

STRATEGY FOR THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS' INITIATIVE (ECI)

“VOTERS WITHOUT BORDERS”

(1 December 2020-30 November 2021)

INTRODUCTION

Our **ECI Voters Without Borders** calls for reform of the partial rights of mobile EU citizens to vote and stand in municipal and European elections in their country of residence and for the extension of the franchise to achieve a true European citizenship with full political rights.

In the [2019 European elections](#), turnout increased, especially among young people, to reach just over 50% but it did not for the 17 million mobile EU citizens, the group whose rights are most affected by European legislators. It is estimated that only 10% voted in their country of residence and 20% back in their country of origin.



The limited political rights introduced in 1993 by the [Treaty of Maastricht](#) are not working – reform is overdue. One reason for this is that EU citizens cannot vote in the elections which really count – the national ones. It is a stain on European democracy that some EU citizens have never voted in any national election because they have practiced their European rights to freedom of movement. Few can vote in referenda, many of which are on European issues. As an [opinion piece in The Economist](#) about the ECI put it, no taxation without representation is not a bad slogan. In a [“Next Generation EU”](#) with a 750 billion euro recovery plan based on sharing borrowing through a common budget, should not a Dutch citizen be able to vote in Madrid and an Italian in Brussels?

Political rights are the gold standard of any citizenship so at each Annual Event organised by the [ECIT Foundation](#) over the last 4 years, steps have been taken to prepare this ECI, which was submitted in January 2020. A first hurdle has been overcome. The Commission has reacted positively and declared that it has the legal competence to make proposals on all aspects of our demands. As this 6-point strategy shows, our task force of Erasmus students has set up the multimedia tools and wider network for the launch of signature collection on 1 September. Over this period there will be opportunities to promote the ECI: the consultation leading to the next report on EU citizenship under Article 25 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, the Action Plan on democracy and the start of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#). Moreover, the [regulation on ECIs](#) has been revised, making signature collection easier.

ECIs were designed to encourage a citizens-based strategy bringing people together across borders to put on the EU agenda the issues which are neglected by a Europe of lobbies and powerful interests. That is the spirit of this ECI and our task force which builds on the commitment shown by the young generation mobilising across Europe in the run-up to the 2019 European elections. The aim of this strategy for signature collection after the launch is to keep that spirit whilst attracting the necessary support for the task force to succeed with its grassroots voluntary activism. There is a unique opportunity to put Europe on a course to complete universal suffrage. Yet, the obstacles are formidable:

- only 1 in 20 ECIs succeeds in attracting over 1 million signatures within the period allowed of 12 months; it is vital to create momentum with a successful launch, but in the current climate this cannot be guaranteed and further unforeseeable setbacks will have to be overcome;
- A minimum threshold has to be reached in at least 7 of the 27 Member States, but for this ECI there is no ready-made network. "[Voters without borders](#)" has to be created by filling gaps, bringing different groups together and providing them with support for a sustained effort;
- To step up the campaign over one year, and keep support from different circles of interest, a minimum of professional input is necessary for website development, social media marketing and other means of communication;
- Advocacy support towards the European Parliament, other EU Institutions, national and regional authorities is needed. This will come from ECIT's partner [The Good Lobby](#). The ECI is attracting political support, but it is also controversial. Above all, it will need follow-up since electoral reform is never easy. Whatever the results with signature collection and follow-up by the EU, "Voters Without Borders" may become permanent.

6-POINT STRATEGY

In this summary of the strategy, the aim is to preserve the voluntary activist spirit which is guarded by our [Task Force](#) and to indicate areas where more funding and professional support are necessary.

i) **Strengthen and expand the task force.**

The aim of the generation which saw the birth of the ECI should be to continue to support but hand over to the one which can make it a success. Preparations can show this can work since the task force has set up an [attractive modern website](#) and put the emphasis firmly on **social media outreach**.

A **transnational community of interest** is being developed among young people for whom European citizenship and freedom of movement have become a way of life. And this is not just networking for its own sake, since no ECI can succeed without a clear goal. We had to a team within a regulatory framework and timetable on tasks requiring a wide range of skills: knowledge of EU law and politics, research and evidence gathering, digital and multimedia communication, and above all a sense of how things work across different cultures and systems. Our task force receives regularly applications from good candidates who understand this opportunity to practice what they have studied in a high-profile project as a start to a European career. It is an approach to encouraging the emergence of future European leaders which deserves more support in its own right and which could be valid for other ECI organisers. A full-time coordinator for recruitment, training and team building is essential since Erasmus student grants last for only 3 to 6 months, whilst the strategy for the ECI requires continuity.

