

## **Speech by Frans Timmermans, First Vice-President of the European Commission, at the European Citizens' Initiative Day 2019**

*European Economic and Social Committee, Brussels, 2 April 2019*

I would like to thank the European Economic and Social Committee for once again hosting European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) Day. I appreciate your continuous commitment to promoting citizen participation in the EU democratic process.

This is the fourth time I am taking part in ECI Day. Today's event comes at a pivotal moment. You will recall that two years ago, here at ECI Day, I announced the reform of the European Citizens' Initiative Regulation. This is now on the brink of being completed. The Parliament and the Council reached a political agreement on the Commission's proposal on 12 December 2018. There was a positive vote of the European Parliament on 12 March 2019. We expect the new Regulation will be formally signed in Strasbourg later this month after the Council has also approved it.

I will come back to the improvements that this reform will deliver in order to make the European Citizens' Initiative more user-friendly. But first let me say some words about another motive for celebration. It has to do with the state of play of ongoing initiatives.

A lot has happened since we last met. Over the past twelve months, the Commission has received no less than 17 registration requests (including as many as 9 since the beginning of 2019). We have already registered 10 initiatives and are still processing the others. This is still the beginning of the year and we should therefore expect others to come. If the current pace is maintained in the coming months, 2019 will be an all-time record for the ECI! This unprecedented increase is very promising. And 2020 may deliver even more impressive results, when the ECI will become easier and simpler to use.

These encouraging developments can – if not entirely, at least in great part – be attributed to the communication campaign and to the online collaborative platform which we initiated a year ago with support from the European Parliament. The communication campaign entitled *You Take the Initiative* was launched at last year's ECI Day. Since then we have engaged with targeted stakeholders across the Union so they can act as multipliers and spread the word on the ECI. We also invested heavily in reaching out to the wider public via digital solutions, such as social media.

We have also addressed another shortcoming of the ECI outlined by many of you over the years, namely the insufficient level and quality of the assistance provided to organisers and potential organisers of citizens' initiatives. We launched the new ECI online collaborative platform, and tested it in a stakeholder participatory workshop here at ECI Day last year, some weeks before the platform went live. I am pleased to report the first results are positive. The organisers of some of the recent initiatives submitted to us have made extensive use of the various services provided by the platform. That includes the independent advice and support mechanism and the discussion forum.

Both the awareness-raising activities and the platform have proved their worth and are now embedded in the future regulatory framework as intrinsic parts of the ECI ecosystem. They are here to stay and will expand further. We are currently in negotiations on the next long-term budget for the EU (the Multiannual Financial Framework) and I am confident that funding to support these ECI actions will be included in the future Rights and Values programme.

In addition to the newly registered initiatives, we may also soon see an increase in the number of successful initiatives. The organisers of the initiative *Minority SafePack* (for the promotion of national minority rights and the promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity) have indicated they have reached the required thresholds. We hope they will soon submit their initiative. We also hope to hear soon from another initiative, *Stop Extremism*, for which the stage of verification of signatures is about to be completed.

At this point, it is worth stressing that whether an initiative is successful is not only a question of whether it is admissible, or whether it meets the necessary thresholds in terms of signatures. Even if it does not, it can still be an expression of a political concern on the part of citizens, which the EU institutions can and should take note of, and which can be the basis of a political debate.

As concerns the follow-up we are giving to previous successful initiatives, I am pleased that political agreement was reached in February this year on the legislative proposal related to transparency and sustainability of EU risk assessment in the food chain. This proposal was a follow-up to the *Ban Glyphosate* initiative.

Another major legislative proposal the Commission tabled last year is under discussion in the Council and in the Parliament. I refer to the revision of the Drinking Water Directive inspired by the *Right to Water* initiative. The draft legislation would oblige Member States to improve access to safe drinking water for all and ensure access for vulnerable and marginalised groups.

These examples show that European citizens can influence the EU agenda-setting, that we listen to them and that we are ready to deliver where we can. Despite the deficiencies of the ECI repeatedly highlighted over the past years, these developments also show that the tool does work. Above all, it demonstrates there is a vibrant community of engaged citizens who are eager to take an active part in EU policy making. We will not let them down.

More generally, even more could be done to support them. This is where the new Regulation comes into play, which foresees major improvements. When preparing an initiative, organisers will get more support, through the online collaborative platform but also through contact points in each Member State. Organisers will be able to create legal entities in accordance with the national law of a Member State, which means organisers will no longer have to engage their personal liability.

At the stage of registration, organisers will now be able to revise their proposed initiative before the Commission takes a registration decision, if the Commission's initial assessment is that there is a risk that signatures cannot be collected because the initiative does not fall within the competences of the Commission. Partial registration of an initiative, a practice introduced by the Commission some years ago, will now become law.

At the collection stage, organisers will also have more flexibility to choose the starting date of their campaign within 6 months of the registration date; this will give them sufficient time to prepare their collection campaigns and raise the chance of obtaining 1 million signatures. EU citizens that want to support an initiative will be able to do so regardless of where they live. They will also need to provide less personal data when giving their support. The Commission will also provide a free service for the online collection of signatures, but I will come back to this point shortly.

Finally, as far as the examination of successful initiatives is concerned, the time for this phase will be extended from 3 to 6 months. This will leave more time for meaningful engagement and debate, before the Commission sets out its legal and political conclusions. Importantly, more stakeholders will have the possibility to take part in the public hearing held by the European Parliament, including not only the EU institutions and advisory bodies, but also national parliaments and civil society.

As in any compromise, some of the objectives set by the Commission could not be reached. Let me mention two briefly.

Firstly, it was not possible to find agreement to lower the participation age for signatories from 18 to 16 year-olds across the Union. Each Member State will have the possibility to lower the age for their own citizens if they wish to do so. I regret that it was not possible to have more ambition here, as a common participation age of 16 across the EU could have been a useful way to engage young people in EU democratic processes.

Secondly, the Commission proposed to keep the possibility for organisers to use their own online collection systems, to ensure flexibility and diversity of online tools. In the end, Parliament and Council agreed that over time there should be a single system run centrally by the Commission. Individual online collection systems will be allowed to run for the first three years of the implementation of the new Regulation. As of 2023, the central online collection system operated centrally by the Commission will therefore be the system for all initiatives.

The Commission regrets this loss of flexibility for organisers, but is committed to set up and maintain a high quality, secure yet accessible tool for collecting statements of support online. We will allow signatories to use e-Identification, which makes supporting an initiative even easier. The Commission will consult stakeholders on the developments and improvements of the new central online collection system for the European Citizens' Initiative to take into account their suggestions and concerns. And the dedicated workshop we are organising today on this demonstrates we mean it.

Overall, the agreement reached in December with the Parliament and the Council delivers on the objectives of the Commission's proposal to make the ECI more accessible, less burdensome and easier to use for organisers and supporters. I am glad we could make this reform happen and look forward to your support in making it a reality on the ground.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to your questions and comments.