

**PUBLIC HEARING ON THE EESC OWN-INITIATIVE OPINION ON THE EUROPEAN  
CITIZENS' INITIATIVE**

**European Citizens' Initiative: more impact, simpler rules**

Monday, 22 February 2016

**REPORT**

**Introduction by Irini Pari, EESC member, president of the EESC's ECI ad hoc Group**

- The ECI is in a very particular political context where democracy and democracies are called into question;
- Such timing provides an opportunity to reflect upon the future of participatory democracy tools and make sure that citizens are not disappointed.
- The EESC confirms its involvement in developing and simplifying the ECI; the institution already offers various services to the organisers, such as translation of ECI descriptions, and is now working on an own-initiative opinion with Antonio Longo as rapporteur and Antonio Polica as expert. The opinion is expected to be adopted at the July plenary session.
- The next scheduled event is the annual conference "[ECI DAY 2016: Forging Change](#)" in Brussels on 20 April 2016.

**Assya Kavrakova, director of the European Citizen Action Service, ECI Support Centre**

- So far, the ECI has been like an elite boutique, accessible only to a few, whereas it should offer more of a supermarket infrastructure, where anyone can go in and get the product.
- There are no commonplace instruments for participatory democracy, which is why it is so important to have a user friendly tool, a simpler version of an ECI, to involve citizens in a consultation process that is not for organised interests, but established in the interests of citizens themselves.
- A new infrastructure for citizens is needed at EU level, specifically to engage citizens. The existing infrastructure should be complemented with other, new e-democracy possibilities already used in many Member States, such as crowdsourcing registration.
- With 40% of ECI proposals rejected, it is not surprising that citizens are disappointed. There is a need for reform, there should be a revision. It is no longer a question of WHAT, but WHEN.
- Empowering citizens is a must and is the only way to secure the sustainable continuation of the EU project.

**Antonio Longo, rapporteur of the EESC opinion on the ECI, European Economic and Social Committee**

The great value of the ECI is that it encourages citizens' participation. However, there are many hurdles in this process that make the tool unsuccessful:

- There is a risk of losing sight of the reasons for which the ECI was created, which was involving citizens in the decision-making process.
- Even if there is some follow-up to the ECIs, it is not clear enough.

- Numerous difficult situations in the Member States (Euroscepticism) and outside (refugees), bank crises, and loss of confidence in States' institutions should lead to a strong commitment to rediscovering the original spirit of the citizens who created the EU.
- The EESC's opinion will aspire to tackle those issues and reflect the debate from the public hearing.

**Carmen Preising, Head of Unit "Work Programme and Stakeholder Consultation", Secretariat-General of the European Commission**

- It is a timely moment to have an EESC opinion and get the civil society perspective.
- Making an ECI a success is a shared responsibility for all the institutions and stakeholders. The translation service offered by the EESC is a good example of inter-institutional cooperation on various aspects of the ECI.
- The European Commission has a very difficult role that involves both registering and deciding. It is therefore very important to see what more other institutions and Member States could do in the pre-registration phase.
- So far there has been little communication on the ECI, as there was no dedicated budget. There is now a dedicated budget line, which will allow giving better visibility to the follow-up given so far by the EC. The Commission is working with the European Parliament's commissions on the ECIs "Right to Water" and "Stop Vivisection" to see how the political discussion could continue.
- The Commission is now looking into improvements to the online collection system (several were already introduced in 2015); free hosting is currently being offered for an unspecified duration; with a new dedicated budget line, more clarification, support and communication can be envisaged.
- The Commission is in touch with Member States regarding the simplification of the forms and data requirements.
- The use of eID is under discussion with DG Connect and Digit.
- The College of Commissioners had an initial discussion on the ECI in December and decided to have another meeting on the subject.
- A common objective is to make the ECI work.
- A strong call for a pragmatic approach

**Gilles Feith, director of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg Government IT Center**

- A common simple solution is required. Member States, which shaped the regulation, should again be more involved, the ECI should not be limited to the inter-institutional context. Three Member States (LUX, AT and DE) have agreed on the need of a revision which would include these recommendations:
- Revise the ECI timeline: organisers to choose the starting date for collection period.
- Simplify the certification process: at the moment, it places too great a burden on the data centres, some actually refuse to host it.
- Offer free centralised hosting, which would take away the technical burden from the citizens and would be more cost-effective.

