

THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS **INITIATIVE**

Power to the people?



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INTRODUCTION

“Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union”, article 10.3 of the Lisbon Treaty. This treaty, which enacts the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI), emphasizes citizens’ right to participate directly in the Union matters, including the right to petition and to contact the European Ombudsman. In our previous note, published last April as part of our European cycle leading up to the European elections, we outlined the European Citizens’ Initiative. However, despite being hailed as the “Participatory Turn” of the European Union (Aldrin & Hubé, 2016), this tool only garnered limited support from citizens. To date, only 10 initiatives have collected and submitted the one million signatures required to be examined by the European Commission. In light of these facts, we are compelled to question the reality :

has the European Citizens’ Initiative failed to fulfil its promises as a tool for empowering citizens?

In this note, we will first focus on understanding the shortcomings of the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) and the reasons it has not gained more traction. We will also explore potential solutions to address these issues. To do so, we will examine the ECI as a “potential” failed tool.

In the first section, we interviewed Daniela Vancic, European Programme Manager at Democracy International and a specialist on the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI), to gain insight into her political perspective on its shortcomings and potential solutions. This offers an opportunity to explore participatory democracy within the European Union. Amidst our critical assessment, we also offer a glimmer of hope and seek solutions to make the ECI a more widely recognised and effective tool for citizens. If the ECI is not currently serving as a tool for citizens, we will investigate how it could evolve into one. In the second part, which aims to be more practical, we will provide guidance on effectively utilising the ECI by drawing on best practices from past and current initiatives.



WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS' INITIATIVE ?

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) allows seven citizens from seven EU member states to come together around a common subject and form an organising group to propose an initiative to the European Commission. Once registered, this initiative has to collect one million signatures from across the EU to be presented to the European Commission for consideration and to have the opportunity to be debated by the European Parliament.

THE 6-STEP PROCESS

1

Establishment of a group of organisers

(7 European citizens residing in 7 different countries)

Registration of the ECI

2

3

Collection of the statements of support

At least 1 million signatures within 12 months (with a minimum threshold in at least 7 EU countries)

Verification of the statements of support

4

5

Presentation of the initiative

Presentation to the European Commission.

Examination of the initiative and response

Review by the Commission, **hearing** in the European Parliament, and **formal response** within 6 months (regarding a new legal act or otherwise).

6

1 THE ICE : ORGANISED, SIGNED AND ABANDONED BY CITIZENS ?



Interview with **Daniela Vancic**, European Programme manager at Democracy International.

The ECI is intended to be simple, enabling citizens to initiate proposals and collect signatures to bring them to the attention of the European Commission. Despite this simplicity, there is a noticeable disengagement from this tool among ordinary citizens, particularly when it comes to being an organiser. This disillusionment may lead some to view it as a failure. Do you share this perspective, and if not, why?

At Democracy International, we view the ECI constructively in the way that we want the ECI to develop even more as an instrument and have more impact. Now, I wouldn't say it is a failure. Currently, we have 10 successful and answered ECIs, and it has been in existence for about 12 years, almost one per year. In a scenario where we lack a European public sphere, that itself poses a challenge. So, I believe that the real problem with the ECI lies in fundamental issues such as **limited political impact** and the **challenges to communicate effectively across the EU with EU citizens**.

But we also have some unique features at the European Union level, such as the **ECI Forum** and the **Central Online Collection System**. At the national level in Germany, there is nothing even remotely similar. When the ECI Forum was established a couple of years ago, we witnessed a significant increase in successful ECIs. I think this is, in part, due to the assistance provided to organisers on how to effectively communicate their ECIs, offering them tips and guidance.

While labelling it a failure might be too strong, it still falls short of being a tool for the people. How can we enhance it, especially in terms of empowering citizens?

First, we have the possibility to revise the tool, which occurs every five years, and it can improve its effectiveness. In the previous revision, we saw the implementation of the ECI Forum, for instance.



However, the Commission decided not to revise the tool last year, as the latest version went into effect only 3 years ago. Furthermore, while the Commission provides the technical support for the development of the instrument itself, the Parliament has emerged as a real visionary on the ECI. Their report on the ECI called for a significant reform; it was quite ambitious, even proposing a progressive funding scheme for ECIs that are successful and those that are not. And we know that running an ECI is expensive (this would therefore allow more time to be dedicated to organising an initiative for 'everyday citizens'), and essentially only professionally run organisations, large coalitions, and networks can successfully manage one. Although this approach has its advantages and disadvantages, it reflects the reality of campaigning in Europe, given the absence of a European public sphere. Thus, substantial resources, and manpower are necessary for an ECI campaign to succeed over the course of a year.

