

Reform of the European Citizens' Initiative: further improvement needed to deliver ECI's full potential for participatory democracy

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) welcomes the European Commission's reform proposal to improve the European Citizens Initiative (ECI), which it sees as "a step in the right direction" to make it more accessible and user-friendly. The EU's Assembly of local and regional representatives however regrets that the proposal falls short of achieving the ECI potential as a transnational tool of participative democracy at European level. In an [opinion](#) led by Luc Van den Brande (BE/EPP), Member of the Management Board of the Flanders-Europe Liaison Agency and Special Adviser to the European Commission on outreach towards citizens, the CoR is concerned that the proposal fails to solve the current conflict of interest whereby the European Commission is both judge and party in the procedure. The Assembly also calls for the European Parliament to play a greater role in political scrutiny and follow up. Since 2012, the ECI empowers one million EU citizens from at least seven EU member states to participate directly in the development of EU policies, by calling on the European Commission to propose new legislation. However, during its six years of existence, only four ECIs managed to successfully secure the required number of signatures, with two of them ([Stop Glyphosate](#) " and " [Right2Water](#)) finally leading to formal EU legislative proposals. Following mounting criticism against the instrument for being too restrictive and burdensome, the Commission came out with a proposal last September to remove excessive legal and technical requirements whilst taking advantage of new identification and collection technology.

The CoR reiterates its strong support for the ECI as a tool than can help respond to the perceived democratic deficit of the EU and bridge the gap with the citizens. The need to restore citizens' trust in Europe is what triggered the CoR's EU-wide consultation process called " [Reflecting on Europe](#) ", mainly in the form of citizens' dialogues at local level, to collect their ideas, ambitions and concerns about Europe's future.

In an [opinion](#) adopted on 23 March, the CoR welcomes major revisions proposed to improve the usability of the ECI, including a central online collection system, a collaborative platform to better advise organisers, the possibility of partial registration of an initiative, and lowering the minimum age for supporting an ECI to 16 years. According to the CoR there is however much more to be done to enable the ECI to truly give a voice to citizens in EU-policy making.

"The Commission has undoubtedly introduced administrative, technical, logistical and communicative improvements to the ECI in its reform proposal. But the EU executive missed a great opportunity to transform it into an effective participatory tool that would truly allow citizens to influence the

EU policy agenda. There is still an impression of an over-cautious stance on the part of the Commission, which is especially evident in the more political aspects of the citizens' initiative “; said rapporteur Van den Brande.

Commission's conflict of interest

The CoR points out that the proposed revision does nothing to resolve the Commission's conflict of interest, namely that it is at the same time the support structure and primary “addressee” for ECIs, and the authority that decides over registration and admissibility. The CoR is therefore repeating its call made in its [2015 opinion](#) for the creation of a “wise-persons council” or “European Citizens Advocacy”.

“ One of the key sticking points with the new regulation is the Commission's conflict of interest and monopoly over all stages of the procedure. Failure to resolve this situation is damaging the effectiveness and legitimacy of the ECI. We therefore suggest that the registration decision is entrusted to an independent committee of lawyers, academics and representatives of civil society ”, explained Van den Brande.

Role of European Parliament

The CoR expresses concern regarding the lack of political scrutiny and follow up to successful ECIs, calling for a greater role for the European Parliament. In particular, the Parliament should take full responsibility for organising public hearings where ECI organisers are invited to present their initiative – as opposed to the Commission's proposal whereby both Commission and Parliament should organise these hearings.

Signatures' collection period

The CoR stresses that collecting 1 million signatures represents quite an undertaking and requires a great deal of publicising and awareness-raising. In order to allow more time to achieve the final target for signatures, the CoR calls for an extension in the collecting period from 12 to 18 months, which would be less of a deterrent for potential initiative organisers.

Follow-up to unsuccessful initiatives

The CoR calls on the Commission to develop appropriate forms of response to those ECIs which receive significant support but do not meet all the formal criteria or do not reach the full 1 million signatures. This would ensure that the political message of such ECI and the mobilisation they have created are not completely ignored.

Note to the editors:

Luc Van den Brande is a former President of the European Committee of Regions and former Minister-President of Flanders (1992-1999). As Special Adviser to the President of the European Commission for “the outreach towards the citizens”, he published a [report](#) last October which sets out a framework for a more citizen-focused Europe.

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