



A short guide to the European Citizens' Initiative

The European Citizens' Initiative became a reality on 1 April 2012, enabling citizens for the first time to ask for EU legislation on specific issues provided they gather one million signatures in support. In the words of Parliament president Martin Schulz, it is "a wonderful thing", but also a very serious act of direct participatory democracy that comes after a decade-long gestation.

With the Citizens' Initiative, the EU places citizens at the very heart of the decision-making process and, as president Schulz pointed out when presenting it to the press, "Signatures and initiatives can change a whole political direction."

In this feature you will find an introductory article by Parliament vice president Georgios Papastamkos, who is responsible for the Citizens' Initiative; a presentation of the initiative's main points by the members responsible for steering it through Parliament, Alain Lamassoure and Zita Gurmai; and a link to an interactive application explaining what the initiative is and how it works.

Introductory article on the Citizens' Initiative by Parliament vice president Georgios Papastamkos

The establishment of the European Citizens' Initiative is innovative and could lead to European public opinion having a big impact on rule-making in the EU. It contributes to the creation of a "European public sphere" from which it will be possible to encourage a "bottom-up" development of the Union. The citizens of the 27 member states are not only invited, but also challenged, to come up with proposals, thus forging their EU identity in a more direct and tangible manner.

The European Parliament proposed the inclusion of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), firstly in the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe and then in the Lisbon Treaty. And it was thanks to the substantial contributions of the Members of this House that the ECI is more "friendly", simple and less bureaucratic.

The Parliament will have an important role in the procedure as it will organise and host public hearings of the Initiatives that have 1 million signatures and will be examined by the European Commission. Having been institutionally upgraded by the Treaty of Lisbon to an equal co-legislator with the Council, the European Parliament has to emerge as a *locus* of creative expression of popular European sovereignty. The use of the premises of the only EU institution vested with direct democratic legitimacy for the presentation of the ECIs has strong political symbolism and constitutes an institutional safeguard.

Apart from providing the necessary organisational and functional support to the organisers of the ECIs, the European Parliament is also called upon to act as a "guarantor" - to ensure that the Initiatives of European citizens are protected from any attempt at disorientation, manipulation and lack of transparency. Since the EU has no relevant past experience, there is always a danger that the whole endeavour could be discredited or distorted. This is especially the case, when the disproportionally high expectations cultivated by representatives of civil society are in disharmony with the objective substance of the European Citizens' Initiative.

A negative response from the European Commission to a Citizen's Initiative will not necessarily mark the end of the efforts made by its supporters. The European Parliament will have the power to pick up the baton, through existing procedures, in order to restore to its agenda topics that, according to its Members, should be the subject of the inter-institutional legislative dialogue.

The European Parliament will mobilise all the human resources and infrastructure available to support and promote the European Citizens' Initiative. New technologies and social media will contribute both to familiarisation with the ECI by young EU citizens and to the cultivation of a new culture of unhampered, interactive and democratic proceedings.

Prof. Dr Georgios Papastamkos
Vice President of the European Parliament

EU Citizens' Initiative: the citizen as legislator

The Citizens' Initiative has arrived... From April 1 EU citizens have the right to introduce, through the initiative, a formal request for legislation on the part of the EU institutions. It can concern any matter they consider important, provided that enough people support it and that it is something the EU is legally able to act upon.

In the words of French Christian-Democrat MEP **Alain Lamassoure**, who was responsible for steering the initiative through Parliament together with Hungarian Social-Democrat MEP **Zita Gurmai**, the aim is to "allow citizens to refer to the European Commission problems and requests that matter to them". Ms **Gurmai** adds: "If citizens feel that we need to be more efficient or if they feel that a different direction should be followed, then they can let us know, with one strong voice, directly. And European institutions won't have any other choice than to listen and react and explain."

What it is about

Ms Gurmai said: "Simply put, one million citizens can ask the Commission to initiate European legislation. This participatory touch to our democratic traditions will add a new layer to political decision-making, a layer that is needed."

Mr Lamassoure said: "The organisers of Citizens' Initiatives will have a power of initiative, a new right but also an unprecedented power. It is thus normal that this right is linked to some duties as well, to ensure that Citizens' Initiatives are both serious and truly pan-European."

