvement of civil society and its component organisations. Therefore, every effort should be made to raise public awareness of the programme to ensure as high a participation rate as possible.

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2.6 **urges** those acceding States, that have not already done so to transpose the Directive 93/109/EC to ensure it is fully implemented in good time before accession;

2.7 **urges** that all non-national European citizens who will be eligible to vote or stand as a candidate as and from the date of accession be informed of that right in good time, and if possible earlier, so that they may exercise their right;

2.8 **urges** current Member States to make special efforts to register or compile lists of potential voters from the future new member states given the short period between the date of accession and the dates of the elections to the European Parliament;

2.9 **calls** for the European Commission to make the 2004 European Parliament elections a priority in its 2004 Communication Strategy;

2.10 **recommends** that in order to improve the awareness of all European Union citizens in relation to voting rights and the right to stand as a candidate in the 2004 elections to the European Parliament the following should be considered:

- Information campaigns using audio-visual and new technologies.
- Information literature through educational institutions, all national, regional and local bodies, hospitals, etc.
- innovative and cost-effective communications such as franking and branding of public correspondence and literature to include recognisable logos and free-phone information numbers;

2.11 **recommends** that as a way of informing non-national EU citizens of their voting rights, the literature which the host State sends to non-national EU citizens eligible to vote should be in the official languages of the enlarged EU, where it is economic to do so. Furthermore all official correspondence with non-national EU citizens should include details of contact numbers, for their information on voting rights.

Brussels, 20 November 2003.

The President
of the
Committee of the Regions

The Acting Secretary-General
of the
Committee of the Regions

Albert Bore

Gerhard Stahl

¹ OJ C 73, 26.3.2003, p. 53

² OJ C 192, 12.8.2002, p. 24

³ OJ C 256, 24.10.2003, p. 24

⁴ OJ C 73, 26.3.2003, p. 46

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CdR 170/2003 fin EN/vh

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