



Opening session
10.00-11.00 a.m.

The state of the European Citizens' Initiative

The moderator **Daniela Vancic** (Democracy International) welcomed participants to the 10th edition of the ECI Day (see [video](#)). The year 2021 has been particularly special for the ECI with the first two pieces of legislation inspired by ECIs going into effect. For this reason, the theme of ECI Day 2021 was "Empower citizens to impact the future of Europe".

Opening address by Christa Schweng

The EESC president **Christa Schweng** welcomed the participants, on behalf of the EESC and its partners. She noted that the ECI Day had become an important "rendez-vous" that the EESC, as the house of European civil society, was very proud to host.

Recalling the theme of the ECI Day, she explained that one key feature of every participatory process is its impact. It determines its success in the eyes of citizens. A lack of impact can create 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. Ms Schweng pointed out that 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.

The year 2021 saw the first two pieces of legislation, inspired by ECIs, take effect: the Drinking Water Directive, influenced by the *Right2Water* initiative; and the Transparency Regulation, which is a follow-up to the *Ban glyphosate* initiative. 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. The organisers of the *Minority Safepack* were disappointed by the Commission's reply – not all initiatives can get a positive reply but the Commission should always properly explain its reasons for taking or not taking action. There is still a need to strengthen dialogue. Ms Schweng stressed 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 EU policy-making, for example, the *Single Communication Tariff Act on the abolition of roaming fees* launched in 2012.

This ECI Day 2021 is an occasion to listen to different ECI stories and try to draw lessons from these past cases, with a view to learning how to make the ECI more impactful. This should be done while always keeping the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) in mind. The main objective of the CoFoE is to engage with citizens and to inform them about their rights and the existing mechanisms to make their voices heard. The EESC too has a role in the promotion of active citizenship: Ms Schweng was happy to announce that an updated version of the online "[European Democracy Passport](#)" had just been published on the EESC website.

Finally, the president of the EESC presented another new feature of the day: several ECI ambassadors – from the programme launched by the Commission to spread the word about the ECI – had organised [activities](#) in their countries around the ECI Day.

Video message by Věra Jourová

Věra Jourová, vice-president of the European Commission responsible for values and transparency, was unfortunately not able to participate but sent a video message.

Ms Jourová pointed out that the pandemic had made campaigning for ECIs much more difficult: that is why the Commission had reacted swiftly by introducing the possibility to extend the time that initiatives have to collect statements of support by a full year. Ms Jourová announced that on 3 June the Commission adopted another decision on a three-month extension. It will benefit six initiatives that started collecting support after 1 May 2020.

Organisers of five initiatives decided to ask for registration in 2020, and another five have already done so in 2021. Ms Jourová was glad to report that seven of these initiatives had already been registered, and the Commission was assessing whether the other three initiatives were eligible.

Ms Jourová recalled the improvements brought about by the ECI rules in place since 2020:

- more support for organisers (notably through the ECI Forum and contact points in each Member State);
- the possibility of partial registration and a two-step procedure allowing the submitted application to be amended, which had already been successfully applied for two initiatives;
- more flexibility for the organisers to choose the starting date of their collection campaign within six months of the registration date;
- a free-of-charge online collection system;
- an extended examination period for successful initiatives (from three to six months), leaving more time for meaningful engagement and debate.

Ms Jourová gave an update on two successful initiatives submitted to the Commission in 2020.

In its Communication on the reply to *Minority Safepack* adopted in January 2021, the Commission carefully examined the initiative, taking into account the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. Ms Jourová realised that this reply did not meet the organisers' expectations, due to the fact that the Commission considered that no new legal acts were necessary. However, the Communication lists a series of actions, already taken or under way, to address various aspects highlighted by *Minority SafePack*. The Commission will closely monitor their implementation and, in due course, review their effectiveness, considering additional follow-up where appropriate.

Concerning the *End the Cage Age* ECI, the Commission expects to adopt the reply by the end of June, after the European Parliament (EP) adopts its resolution on this initiative.

As regards previous successful initiatives, Ms Jourová was pleased that a legislative follow-up to the *Ban Glyphosate* initiative entered into effect in March. In addition, the revision of the Drinking Water Directive, which entered into force in January, was inspired by the *Right2Water* citizens' initiative. Ms Jourová recognised that it takes time for the tangible results of the initiatives to materialise – but this is the way European law-making works. Moreover, various elements of such initiatives received non-legislative follow-up (see the Commission's [ECI website](#)).