Looking to the future, the ECI can really evolve as a participatory instrument is to fully scale it up from the agenda-setting instrument it is today to a real citizens' initiative right with impactful political power.

For example, in a time when we are discussing EU treaty change and democratic reforms as well as introducing EU wide referendums, the ECI would be the first step to ensure these democratic processes happen in a bottom-up manner that directly involves citizens.

[This is precisely the aim of this short interview; how can we shift from the current dominance of NGOs over the ECI towards a more citizen-centric approach?](#)

I don't think we can exclude NGOs from being involved in ECIs, nor should we. In the end, you also need professional and dedicated campaigners to run a successful ECI, and who better to do that than NGOs that focus on those very issues addressed by ECIs? However, to make it more citizen-centric, I believe **volunteerism** and the **multiplier effect** are crucial. **This would require centralisation and monitoring by an NGO or professional campaign team**, but they also need to reach a wider audience, encouraging individuals to tell their friends, get involved, donate, share on social media, and post videos on platforms like Instagram. This engagement is happening right now with several running ECIs, and I think it will be a key factor in the success of future ECIs.



Finally, on a broader note regarding participatory democracy at the EU level. The ECI is frequently depicted as the torch-bearer of participatory democracy in Europe, being one of its kind. Do you think the ECI remains the primary avenue for participatory democracy in Europe, or was it once the primary means and has now evolved?

I think next to elections, which is the most consequential democratic opportunity we have at the EU level, the ECI is the next most significant and impactful democratic instrument available to us (at the EU level). The ECI is unique in that it allows for grassroots participation, starting from an individual or group.

It enables individuals to build campaigns and mobilize masses of Europeans from the ground up.

This is what makes the ECI so powerful — every signature truly counts, and reaching the 1 million mark is a significant achievement. While we also have other participatory instruments today, such as citizens' panels, these are top-down approaches, giving them a more consultative role. So yes, in my view, at the EU level, the ECI is the second most powerful instrument available to citizens after European elections, granting us the right to participate as European citizens in a bottom-up manner.



2 TO HAVE POWER, YOU NEED TO HAVE KNOWLEDGE !



To give this note a guide-like feel with actionable tips, this part will focus on practical aspects organisers, including ordinary citizens, can implement when initiating a European Citizens' Initiative. Indeed, one of the critical areas needing improvement when we talk about the ECI is public awareness. This part aims to enhance the promotion of the ECI tool effectively from the project manager perspective but also from every citizen's point of view.

While we need to be practical about the ECI, it is not the perfect participatory tool, we must strive for its improvement and make the most with what we have. Therefore, we can provide a realistic understanding of what the tool is and highlight what we can do to make initiatives succeed.



Every time we have a new successful ECI, we build on success stories, we build on best practices, and that helps each one in the future.

Daniela Vancic



There is a strong ECI community, building on success stories, as Daniela Vancic highlighted. It is on this community (and especially the **ECI Forum**), that we rely on to share best practices.



KEY ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL ECI

1

Strategic Planning and Goal Setting : Before initiating a European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), it's crucial to strategically plan and set clear goals. Identify the purpose of the ECI, ensure it falls within EU competencies, and define measurable objectives.

2

Stakeholder Engagement and Partnership Building : Establishing partnerships with civil society organisations, NGOs, and relevant stakeholders to mobilise support, share resources, and amplify the campaign's reach.

3

Communication Strategy and Message Development :

- Develop a comprehensive communication strategy tailored to the target audience. **Craft clear and compelling messages** that resonate with supporters, highlighting the importance of the ECI and its objectives. Utilise various communication channels and platforms to effectively convey the message.
- Foster cohesion with a **slogan** like “cage fighter” or more recently “my voice, my choice”, this example can unify messaging and empower advocates.
- **Utilise important dates**, such as awareness days or relevant initiatives, to increase visibility and support. For instance, the 'Ban Conversion Practices in the European Union' initiative collected over 10,000 signatures in a single day during Pride Month, while the 'My Voice, My Choice' initiative gathered 30,000 signatures on International Safe Abortion Day. These examples demonstrate the effectiveness of leveraging such occasions.



4

Fundraising and Financial Management :

- **Secure adequate funding** for the ECI campaign by diversifying funding sources, leveraging in-kind donations, and implementing transparent financial management practices.
- Start fundraising efforts early **even before registration** with the Commission and ensure transparency by reporting donations exceeding 500 euros.

