



Conference Report

The aim of the event, marking the first anniversary of the launch of European Citizens' Initiatives (ECIs), was to gather the experiences of stakeholders, draw conclusions and devise intermediate solutions to current problems while looking ahead to the 2015 revision of the regulation. The conference was organised by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in partnership with the Committee of the Regions (CoR), the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS), Democracy International, the Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe (IRI) and media partner Euronews and was attended by around 220 participants.

Evaluation of the first year of ECIs:

The EESC president Staffan Nilsson opened the conference and expressed the EESC's support and role in the citizens' initiative. He made it clear that the Committee, as the EU body representing organised civil society from all Member States, was there to make this tool work in an impartial and independent way. They offer a platform and visibility for organisers of initiatives in a neutral way (equal treatment to everyone) as long as they do not go against fundamental rights and EU values. Staffan Nilsson expressed his support for the creation of any structure that can make things easier for the organisers: "Often it is more a matter of pooling resources than finding resources! So we believe in alliances and collective actions that could create and run an independent supporting structure, such as an independent help-desk or a one stop shop or contact point". In addition to the role of a communicator of and facilitator for citizens' initiatives, the EESC President also positioned the Committee as an institutional adviser and mentor, helping the EU institutions to evaluate the process and advise on improvements, with specific proposals in time for the 2015 regulation revision. However, Staffan Nilsson concluded by saying that "we are not there yet. Let's be patient, learn by doing, support citizens' initiatives to develop and make it."

Following pledges from leading representatives of both the EESC and the Committee of Regions (CoR) to cooperate and support the development of ECIs, the responsible Vice-President from the European Commission, Maroš Šefčovič, outlined the state of play with ECIs one year after the launch of the regulation. 25 ECIs have been proposed; of which 16 were registered, 14 are ongoing and one is under discussion. One initiative has reached the target of 1 million signatures, although national quotas still have to be fulfilled.

Having recognised the problems surrounding the Online Certification System (OCS) for signature collection and outlined the Commission's response, Mr Šefčovič spoke of his vision for the future of ECIs. Long-term decisions regarding the OCS, notably whether it should be centralised or decentralised, need to be taken. Concerning communication, the Commission should do more to disseminate information about the ECI in general, starting with use of the website and social media for the European Year of Citizens 2013. In terms of individual ECI campaigns, the Commission's role is limited by neutrality but Šefčovič stated his support for an independent civil society contact and advice point and stressed the need for ECIs to prepare their efforts in advance. The Vice-President also called on Member States to do more, both via correctly implementing the Regulation and promoting the ECI concept in national languages. The long-term possibility of a European e-card enabling simpler signature collection was also raised.

Mr Šefčovič concluded by welcoming a debate regarding changes to the regulation in 2015, while recalling that new issues may arise in the interim during the verification process and eventual treatment of successful ECIs by the institutions; steps that will be tested for the first time in the coming 12 months. Finally, the Vice President reasserted his support for the tool, which he considers the first step towards European transnational e-democracy.

Gerald Häfner, MEP, underlined the importance of ECIs as the first step towards making citizens' voices heard at EU level. He encouraged reform to start as early as possible; pointing out that certain changes can be made without legislative reform. He went on to suggest the creation of a single website for ECIs and higher profile communication from the EU institutions, an extension of the time for signature collection, a broadening of the Regulation to enable ECIs to demand treaty change and quicker and more specialised advice services.

Bruno Kaufmann's assessment of the first year of ECIs firstly focused on the positive fact that a new procedure, enabling the innovative principle of transnational, direct and digital democracy has successfully been put into practice and used for a variety of purposes. He then identified the challenges ahead. Communication regarding ECIs must be increased; Kaufmann suggested the Presidents of the main EU institutions write and send a letter to every household across Europe informing them about the ECI, together with the announcement of the forthcoming European Parliament elections. Usability, notably in the area of online signature registration, must be improved. Finally, he called for reform, through revision of the regulation, recommending simplified signature gathering rules and extending the capabilities of the tool in order to match the EU institutions' ability not just to implement, but also to amend, the Treaties. Ultimately, for the ECI to be a lasting success, the mechanism must be given prominence by the EU and receive the level of resources that reflects this.

