



Commentary

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Despite teething problems, the ECI stimulates European-wide debates

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The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), launched in 2012, was created to foster direct participation of citizens in EU decision-making and “to stimulate Europe-wide public debates on issues of concern to EU citizens” (European Commission, 2015).¹ Due to the high technical and legal barriers, the requisite one million signatures has been reached by only a few campaigns, and the lack of enthusiasm shown so far by the European Commission to put forward proposals based on the ECIs has meant that the inclination among campaigners to register initiatives has waned.

Drawing on the authors' previous research,² this contribution maps initiatives that have fostered a European-wide debate and finds common characteristics among the campaigns that remained active following the signature collection period. The analysis shows that the ECI has contributed to a European public debate with cross-border communication and the exchange of knowledge among networks of actors. Despite ECI campaigners' fear that the current problems in implementing the instrument discourage its use, the evidence of the ECI's contribution to Europe-wide debates should be acknowledged in any assessment of its utility.

The success of the ECI is often assessed through the lenses of the three ECI campaigns that have gathered a million signatures to date – *One of Us*, *Stop Vivisection and Water & Sanitation are a Human Right* – but as shown in Table 1, these campaigns are not the only ones that have remained active after the signature period came to a close. A total of 10 initiatives launched in the period 2012-15 continued to advocate on behalf of the issues they raised after the official ECI period had ended. Although the *STOP TTIP* and *My voice against nuclear power* initiatives did not obtain official ECI status, their public profiles warrant consideration in the ECI context since the campaigns lived on.

¹ A citizens' initiative has to be supported by at least one million EU citizens, spread across at least seven member states, in each of which a minimum number of signatories is also required.

² See Greenwood & Tuokko (2016), which presented material collected via research and interviews with over 20 campaigners.

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Table 1. ECI registration applications with continuing medium-to-high profile public campaigns, 2012-15

Initiatives	Did the initiative bring new issues to a European-wide debate?
Receiving over 1 million signatures	
<i>Stop vivisection</i>	No
<i>Water and sanitation are a human right! Water is a public good, not a commodity</i>	Yes
<i>One of us</i>	Yes
Receiving 100,000 – 300,000 signatures	
<i>End ecocide in Europe: A citizens' initiative to give the earth rights</i>	Yes
<i>European Free Vaping Initiative</i>	Yes
<i>Unconditional basic income</i>	Yes
<i>Weed like to talk</i>	No
<i>European initiative for media pluralism</i>	No
Registration rejected	
<i>STOP TTIP</i>	Yes
<i>My voice against nuclear power</i>	No

While these 10 campaigns continued to foster a European-wide debate, not all of them introduced a new issue into the European public debate. Campaigns such as *My voice against nuclear power* as well as *Weed like to talk*, which promotes the legalisation of cannabis, served as additional vehicles for promoting causes that had long been in the public discourse in the European sphere and therefore cannot be seen to represent the success of the ECI. This nuance is indicated in the second column of Table 1.

Therefore, it is those campaigns that brought new topics to the European public debate that are of particular interest in this present assessment of the ECI's success. Our previous research (Greenwood & Tuokko, 2016) showed that these campaigns share many common features, which can be used by campaigners, researchers and policy-makers alike to acquire a deeper understanding of the factors that can contribute to the effectiveness of ECIs in promoting European-wide debate.

First of all, many ECI campaigns can be characterised as being **largely autonomous from established organisations**. The *European Free Vaping Initiative*, for example, arose in a context of vaping activism in the US, but started as an autonomous EU campaign in (unsuccessfully) seeking exclusion for e-cigarettes from the regulatory scope of the 2014 Tobacco Products Directive. At the same time, however, it gathered support from businesses with links to medical organisations both in the EU and the US. The *Unconditional Basic Income* (EBI) campaign took inspiration from the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN), which dates back to the 1980s, and in some countries, from social movements embracing trade unions, ATTAC (an international movement promoting alternatives in the globalisation process) and Blockupy, a protest movement against austerity.

Secondly, some campaigns have **shared linkages with global movements**. This is the case, for example, with *End ecocide in Europe*, which brought the United Nations concept of ecocide to the European level. Thirdly, many campaigns that succeed in staying in the public's eye for some time manifest a **'post-student' feel**. Most campaigners belonged to a young cohort who view the ECI as a tool for political participation.

Fourthly, some campaigns manage to attract the **endorsement of celebrities**, which can be linked to periods registering spikes in signature collection. Celebrity endorsement was an essential factor in the success of the *STOP TTIP*, *Unconditional Basic Income* and *End ecocide* campaigns. These campaigns also received **notable support in Central and East European countries**. This was particularly the case in Croatia (*UBI*, *STOP TTIP*), Bulgaria (*UBI*, *End ecocide in Europe*) and Estonia (*End ecocide in Europe*).

Finally, **campaigns regularly used national domestic politics to frame their cause** and to maximise signature collection. This was particularly the case when campaigns touched local sensitivities that struck a responsive chord in neighbouring countries. The themes were therefore linked to national politics with substantial support from national and local organisations. In particular in the Central and East European countries, local NGOs reported that the ECI provided them with some of their first experiences in campaigning on an EU-wide issue.

The ECIs presented in this commentary demonstrate the transnational character of ECI campaigns. On the basis of our survey of the instrument's first three years of operation, we have found evidence of its ability to contribute to a European public space. With the EU struggling to overcome serious challenges to its democratic legitimacy, the ability of the ECI to engage younger cohorts and the presence of campaigns in new EU member states show that the instrument has the potential to facilitate pan-European debates.

Bibliography

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