Even initiatives that do not reach the final formal steps of the process can generate multiple impacts. From the moment citizens start an ECI, they bring the issue they care about into the public space and this generates awareness and effects. Some of these issues become mainstream – and sooner or later they do make it onto the decision-makers table, even if not necessarily as an official reply to an ECI. For example, the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork strategy reflect many ideas that were also included in European citizens' initiatives. All of these developments show that the ECI works and demonstrates that there is a vibrant community of engaged citizens who are eager to take an active part in EU policy making.

Initial statement by Pedro Silva Pereira

Pedro Silva Pereira, vice-president of the European Parliament (EP) in charge of European democracy and the ECI, recalled that the ECI had been introduced in the Treaty of Lisbon, during the previous Portuguese Presidency of the EU. Mr Silva Pereira remembered that back then, the ECI had been one of the instruments considered as being very important for reinforcing European democracy. He welcomed the announced new extension of the period for collecting signatures. In Mr Silva Pereira's view, even if it is perhaps too soon to assess the full impact of the changes introduced last year to the ECI, it is already possible to identify positive signs in their implementation.

The first goal of those changes is simplification (offering the possibility for EU citizens to support an ECI regardless of where they live; more flexibility in choosing the start date for collecting; less personal data for signatories to provide). The second goal is to provide more support to organisers – at the insistence of the EP.

Mr Silva Pereira pointed out that the European Parliament has so far been a strong supporter of this mechanism. One of its important contributions is to ensure visibility and proper follow-

up to ECIs, by ensuring the accountability of the European Commission. In the following weeks, the EP will discuss a resolution on the *End the cage age* ECI.

In Mr Silva Pereira's view, the number of successful initiatives (six to date including two with legislative impact) is not satisfactory. If an ECI reaches the final stage of the procedure, then it must be taken seriously and it is important to ensure proper follow-up.

Last month the General Court of the European Union annulled a decision of the Commission refusing to register an ECI on *Ensuring Common Commercial Policy conformity with EU Treaties and compliance with international law* because insufficient reasoning was given to support the refusal. Mr Silva Pereira stressed that according to the General Court judgement, the adequacy of the Commission's response must be assessed in the light of the objectives of the ECI instrument, consisting in encouraging the participation of citizens in democratic life.

Mr Silva Pereira expected the ECI to be one of the issues for public debate during the CoFoE.

Panel discussion

Ms Vancic addressed the **first question to Ms Schweng**: "the new procedure opened the door for more opportunities for dialogue, notably with possible debates on successful initiatives in the EP plenary session and at the CoR, in addition to the EESC, which had already started this practice under the previous regulation. What could help further strengthen the dialogue between the organisers and the EU institutions? How could the EESC contribute to the debate on successful initiatives, and what recommendations could it make?"

Ms Schweng replied that the new regulation introduced a longer examination procedure, which provides an opportunity to have broader debates about initiatives. More stakeholders have been informed about those initiatives, in particular national parliaments, and the European Parliament has started to discuss successful ECI initiatives at its plenary session and to adopt resolutions. Involving national parliaments also opens up the debates and can lead to more impact for the initiative. Some Member States might decide to act on an initiative, possibly in addition to the Commission's actions or with more ambition. However, even if the debate has been enlarged, the recent example of *Minority Safepack* shows that more needs to be done to strengthen dialogue with the organisers. The Commission could establish closer ties with ECI organisers during the examination procedure and after its reply. The organisers could be more involved in the Commission's activities that take place in relation to the subject of their ECI after the Commission has delivered its initial opinion.

Ms Schweng explained the EESC wants to give organisers the opportunity to be heard and to network: the Committee was the first to invite successful organisers to speak at its plenary sessions, as well as to its specialised section meetings. The EESC wants to give advice to the EU institutions on the implementation of the ECI tool, through the EESC's ECI ad hoc Group. The EESC will also be attentive as to how the Commission is handling the initiatives. It will scrutinise the upcoming reply to the successful *End the cage age* initiative, keeping in mind that this reply should not be the end of the story and that dialogue should continue afterwards – not only with the Commission, but also with the EP and the Council, in case the Commission tables a legislative proposal.

Ms Vancic then asked **Mr Silva Pereira a question**: "how do you, so far, assess the possibilities granted to the European Parliament by the new ECI regulation, in particular the possible debate in the plenary session and the adoption of a resolution on a successful initiative, as well as the assessment of the measures taken by the Commission on those initiatives?"