Bruno Kaufmann's chart, showing the progress of the individual ECIs in the first year, can be found here: <http://www.ecas-citizens.eu/content/view/489/>

How to devise a professional campaign and keep the momentum:

Carmen Dupont, Amnesty International's European Campaign Coordinator on Migration, presented the crucial elements of running a successful campaign; having a clear direction, forming networks, possessing passion, being innovative and providing regular and clear communication.

A range of ECI organisers then spoke of the difficulties they have encountered in terms of communication. The recurrent themes were:

- Language barriers: both rejection of official translations by the Commission and the difficulties of achieving outreach to different Member States.
- Problems encountered with the online signature collection system: Independent systems are expensive and time-consuming to establish and host. The system offered by the European Commission was delayed and many problems remain with its design.
- Complicated and diverging data protection rules and authorities in different Member States.
- Lack of necessary resources: discussions showed that a general estimate for the cost of running an ECI is €1 million, while most organisers are working part-time or volunteering.
- Certain EU citizens are currently denied their right to sign ECIs.

The restrictions, in particular related to data protection and signature collection, are highly significant in explaining why large organisations such as Amnesty International have so far shown no interest in creating an ECI. Further concerns were raised regarding the potential treatment of double signatures, although Mr Šefčovič reasserted the Commission's intention to facilitate the signature verification phase by ensuring regulations are sufficiently lenient and by allowing random sampling.

Signing made easy: how to improve the online collection system:

Carsten Berg, ECI Campaign, underlined the importance of an effective open source online collection system in the knowledge that between 80% and 90% of signatures have been collected in this way. He called for cooperation in order to overcome the difficulties met up to now.

Francisco Gimeno of the European Commission and Xavier Dutoit, an IT developer from Tech to People, disagreed on the functionality and user-friendliness of the European Commission's OCS, based in Luxembourg. Dutoit's criticism focused on three elements of the OCS from a campaigning point of view. Firstly, the design is unattractive and fails to engage citizens, lacks links to the ECI websites and is provided in a uniform and fixed format. Secondly, technical problems regarding the recognition of valid identification have been experienced in several Member States. Finally, the Commission was criticised for failing to test the OCS for peaks in signature collection; a claim rejected by Gimeno. The latter went on to claim that the OCS meets the standards and restrictions laid out in the Regulation and has been proven to work in practice.

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/eci-day-2013---session-ii---francisco-gimeno-dg-digit.pdf>

Aleksi Rossi, IT expert from Open Ministry, drew conclusions from his experience working with the OCS for the citizens' initiatives in Finland, which has proved to be successful. He compared the developing process he has worked on with that of the European Commission, showing the flaws in

the current technical set up. (<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/eci-day-2013---session-ii--aleksi-rossi.pdf>)

Gilles Feith, Deputy Director of Centre des Technologies de l'Information de l'Etat (CTIE), the organisation responsible for certifying the central OCS run by the European Commission, outlined his recommendations for improving the current system. He advocated providing regular feedback to ECI organisers, reviewing the ECI timeline, removing certain security requirements, supporting appearance customisation and maintaining centralised hosting. The latter issue provoked a variety of reactions, ranging from those in favour of independent hosting to those who believe the Commission's management is a source of reassurance for users. Finally, Feith supported the earlier long-term suggestion of introducing online electronic signatures.

(<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/eci-day-2013---session-ii---gilles-feith.pdf>).

It was widely felt that a simplification of the Regulation regarding personal data collection would facilitate the accessibility of and participation in ECIs.

