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The European Citizens' Initiative: the Ombudsman is ready to help, if problems arise

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The European Ombudsman investigates complaints about maladministration in the EU institutions and bodies. Any EU citizen, resident, or an enterprise or association in a Member State, can lodge a complaint with the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman offers a fast, flexible and free means of solving problems with the EU administration.

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The European Ombudsman can help resolve problems that arise in the operation of the “European Citizens’ Initiative” (ECI), which will be launched on 1 April 2012. The ECI allows for one million EU citizens from at least seven Member States to call on the European Commission to propose legislation in areas falling within EU competence. The Ombudsman will be an important redress mechanism for individuals and organisations who have complaints about maladministration in the Commission’s handling of citizens’ initiatives.

Complaints may be lodged if problems occur in, for example, the following procedural stages:

- The Commission must decide within two months whether it will register a citizens’ initiative. Potential problems could include failure to reply to organisations wishing to register an initiative, delayed replies, or lack of transparency.
- The Commission can refuse to register an initiative, for example, because the field of the proposed action does not fall within EU competence. Organisers may challenge this decision in a complaint to the Ombudsman, as well as by going to court.
- The Commission has three months to examine an initiative which has received one million signatures and to explain which actions it will take. The Ombudsman could examine whether the Commission’s conclusions are reasonable and thoroughly explained.

It is important to point out what the Ombudsman cannot do in this area. Specifically, the Ombudsman cannot examine the substantive follow-up which the Commission decides to give to citizens’ initiatives. This is, rather, a political matter for the European Parliament to monitor.

The Ombudsman, **P. Nikiforos Diamandouros**, stressed: “The European Citizens’ Initiative is a key step forward in the democratic life of the Union. It is a concrete example of bringing Europe closer to its citizens. I am ready to help ensure that the relevant procedures and citizens’ rights are respected.”

The role of the European Network of Ombudsmen

The national ombudsmen in the EU may also find that individuals and organisations turn to them if they encounter problems with the operation of the ECI in the Member States. Such problems could be related, for example, to the procedures for certifying the national signature collection systems.