ii) **Develop fact-finding, story- telling and research**

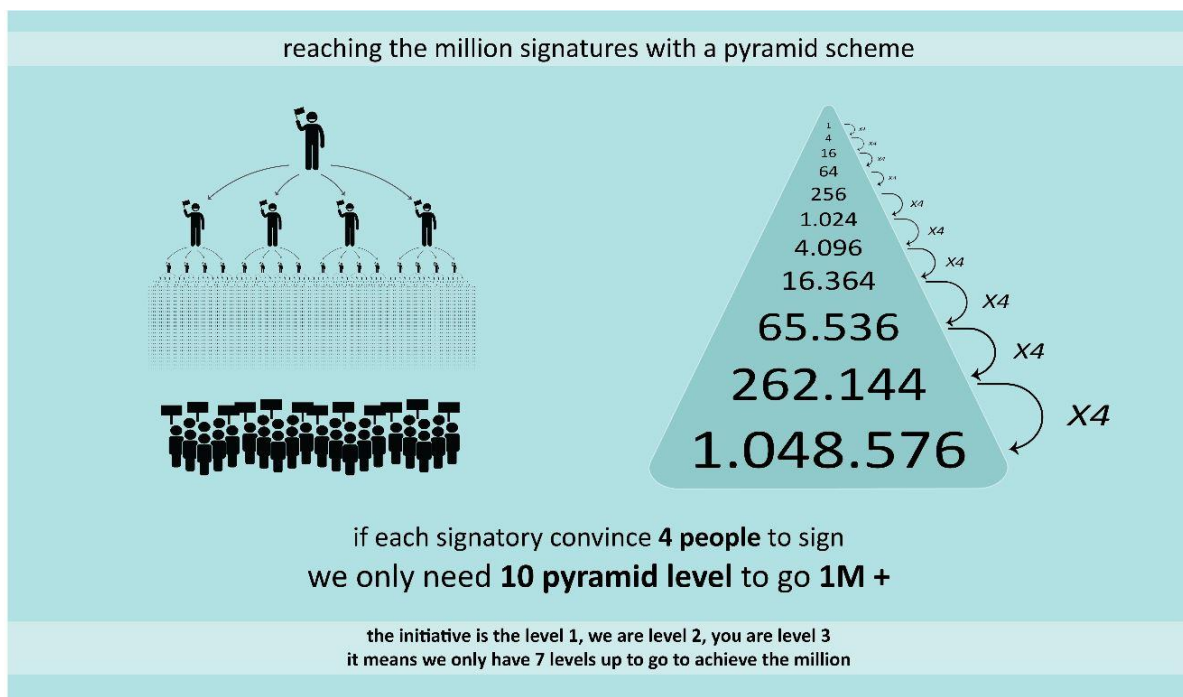
For the launch event our task force is developing a **model for a single European law** giving full political rights to EU citizens. Whilst opinion polls show a large majority in favour of voting in one's country of residence, twice the number vote in their country of origin. This suggests lack of information and obstacles to registration about which a questionnaire has been sent round through social media.

From the replies and other sources, personal stories are being put together to back up the case for reform together with statistics on patterns of freedom of movement across the EU and evidence from opinion polls. It is a good exercise for us Erasmus students to get involved with the process of trying to change EU law. One of the outcomes will be to design a **help desk** for cross border voting which in its recent [report on the](#)

results of the European elections, the Commission sees too as necessary. One of the objectives of the ECI is to ask the EU to encourage further research in an area where basic data is often lacking so it is difficult to assess the likely impact of reforms and where safeguards or transitional periods may be necessary. More structured cooperation could be sought with a university or research institute specialising in freedom of movement and migration.

iii) Make on-line participation and outreach the key to signature collection.

The 14 million transnational voters directly affected by this ECI are by definition difficult to reach through formal associations or informal networks in either their country of origin or of residence. They also make up a heterogenous population in terms of age, income and occupation. Concentrating on their own generation and universities with a critical mass of foreign students is one approach. Our task force is also on the way to tackling the problem of reaching mobile voters by mapping Facebook groups (e.g. Lithuanians in Ireland or Italians in Brussels) and urging them to join the special group for Voters Without Borders, which already has over 600 members from across the EU. Corresponding to opting for **Social Media** makes sense in a climate where public gatherings are discouraged and is encouraging the task force to consider innovative approaches to signature collection as this picture of the “pyramid structure” shows.



We have also designed programmes for webinars and social media marketing so that basis has been created and of course, as the signature collection develops, more external expertise for design and marketing will be needed. We plan to send out at the beginning of each month a multilingual package of ready-to-go social media posts and videos for their own social media and those of their partners, as the examples below show.



OOPS!... I SIGNED IT AGAIN.

VOTERS
without
BORDERS

VOTERS
without
BORDERS

Our European Citizens Initiative is asking for full political rights for all EU citizens

JOIN THE COALITION!



VOTERS
without
BORDERS

c'est ta chance
d'améliorer les droits
de vote des
Européens !