Mr Silva Pereira pointed out that it is too soon to assess the new regulation, also because the COVID-19 crisis has changed everything in the last few months. He considered the new regulation as a positive development that allows for more flexibility and less bureaucracy. The debates on the ECI in the EP are relevant, adding more visibility and political meaning to the initiatives. It is already possible to see a greater impact on EU agenda setting – in some cases even legislative impact. Mr Silva Pereira was optimistic, but he highlighted the need to keep improving the ECI – also by providing more information to citizens on this mechanism. To raise awareness, the ECIs have to be taken very seriously, in particular by the Commission, avoiding frustration among citizens.

Ms Vancic came **back to Ms Schweng for the third question**: "after almost 1.5 years of implementation, how would you assess the new rules governing the ECI?"

Ms Schweng replied that some positive effects are already visible, but the pandemic has also highly impacted initiative organisers, drastically reducing their possibilities to collect signatures in public spaces. A number of improvements are certainly facilitating the use of the tool – improvements that the EESC had also requested. The EESC's ECI ad hoc Group has listened to several organisers who are subject to the new rules and the overall feedback so far is positive.

Ms Schweng mentioned that the registration procedure, the online collection system and the flexible start date for the signature have greatly facilitated the work of organisers. She regretted that the possibility of independent online collection systems built up by organisers would not be maintained beyond 2022 – this option gives more freedom to organisers in the way they manage their campaigns, although it makes it more difficult for them to manage data protection issues.

Beyond the rules themselves, two aspects need to be improved: the impact of successful initiatives and awareness of the tool, with more ad hoc campaigns promoted by the Commission and the Member States. The EESC can also play a role in promoting the instrument: through the ECI Day this year, additional efforts were made to reach out to citizens in Member States (with the involvement of ECI ambassadors) and to the media, through the voices of the EESC members and through cooperation with national Economic and Social Committees.

It is also important that citizens are made aware of the follow-up given to initiatives they have signed. According to the new regulation, the Commission must inform signatories about the measures taken in response to the successful initiative they had supported.

The last question of the panel discussion was **addressed to Mr Silva Pereira**: "what opportunities will the CoFoE offer in terms of discussing participatory democracy tools,

including the ECI? Will it offer opportunities to make the instrument more known to the public and for organisers to draw attention to their initiatives?"

In **Mr Silva Pereira's** view, the CoFoE is a good opportunity to relaunch the relationship between EU institutions and citizens, together with the vaccination strategy and the Resilience and Recovery plans. One of the topics for debate during the Conference will be how to further improve European democracy. There is a need to ensure a stronger role for the EP but also to ensure mechanisms for citizens' participation. Mr Silva Pereira believed the ECI had a role in that and hoped the CoFoE would support this vision.

Q&A with the audience

Before taking questions from the audience via Slido.com, Ms Vancic ran a few polls targeted at the participants of the event. The first poll asked: "what is, in your opinion, the greatest strength of the ECI, using one word?", and the main answers were "participation", "networking", "individual collection system", "democracy", "influence", "transnational", "digital". The second poll asked: "what is, in your opinion, the greatest weakness of the ECI, using one word?", and the main answers were "impact", "complexity", "publicity", "low awareness", "bureaucracy", "follow-up".

Ms Vancic addressed the **first question from the audience to Ms Schweng**: "what are your hopes or wishes for the ECI in the Conference discussions?"

The EESC president replied that the CoFoE should put people and organised civil society at the centre of EU policies, assessing the available options for citizens to be involved in policy-making at EU level, including the ECI, and whether there is a need to improve them, streamline them or add some new tools. Debates are organised on topics that matter to citizens so the ongoing initiatives will certainly feature in those debates. Concerning the Slido polls, Ms Schweng agreed with the most quoted words ("participation" for the main strength and "impact" for the main weakness) and referred to the ECI as an example of participatory democracy.

Ms Vancic asked **Mr Silva Pereira a mix of different questions**: "how about providing the EP and the Council with the right to vote on successful ECIs?", "how can we raise awareness about the ECI, especially among young people?", "what opportunities do you see for the Commission to strengthen the ECI?"

Mr Silva Pereira, replied that the EP already has the right to vote as far as it can, by discussing and voting on resolutions. However, the Commission evaluates the ECIs, because it has the right of legislative initiative. Mr Silva Pereira pointed out that raising awareness is a fundamental topic but this is mostly a task for the Commission since it has the duty and the means to do it. The EP contributes to this, raising awareness through its online platform. Now that the rules are more flexible, raising awareness among citizens is a crucial element that requires greater investment in the future.