**Speech by Christa Schweng,**

**President of the European Economic and Social Committee**

**European Citizens' Initiative Day**

**3 June 2021**

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Dear Vice President Silva Pereira,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this 10th edition of the European Citizens' Initiative Day, on behalf of the European Economic and Social Committee and its partners, the European Committee of the Regions, Democracy International, the European Citizen Action Service, the ECI Campaign and Bertelsmann Stiftung.

We are meeting for the 10th time to celebrate this very important instrument of participatory democracy, the European Citizens' Initiative. As highlighted in the video, much has happened during the previous editions. Over the years, the ECI Day has become an important *rendez-vous* that the EESC, as House of the European civil society, is very proud to host.

The ECI is a unique tool to give a voice to European citizens. In that sense, the theme of today's edition is very clear "Empower citizens to impact the future of Europe".

Of course, our ECI days are a must for ECI activists and organisers. It is a chance to take stock of ECI's development, discuss best practices and create a space of networking. I am happy to say that over the years, this event has really raised the profile of the ECI, and played an important role in keeping it high on the EU's institutional agenda.

Unfortunately, we cannot meet in person this time so we decided to organise this event online and on two days. Today will be a full day of debates around the ECI tool. We will put the spotlight on the ongoing citizens' initiatives tomorrow.

Although the format is different this year, we hope that we will keep the spirit of this event and will make the most of this online edition.

As I pointed it out, the theme of this edition is 'Empower citizens to impact the future of Europe'.

And rightly so, one key feature of every participatory process is its impact. It is crucial since it determines its success in the eyes of the citizens, and encourages people to use it or not. The lack of impact can create disenchantment, disengagement and frustration among citizens.

It is only by increasing its impact that the ECI will become a strong tool, able to reconnect the EU with its citizens.

The track-record of the ECI is still in the making. Only six initiatives have managed to reach the required signature thresholds since 2012 and their impact has been so far quite limited and late.

However, there are also reasons to be optimistic:

• 2021 saw the first two pieces of legislation, inspired by ECIs, take effect:

• the Drinking Water Directive, which has been influenced by the Right2Water initiative and

• the so-called Transparency Regulation, which is a follow-up to the Ban glyphosate initiative and aims at increasing the transparency and quality of studies used in the scientific assessment of substances.

The Commission replied to an initiative, Minority Safepack, earlier this year and will reply to another one, End the cage age, in the coming weeks. We know that the organisers of the Minority Safepack have been disappointed by Commission's reply.

Of course, not all initiatives can get a positive reply from the Commission but I believe the Commission should always well explain its reasons from taking or not taking action. There is still a need to strengthen dialogue in that respect.

I would also like to stress that even if ECIs do not get an immediate positive response from the Commission, they can be stepping stones for the future.

Some initiatives, although they did not collect the necessary signatures, managed to impact the EU policy-making. One of the best examples of those initiatives is the Single Communication Tariff Act on the abolition of roaming fees. This initiative was among the first ones to be launched in 2012.

Today, we will listen to different stories of initiatives and whether and how citizens have achieved success and we will try to draw lessons from these past cases on how to make the ECI more impactful.

Of course, we will keep in mind the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe. The Conference's main aim is to engage with citizens and involve them in policy-making and shaping the future. Engaging citizens helps develop policies that are adapted to their needs, that are better accepted and thus better implemented. This is particularly important when there are reforms going on for recovery and future resilience agenda.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is also an opportunity to inform or remind citizens about their citizens' rights and the existing mechanisms to make their voices heard.

In this respect, the Committee too has a role in the promotion of active citizenship. I am happy to that an updated version of the online European Democracy Passport has just been published on the EESC website. The passport explains the rights of EU citizens and what options they have for influencing issues that matter to them. Its author, Bruno Kaufmann, will speak about it in the last session of today.

Finally, there is another novelty this year: several ECI Ambassadors, from the programme launched by the European Commission to spread the word about the ECI, are organising activities in the countries around the ECI Day, this week or next week. Thanks to them, the ECI Day will also be celebrated in France, Spain, Cyprus, Poland and Hungary.

For this opening session, I am glad to be joined by Mr Silva Pereira, Vice-President of the European Parliament in charge of European Democracy and the European Citizens' Initiative.

Ms Vera Jourova, European Commission Vice-President in charge of the ECI, could unfortunately not participate but she has sent us a video message. Let us first listen to her.

Thank you very much.