ECI DAY 2016: Forging Change

Report on the ECI's greatest successes and disappointments

The ECI DAY 2016 took a close look at the state of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) four years after it was first launched. There was a clear division between the European Commission, which has concluded that more time and reflection are needed to review the terms and conditions of the ECI Regulation 11/2011, and other EU institutions, campaigners and civil society partners, who called for a revision of the ECI as a necessary step towards helping this instrument to grow and become more efficient and accessible to citizens.

During the conference, participants were asked to fill in two voting cards, labelled "ECI: greatest success" and "ECI: greatest disappointment" to share their ideas about the strengths and hopes that are associated with the ECI today and suggest areas where there is room for improvement. Here is a summary of their answers.

ECI's greatest successes

It exists!

The absolute number one response was that the ECI had been brought to life and had thus created a new dimension for citizens' involvement in EU policy making. It should not be underestimated that the simple existence of a transnational tool may have positive and far-reaching consequences:

- It allows citizens to raise issues of general concern to all Europeans even if the ECI is not registered;
- Campaigns may stir up debates on an EU level even if not successful (the potential of agenda-setting);
- Its existence confirms the need to include citizens in policy-making.
- It broadens and enriches democracy in the EU.

It is also important to mention that despite the difficulties faced, three ECIs have reached 1 million, which best demonstrates the need for the existence of a pan-European instrument.

"Over 6 million EU citizens have joined the debate about positive EU issues through the ECI."
Getting people involved

The ECI makes it possible for individual citizens to commit to a European cause – very many regular citizens are unaware of the possible ways in which they can influence EU politics. Thanks to the ECI, individual citizens may voice their concerns and, while running the campaigns, become more and better informed about EU functioning and policy making.

"The ECI's greatest success is the number of citizens who have participated in it".

Making transnational mobilization possible and raising public awareness

The ECI encourages citizens to get organised, create networks and work together across borders. At the same time, the general public becomes more informed on the issues included in the campaigns. For example, the Stop TTIP campaign, despite being refused as an ECI, gained a lot of momentum and attracted public and media attention, bringing various European stakeholders together as a result. It is also not without significance that with every ECI registration request, the European institutions receive a signal about the issues that prompt EU citizens to act.

"It is a pan-European tool which stimulates cross-national debates, and this has the potential to enhance the notion of EU citizenship."

More debate on participation and democracy on all levels

Discussing the transnational participative methods, building up a European public sphere, analysing the difficulties and looking for solutions – these topics now appear regularly on various programmes on a local, national and EU level. The ECI enhances the notion of EU citizenship and, potentially, may help to build and strengthen the European demos. It contributes to building up a community of Europeans dedicated to participation and democratic debate.

"Local level impacts and successes as a consequence of ECI campaigns (could be mentioned), as well as mobilisation of citizens at local and national level, e.g. Right2Water in Greece and Ireland or Stop TTIP mobilisation, (which was) unexpected yet not insignificant."

ECI's greatest disappointments

No impact

Only three ECIs managed to collect over 1 million signatures and overcome the technical hurdles of registration and running the campaign. No major political follow up was given to any of them by the European Commission. After four years of application these factors have become most alarming and demotivating for potential ECI organisers. The successful organisers are disappointed because even modest parts of their requests were refused. What is more disquieting is that not only is there no legislative follow-up to their proposals, but no dialogue or cooperation whatsoever – once the communication was issued, the dialogue with the campaigners stopped. The participants believe that there should be a more structured approach and a follow-up to all proposals, especially the
successful ones. The most frequent reply suggested obliging the European Commission to organise a referendum on the ECIs that reached the required million. The lack of political and legislative change leaves citizens with the impression that the Commission ignores their voice and that the ECI is only a decorative gadget to give citizens the impression of being listened to.

"All ECIs should become part of institutional debate."

**No revision by the European Commission**

After the mid-term review of the ECI Regulation, expectations were high to see a full-fledged revision in 2016. Participants were disappointed to find out that the Commission is still in a period of reflection and claims to require more time and analysis. It was pointed out that most of the institutional and social partners have by now produced reports, opinions and analysis and there is plenty of documentation of the existing problems that can only be solved by a reformed regulation and countless recommendations. The lack of a decision to review is a source of frustration and, more importantly, leaves citizens with the impression than professional lobbying is the only way to approach the Commission and influence its policy-making.

"The Commission does not seem to realise that citizens are frustrated by the lack of reaction on its part. The Commission is condemning its own tool, and thus makes people think: is the ECI a real tool or just a facade to pretend that the EU cares about citizens?"

**Lack of communication**

The participants called for much more communication about the ECI. EU citizens do not know about the tool and do not understand how to use it. Campaigning for an ECI consists mainly in explaining the tool itself. It is a general belief that more promotion of the ECI should be carried out by European authorities in the EU to make citizens aware of the ECI’s existence and thus make it easier for the organisers to collect signatures, allowing them to focus primarily on the content of their initiatives.

"Although it has existed for several years, EU citizens still do not know about the ECI. A vast amount of work still needs to be done in communication (what about a TV campaign?)."

**Technical hurdles**

Many comments referred to specific technical problems, such as:

- the launch date: time is lost at the beginning due to technical requirements and excessive bureaucracy, there is not enough time for a professional opening of the campaign;
- the complexity of legal and technical requirements: differing national registrations and confusing paper forms depending on the Member State and language;
- no central IT solution and complicated online collection system;
- the ECI is not cost-effective: the money invested goes to administrative problem solving and not to campaigning itself.
“The organisers have to dedicate 80% of their time to troubleshooting, complaint management, and solving administrative questions instead of campaigning for the cause.”

**Interest waning**

Participants also mentioned diminishing interest as a significant threat to the ECI. The difficulties piling up in front of the organisers discourage potential users of the tool from launching new campaigns, especially in view of the availability of other, easy forms of petitioning requiring only simple registration data such as a name, surname and an email. One may argue that they have little political impact, but since the ECI has not yet proven to have a greater impact, in the end citizens will be reluctant to choose something more complicated if the results are the same.

“(The ECI Day) made me realise that the European Commission has no political will to improve the ECI system which risks becoming obsolete in the face of the existing electronic ways of petitioning, e.g. Avaaz and other.”