



RECOMMENDATION

Ad hoc Group on the European Citizens' Initiative

Functioning of the European citizens' initiative 2020-2022

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1. Introduction

With the new [Regulation \(EU\) 2019/788 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the European citizens' initiative](#) entering into force on 1 January 2020, the European citizens' initiative (ECI) is moving into its next phase, proposing substantial improvements and changes to the instrument.

In line with Article 25 of the Regulation, the European Commission is currently working on its first review of the functioning of the initiative under the new rules.

This recommendation thus aims to feed into the ongoing Commission review in order to further improve the initiative as a unique cross-border tool for participatory democracy. In this context, it is also important to consider the discussions and outcomes of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#), in particular the proposals on European democracy, such as proposal 36 aiming to increase citizen participation and youth involvement in democracy at the EU level, primarily by improving the effectiveness of existing tools and developing new citizen participation mechanisms by better informing about them.

The document itself builds upon the recommendations made by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in its opinions¹ on the ECI tool, and draws conclusions from its flagship ECI Day events held in 2020, 2021 and 2022, as well as discussions from meetings of the EESC's ad hoc group on the European citizens' initiative (AHG ECI) during the given period.

2. Background

As a first and unique transnational tool for participatory democracy in the world, the ECI is a source of inspiration and an example of the adaptability of Europe's institutions, and their capacity to involve citizens in policy-making. The initiative is a key part of making democracy fit for the future.

As an instrument that allows people across Europe to make their voices heard and formally recognised, and that puts issues onto the Commission's agenda, the ECI has a strong potential to help overcome the democratic deficit by promoting active citizenship and participatory democracy.

Regulation 2019/788 introduced major changes and improvements to the ECI mechanism. Despite the fact that its implementation was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, some positive effects can already be seen. A number of improvements are certainly making the tool easier to use, for example more support for organisers (ECI Forum, contact points in the Member States), more flexibility for the organisers to choose

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See in particular EESC opinion on the [Regulation on the European citizens' initiative](#) (2018, SC/49); and that on [The European citizens' initiative \(review\)](#) (own-initiative opinion) (2016, SC/43).

the starting date of their collection campaign, a free-of-charge online collection system, and an extended examination period for successful initiatives.

While the overall feedback so far is positive, there appear to be several weaknesses in how the ECI works, particularly in terms of its relatively low political **impact** and **visibility**, its **deliberativeness**, and its **financial** and **digital dimension**, as well as the level of **awareness** among citizens.

3. Recommendations

Beyond the ECI rules themselves, AHG ECI notes an urgent need to improve two major aspects of the instrument: public awareness on the tool's existence and the impact of successful initiatives. This includes making citizens aware of the follow-up given to initiatives they have signed.

3.1 Visibility and awareness of the ECI tool

Different surveys and studies suggest that only a small minority of EU citizens are aware of the existence of the ECI tool and have actively participated in it².

There is **much room for improvement in visibility³ across Europe**. AHG ECI therefore calls on the Commission to step up its efforts and upgrade its ECI-related communication campaign and the way the ECI is being promoted⁴.

AHG ECI stands ready to work together with the Commission and support increasing ECI visibility within its remit.

Awareness of the ECI goes hand in hand with its impact. While the ECI cannot be an efficient tool if it remains relatively unknown, a more successful ECI⁵ would become better known and more widely used.

² Bertelsmann Stiftung, Under construction, Citizen Participation in the European Union, (2022): "Only a small fraction of the EU population has actively participated in an ECI so far. Around ten million ECI signatures have been collected. Even if these were all different citizens, it would only account for roughly 2.5 percent of the EU's overall voting-age population".

³ In its opinion on the *ECI review* (SC/043, 2016), the EESC suggested "providing the public with more information and raising awareness of the ECI mechanism through ad hoc campaigns, enabling citizens' committees to inform signatories about the results achieved and, above all, through greater commitment by the Commission to publicising the follow-up to successful initiatives".

⁴ A more targeted approach is needed, for example to ensure that journalists are aware of this tool, particularly in big newspapers). Also needed is more promotion in Member States, more appointed ambassadors in all EU countries, and conversations with students, working together with celebrities on ECI promotion.

⁵ ECI figures are rather sobering, with only 9 successful and 2 implemented initiatives over the 10 years that ECIs have been active.

3.2 Follow-up and impact of the initiatives

AHG ECI underlines the importance of active citizen participation in shaping and reinforcing EU democracy. In this context, it highlights that impact is a key feature of every participatory process.

If EU citizens are to genuinely participate in EU policy-making, in particular in ECI as a tool for participatory democracy, their voices must be heard, and a follow-up to their requests ensured. A low impact can only widen citizen disengagement and frustration.

It is thus crucial for the EU institutions to significantly increase their responsiveness. AHG ECI therefore calls for an appropriate follow-up to successful initiatives⁶ to be made obligatory.

Moreover, **closing the feedback loop** is important. Dialogue with the organisers should be strengthened during the examination procedure and after the Commission's initial reply, specifically by involving organisers in the Commission's activities related to the subject of their ECI. The impact must also be better communicated and highlighted, and success stories and achievements shared with citizens in order to increase the trust in and the use of the ECI tool in general.

