

Many thanks for your kind invitation to join today's debate.

Let me confess how tempted am I to share my academic take on the state of the European Citizen Initiative, to make a plea for an actual reform thus delving into the many technicalities that only excite lawyers like myself, but – lucky you – I will spare you today.

Instead (of lecturing to you), I will share some provocative reflections (*contained in my forthcoming book, "Lobbying for Change: Find Your Voice to Create a Better Society"*)

You're warned: it will be a rather uncomfortable journey of self-reflection!

Today should be a day of celebrations: the ECI – the first instrument of transnational democracy - turns 5 years old this year. But despite today's celebratory mood, we must recognize that this tool has not only been mistreated by its parents – the EU institutions and the MS – but also largely overlooked by its citizens.

Let's face it: the ECI remains an undecipherable acronym for virtually everyone outside this room. Yet paradoxically this instrument carried - and still promises to carry - an enormous potential in making those people less culturally homeless and in addressing a growing civic empowerment gap in the EU space.

That's why this community – the ECI community – does not want to give up. And that despite the renewed set-back it has lived since ECI's birth.

Let me take a narrative path and begin with a story.

Let me introduce you to Barbara. She's an excellent student - originally from Germany - who had the chance to travel, live and study across European countries, since her Erasmus program, now doing an internship and figuring out what to do in life.

No surprise, Barbara is articulate, multi-lingual, compassionate and shares cosmopolitan worldviews. She is very passionate about politics, life-enthusiast and committed to improve the state of the world. She is not only a promising professional, but also a dedicated one: today she decided – upon the invitation to a friend – to take part to a rather mysterious debate dedicated to the future of the

ECI – ECI what? – yes, respond her friend - a sort of wanna-be online petition system such as Avaaz or We Move.eu but the major difference being that it doesn't work.

Barbara is intrigued and confused at the same time.

She's now attending the opening session of that event, when one of the panellists asks the audience (Are you ready to play?):

- How many of you are afraid for the future of Europe in particular as a result of Brexit and the rapid emergence of populist forces?

Barbara raises her hand. It is a sea of hands.

Keep you hands raised – adds the speaker if – besides going to events like this one - you are actually doing – not reading – something about it by for example:

- running or preparing to run for office...
- confronting with supporters of political parties populist in nature, Brexiteers, thus forcing yourself to be exposed to the critical voices...

Although embarrassed, Barbara did not raise her hand. She had grown frustrated instead: she felt so knowledgeable about the drivers behind the current developments (and was even pondering about writing a PhD over the subject) yet she did not know how to mobilize her skills into society...

I'm afraid: I see dozens of 'Barbaras' in this room and I know that there are many more – we are millions – in Europe.

Isn't that a paradox that the generation that most has received from the EU project, that better understands what Europe really is about, the generation that has planned its own life based on the realities of Europe is incapable to mobilize to defend it and that notwithstanding its mounting expertise, talents and professionalism?

But what can Barbara – AND YOU - can realistically DO to change that?

This is the question that keeps me awake at night to the point of writing an entire book addressing it. Its title is: "Lobbying for Change: Find Your Voice to Create a Better Society".

So what can Barbara do and what YOU can actually do?

This may potentially be Barbara's 'AAH' moment.

During the event – yes the ECI Day – Barbara realisez how many opportunities she has to make a difference in life beyond the traditional script of running for office and/or voting.

She realised that - contrary to conventional wisdom - the EU provides many more opportunities than her Member States to engage with the policy process...

She thus stumbled upon the 'EU Citizen tool-box', a pandora's box of avenues of participation open to any citizen who cares about defining the opportunities and quality of her own life... she finds out about:

- petitions to the EP
- public consultations
- public hearings,
- the public broadcasting of EU meetings,
- she learns about the possibility to complain to the EU Ombudsman, and – here it comes
- about the European Citizen Initiative!

Surprisingly, but sadly, even a pretty educated citizen like Barbara never heard about these many opportunities. And more critically she didn't even think of actually using them before as they are inexistent or much more difficult to use in her own country...

Emboldened by this discovery and encouraged by the new friendships she just made at this event, Barbara went back home with a clear commitment:

To launch an ECI to ask the EU to do what her country does not want to do and what – she believes – the EU can do better...

Yet many voices tried to dissuade her:

- you need financial resources to make it happen- they say to her (at least

100 k say some; at least 300 k say somebody else;)

- you need to meet the competent EU Commissioner: failing to do so will curtail your project - say others...

Despite some hesitation and with the bravery than only few can show, she registers – together – with some friends her ECI.

