

Speech, as delivered

Thank you very much for hosting once again this annual event which I think is very important. This is a special edition of the ECI Day: 60 years of the Rome Treaties and 5 years of the European Citizens' Initiative.

Let's just have a brief look at how our Union has changed in those 60 years. We are in a different Union to our parents and grandparents, and I think a few things have changed fundamentally. We are no longer in a paternalistic society - we are in a post-paternalistic society. But our institutions and the way we do politics is very much still based on the paternalism that we were used to for generations. We need to adapt to a post-paternalistic society. We are no longer in an ideological confrontation. Our youngest generation is post-ideological. Very idealistic, but not ideological, which is a new situation we are confronted with.

If there is an ideological confrontation, in Europe or the Western world, it is between people who believe in an open society and people who believe in a closed exclusive society. And I think those people who advocate a closed, exclusive society are proposing to unscramble scrambled eggs.

We are diverse societies, and even if some propose to undo diversity in our societies the only thing they will achieve by proposing that is to destroy or weaken our societies. Try and unscramble a scrambled egg in your kitchen. You get a lot of mess but you don't get a better egg and certainly you can't separate the yolk again. That is where we are in terms of our societies and this is I

think a fundamental challenge to the European construction.

Now, if people can vote when they watch TV for the Voice of Belgium, the USA or the UK and instantly see the result of their vote, then that is their way of thinking about the world. And what we propose in politics is one vote every four or five years. That no longer works for many people; certainly not in a post-ideological society, a post-paternalistic society. Where a politician used to say "trust me", and that trust would last for as long as his or her mandate, and that trust was given on the basis of shared backgrounds or ideologies. Now society has changed. We are no longer in a 'trust me' society, we are in a society where citizens say "show me" to politicians on a daily basis. To show what you do on a daily basis in a fast changing world is difficult. We need different forms of engaging with citizens.

One of the panelists importantly mentioned the crucial distinction between consumers and citizens. Are politicians going to treat citizens as consumers and are they going to behave as consumers, or are they going to behave as citizens, which comes with rights but also responsibilities? Consumers only have rights. But citizens have rights and responsibilities and need to strike a balance. Participating in our democracy is a right but also a responsibility. And I think we need to find new ways of engaging with that.

Before going into the ECI more specifically, there is a lot of talk about there not being a European public sphere. Of course there are some shortcomings but there are also signs of hope. For the younger generation, Europe is their

natural habitat. The Europe with borders you can cross without problems. We need to convince our younger generation that this habitat is not a thing of nature but it is man-made. So it can be man-unmade. So we need to get young people to engage to protect what they think is their natural habitat. If they can engage to protect nature and the environment, they can also engage to protect a political structure which has brought peace to Europe for the first time in its history, for over 70 years. It's not going to stay just because we think it's the natural state of play. The EU can be dissolved and destroyed, if the forces that believe in a closed society carry the day in national politics. That is something that needs to be fought for; the public sphere is also evolving because we all, especially the younger generation have all learnt to speak the same lingua franca, which is bad English. And it's something that we are starting to share, and we understand each other.

My last piece of evidence for the European public sphere is how people react to elections. Who would have had any interest in Dutch elections ever before? Arguably the most boring elections ever, but now everybody was watching and fearing a populist tsunami. Why? Because people understand that an election in one nation can have an effect on an election in another nation. In that sense we are creating a European public sphere more than sometimes we tend to believe.

Why is Europe making people uncomfortable? Because they understand our fates are linked and we are all in the same boat. And this does not feel comfortable in times of crisis, of existential challenges to our society, to depend on somebody in a different country far away is not always a comfortable feeling. So the proposition of national

politicians to say we'll go back to a history that never was and I can protect you against being dependent on others is a proposition that to many is attractive. Because the other proposition is not strong enough and it is our fault that we do not make a better proposition that dependency is a good thing, that being in the same boat is a good thing because the boat is much bigger than all these small national boats, that there are two types of Member States: small Member States and those that don't know they are small yet. That is the situation globally.

It is in this context I want to address the ECI.

We're only at the beginning of the ECI. After five years let me recall some of our major achievements:

- Over 40 initiatives have been registered: they have generated political debates across Europe, involving more than 6 million people from all Member States, and they have forged links between like-minded people across the continent. This is also an element of starting a European public sphere.
- Three Initiatives secured 1 million signatures and were put on the Commissioners' weekly agenda, with two of them - "Right2Water" and "Stop Vivisection" - directly influencing current EU policies. As many of you know, we are following up the "Right2Water" Initiative in this year's Annual Work Programme, and we will come forward with a legislative proposal this year on minimum quality requirements for reused water and a revision of the Directive on drinking water.

