

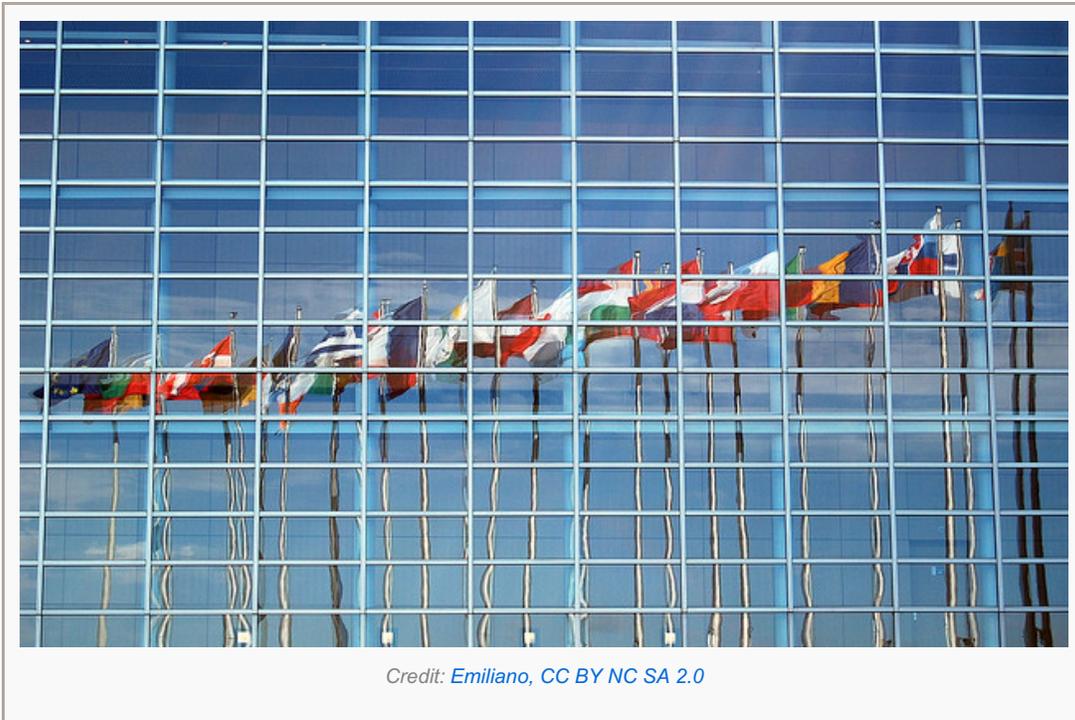
Poor visibility and design flaws are hampering the participatory potential of the European Citizens' Initiative

democraticaudit.com/2015/06/26/poor-visibility-and-design-flaws-are-hampering-the-participatory-potential-of-the-european-citizens-initiative/

By Democratic Audit UK

2015-6-26

*The European Citizens' Initiative was introduced with the Treaty of Lisbon with the aim to improve and expand participation in European Union policy-making. **Sergiu Gherghina** and **Adriana Groh** argue that its potential is being hampered by poor citizen knowledge of the initiative, and multiple design flaws.*



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Introduced in April 2012 as the world's first element of transnational participatory democracy, the European Citizen's Initiative (ECI) aims to stimulate public participation, to provide a channel for communication between citizens and institutions of the European Union (EU), and to bring citizens closer to the European project. With the ECI citizens can make a proposal on the European Commission's agenda. To support the initiative at least one million signatures have to be collected in at least 7 of the current 28 EU Member States.

The Commission has to react to this initiative but is not committed to take further action. While the ECI opens the floor to a bottom-up involvement in the EU decision-making process, many people do not know about the ECI and the opportunities it provides. More important, even those who know about the ECI are not eager to use it. This is somewhat peculiar especially at the EU level that was often criticized for its distant towards citizens. One might expect that as soon as people become aware about opportunities for involvement, they may be willing to take advantage of them.

A web survey conducted on 457 respondents from Germany (240) and the UK (211) in November 2014-January 2015 revealed that when it comes to the ECI, many citizens do not wish to take action. The survey was not conducted on a representative probability sample and thus results cannot be generalized to the entire population. However, they remain illustrative and quite important in the context of a heavy presence among the respondents of young and highly educated persons; these are the usual suspects to hear about the ECI due to their exposure to information. In spite of these, only one third of respondents (36% in Germany and 31% in the UK) have heard about

the ECI three years after its implementation. Since the survey aimed to capture also the willingness to use the ECI, all those respondents who were not familiar with this tool were provided with a short text that outlined its basic features.

All respondents were then asked whether they would use the ECI and only 10% in Germany and 26% in the UK answered positively. In spite of similarly low levels of knowledge about the EU, in the UK there are three times more respondents willing to use the ECI than in Germany. At a glance this observation is counter-intuitive since the level of Euroscepticism in the UK is considerably higher than in Germany and the interest towards EU politics is arguably lower. A close look may provide an alternative interpretation in which the ECI could serve as an instrument to diminish existing problems and to adjust for the right decisions. Along these lines, the ECI could be also used to hinder EU decision-making processes rather than to support it. Somewhat more surprising is the fact that out of those who declared that they know what the ECI is only 6% in Germany and 20% in the UK declared that they are willing to use it in the future. Consequently, knowledge about the ECI is not associated to further action.

One explanation for this result is that citizens may not see the ECI as an effective instrument. So far it had a low rate of success and very few initiatives gained enough support to get proposed to the Commission. Only three initiatives reached the threshold of one million signatures and none of them ended up in legislation or policies. In essence, the ECI does not appear to deliver the promised involvement and thus citizens do not see the benefit of using it. In this sense, the more people know about it, the more likely they would know about its limitations and thus are demotivated to use it. Another possible explanation is the relatively poor advertisement.

In this case although people heard about the ECI the absence of in-depth knowledge about potential advantages does not trigger an interest to use it. Such an attitude can be seen in a positive light because citizens are not eager to use a tool about which they do not have detailed information. With these mechanisms in mind, there is more pressure on the EU institutions to improve the functioning and visibility of the ECI if they want to perform its initial functions (e.g. addressing a part of the democratic deficit, bringing citizens in).

Existing research based has shown that many European citizens strive for better representation in the EU. One way to go about it is to give them a voice in the decision-making process and the ECI aims, in theory, to provide such means. However, its design flaws, limited impact, and poor visibility are likely to keep citizens away: they have little incentives to learn about the ECI and are not willing to use it. In the particular case of the survey conducted in Germany and the UK, even a very small share among those who knew about the ECI is willing to take action. This raises question marks about how meaningful and 'useworthy' such an instrument is in its current form.

Note: This post represents the views of the authors, and does not give the position of Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.

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