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On 1 April 2012, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) was launched, the EU's first major step into the world of direct participatory democracy. In the two years since that launch, we've seen over 30 initiatives submitted to the European Commission – a demonstration that this tool has been well accepted and used by European citizens.

We have now completed the first full cycle of the ECI process. *Right to Water* was the first ECI to successfully reach the one million signature mark and at the end of 2013 submitted more than 1.6 million signatures to the Commission in support of its proposals.

Two extremely informative and helpful hearings were then held with the organisers of the ECI: one at the Commission with representatives from the eight DGs covered by the scope of the ECI and one at the European Parliament with MEPs. I was privileged to take part in both of these meetings, to meet the ECI organisers first hand and hear them talk with passion and skill about their proposal.

And of course this input was key in helping the Commission to draft its first ever communication in response to a proposal for legislation coming directly from the European public! It was impossible for the Commission's communication to respond to every proposal in the *Right to Water* ECI because they fell outside the areas where the Commission is empowered to act. We were however able to respond very positively to many of them, setting out a concrete list of actions to improve access to, quality of and information concerning water for citizens across the EU.

At the time of writing, two more ECIs have hit the one million signature mark. *One of Us* has already submitted its 1.8 million verified signatures to the Commission and will have the chance to present its proposals at hearings in Brussels later in 2014. *Stop Vivisection* is still in the process of getting its 1.3 million signatures verified. And there are new ECIs being proposed on a regular basis. So there is every chance that we will see more initiatives reaching the million signature threshold in the future.

The economic crisis has put citizens' faith in their political leaders to the test, making it all the more important for the ECI, which puts citizens firmly in the legislative driving seat, to be a success.

The ECI regulation foresees a review by 2015. Now that we have brought the first ECI to a successful conclusion, we can start to look at whether there are any particular elements of the process that can be improved. Input and ideas from civil society are, of course, very welcome.

It's certainly true that the launch of the ECI has not been without its teething problems. I'm glad to say that some of the burdens imposed on citizens by the member states (for example, the obligation in many countries to provide ID card numbers) have already been dropped as a reaction to complaints from citizens that the process was too cumbersome.

This will give us plenty of food for thought throughout the review process, and help us, if necessary, to refine the rules in order to make it even more effective for citizens to have their say on the future of European legislation – which, after all, was why the ECI was established in the first place.

One thing that will need to be addressed in the review is the question of the online collection platforms, including issues such as the complexity of the software, the cost and administration of the hosting and the certification. These were perhaps the most prominent issues that came to the fore following the launch of the ECI and led to an extension of the signature collecting deadlines for the first ECIs registered.

I'm happy to say that the Commission was quick to respond to these issues. For example, it offered to host several of the first registered ECIs on its own servers in Luxembourg and made its IT staff available to help organisers with questions regarding the installation of software.

The first two years of the ECI have also answered a number of questions that were frequently posed ahead of the launch. Notably, concerns that the ECI would be hijacked by big business as a sort of 'lobbying by the back door' have been completely unfounded. There are no real examples of this in any of the registered ECIs. But experience has also shown that initiatives that have the backing of sizeable organisations seem to have a greater likelihood of success, not least because of the reach that these organisations have in communicating their support for the ECI.

It is important to remember that creating a successful ECI is not necessarily an easy task. Leaving aside the question of registration for a moment, simply raising awareness of the initiative in 28 member states is by no means an easy one – although it is undoubtedly far easier today with the advent of social media than it would have been in the past. That's why getting support for a citizens' initiative from a Europe-wide organisation has certainly proved to be vital in obtaining the necessary million or more signatures.

Returning to the issue of registration, I think one thing that has become clear over the past couple of years is that EU law is complex and difficult to understand for many EU citizens! This is not surprising perhaps, but it is important since the success or failure to register an ECI depends predominantly on whether there is a sound legal basis for it (in its entirety) in the treaties. Several ECIs have in fact been rejected because there is not sufficient legal basis for all the proposals they contain.

The ECI has been a learning process for all of us: the Commission, member states and citizens themselves. Well-run, well-supported initiatives can be successful, but we still have much to do in terms of raising awareness within each member state of the right to launch ECIs and to promote ongoing initiatives to help them successfully meet the threshold for signatures. These are things that we can do regardless of the outcome of the review, and I urge all member states to work alongside the Commission and the European Parliament in doing more to help us create a real ECI that works!

Maroš Šefčovič is European Commission Vice-President for Inter-institutional Relations and Administration.

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**Learning from the first two years of the European Citizens' Initiative**

**Edited by** Carsten Berg and Janice Thomson

**Prefaces by** Maroš Šefčovič, Martin Schulz and Dimitris Kourkoulas

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14 analytic and prospective contributions, and two interviews.

You may order the book by email: [contact@citizens-initiative.eu](mailto:contact@citizens-initiative.eu)

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