3.3 Youth involvement

The EESC considers it crucial to ensure that young people have a say in decisions that directly or indirectly affect their future, and points out that the meaningful participation of young people in policy- and decision-making processes can support better regulation and policies. It therefore calls for measures and mechanisms to ensure that the youth perspective is taken into account in every policy field⁷. Recognising this need to better support our youth and re-connect with them in the democratic process, the AHG ECI pays particular attention to the involvement of young people in citizen initiatives.

Future generations should be encouraged to make use of this powerful tool to influence policies that ultimately impact them. Besides further simplification and awareness-raising, the AHG ECI stresses the

⁶ EESC opinion SC/049 (2018): "With this goal in mind, the EESC would hope to see all the EU institutions equally involved in creating opportunities for the organisers to present and debate their initiatives, in line with the EESC's example of inviting ECI organisers to various debates".

EESC opinion SC/043 (2016) calling on the Commission to "prepare a legislative proposal within 12 months of the end of the campaign or supplying appropriate justification for the decision not to present a proposal".

Other forms of follow-up might include impact assessments, seminars, debates in national parliaments, and connecting ECI with other existing participation instruments – such as the Commission's online consultations and European Parliament petitions. A Citizens' Assembly should be set up for each successful initiative.

⁷ EESC opinion on [The EU Youth Test](#) (2022, SOC/728).

value of and the need for further debate to decide on **lowering the minimum age requirement**⁸ for supporting an ECI⁹.

Moreover, for interested and confident EU citizens to use the instrument, the EU needs to focus on **making sure they understand how democracy works for them**. As an innovative transnational feature in the participatory democracy toolbox, the ECI should be part of a comprehensive, informative and educational support package provided by governments at all political levels.

For awareness-raising, efficient communication is key. Based on a poll carried out under the 2022 European Year of Youth, more than 80% of young people said they preferred to receive information through **social media**. Different social media platforms, complemented by cooperation with influencers, apps and other tools, should therefore be used to increase youth involvement in the democratic process.

3.4 Shortcomings in registration

While welcoming the progress achieved so far, the AHG ECI notes some shortcomings in the registration process.

The admissibility of an initiative that falls within the Commission's competence, even if confirmed in the registration phase, is not definite. The Commission can still carry out an in-depth analysis once the ECI is submitted as a successful one and decide to revoke its admissibility. This can lead to frustration among organisers, supporters and other stakeholders, ultimately deterring them from making use of ECI tool in the future.

At the same time, the Commission must adopt clear and straightforward procedures and provide detailed answers and possible solutions when initiatives are declared inadmissible (be it partly or fully), enabling organisers to amend and present them again¹⁰.

Another risk is linked to potential **conflicts of interest**. The Commission's dual role of institutional mentor and decision-maker at registration should be shared with another EU institution¹¹.

⁸ On 1 January 2023, Germany became the 6th Member State to lower the minimum age from 18 to 16 years.

⁹ EESC opinion SC/049 (2018).

¹⁰ EESC opinion SC/043 (2016).

¹¹ EESC opinions SC/049 (2018) and SC/043 (2016).

3.5 Central collection system vs. individual systems

AHG ECI acknowledges the advantages offered by a central online collection system (for example in terms of budget and timing) and the Commission's efforts towards its continuous improvement.

Nevertheless, it regrets that the possibility for organisers to use independent online collection systems will not be maintained beyond 2023. Independent systems give more freedom to organisers in the way they manage their campaigns. Despite the challenges an individual signature collection system brings (data protection requirements, costs and time burdens), an independent campaign website would allow access to more statistics and a more engaging tool, with direct access to the organiser's own database.

Use of the Commission's **central online collection system should therefore be optional, not mandatory**, so that ECI organisers maintain the right to use certified alternative collection software if they prefer to do so.

3.6 Personal data

Signing an ECI appears to be more complicated than signing other petitions. **Personal data that signatories are obliged to provide could be an obstacle** in collecting the 1 million signatures needed for an ECI, as many people are not willing to provide their data, especially through the Commission platform.

In this context, AHG ECI points out that it is more difficult to collect signatures in some countries than in others due to the types of data the signatories are obliged to provide¹².

The Commission should therefore negotiate with Member States to further simplify, reduce and harmonise the system of national standards laid down for the collection of data¹³.

3.7 Financial dimension

The ECI tool should be accessible to all EU citizens. However, running an ECI not only requires extensive time commitments, preparation, and dedication, but often comes with substantial costs. It is thus not possible to campaign for a successful initiative without involving major organisations and interest groups.

As a matter of political equality, the AHG ECI therefore reiterates its call for, in principle, every EU citizen to be able to organise an ECI, by guaranteeing the option of **covering a campaign's unavoidable expenses**

¹² Depending on the Member State, signatories are required to provide their national identification number / personal identification document, or residential address.

¹³ EESC opinion SC/043 (2016).

for registered ECIs¹⁴. This could be done, for example, by giving guidance on the use of EU funding programmes, and providing reimbursements once an ECI reaches certain level of support.

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¹⁴ EESC opinion SC/043 (2016).