



What is the ECI?

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is one of the major innovations of the Treaty of Lisbon. It aims to increase the participation of citizens in the European Union and thus bridge the large and growing gap between citizens and the EU.

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.

Importantly, the ECI is a non-binding agenda-setting initiative. It is not a binding referendum and therefore has no directly binding impact on EU law.

Why is a citizen-friendly ECI regulation important?

To be relevant to citizens and usable in practice, regulations implementing the ECI must be designed in a citizen-friendly way. Unfortunately, the draft regulations to implement the ECI proposed by the European Commission on 31 March 2010 are excessively restrictive and risk rendering the ECI unusable. The world's first instrument for transnational participatory democracy is in real danger of becoming a "toothless tiger" - - yet another example of the EU's failure to connect with its citizens, unless we don't develop an appropriate understanding for this new democratic instrument to come.

What needs to be changed in the ECI regulation to make the ECI usable?

In order to ensure that the ECI can fulfil its potential to engage citizens in EU issues, we suggest the following modifications to the ECI regulation:

1. Clarify the European Commission's follow-up to successful ECIs

The draft ECI regulation is silent on the most important phase of the ECI: the Commission's response to a successful ECI. This needs to be clearly detailed in the regulation. Each successful ECI should result in a public deliberative hearing where the Commission explains its response to the ECI in a transparent way. As is the case for a legislative initiative from the European Parliament, the Commission should also be given a time limit in which to issue a legislative

proposal.

2. Simplify the signature form and eliminate ID number requirements

In the draft regulation, each person supporting an 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 card number (ID card, passport, social security card). The ID number requirement could effectively render the ECI unusable by raising public fears of violation of privacy and identity theft. Such intrusive personal data requirements clearly deter supporters and thus significantly raise costs for signature collection. The requirement of providing a personal identity card number should therefore be removed.

3. Lower the signature threshold to trigger an ECI admissibility check to 25,000

The Commission's early stage check of the admissibility of an ECI is a wise step. It balances the desire for open debates on diverse topics with the need for ECIs to impact policy. However, the requirement of first obtaining the large number of 300,000 signatures is excessively costly for organisers of ECIs which will later be deemed inadmissible. 25,000 signatures would be a sufficient number for this purpose.

4. Provide practical support to ECI organiser

Given the huge practical challenges inherent in collecting one million signatures at transnational level, ECIs should have the right to formal support. Support prior to signature collection should include comprehensive information on how to conduct an ECI and legal advice. Once the ECI has been declared admissible, official translation of the text into all 21 EU official languages should be provided. To promote transnational citizen involvement, travel vouchers and free meeting-space for citizens from different countries to meet to discuss the ECI topic could also be provided.

5. Reduce the minimum number of Member States to five

The proposed requirement of a minimum number of signatures from nine Member States (1/3) is far too high. A European Party only needs members from seven Member States. Given that this is simply an agenda-setting initiative that will later follow standard EU legislative procedures, signatures from at least five member states would be sufficient.

6. Narrow definition of admissible topics would ignore 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.

7. 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.