

**Committee of the Regions****CIVEX-V-036****99th plenary session, 31 January-1 February 2013****OPINION****Strengthening EU Citizenship: Promotion of EU Citizens' Electoral Rights****THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

- emphasises how important it is for EU citizens to participate in the democratic life of the European Union, not least in their country of residence. European citizenship, by involving citizens in the process of European integration and in the political process of their country of residence, helps to build European democracy;
- points out that a sense of belonging plays a key role in making the European Union comprehensible for citizens; it is therefore vital to strengthen their allegiance to Europe and their awareness of citizenship. Bringing citizens closer to the European Union using the available tools and measures is an ongoing task;
- emphasises that local and regional authorities play a key role in constantly promoting and raising awareness of EU citizenship and the rights associated with it. These bodies are closest to European Union citizens, and can make the biggest contribution to strengthening participatory democracy and raising awareness of the benefits offered by European integration;
- with regard to the 2014 European elections, emphasises the need to make EU citizens aware of their rights, and of their electoral rights in their countries of residence, and to facilitate the exercise of those rights;
- keeping the subsidiarity principle in mind, the Committee of the Regions encourages Member States to ensure that EU citizens can exercise their electoral rights by enabling them to vote not only in local elections but also in regional ones;
- with due respect to the principle of subsidiarity, suggests that Member States could explore measures which would make it possible to synchronise local and regional elections with European elections; believes that this could help to raise awareness of the impact of European, regional and local elections on the everyday lives of EU citizens.

Rapporteur

György Gémesi (HU/EPP), Mayor of Gödöllő

Reference document

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions – Strengthening EU Citizenship: Promotion of EU Citizens' Electoral Rights

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

EU citizenship and electoral rights

1. is committed to promoting the area of freedom, security and justice, and EU citizenship;
2. welcomes the 2013 European Year of Citizens, which will focus on EU citizenship; among other things, this will be a real opportunity to step up efforts to raise voter turnout in different level elections, with the involvement of the local and regional authorities and national bodies concerned, and of the main stakeholders shaping the political life of Member States and their citizens;
3. agrees that the 20th anniversary of EU citizenship introduced by the Maastricht Treaty and the 2013 European Year of Citizens represent a timely opportunity to raise public awareness of the rights and duties associated with EU citizenship, and to ensure that citizens' rights - particularly electoral rights - are fully exercised or even strengthened;
4. sees it as important to help support European citizenship and European rights, to promote and fully apply citizens' rights to vote and stand in elections as enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty, and at the same time to encourage electoral participation by guaranteeing the rights associated with EU citizenship and the exercise of those rights;
5. recalls that the instrument of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon, creates a new right of democratic participation at EU level which should play an important role in filling EU citizenship with life; therefore, calls on the European Commission to take all necessary action to promote this instrument;
6. emphasises how important it is for EU citizens to participate in the democratic life of the European Union, not least in their country of residence. European citizenship, by involving citizens in the process of European integration and in the political process of their country of residence, helps to build European democracy¹;
7. points out that a sense of belonging plays a key role in making the European Union comprehensible for citizens; it is therefore vital to strengthen their allegiance to Europe and their awareness of citizenship. Bringing citizens closer to the European Union using the available tools and measures is an ongoing task;

¹ CdR 355/2010.

8. stresses the importance of cooperation with the European Commission, the European Parliament, and local and regional authorities from all Member States in order to promote EU citizenship;
9. reiterates that establishing a genuine area of freedom, security and justice serving the citizen is highly important in an increasingly mobile world² and that the right to freedom of movement within this area is a key aspect of European citizenship;
10. stresses that EU citizens have the right to vote and to stand as candidates in municipal and European elections in the Member State in which they reside, under the same conditions as nationals of that State³;
11. points out that there are still some obstacles to the full exercise of electoral rights in everyday life, even though the Member States have already aligned their electoral legislation with EU directives⁴. These obstacles were mentioned by the European Commission in its reports on implementation of Directives 94/80/EC and 93/109/EC⁵;
12. welcomes European Commission initiatives to dismantle obstacles to the exercise of rights associated with EU citizenship; regrets in this context that some EU citizens cannot exercise their full rights as citizens, due to legislation in particular Member States which denies electoral rights to citizens that live or have lived outside the country of their nationality; calls on the Commission to encourage EU Member States to ensure that this fundamental democratic right is guaranteed for all EU citizens;
13. supports the European Commission's 2013 report marking the European Year of Citizens; offers to work together with the Commission on this report, which will describe progress since the 2010 report on EU citizenship, and recommend further measures;
14. emphasises that local and regional authorities play a key role in constantly promoting and raising awareness of EU citizenship and the rights associated with it. These bodies are closest to European Union citizens, and can make the biggest contribution to strengthening participatory democracy and raising awareness of the benefits offered by European integration. This should go hand in hand with specific activities geared towards information and education;

² CdR 201/2009.

