Voluntary organisations and foundations in Europe

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The Economic and Social Committee, which represents European citizens' organizations, welcomes the long-awaited Communication and appreciates the Commission's positive approach to voluntary organizations and foundations. The Committee feels the Communication should be followed up with concrete measures. In the run-up to the IGC, voluntary organizations had high hopes of an explicit reference to the sector's role being enshrined in the Treaty. The Committee regrets this did not happen, as it would have provided political recognition for the activities of the voluntary sector. The sector is, however, affected by the declarations adopted in Amsterdam on voluntary service activities and sport. In the run-up to EU enlargement, the Committee would call on the Commission to ensure that accession negotiations take account of the situation of voluntary organizations and foundations in the applicant countries, both in terms of legislation and other opportunities for full participation in European cooperation. Given the lack of information on the sector, the Committee believes it is essential to carry out regular surveys in order to be able to assess the development of voluntary organizations and foundations in all EU countries. The Committee would particularly emphasize the importance of voluntary organizations in bolstering democracy in Europe. They provide individuals with an outlet for their ideas, and an opportunity to work towards the goals they believe in; they can carry out meaningful tasks and find a place in society; they can make themselves heard, and influence and achieve change. In the Committee's view the subsidiarity principle should continue to be applied to legislation governing voluntary organizations and foundations. At the same time, the Committee would call on the Member States to review their regulations, to remove any obstacles to the variety and development of such bodies.