5

Community Mobilising and Grassroots Organising :

- **Mobilise communities** and grassroots organisations to actively participate in the ECI campaign. Empower individuals to take ownership of the initiative (provide template letter for recruitment), **organise local events**, and engage in outreach efforts to collect signatures and raise awareness.
- **Start Challenges** and encourage sharing with friends to expand reach and engagement
- **Regionalise the campaign** as much as possible (according to Daniela Vancic, you need to treat it as a national project rather than a European one). Relating to this, you can provide materials in specific national, regional, and local languages.

6

Advocacy and Lobbying Efforts : Advocate for the ECI's objectives through **targets lobbying efforts** aimed at policymakers and relevant stakeholders. Build alliances, leverage media coverage, and utilise lobbying tactics to influence decision makers and garner support for the initiative.



7

Digital Outreach and Social Media Engagement :

- Leverage digital platforms and social media channels to maximize outreach and engagement. Develop engaging content, **utilise influencers** to amplify the campaign's message and mobilise supporters online.
- Provide **campaigning materials and communication kits** to multipliers to enhance reach and engagement.

8

Evaluation and Continuous Improvement : Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the ECI campaign, collect feedback from stakeholders, and identify areas for improvement. **Continuously refine strategies**, adapt tactics, and learn from both successes and challenges to enhance the impact of your ECI campaign.

As a Citizen I can contribute :

I can **share the initiative** on social media platforms, promote it among my friends and family, and encourage others to sign. Going a step further, I can **volunteer** to support the organisers by reaching out to them and joining the campaign at a local, regional, or national level. If there is no ongoing campaign team in my area (or even my country), I can take the initiative to lead and dedicate my time to ensuring the success of the cause. Thus, as a citizen, I can not only sign the ECI, but I can also actively promote it. **This citizen-led promotion allows the ECI to become a genuine European initiative that engages individuals in a collective effort.**



A COLLABORATIVE MUNICIPAL APPROACH : A NEW PATH FOR ENHANCING ECIs ?



Introduction to a new approach

In contrast to the prevalent involvement of NGOs in ECIs, the past year marked a milestone with the emergence of a new type of ECI, one backed by a municipality and driven by citizens.

Rennes : A pioneering example

The city of Rennes initiated an ECI titled "Ensuring a Dignified Reception of Migrants in Europe," a noteworthy endeavour despite its lack of success.

According to Daniela Vancic, this was an unprecedented move, as cities rarely sponsor ECIs. This experiment highlighted the importance of collaborative efforts beyond individual cities. Rennes embarked on a citizen-led ECI, aiming to engage citizens in a participatory project with a European dimension. Citizens selected a project and decided on its theme through voting. This example demonstrates how citizen involvement can be harnessed in ECIs, with themes emerging from citizen input and support from municipal authorities.



Building a european network :

An ideal approach would involve establishing a network of cities across Europe, with each city endorsing the ECI and allocating resources for a unified campaign. This innovative model has the potential to yield positive outcomes, despite being relatively untested.

Future outlook?

Despite the challenges, could similar initiatives offer promising prospects for the future of the ECI? These efforts could pave the way for innovative methods of citizen involvement and engagement, contributing to the evolution of participatory democracy at various scales.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by consolidating the insights shared in this note, we equip both organisers and signatories with a comprehensive toolkit for navigating through the complexities of an ECI campaign. While these strategies have proven effective for some, it's important to acknowledge that success is not guaranteed. Dedication, persistence, and communication are essential, given that an ECI campaign demands year(s)-long commitment and meticulous planning with several actors.

Moreover, seeking support and guidance is paramount. The ECI forum serves as a valuable platform for accessing advice and resources, while engaging with professionals, such as legal experts, can provide invaluable assistance in drafting proposals.

Exploring the potential of this unique tool sheds light on the state of participatory democracy at the European level. By embracing the challenges and opportunities presented by the ECI, we contribute to the ongoing evolution of democratic engagement within the Union.

Ultimately, tools like the ECI pave the way for a more democratic and participatory European Union. Actively using, promoting, and exploring the ECI strengthens and reinforces democracy across the Union.

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SUMMARY



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This note provides organisers and signatories with vital strategies for successfully navigating the complexities of European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) campaigns. While the outlined approaches have demonstrated effectiveness, attaining success requires steadfast dedication, perseverance, and effective communication skills. Actively engaging with the ECI forum and seeking guidance from legal experts can significantly enhance a campaign's potential by offering essential resources and support.

Exploring the unique capabilities of the ECI illuminates the current state of participatory democracy within the European Union. By embracing both the challenges and opportunities the ECI presents, we contribute to the ongoing evolution of democratic engagement across the Union. Ultimately, leveraging tools like the ECI strengthens democracy and fosters a more participatory European Union, encouraging citizens to actively participate in shaping their future.