³ Articles 39 and 40 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2010/C 83/02) and Article 20(2)(b) and 22 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

⁴ Directives 94/80/EC and 93/109/EC.

⁵ COM(2012) 99 final; COM(2010) 605 final.

15. points out that local and regional authorities must provide a sound basis for developing a strong and sustainable democratic culture at different levels. It is therefore of great importance that numerous citizens vote in local and regional elections and exercise their electoral rights; it is also crucial that democratic and civic education are promoted by local and regional authorities within the remit of their competencies, and that such education is based on everyday, real life experience of citizens of democratic processes and a culture of democratic governance;
16. encourages EU citizens to participate in local and political life and to exercise their electoral rights; at the same time, respects their freedom to choose whether they want to take part in local and European elections in their country of residence. To enable EU citizens to take informed decisions in cross-border situations, it is important for them to be aware of their rights in the EU Member State where they live;
17. is pleased that the Stockholm Programme⁶ also prioritises the fundamental right to free movement, partly by promoting and strengthening electoral rights, and increasing electoral turnout; also points out that it is not enough to establish rights - it is also important to ensure that they can be easily exercised. According to its political priorities for 2012, the Committee the Regions also "remains committed to contributing to the full delivery of the objectives of the Stockholm Programme and Action Plan"⁷;
18. welcomes the European Commission's intention to establish an informal forum with the Committee of the Regions as well as local and regional authorities and their associations, enabling direct dialogue on the exercise of electoral rights. The purpose of such discussion would be to facilitate and encourage debate and dialogue on EU citizenship, to identify themes and challenges, and to support the exchange of experience and best practices;
19. points out that the Committee of the Regions is planning numerous activities for the 2013 Year to help raise awareness of EU citizens' electoral rights and encourage the exercise of those rights⁸;
20. recalls that, in the 2013 Year of Citizens, the Committee of the Regions will organise a number of activities in close cooperation with the other EU institutions, particularly the European Commission. Activities will include: the dissemination of information, - presentations and visits to schools and universities by CoR members; workshops, public debates, meetings in town halls and media events involving local journalists, on the right to free movement, electoral rights, and the role of local and regional authorities; the provision of information on these activities online, together with documentation on the CoR EU

⁶ Council document 17024/09, adopted by the European Council on 10/11 December 2009.

⁷ CdR 361/2011 fin.

⁸ R/CdR 1030/2012 item 7.

passport in all official languages; and the presentation of best practices in decentralised communication on the EU at the annual EuroPCom conference;

Local and European elections

21. points out that, according to a report⁹ by the European Commission, voter turnout for EU citizens living in countries other than their own is on average higher for local elections than for European elections¹⁰; this is an important finding and would merit closer scientific investigation – in any case it shows that local issues do matter and motivate some citizens to engage. It is important to build on this momentum and try and explore which factors could also motivate people to engage in EU political matters and the European elections;
22. points out that getting more EU citizens with electoral rights to vote in local elections and fully exercise their rights remains a challenge;
23. feels that projects could be targeted at different age groups to raise awareness of the importance of voting in municipal and European elections, to foster a sense of belonging to a community, and to explain the resulting benefits. Such projects could involve electoral role playing, the exchange of experiences, the use of a variety of information channels, and underlining the relevance of decisions taken at local and EU level for the everyday lives of citizens in a given city or area, thus going a long way towards answering the question "what do I get out of voting?";
24. emphasises that further action is needed at all governance levels to increase voter turnout and the number of registered voters; it is also important to help overcome insufficient awareness of electoral rights and procedures, obstacles to voter registration and linguistic barriers;
25. recommends simplifying administrative procedures and calls on Member States to introduce appropriate e-services enabling EU citizens to exercise their electoral rights, particularly with regard to registration on electoral rolls; supports the exchange of best practices in this field;
26. agrees with the European Commission's idea that declaration of residence could automatically lead to automatic voter registration, and supports the Commission's efforts to that end. Simplified administrative procedures with regard to registration in electoral rolls could effectively contribute to integration as well as encouraging citizens to exercise their electoral rights;

⁹ COM(2012) 99 final.