You won't be surprised to hear that Barbara – amid the many technical difficulties she encounters (Hundreds of thousands of signatures are not validated) – she fails to reach the 1 M milestone.

Barbara was let down despite her best efforts. She starts become cynical about the EU. Yes even Barbara...

This is the dark side of citizens participation in the EU, many of us have experienced.

Yet this is not the full story. There's also a bright side in Barbara's tale.

In less than few months Barbara was capable of:

- acting as a citizen rather than as a consumer
- caring about something and acting upon it
- she mobilized hundreds of citizens for a cause they all care about, thus built a movement – the ECI is not click-activism: it entails more than a signature...
- she learned about the cause she cared about and more importantly realised the many trade-offs existing for policymakers addressing that issue, thus becoming humbler and realistic about the process
- but most importantly she succeeded in putting her cause on the agenda and – with the help of few sympathetic journalists –
- pressurize policymakers to position themselves upon her cause.

It seemed like Barbara had to lose as an ECI- initiator in order to actually win it as a citizen.

After 6 month, Barbara's cause was included into the EU Commission's legislative program with the support of several MEPs who embraced her cause.

I know what you're thinking: not all ECIs have such a happy end, but Barbara's story is not – and should not be – an exception.

So what's Barbara's story tells us?

It suggests that the well-rehearsed script according to which to make a difference in life you need to vote or run for office is terribly outdated.

Today – all the more so in the EU – there is a third option to act:

→ citizens like you can lobby and the EU provides you the tools to actually make it happen.

Lobbying is no longer a prerogative of few actors, such as companies and organised interests, with lots of resources and tons of contacts.

Lobbying is a legitimate activity which consists in voicing your concerns to decision makers so as to influence them.

A citizen lobbyist is someone who – by tapping into their expertise and talents – mobilize the very same repertoire of tools and techniques used by professional lobbyists in order to influence the policy process.

You can set the agenda through a petition, hold decision-makers accountable through FOIA's request, lodge complaints or help NGOs to actually do so.

Over the years together with my students and colleagues we have:

- Petitioned to eliminate the last obstacle to the free movement of EU citizens: international roaming (the ECI was a failure but the goal was attained)
- Contested the lack of transparency in judicial appointment: the Council changed its policy as a result when it comes to handling state's documents outside of EU law
- wrote and campaigned the first directive protecting WB: nobody wanted it a year ago but now it is in the legislative working program and the Commission recently opened consultation...
- our complaint with the EU Ombudsman re: the failure of the EU Commission to adopt a decision on Barroso joining Goldman led the EU

Ombudsman – together with the EU Employees - to open an investigation which is ongoing

- More recently our Brexit-related request to the EU Commission Secretary General was rejected, it led to a complaint to the EU Ombudsman, which pushed the lead negotiator Mr Barnier to announce that their forthcoming negotiations will be fully transparent: their negotiation positions will be public....

What we – a small community of EU citizens – have achieved can be done by millions of citizens in the EU. Like Barbara, we are not the elite nor the establishment.

The beauty of this new form of citizen engagement is that it is not antagonist but complementary to representative democracy: it re-connects the representatives and the electors to work together in an entirely new ecosystem of on and offline interactions.

Citizen lobbying does not just scrutinise government and make it more responsive, but also helps everyone feel (and become) a part of the policy process.

It is about the process as much it is about the outcome.

It counters the undue influence of special interest groups (e.g. think about the ongoing ECI against glyphosate's re-authorisation).

Citizen lobbying helps elected representatives to identify and pursue the public interest. It improves the quality of policymaking while giving all of us a chance to learn about how government works.

That's where lies the future of our democracies:

In reconquering the space between decision-makers and citizens between elections.

Key-note speech by Aleberto Alemanno at the ECI DAY 2017

Research suggests that societies with assertive citizens are more accountable, transparent and also happier than those characterised by allegiant citizens.

It won't be through ECIs that we will build Europe but it won't be ECIs – dear European Commission – to destroy Europe.

Time has come for the EU to overcome its historical unease with all forms of popular sovereignty.

The EU can no longer fuel itself of European Council's conclusions...

The EU needs its citizens as much as its citizens need the EU, all the more so in this unprecedented and challenging times.

The good news is that the EU has the instruments – the MAGNA CHARTA of citizen participation – that is easily available to us. Despite its accessibility and significant potential in empowering citizens, its participatory rights and avenues of participation remain largely underused.

Not it is up to each of us to make use of the panoply of channels of influence the EU.

Let's all use on this opportunity to experience government, to feel EU citizens instead of EU consumers...

Let's embrace citizen lobbying to defend the many opportunities we gained and possibly gain more...

As Margaret Meads famously say:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

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