Signe la pétition
maintenant !



iv) Create partnerships

How to create the multiplier effect and the Europe-wide network of support is challenge no 1. Target groups can be found in one of the three fields in the box. The actual partners or coalitions being put in place are very different in different countries. These range from migrant rights, to human rights and pro-democracy organisations to those supporting active citizenship and civil society. The main target countries are **Belgium, Italy, France, Germany, Rumania, Spain, Lithuania and the Netherlands**. The national approach is being supplemented by targeting major cities where there is a large student population, significant numbers of EU citizens and a city council and

stakeholders willing to play a strong European role and welcome migrants. Here the task force has received support from the EU support desk for ECI organisers, the Good Lobby and ECIT contact data. Over the year of signature collection, the task force should be able to provide a minimum of additional financial support to partners ready to conclude agreements with specific deadlines and targets.

1. Students and young people on the move

- students associations (ESN, ELSA, AEGEE, IAPSS, ESN, AISEC and many local and national ones)
- social media groups
- youth organisations at different geographical levels
- advice and on-line support services for mobility of students and young people

2. European citizens living and working in other Member States

- campaigns for EU citizens' and migrants' voting rights
- Facebook groups of EU citizens
- influencers/YouTubers hosting blog/vlog/instagram accounts of their life abroad
- associations either from countries of origin or in countries of destination
- support services for EU citizens and European rights
- foreign-language media

3. Supportive organisations and individuals

- organisers of other ECIs, support services and researchers
- protagonists of EU reforms and transnational participatory and representative democracy
- human rights activists focussing on political rights
- MEPs local political representatives elected in another member state
- think tanks, academics foundations active in the areas of migration and democracy

v) **Set up a supporter group.**

In the absence of a ready-made organisational network across the EU and a solid funding base, the success of this ECI is highly dependent on voluntary effort and support from opinion leaders who have a substantial following on social media.

Our task force needs to acquire human resources to build this network. It should include **MEPs** from the main European political groups in a personal capacity, as well as national and regional politicians. Those interested may well have had experience themselves as Erasmus alumni or of living or working in other Member States. The network of supporters should also be drawn from leading writers on European citizenship and European affairs as well as civil society activists who are well known.

The list should be published on the website and should be as all party and cross-sectoral as possible. This corresponds to the objective ECIT has had since it was set up 5 years ago: to bring together a constituency of support for European citizenship among the scattered interests involved in civil society, university research and policy makers in the EU institutions.

vi) **Get visibility at events and use other pegs on which to hang the ECI**

It should not be assumed that the campaign can be conducted exclusively on-line especially since **transnational voting rights** is an interesting theme, which many people would like to have the opportunity to debate and not just be asked to support

with a signature. It is also a theme which should be regularly updated by linking it to elections and other initiatives for democratic reform which are already on the agenda, so that there is news to report in order to encourage signatures. There are three main types of opportunity:

- **European events.** These include the [launch on 1 September](#), the [ECIT Annual Conference](#) scheduled for 1-2 December as well as having Voters Without Borders on the agenda at events organised by others such as the coalition for "Citizens take over Europe", a big event in Berlin in early November by [NECE \(Networking for European Citizenship Education\)](#) and a conference on ECIs scheduled by the Commission before the end of 2020.



- **National, regional and local elections.** Voters without Borders is already part of a coalition for migrant voting rights who are campaigning at city level. Some elections such as the June 2020 presidential elections in Poland are a good opportunity to raise the issue of cross-border voting rights which may be decisive in a close-run contest. Electoral authorities and political parties are deeply concerned about the possible impact of COVID-19 on turnout and elections, so the ECI should show how it is one measure to respond.

EU processes on democracy and citizenship. Throughout 2021 the task force should be actively involved in the three initiatives mentioned in the introduction: the action plan on democracy, the citizenship report and the Conference on the future of Europe. There should be monitoring of other developments, especially court cases, new studies etc.

It should be borne in mind however that involvement in such activities, however relevant to the ECI, can be time-consuming and will not in itself generate significantly more signatures. Participation can only do that if each opportunity produces a new



story which can be communicated to a wider audience and contacts which can be developed.

CONCLUSION

This outline has shown that there is a strong case for leaving the task force which has carried out extensive and innovative efforts for the launch of the ECI, the main responsibility for the campaign for collecting signatures over the subsequent 12 month period. Transforming the operation and seeking to create a fully professional operation with a sizable budget could be counterproductive and lead to some losses. Supporting and developing what exists with the minimum of internal and external professional support results in the modest indicative budget attached and corresponds to the spirit of ECIs.

Finally, it should be obvious that the ECI will not be the end of the story or that we are in a win-or-lose situation depending on the number of signatures collected. The groundwork has been done for the ECI to be deemed a success in its own terms by the number of signatures collected, even though 1 million is very hard to reach. Increased external support, building on what has been achieved might though be the tipping point to make that possible. The task force has been innovative and deserves such support having pioneered **approaches which may be useful for other ECI organisers**. Our task force should ideally also be able to offer at least seed money to national coalitions in support of the ECI to organize local action days. Furthermore, whilst one can expect at least some reforms to be introduced by the Commission as a result of this ECI, responsibility for elections, even the European ones, rests primarily with member states. This is why we mentioned earlier the need to consider the follow-up to the ECI and the case for setting up **Voters without borders** as a permanent feature of the European landscape.