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Proposed regulations cripple the European Citizens Initiative

Intrusive personal data requirements, narrow topics and unclear follow-up could render the ECI unusable

Supported by democracy advocates as an important new tool to bridge the large and growing gap between citizens and the EU, the European Citizens Initiative (ECI) is in danger of being rendered unusable by the excessively restrictive regulations proposed by the European Commission today. The European Parliament and Council will now negotiate the final regulations.

As set out in article 11.4 of the Lisbon Treaty, the ECI allows one million citizens from a significant number of EU Member States to ask the European Commission to propose new legislation. It thus gives citizens the same rights as the European Parliament and Council to influence the EU's legislative agenda.

According to Carsten Berg, coordinator of the ECI Campaign, a coalition of democracy advocates *"some positive elements have been added to the proposed regulation based on input from a public consultation and hearing. However, other excessively restrictive requirements risk killing the ECI before it is born. A few changes could ensure that it is usable."*

Intrusive personal data requirements could deter supporters

Each person supporting a ECI would be required to give not only his or her name, address and signature but also date and place of birth and personal identification number. This could make the ECI unworkable in practice by raising public fears of violation of privacy and identity theft.

Narrow definition of admissible topics ignores important citizen interests

Since the ECI will be restricted to policy proposals necessary to implement existing treaties, many issues important to citizens, such as a single seat for the European Parliament, could not be discussed. Given that the Commission may propose treaty amendments, it should be possible to launch ECIs requiring treaty amendments to implement.

Unclear follow-up could dissuade ECI organisers

The Commission remains silent about the most important phase of the ECI: their response to a successful initiative. *"We now know what we have to do, but we don't know what we get"* says Carsten Berg. Every successful ECI should be recognized with a public deliberative hearing where the Commission explains its response in a transparent way. Moreover the Commission should be given a time limit to issue a legislative proposal, as is the case for initiatives from the European Parliament.

No practical support for ECI organisers

It is disappointing to see that the Commission does not plan any practical support elements for ECI organisers such as the legal advice, translation of the ECI text or reimbursement for some costs. High costs could prevent small organisations and citizens groups from launching ECIs making the ECI a tool only for well-funded organisations, businesses and wealthy individuals.

Signature requirements to trigger an admissibility check are too high

While ECI advocates applaud the inclusion of an early-stage check by the Commission of the legal admissibility of a ECI, the requirement of first obtaining 300,000 signatures is excessively costly for organisers of ECIs which will later be deemed inadmissible. 50,000 signatures would be sufficient for this purpose.

Insufficient time for EU-wide campaigns

The ECI Campaign welcomes the fact that signatures can be collected in paper form or electronically. However, the maximum time period of 12 months to collect one million signatures from nine countries is insufficient. Often 24 months will be needed, especially for ECIs coordinated by smaller organisations or for issues that are not yet well known or understood by the general public.

The ECI Campaign is a coalition of democracy advocates, including more than 120 European NGOs. For more information contact Carsten Berg at +49-1764-3064365 or visit <http://www.citizens-initiative.eu/>