

# ECI High-level Panel

## The ECI at a Crossroads - an Opportunity to Take a Step Forward

5 March | 09:00 - 10:30



**Co-organised by** Daniela Vancic (Democracy International), European Economic and Social Committee, and Carsten Berg (The ECI Campaign)

### Report

ECI Day 2024 commenced with a high-level opening session titled "The ECI at a Crossroads - an Opportunity to Take a Step Forward." The ECI, introduced 12 years ago, serves as a unique tool for European citizens to directly participate in the EU's democratic processes by proposing legislative initiatives to the European Commission. Despite significant progress related to the support infrastructure of the instrument, substantial challenges persist regarding the effective implementation of successful initiatives, raising questions about democratic integrity and the instrument's political impact.

The opening session began with two Slido questions to the audience to gather their assessment of the ECI :

1. From your perspective, do you consider the ECI has become more *user-friendly*, taking into account its support infrastructure (ECI Forum, Online Collection System, etc.)?
2. From your perspective, considering the successful ECIs which have received a response by the Commission, do you consider the ECI to be a *politically effective* instrument to influence EU policy decisions?

The audience's responses on Slido, in particular the clear agreement among participants that the ECI is either strongly or somewhat user-friendly instrument sends a strong message of ease of use and accessibility in the ECI's support infrastructure. While a majority consider the ECI somewhat effective in influencing EU policy decisions, a notable minority express skepticism or dissatisfaction, suggesting room for improvement in its political impact.

### *Debating the Political Impact of the European Citizens' Initiative*

The opening session underscored the ongoing debate regarding the political impact of ECIs. The strength of this impact is crucial in determining the credibility and relevance of the ECI as a democratic instrument. Speakers engaged in discussions aimed at addressing these challenges and exploring opportunities for enhancing the political efficacy of the ECI.

One of the primary discussions centered around the recognition of successful ECIs and the imperative to fortify the structural role of the European Parliament (EP) within the ECI framework. There was little point of contention that the ECI would stand to benefit from the EP playing a more assertive role in responding to successful initiatives. Tilly Metz, Member of European Parliament, in particular, advocated for measures to augment the EP's involvement, agreeing with the proposal that the EP should hold a plenary debate on successful ECIs following the public hearing. This proposal aimed to instigate greater inter-institutional scrutiny of the ECI process, thereby strengthening democratic accountability in EU decision-making. Pascal Learadini, Deputy Secretary General, Secretariat-General of the European Commission (EC) took the opportunity to underscore that the Commission's proposal for sustainable use of pesticides as demanded by the ECI 'Save the Bees' was rejected by the EP, highlighting that all institutions have a role to play in the ECI follow-up process.

Olga Kikou, ECI campaigner, provided illuminating insights into the ECI 'End the Cage Age', which served as a poignant illustration of the challenges associated with the ECI process in terms of follow-up. The initiative garnered widespread support from citizens and served as an exemplary ECI for how to organise and mobilize supporters. However, Kikou also highlighted the obstacles encountered during the implementation phase, including backtracking from commitments and delays in response from the EC. Carsten Berg, The ECI Campaign, further explained the implications of such a case, emphasizing the importance of ensuring the effective implementation of successful ECIs to uphold democratic integrity and maintain citizens' trust in the EU's decision-making processes.

Learadini addressed prevalent concerns regarding the EC's handling of successful ECIs, emphasizing the necessity for a broad impact assessment of the demands brought forward by initiatives. He highlighted that each ECI is an agenda-setter and underlined the EC's institutional role in the ECI, where it meets organizers twice after an ECI is successful. Learadini also stressed the surge in citizens' use of the ECI, considering four successful ECIs last year and one new ECI registered per month since the pandemic.

This discussion underscored the importance of accountability and transparency from EU institutions in following up on successful initiatives. Emily O'Reilly, European Ombudsman, provided valuable insights into the Ombudsman's role as a bridge between citizens and EU administration. O'Reilly emphasized the significance of transparency and underscored the moral and ethical responsibility of EU institutions to respect and uphold democratic instruments such as the ECI. She underlined a critical point that the wrong message is being sent to people about democracy if instruments like the ECI are not heard.

Olga Kikou emphasized the pervasive influence of lobbying within EU decision-making processes, raising concerns about the disproportionate sway held by lobbyists compared to ordinary citizens. Emily O'Reilly echoed these sentiments, highlighting the need to recognize the potential misuse of lobbying and its impact on democratic instruments like the ECI, urging for transparency and accountability in lobbying practices to ensure fair representation of citizen voices.

Hendrik Van de Velde articulated Belgium's commitment to citizen participation during its Council Presidency and underscored the broader perspective of the ECI's role in democracy. He emphasized the need to avoid viewing the ECI and broader EU issues in isolation, highlighting the EU as a democratic peace project and suggesting that citizen voices are indeed heard within the national perspective, especially in Belgium.

Tilly Metz, Olga Kikou, Emily O'Reilly, and Carsten Berg emphasized the need for bold steps to enhance the political impact of the ECI and ensure citizens' voices are heard and respected within the EU decision-making process.

To end, moderator Daniela Vancic, Democracy International, acknowledged the maturity of the ECI infrastructure over the years. While recognizing the instrument's developments on the support side, Vancic echoed the call for bold steps to enhance the instrument's political impact.

Overall, the session provided a comprehensive examination of the challenges and opportunities facing the ECI, underscoring the importance of continued efforts to strengthen its role as a vital instrument of participatory democracy in the European Union.