

## Open Letter: European Parliament, make the ECI work!

**On 20 June, the Constitutional Affairs Committee (AFCO) of the European Parliament will cast a vote of crucial importance for the future of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI).<sup>\*</sup> With this open letter, civil society organisations and former ECI organisers call upon the European Parliament to take its responsibility for this participatory instrument by obliging itself to debate and vote on every single successful ECI in plenary before the Commission adopts its formal response.**

Dear Members of the European Parliament,

We know that you have been waiting for this almost as long as we have been: the long overdue revision of the European Citizens' Initiative. Some of you may be tired of the topic because of the number of times you have already debated it in your House and elsewhere, with many arguments coming back over and over again. However, this is not the time to lose focus. This is your time to take your collective responsibility, to commit yourselves to this participatory instrument, and to make the ECI politically meaningful! Only YOU can do this. **We call upon you, the European Parliament, to oblige yourself to have a debate and vote in plenary on every single successful ECI before the Commission adopts its formal response.**

Even if the ECI is a novelty at the transnational level, it is not unique. In Latvia and Finland, they have successfully implemented citizens' initiatives at the national level that largely resemble the ECI. *Their* citizens' initiatives seem to work reasonably well, not only in the eyes of politicians, but also in the eyes of citizens.<sup>1</sup> Why can we not make the ECI work? There is a crucial difference that sets the ECI apart from these national citizens' initiatives. In the latter case, it is the Parliament that is in charge of dealing with citizens' initiatives successful at collecting the required number of signatures, not the government. Why is this relevant for their success? It is not because the Parliament has always agreed with these initiatives. From the 24 successful initiatives in Finland, so far only 2 have been approved by the Parliament and resulted in a direct legislative impact. What makes a critical difference, though, is that citizens who signed a successful initiative can follow what happens with their initiative, how it is taken up and debated by their directly elected representatives and what outcome this results in. If the initiative you supported as a citizen is rejected by the MP you voted for, you may have less reason to vote for that MP in the future and vice versa. This direct link between participatory and representative democracy is fundamental for the success of a participatory instrument, and as such it strengthens democracy overall.

At European level, we have a disconnect. A successful ECI can only count on a reply from the Commission, which is not directly answerable to citizens. The months between the submission of a successful ECI and the Commission reply are like a black tunnel for ECI organisers and supporters. Citizens have no way of telling how a Commission reply has come into being and whether this can be considered a democratically fair response. This disconnect leads to a structural mismatch of expectations on the type of impact a successful ECI can reasonably be expected to have. The European Parliament can change this. By

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<sup>1</sup> Christensen, Henrik Serup; Karjalainen, Marija; Setälä, Maija; 'Finnish Citizens' Initiatives – Towards Inclusive Agenda-Setting?'; published in *Scandinavian Political Studies* (December 2017), p. 17.

having a debate and vote on every single successful ECI before the Commission reply, the European Parliament takes on an indispensable function of representative politics: that of democratic mediator – mediating between the expectations of citizens and the institutional reality of policy-making, between ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’. In the absence of such democratic mediation, there will continue to be a disconnect between this participatory instrument and our European system of representative democracy, and the ECI will continue to result in “more pain than gain” for all parties concerned.<sup>2</sup>

We count on you during your vote on 20 June!

Democratically yours!

This joint open letter is an initiative of The ECI Campaign (citizens-initiative.eu), with the support of Democracy International and WeMove.EU. The open letter is co-signed by 65 civil society organisations and ECIs.

The ECIs supporting this open letter are:

1. First-ever successful ECI Right2Water
2. One of us
3. Stop Vivisection
4. Minority SafePack - one million signatures for diversity in Europe
5. Fraternité 2020 – Mobility. Progress. Europe
6. Central public online collection platform for the European Citizen Initiative
7. ONE MILLION SIGNATURES FOR “A EUROPE OF SOLIDARITY”
8. Unconditional Basic Income
9. End Ecocide in Europe: A Citizens’ Initiative to give the Earth Rights
10. 30 km/h - making the streets liveable!
11. European Free Vaping Initiative
12. PEOPLE 4 SOIL
13. More than education - Shaping active and responsible citizens
14. Retaining European Citizenship
15. We are a welcoming Europe, let us help!

The civil society organisations supporting this open letter are:

1. AEGEE / European Students’ Forum
2. ARCI (Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana) – Italy
3. Asociația Pro Democratia – Pro Democracy Association (APD)
4. Associação À Praça
5. Austrian Society for European Politics (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, ÖGfE)
6. Berliner Wassertisch
7. Civil Society Development Foundation Romania
8. Community Development Institute Macedonia
9. Democracy International

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<sup>2</sup> Quote from Bertelsmann Stiftung, ‘Factsheet to the Policy Brief 2/2018: More Initiative for Europe’s citizens’ (March 2018), p. 9. Available at: <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/democracy-and-participation-in-europe/project-news/the-european-citizens-initiative-is-largely-unknown-and-hardly-has-any-impact/>

10. Democracy Without Borders
11. Deutscher Naturschutzring (DNR) – German League for Nature and Environment
12. EUGENT - Europäische Gesellschaft für Entschleunigung gUG - European Association for Deceleration
13. European Association for the defence of Human Rights (AEDH)
14. European Citizen Action Service (ECAS)
15. European Citizens' Rights, Involvement and Trust (ECIT)
16. European Civic Forum
17. European Democracy Foundation
18. European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU)
19. European House, Hungary
20. European Institute Foundation (EI)
21. European Think and do tank POUR LA SOLIDARITÉ
22. European Water Movement
23. European Youth Forum
24. Food & Water Europe
25. Forum Italiano Movimenti Acqua
26. Foundation for Public Participation - ManaBalss.lv, Latvia
27. G1000
28. Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe
29. Institute of Public Affairs (ISP), Poland
30. La ligue de l'enseignement
31. Lifelong Learning Platform
32. Mehr Demokratie
33. Migration Policy Group
34. Nature's Rights
35. Netwerk Democratie
36. New Europeans
37. Nyt Europa
38. Open Ministry (Avoim ministeriö), Finland
39. openPetition gmbH
40. people2power.info
41. Solidar
42. Swiss Democracy Foundation
43. The Democratic Society
44. The ECI Campaign
45. The Good Lobby
46. Unconditional Basic Income Europe
47. Volonteuropa
48. We are Europe! e.V.
49. WeMove.EU
50. Young European Federalists (JEF Europe)

*\* Enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty, EU citizens have the official right to start a European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) as of 1 April 2012. This instrument allows 1 million EU citizens from at least 7 different Member States to invite the European Commission to start legislation or take some other kind of legal action. From the 70 initiatives that have been started by citizens, 48 have been registered by the Commission and only 5 have collected the*

*necessary 1 million signatures. The impact of successful ECIs on European policy-making has been perceived as marginal by many ECI organisers and civil society organisations. On 13 September 2017, the European Commission published a proposal for revision of the ECI regulation. This proposal is currently under negotiation within the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. The negotiations between Parliament and Council are starting after the summer, an agreement is expected by the end of 2018, and the new regulation is expected to come into force on 1 January 2020.*