- This year, we have seen a renewed interest in the ECI, and we have already registered five new initiatives this year. There are seven open initiatives currently collecting statements of support.

Does this mean that we should be satisfied and rest on our laurels? Not at all. It's not about sitting back. We need to move forward. From the start of our mandate this Commission has focused on how to make concrete improvements in the way the ECI works. I'm not happy with the way it works I have to say.

We have worked within the current Regulation to provide technical and political support to organisers – from hosting online collection systems on our servers to providing translations, agreeing together on appropriate registration dates, and tweaking the technical requirements where necessary and where possible.

Today we are presenting a new open source collection software which will be provided free of charge to organisers of citizens initiatives.

In other words we have already gotten our hands dirty and delivered practical solutions, rather than platitudes.

But I'm also well aware that despite this, many feel that the barriers to registration are still too high. Some of you have also been disappointed when the Commission has rejected the registration of certain ECIs, and have challenged our application of the legal framework.

Respecting the legal criteria is inescapable. But having said that, we have shown that we can evolve. In recent weeks we have decided for the first time to partially register two

initiatives, rather than dismissing the full initiative because of one or two clauses which fell outside the legal framework, which was what we did before. If we can identify part that is within the rules, we will then register that part. That is a concrete improvement.

But I do not want to stop there.

I know that the requirements to set up an ECI and collect signatures can still be burdensome. **I want to make the ECI more accessible and citizen-friendly. I want the ECI to become a popular and living instrument, one that citizens are familiar with.**

Where people used to say "Europe doesn't listen", I want people to say "Let's make Europe listen. Let's start a European Citizens' Initiative".

In the coming months we will therefore take stock of the ECI Regulation, with your active support. There are obstacles to a more accessible and citizen-friendly ECI which have their origin in provisions of the ECI Regulation itself. We should take a careful look at those too.

But first, we want to hear your views - today and through a public consultation that we will launch in the coming weeks. **Depending on your feedback, this process could culminate in a proposal to revise the ECI Regulation in the autumn.** I want to do this before the end of this year, because if we want to get legislation before the end of the mandate, proposals need to be on the table before the end of this year.

I'm not talking about reinventing the wheel: the Treaty defines what the instrument is and how it fits with the EU institutional framework. But I have to say that the present Regulation is far from perfect: some things did not work out as planned; other problems were not anticipated.

So what we could do is **address the practical obstacles which make the ECI unnecessarily complex for those who set them up and collect signatures, and also for the citizens who want to sign them.**

After five years, I think we now have the necessary experience to take another look at these issues.

The European Parliament has provided valuable input on the future of the ECI, and we have also taken careful note of the input of the REFIT Platform which has offered an opinion on making the ECI more 'fit for purpose'.

I go into this with an open mind, but there are a few issues which I expect you will want to raise, and which the Commission is looking into already:

- There are still many divergences in the conditions and personal data requirements for signatories in the different Member States. This could be addressed horizontally.
- We need better tools for collecting signatures online. The use of new tools needs to be explored. If they can do it with 'The Voice' then we should be better at it as well. Citizens' Initiatives should be more in tune with the way that people engage today in the online world.

- Liability issues appear to be an obstacle for citizens' committees who set up an ECI; we should look at how this could be addressed.
- And we could have another look at how people who sign an ECI are kept informed of what happens next; and how the EU institutions could better engage with organisers of ECIs to take these debates forward.

Europe is at a turning point. We celebrated 60 years of the Rome Treaties at the same time we are building Europe of 27 Member States.

In a world that throws so many challenges at us, I cannot stress enough the importance of a dialogue with our citizens, of offering citizens the opportunity to engage with us on our common future.

But I also have to say, we are so dependent on the sense of responsibility also of our national leaders. If they go to Rome and sign a solemn declaration, where they commit to a collective European future, on the basis of shared values, and then go home and the first thing they do is they launch an initiative 'Stop Brussels', then we're in a very strange situation. That you commit to one thing together with 26 colleagues, and then go home and do something completely different; that is what turns people off Europe. That is what turns people off doing things together. So yes, in this post-paternalistic, post-ideological world we need to give citizens a better chance to engage more often and more directly with politics, but we also need leaders to take the responsibility for our collective European future, and not try and have their cake and eat it – playing the issue of

openness when it comes to structural funds and the internal market, but then advocate a closed society when it comes to everything else. That is incompatible with each other. And I passionately believe in an open diverse society as the future of our common Europe, and I hope you will all engage with me to make it happen.

Thank you very much.