- Introduce e-ID / eIDAS regulation
- Enhance public awareness; it should however be noted that if the tool is powerful enough, it won't need promoting.
- Member States should be more aware and willing to offer more support.

**Sophie von Hatzfeldt, Democracy International and ECI Support Centre**

- A root and branch overhaul of the regulation is needed, not just small changes.
- A stronger follow up – citizens as co-legislator.
- Each institution ought to be obliged to deal with a successful ECI. The European Parliament should debate it in full plenary.
- Lower the age limit of citizens entitled to sign to 16 to facilitate participation of young people.
- Single EU form.
- Personal liability should be better defined.
- Amplify the scope for ECIs: allowing treaty amendments.
- Possibility of funding.
- Upgrade ECI to the tool of direct democracy, for example by allowing European-level referenda at 5 million signatures. Giving more impact to an ECI is necessary for the growth of the instrument.

**Prisca Merz, ECI organiser of End Ecocide in Europe**

- Speaking from the perspective of an ECI organiser, the tool does not work for many reasons: data requirements are too high, the timing does not reflect the optimal conditions for the organisers, who cannot decide about the starting date, the liability is an enormous burden for individual citizens, there is no actual follow-up, the tool lacks impact
- ECIs must be taken seriously: obligatory discussion following the normal legislative process
- Legal admissibility check should not be binding
- No exclusion of EU citizens
- Same data requirements for all countries
- Collection of statements of support on one form
- More time between registration and collection
- Legal status for the citizens' committee
- Improvements to the Online Collection System
- Need to change the ECI Regulation
- Unless the tool is really improved, there is no point in providing information about it or promoting it.

**Carsten Berg, director of The ECI Campaign, Association for the ECI**

- Originally, the ECI was conceived to be a working tool of participatory democracy that citizens actually use. It was also meant to have an impact and there would be a review every three years if the first two conditions were not met.

- A gradual drop in the number of registered ECIs since 2012. It is now used, but not very much. Experience shows that it is not really used by citizens, who choose petitions instead.
- The ECI is neither user friendly, proportionate nor equal (conditions from the Regulations preface).
- The ECI needs a thorough overhaul, not just a review.
- Postulates: the timeline should be revised – organisers to choose their own starting date; liability should be limited; citizens' committee with a legal status; data requirements: require fewer + uniform personal data. Only data used by Member States to identify a person should be required; ECI proposals should be made available to the Parliament and Council; ECI should be able to address primary law; remove legal admissibility check at the beginning and put it towards the end of the process.
- The best way of putting the ECI across is to make it simpler.

### General debate:

- **ECI difficulties:** ECI organisers complain about the length of the waiting period for a decision from the Commission about the validity of an ECI proposal. They also expressed concern about the actual change – there is much discussion about what should change, but the major question is when it will finally happen. ECI organisers should set the time for beginning and running their campaigns. The OCS is too complicated, the entire process is very discouraging.
- **ECI communication:** many initiators complain that they have to campaign on the tool, not just the subject. Revision of how citizens interact with institutions. ECI within the framework of how to integrate it with new technologies in Europe.
- **Direct and participatory democracy:** the ECI is part of the larger process. It is not a tool for direct democracy but for involving the citizens in agenda setting. A general participatory setup should be revised and reinforced for the ECI to work: an agora of citizens. Call on the EESC to strongly represent the voice of the citizens and civil society with its values.
- **Digital democracy:** the ECI falls into this category.
- **Institutional setup:** EU institutions have a clear mandate in the legislative process. Empowering citizens should not be unlimited – some ECIs only represent certain specific interests and do not reflect the needs of all citizens. Therefore not every successful ECI should become a proposal. In other words, citizens should not bypass the European Parliament and its prerogative to represent the people of Europe with their proposal.
- **Role of the Member States:** more involvement on the national and local level is necessary. Member States should simplify their verification systems and agree to one European form for collecting signatures with one set of data required.
- **Online collecting system:** proposal to have a private-public partnership: the European Commission should produce it, while civil society should invest in its running etc. When sharing on social media, the foreword should include information on the campaign and not on the OCS.

- **Common general recommendation:** thorough revision and simplification of the ECI. The ECI now has too little impact to become a strong tool. It runs the risk of falling into obscurity given the barriers to its use.