



European Economic and Social Committee

PRESS

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European Citizens' Initiative marks one year anniversary

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) today convened key stakeholders to mark one year since the establishment of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) – the world's first direct, digital and transnational tool of participatory democracy. Organised in partnership with the Committee of the Regions, the European Citizen Action Service, Democracy International, the Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe and Euronews, the European Citizens' Initiative Day 2013 provided the platform to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the initiative and debate future improvements. Most initiatives' organisers were on the spot and had the possibility to share their experiences and expressed their needs and concerns.

Launched through a single website on 1 April 2012, the ECI has given rise to 27 initiative proposals and garnered over 1.6 million signatures, with fourteen initiatives currently in the running for submission to the European Commission. Allowing for an exchange between ECI organisers, decision-makers and experts, the ECI Annual Day addressed a number of technical, legal and economic barriers to raising signatures, while also highlighting the unique potential of the ECI to encourage direct participation and create a new space for European debate.

"Despite the economic and social challenges facing Europe, the European Citizens' Initiative is helping EU's democracy to evolve," said Staffan Nilsson, president of the EESC. "Used effectively, it will leverage the collective wisdom of European citizens to ensure greater cohesion and engagement. The European Economic and Social Committee is therefore committed not only to raising awareness of this important initiative, but also to assisting in the development of an easy and transparent process for citizens' initiatives."

Examples of the most successful ECIs – including the "Right 2 Water" initiative, which is reflected in several Commission policies – offer lessons for both the participative process and for reform of the regulation in 2015. Participants of the conference raised questions regarding the practical aspects of campaigning, particularly related to cost, the system of online signature collection and the need for better communication and dissemination. Proposals were made to create a supportive infrastructure for organisers of ECIs, such as

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the creation of an independent civil society driven help desk, one stop shop or contact point.

"The ECI is the first step on our way to European transnational e-democracy and therefore we should deal with it with respect, full appreciation of its potential and in full understanding of what is coming up" said Maroš Šefčovič, Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of Inter-Institutional Relations and Administration.

"The ECI has offered a very clear monitor of what's going on in the EU, as the initial initiatives have covered everything from technical-administrative matters to down-to-earth concerns such as voting rights," elaborated Bruno Kaufmann, President of the Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe.

With millions of individuals as well as hundreds of organisations, authorities and institutions now involved, it was concluded that targeted reform of the regulation would help make the ECI a more effective tool in the future.

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