¹⁰ Although some capital cities - Athens, Budapest, Copenhagen and Riga - were exceptions in recent elections.

27. encourages Member States to cooperate with local and regional authorities in drawing up reports and analyses evaluating how effectively EU legislation is transposed and applied, thus helping to share and disseminate experiences; these should be made publicly available by means of information and publicity systems;
28. based on the principle of multilevel governance, feels that it is important to ensure effective cooperation between different governance levels in order to find legal solutions to problems potentially arising from the application of national rules on conditions for exercising electoral rights, based on experience and taking expert recommendations into account;
29. encourages Member States to remove barriers to the exercise of voting rights and to enable EU citizens from other countries to stand as candidates and become politically active in their country of residence;
30. recommends that Member States set up contact points to help gather and regularly assess data on participation by EU citizens from other countries standing as candidates and being elected in their country of residence; this could also make it easier for Member States and EU institutions to share their experiences;
31. with regard to elections to the European Parliament, realises that the mechanism established by the EU directive to prevent EU citizens from voting or standing as candidates in two countries is still not sufficient; therefore supports the European Commission's efforts to draw up a new proposal in order to deal with this problem more effectively while making sure that the resulting legislation does not create new administrative hurdles for the exercise of the EU citizens' right to stand for EP elections in the country of residence;
32. with regard to the 2014 European elections, emphasises the need to make EU citizens aware of their rights, and of their electoral rights in their countries of residence, and to facilitate the exercise of those rights;
33. feels that European political parties are key elements in raising awareness of European policies and in expressing the political will of the EU citizens, and have to act as a bridge between national and EU political life; they represent citizens' views and enable public debate on European issues, while supporting interaction between all levels of the European Union's system of multilevel governance; encourages therefore the European political parties to intensify their activity and develop new means to create political awareness, for example by presenting leading candidates for top European office in European elections or by running trans-national lists in elections to the European Parliament;

EU financial programmes in support of EU citizenship

34. feels that it is important to raise EU citizens' awareness of their legal status and the rights and responsibilities associated with EU citizenship¹¹, and to support the potential of European projects and EU financial instruments to disseminate information, through conferences, seminars, training courses, the exchange of best practices, and cooperation activities, with a particular focus on the "Fundamental Rights and Citizenship" and "Europe for Citizens" programmes; encourages local and regional authorities to become actively involved in cross-border and town-twinning projects;
35. feels that the EU programmes which support EU citizenship are those whose overall aim is to support activities in the Member States to raise awareness of EU law and policies and support their implementation in the Member States, to promote cross-border cooperation, and to strengthen knowledge in different fields;
36. once again, draws attention to the relevance of support for various forms of territorial cooperation, thus enabling projects and initiatives to make EU citizenship more understandable and to reduce administrative burdens and barriers;
37. emphasises the need for a simpler and more efficient approach to financing EU citizenship related programmes, with better defined priorities, tying in with political priorities; calls for a focus on disseminating the results of projects to ensure greater visibility. Support is needed for training and awareness raising, while consolidating networks and facilitating cross-border cooperation, thus enabling general and specific political objectives to be achieved; at the same time, programmes to support EU citizenship must be made more attractive through more effective publicity and presentations in the Member States;

The role of education and youth in active European citizenship

38. stresses that, with the help of increased information activities and EU projects, there must be more of a focus on young people, with the involvement of schools and higher educational institutions. The role of education in promoting active citizenship among young people is emphasised in a Committee of the Regions own-initiative opinion¹²;
39. points out that education policy plays a key role in informing EU citizens and young people in particular of the idea of EU citizenship and associated rights, and should do much more to encourage multilingualism together with student and teacher mobility;
40. believes that young people must have a broad enough insight to act as informed citizens and voters. The issues at stake and the purpose of elections must be better explained to them;

¹¹ CdR 355/2010.

¹² CdR 173/2007.

