

The European Citizens' Initiative is five years old – and it has been no step forward for EU democracy

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Despite the high hopes of its proponents, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) has not alleviated the “democratic deficit” of the European Union, writes [Manès Weisskircher](#). He highlights that even the three campaigns that managed to collect the required one million signatures could not reach their political goals, with the European Commission deciding against further legislative action. He argues that despite the need to improve the ECI, prospects of substantial reform remain modest at best.



Five years ago, on 1 April 2012, the [European Citizens' Initiative](#) (ECI) came into effect. Since then, EU citizens can formally call on the European Commission to propose legislative action. In order to launch an ECI, the collection of one million signatures is required. In addition, low thresholds need to be met in at least one quarter, i.e. currently seven, of the EU member states.

Initially, the proponents of the ECI praised it as an innovative instrument of transnational democracy. Advocates of the Treaty of Lisbon, and of the failed Constitutional Treaty before, highlighted the ECI as a positive feature of these agreements. What is more, some social scientists emphasised the potential of the ECI to alleviate the “democratic deficit” of the EU.

[A study by the German Bertelsmann Stiftung](#) even called the ECI “a revolution in disguise”, expecting that “[a] million signatures are bound to have an impact”. However, after five years of existence, the ECI can only be described as a failure. “[Fraternité 2020](#)”, the very first registered effort, failed to mobilise enough support. The proposal to improve mobility measures within the EU managed to convince slightly more than 70,000 signatories.

Other campaigns have hardly been bigger success stories. Up to now, 63 initiatives have attempted registration, of which the Commission deemed 20 as not within its competence and therefore invalid. Of the 43 registered initiatives, 32 failed to mobilise the required support, while eight are still open.

So far, only three (!) ECI campaigns have been able to actually collect the required number of signatures – less than 10 per cent of all completed ECIs. Moreover, even the campaigners behind the three “successful” ECIs were highly dissatisfied with the ultimate outcome of their efforts: the Commission did not propose their desired legislative measures.

“Successful” initiatives

The three campaigns that gathered the required support dealt with water supply, with stem cell research and abortion, and with animal rights. First, “[Water and Sanitation are a Human Right](#)” (“Right2Water”) wanted to secure water supply as a public service and to preclude its privatisation (1,659,543 certified signatures). Second, “[One of Us](#)” aimed to protect human embryos, prohibiting and ending the funding of human embryonic stem cell research and of organisations promoting abortion (1,721,626 certified signatures). Third, “[Stop Vivisection](#)” mobilised for the abolition of animal experimentation in scientific research (1,173,130 certified signatures).



A Right2Water rally in Dublin. Credits: Sinn Fein (CC BY 2.0)

All these campaigns were backed by social movement networks, such as trade unions, “pro-life” groups, and animal rights organisations, often also with ties to representatives of political parties. During their mobilisation efforts, campaigners mainly focused on one or more populous countries to collect a high absolute number of signatures. For example, 59 per cent of signatories for “Stop Vivisection” were based in Italy and 75 per cent of the signatures for “Right2Water” were gathered in Germany. Focusing on large states corresponds to the requirements of the instrument. A truly EU-wide mobilisation is not necessary for achieving the necessary number of signatures – and would also overburden many organisers, who often have only modest resources at their disposal. Still, campaigners have to work transnationally and to mobilise in a number of states in order to pass all required thresholds.

The considerable efforts of “Right2Water”, “One of Us”, and “Stop Vivisection” did not lead to legislative action. In all three instances, the Commission decided against proposing their political goals to the Council and the European Parliament. Correspondingly, activists were highly dissatisfied with these outcomes, or rather lack of outcomes, and rightly questioned the efficiency of the instrument. At best, campaigns have been granted very limited, often merely rhetorical, concessions so far, or have been able to make some gains at the national or local level, as part of broader social movement mobilisation.

The conflict over the TTIP initiative

[Opponents of TTIP and CETA](#) attempted to make use of the ECI as well. They aimed to “invite the European Commission to recommend to the Council to repeal the negotiating mandate for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and not to conclude the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA)”. However, the Commission refused to register “STOP TTIP” as an ECI, [arguing that](#) the “proposed citizens’ initiative falls outside the framework of the Commission’s powers to submit a proposal for a legal act”.

This decision caused huge controversy: According to the “STOP TTIP” organisers, it was not legally justified, but “[politically motivated](#)” – a challenge at the European Court of Justice is still pending. Meanwhile, the activists’ self-organised initiative against TTIP and CETA collected more than three million signatures, which would have resulted in it becoming the ECI with the strongest support so far.

A drop in new initiatives

The difficulties surrounding the ECI have not gone unnoticed. After a strong initial interest in the instrument, the number of new initiatives has drastically decreased. In 2012, although launching an ECI was only possible from April onwards, 16 initiatives were registered (including all three “successful” ECIs), while the registration of seven more was refused. Combined, these efforts account for almost 40 per cent of all attempted ECI registrations.

Recent developments stand in stark contrast with this early enthusiasm: In 2015, six ECI campaigns were registered, while in 2016 the number dropped to only three. This year, four campaigns have been registered so far. For many potential initiators, there might be no incentive to work on a campaign that does not hold the promise of actually having an impact on EU policies.

The future of the ECI

These experiences with the ECI have led to multiple calls for reform. Activists, scholars, and politicians have met in forums such as the annual [ECI Days](#) in April, hosted by the European Economic and Social Committee. Their proposals include giving organisers the choice of when to start the one year-long signature collection period, lowering the minimum age for supporters to 16, making it possible to suggest EU treaty amendments through an ECI, and depriving the Commission of the power to decide whether an initiative falls within its competence. However, despite the modesty of many of these proposals, the Commission has not been eager to make the ECI a more influential instrument. After all, the ECI represents a challenge to the Commission’s monopoly on legislative initiative.

The most far-reaching change, proposed by some activists, would be the option to call an EU-wide referendum as a consequence of the successful collection of signatures. However, as this would require a reform of the EU treaties, it does not seem to be a realistic scenario in the near future. Five years after its birth it remains uncertain whether the dominant policymakers in the European Union will ever allow the ECI to become a meaningful democratic instrument.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

Manès Weisskircher – *European University Institute*

[Manès Weisskircher](#) is a Researcher at the European University Institute in Florence and teaches at the University of Vienna. His research focuses on social movements, political parties, and democracy. He tweets [@ManesWeissk](#).