Insights from the preparatory sessions held on 19 March on the assessment of the first year of ECIs: 'ECIs- A case for orientation or re-orientation?'

Encouraged by Mr Šefčovič's openness to reform, Tony Venables, ECAS, presented the recommendations agreed at the conference on 19 March (see in full: http://www.citizenhouse.eu/images/stories/10_recomandations.pdf). Simplifying the ECI procedure, by establishing a single data protection authority and regulation and removing ID requirements for signature collection in all Member States, was emphasised. Extending the signature-collection period would increase chances of success. In the same vein, the long-term objective of using a European e-card for voting should be officially established. In terms of communication, the Commission and Member States should do more to disseminate information on ECIs in general. Writing their obligation to do so into secondary legislation was proposed and Kaufmann's suggestion of a letter being sent to each European household supported. Finally, an independent civil society help-desk for ECIs is needed. Mr Venables warned, meanwhile, that the upcoming signature verification stage is likely to present new issues and recognised the desire of some at the earlier conference to go beyond the above measures by pushing for Treaty reform.

All the panellists agreed on the need for civil society organisations to join forces in creating a single independent help desk for ECIs. There was widespread agreement with Daniel Schily's (Democracy International) view that the Commission cannot be expected to perform this role. In a meeting hosted by the EESC President before the conference, ECI Campaign, ECAS, Democracy International and Euractiv agreed to work towards this aim, initially through the establishment of an online platform gathering existing information on ECIs and the creation of a network of jurists. During the same informal brainstorming meeting on supporting structures, civil society organisations around the table expressed the need for each EU institution to clearly state the list of support services they can concretely offer to citizens' initiatives. A Round Table meeting with EU institutions could be convoked and facilitated by the EESC, however this was something to be decided by the EESC at political level in the near future. A distinction should be drawn between official contact points run at local level by the Commission and the civil society help desk, run by NGO professionals, with the aim

of pre-assessing individual ECIs' chances of success, facilitating synergy and alliance building and devising effective communication campaigns. Christophe Leclercq, Euractiv, emphasised that the new helpdesk must tackle the issue of communication. Too much focus has so far been placed on the ECI procedure itself, to the detriment of alliance building, outreach and anticipation of the EU policy response to successful ECIs in the future. The first joint actions to be taken are a survey gathering the experiences of ECI organisers and the writing up of 2 pages of recommendations for the next meeting on ECIs in November.

Carsten Berg, meanwhile, called for the role of each of the institutions to be clearly defined in relation to ECIs. The Commission should provide comprehensive help with the translation of official documents, offer initial contact points and basic advice. The Council must support the implementation of the ECI Regulation at Member State level. The EESC should adopt a more central role; offering ECIs a platform and forming a link with the institutions.

(<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-eci-day-2013-presentations>)

The report of the 19 March conference, as well as documents released during the event, can be found here: <http://www.ecas-citizens.eu/content/view/489/>

The way forward: creating ECI 2.0

Bruno Kaufmann concluded the event by identifying three key areas for development: the removal of current barriers to accessing ECIs, strengthening the tool's power by enabling Treaty change, and increasing communication. The point at which the content, rather than the procedure, of ECIs becomes the headline will signal the tool's success.

Maureen O'Neill of the EESC and Gerald Häfner MEP reasserted their commitment to ECIs on behalf of their respective institutions. The EESC sees its role as a neutral facilitator of ECIs; enabling ECI organisers to meet in their premises and make coalitions and exchange on the content of their initiatives, thus giving initiatives a voice within the institutions. The EESC has made a commitment to participation in communicating about the ECI at the local level, where it is most needed. The Committee will continue to gather stakeholders to discuss ways of improving the ECI procedures, making it more accessible, and most importantly will seek to find ways of involving people in citizens' initiatives, which is much more of a challenge. The European Parliament, as the representative institution of Europe's citizens, should back the ECI as a means of bringing citizens closer to EU decision making.