41. points out that the Council of Europe has considerable experience in promoting educational networks and recommends cooperating and exchanging experiences, based on its work in this area;
42. believes that information campaigns can raise EU citizens' awareness of their rights and encourage them to vote. Partnership-based cooperation between schools, tertiary and other educational institutions plays a key role here; points out that there are many exchange students from other EU countries at colleges and universities, and such initiatives can encourage them to exercise their electoral rights;

Recommendations to increase voter turnout

43. points out that, based on experience, holding general elections at the same time as local or regional elections can boost voter turnout¹³;
44. recalls that its opinion on the Stockholm Action Plan¹⁴ urges all actors to consider how it could be made easier for EU citizens to take part in elections in their Member State of residence;
45. notes that, with regard to participating in local and European elections, the EU legislation in force does not envisage the full harmonisation of national electoral systems. Keeping the subsidiarity principle in mind, the Committee of the Regions encourages Member States to ensure that EU citizens can exercise their electoral rights by enabling them to vote not only in local elections but also in regional ones;
46. expresses its intention to actively support the development of the "Let me vote" European citizens' initiative;
47. with due respect to the principle of subsidiarity, suggests that Member States could explore measures which would make it possible to synchronise local and regional elections with European elections; believes that this could help to raise awareness of the impact of European, regional and local elections on the everyday lives of EU citizens;
48. acknowledges that there is considerable diversity in local and regional authority structures and in the legal and administrative traditions of the different Member States;

¹³ E.g. in Berlin, where municipal elections were held concurrently with regional elections; Rome, 2008; also, Koblenz 2009, United Kingdom 2010.

¹⁴ CdR 170/2010.

49. agrees with the European Parliament that European elections should be moved from June to May and believes that this can have a positive influence on voter turnout;
50. feels it is important to make EU citizens better informed, and more interested and motivated to vote; keeping in mind the subsidiarity principle and in order to increase voter turnout, recommends that the Member States consider in the long term if and how they could make electoral procedures more accessible, for example by enabling advance voting, electronic voting or mobile polling stations; due account should also be taken of the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which expressly require complete and unhindered access for elections too;
51. notes that despite specific measures to raise EU citizens' awareness of their electoral rights voter turnout varies considerably; therefore recommends encouraging and stepping up sharing of best practices on the part of local and regional authorities in order to foster the exercise of electoral rights;
52. emphasises that tying in the idea of EU citizenship with local and regional perspectives and reminding citizens of the role played by local and regional authorities in EU decision-making can encourage them to vote;
53. feels, as noted in its opinion on the EU Citizenship Report 2010, that it is important also to strengthen the political rights of third-country nationals. In several EU Member States, third-country nationals are entitled to vote and stand in local and regional elections; this is likely to increase interest in the elections among all foreign nationals, which will also increase demand for information materials in various languages;
54. recommends working towards broad cooperation between EU institutions, their representatives, Europe Direct centres, local and regional authorities, civil society organisations, and economic and social partners to ensure that all EU citizens of voting age are responsibly aware of their rights and how to exercise them;
55. feels that awareness-raising, information and education campaigns developed jointly by local and regional authorities, government agencies, civil society organisations and the media under the auspices of the European Year of Citizens should use simple, citizen-friendly language. The relevant publications and publicity materials should be available in all official EU languages;

56. emphasises the importance of EU institutions, Member States, and local and regional authorities working more closely with the press. The Committee of the Regions could launch a competition for the best and most accessible articles and reports on the subject of elections, citizens' rights and the different stages of electoral procedures.

Brussels, 31 January 2013.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions

Ramón Luis Valcárcel Siso

The Secretary-General
of the Committee of the Regions

Gerhard Stahl

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Opinion on Strengthening EU citizenship: Promotion of EU citizens' electoral rights
Reference(s)	
Legal basis	Art. 307 TFEU
Procedural basis	RoP 39 (b)
Date of Council/EP referral/ Date of Commission letter	-
Date of Bureau decision	17 July 2012
Commission responsible	Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX)
Date adopted by commission	4 December 2012
Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	Adopted by a majority
Date adopted in plenary	31 January 2013
Previous Committee opinions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Opinion of 18 July 2012 on EU Financial Instruments in Justice and Citizenship (CdR 13/2012)– Opinion of 31 March 2011 on the EU Citizenship Report 2010 (CdR 355/2010)– Opinion of 1 December 2010 on Delivering An Area of Freedom, Security and Justice for Europe's Citizens – Action Plan Implementing the Stockholm Programme (CdR 170/2010)– Opinion of 5 October 2009 on The Stockholm Programme: Challenges and Opportunities in View of a New Multiannual Programme on the EU Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (CdR 201/2009)– Opinion of 6 February 2008 on Promoting the Active Citizenship of Young People through Education (CdR 173/2007)
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	