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**ECI Day 2025: European Citizens’ Initiative needs to reach its full potential**

**The European Citizens’ Initiative has proved to be an effective tool for increasing citizens’ participation in the political life of the EU. But it must be reinforced to counter the risk of the EU institutions becoming detached from ordinary Europeans.**

The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) took centre stage on the second day of the European Economic and Social Committee’s (EESC) Civil Society Week on 18 March. The ECI is an EU participatory mechanism designed to strengthen direct democracy by allowing at least one million EU citizens (with a specified minimum number of nationals from at least seven Member States) to ask the European Commission to propose an act in an area where Member States have transferred powers to the EU level.

‘The EU should take further steps towards participatory democracy to complement its representative form. The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) is the very first instrument of participatory democracy at transnational level. It is the closest equivalent to a citizens’ legislative initiative, but let’s not forget that it is also an agenda-setting tool’, said **Laurenţiu Plosceanu**, EESC Vice-President for Communication.

According to the European Ombudsman, **Teresa Anjinho**, the ECI is a powerful instrument, but it has not lived up to its potential. ‘We have to improve communication on its purposes and functions. Awareness campaigns must be strengthened so that citizens are fully informed about what an ECI can and what it cannot do, and take action. To preserve the ECI as a meaningful tool requires transparency, honesty and communication. If we fail, we will also be failing to maintain trust in this instrument as well as in the future of our Union", said Ms Anjinho.

Since 2012, when ECIs were launched, the European Commission has registered 119 initiatives and their organisers have collected around 20 million signatures. So far, 11 initiatives have been validated as successful and 10 of them have already received a response from the Commission. ‘There should be no ECI left unanswered by the European Commission’ emphasised **Nicolae Ștefănuță**, Vice-President of the European Parliament.

‘We are seeing the real-world impact of some successful ECIs with several legislative acts, such as the revised drinking water directive, the regulation on transparency and sustainability, on risk assessment in the food chain and the nature restoration law. Work also continues on commitments made by the Commission in response to several recent initiatives, such as provisions to phase out cages for farm animals, actions to phase out animal testing in chemical safety assessment and measures to protect sharks’, said **Maroš Šefčovič**, Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, Interinstitutional Relations and Transparency, in a video message.

During the ECI Day event, nine ECI initiatives were present, including those concerning access to water, food security, abortion and LGBTQ+ rights and existing building protection from demolitions, videogame heritage protection, a new model to diminish emissions by Air-Quotas, new healths standards for the medical use of psychadelics.

**Piotr Stec**, adviser to the Polish minister for civil society, underlined that the ‘ECI is proactive, unlike many other European mechanisms for consultation or petitions’. ‘It is also something that really helps to support minorities. If you look at the number of signatures that have been collected, you can see that this is actually a minority voice, or a smaller part of the citizens involved’, said Mr Stec.

Responding to calls to secure funding for ECI initiatives, **Adriana Mungiu**, head of the ECI team at the Commission’s Secretariat-General, urged activists not to wait for new and rather distant budgetary solutions dedicated only to ECIs. Instead, they should make more intensive use of the funds available in the current EU budget, including in the chapters on ‘Citizens' Participation’.

**Conclusions**

At the end of the ECI Day event, the organisers presented their conclusions which will feed into the Civil Society Week’s final recommendations for steps forward, such as:

* ECIs should be further strengthened by making them more visible, more effective and thus more widely used. This can be achieved through financial support to the for ECI organisers, encouraging more young people to take part in ECIs;
* Well-structured campaigns with clear messages to overcome public scepticism;
* A review of the ECI Regulation by the end of 2027;
* Raising awareness on the legislative follow-up of ECIs to ensure the continued relevance of the initiative.
* An appropriate follow-up by all EU institutions to be ensured.

In her concluding remarks, Violeta Jelić, Chair of the EESC Ad Hoc Group on the ECI, said: ‘We have shared valuable insights, explored new ideas and networked with like-minded individuals, all committed to advancing our common goal – a powerful and widely used ECI as a means to strengthen cohesion and active democratic participation’.

**Background**

In 2013, the EESC set up an *Ad hoc Group on the ECI* made up of nine members to provide political guidance on the ECI and follow developments in this area. The EESC’s network of stakeholders on the ECI contribute to the Commission’s work by organising debates with organisers in its meetings and plenaries, holding annual ECI Day conference that provides a platform for ECI organiser to network and exchange best practices, drafting opinions on ECI as a tool and valid ECIs before the Commission adopts its respective decision on an initiative relevant to the EESC’s work, and more.

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*The European Economic and Social Committee represents the various economic and social components of organised civil society. It is an institutional consultative body established by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. Its consultative role enables its members, and hence the organisations they represent, to participate in the EU decision-making process.*

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