What initiatives will be considered

For an initiative to be considered valid and be examined by the Commission, it must meet the following conditions:

- it must concern a subject on which the Commission has the right to propose legislation (such as enlargement, the environment, agriculture, transport or public health)
- it must be accompanied by 1 million signatures from EU citizens of voting age from at least seven member states which...
- ... must be collected within a year by a committee of at least seven citizens from at least seven member states. The collection can be made electronically via a tool provided by the EU and signatures are validated by the member states according to their own rules and procedures

What happens once an initiative has been declared valid

Once the initiative has been received and declared valid or admissible by the Commission:

- the organisers meet the Commission to explain their initiative in detail
- they present it at a public hearing in the European Parliament
- within three months the Commission formally announces what action, if any, it will take and explains its reasons.

How Parliament improved the original Commission proposal

Mr Lamassoure said the Parliament had worked hard to remove restrictions to organising an initiative in order to make it as easy and practical as possible. He explained: "The European Parliament ensured that citizens from seven rather than nine member states need be involved; that an admissibility check be carried out before signatures are collected so that citizens do not become engaged in an initiative that can not be accepted, and that the European Commission provides free software for the online collection of signatures, as well as a simple and clear user's guide so that the European Citizens' Initiative can be accessible to everybody."

Why the Parliament will keep a close eye on the Citizens' Initiative

Ms Gurmai said: "We are entering uncharted waters here. We think that we did our best to have a user-friendly regulation, one that ensures proper involvement for citizens and even incentives to do so (but) this doesn't change the fact that we have to monitor very closely the functioning of Citizens' Initiatives in the near future and if need be, we will have to proceed to adequate modifications in the regulation."

Citizens' Initiative explained

If you are interested in improving the EU and making your voice heard, you now have the chance. From 1 April 2012, European citizens will have more of a say in EU affairs thanks to the European Citizens' Initiative. This enables citizens to ask for EU legislation on issues that are important to them provided they gather one million signatures in support. Check our application to understand the procedure and spread the word!

The Citizens' Initiative: the way to a Citizens' Europe

The European Citizen's initiative, in force since 1 April 2012, is an unprecedented opportunity for European people to unite in order to influence the flow of European politics. EP Vice President Georgios Papastamkos, who agreed to answer questions on the Initiative submitted by followers of the Parliament's Facebook page, believes it could be the beginning of something bigger, a true "Citizens' Europe".

How will the initiative solve any of Europe's problems? Shouldn't Parliament concentrate on making European elections a true contest instead? For example, by having each political group nominate its own candidate for Commission President and then leave it to the citizens to decide who gets the post? This would really bring politics to Europe.

From this time onwards Europe's citizens can participate in the EU's legislative process by asking the Commission to propose rules on issues that fall within its competences. In this vein, the Lisbon Treaty helps to address one of the main problems the Union faces, namely the lack of citizens' participation in its democratic life. Your question is extremely interesting and is already the subject of much debate in the European Parliament. I have personally supported the direct election of Commissioners, alongside MEPs, already since the 1990s. However, this is an issue that is so far discussed *de lege ferenda* (in view of future legislation) as it is not possible to do so currently under the provisions of the existing Treaties.

What are EU officials to do if they receive widely supported initiatives asking for radical change in the European Union, in terms of either further integration or even disintegration?

I hope this innovative concept will have the response you indicate in your question. I personally believe that the degree of support that each initiative receives from citizens must be taken into account by the Commission when it decides whether to take it up or not. We hope for Initiatives that will further European integration. However, demands that are at odds with the Union's principles cannot become the object of an Initiative. In any case, receiving, evaluating and acting upon any initiative actually presupposes a minimum European integration and of course that the Commission has a right of initiative in the respective area.

How will Parliament help ECI organisers? How will the public hearings in Parliament be carried out?

Parliament will offer those organising an Initiative all the assistance it can provide, both in terms of infrastructure and human resources, to enable them to present it in the best possible way. In addition to the organisers and the representatives of the EU Institutions, representatives of civil society and all interested parties will be invited to the public hearings. Holding these hearings in the only directly elected EU institution will send a very strong signal.

Do you fear that interesting Initiatives (such as the one potentially spawned by the "One Seat" campaign for Parliament itself) will not be admitted for lack of Commission authority to deal with it? Can this requirement be overcome?

My concern is that some will be disappointed, not because their initiative didn't have the results they expected, but because of the extremely high expectations that some are purposefully cultivating or will seek to cultivate in the future. Both President Schulz and I have on every occasion underlined the need to better inform citizens about the rules and the requirements and what can objectively be asked of the Commission through an initiative. The example of the Parliament's seat is an obvious case in point: it is simply beyond the Commission's legislative remit, as the seat of the Institutions is set by common agreement of the governments of the member states. We must in all cases defend this truly innovative instrument from any attempt to discredit or manipulate it. There is a wide scope of initiatives to be taken that could help making Europe more visible, more democratic and more efficient; a real "Europe of Citizens".