
6. Unconditional Basic Income (UBI) – Exploring a Pathway towards Emancipatory Welfare Conditions in the EU

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Editor's summary: The goal of this ECI was to raise awareness of the social policy of "unconditional basic income" and prod the EU to support its implementation. It encountered many early technical challenges which slowed campaign momentum and lost supporters – from initially being refused registration to OCS software glitches. Through creative signature gathering techniques and the clever use of a parallel Avaaz online campaign, this grassroots campaign with limited financial resources collected an impressive 285,000 signatures.

Crash-testing the ECI: pains and hopes from the basic income movement

For decades, economists, sociologists, entrepreneurs, philosophers, think tanks, activist organisations and even some isolated politicians from all over the world have praised the merits of an *unconditional basic income (UBI)*: a social policy that gives all citizens of a political community an income from birth to death, without conditions or means testing.

In Europe, a movement pushing for UBI has slowly taken shape in recent decades. Since the 1986 creation of the *Basic Income European Network (BIEN)*, several congresses were organised in Europe and beyond, and various organisations have joined the effort. A consensus was reached that a European-wide action should be organised to support ongoing national campaigns. The new European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) tool was seen as a strategic means to achieve two different goals: make the idea of basic income a "hot topic" in Europe and get the EU to move in the direction of its implementation. We also hoped that being one of the first ECIs to be launched would bring our campaign additional media exposure.

Drafting an ECI text acceptable to the Commission was tricky

About 40 participants from various countries and organisations first met in April 2012, with the technical assistance of Green MEP Gerald Häfner, to discuss the purpose of an ECI on basic income and craft a proposal. It was tricky to come up with a reasonable demand to the Commission for our idealistic project. Since social policies usually fall under the responsibility of member states, we could not directly ask the EU to implement UBI. However, the Commission's remit does include harmonisation of social policies and exchange of best practices.

In July 2012, after a second preparatory meeting, we submitted our first ECI proposal to the Commission for registration. We asked the European Commission to "*use all its existing means and possibilities to speed up the introduction of an Unconditional Basic Income*" and to introduce a legal rights act to "*achieve the aims of the EU, to combat social exclusion and discrimination, and to promote social justice and social protection.*"

This proposal was rejected by the Commission on the grounds this it "*falls manifestly outside the framework of the Commission's powers.*" The Commission admitted that UBI could help achieve the goals of the EU to combat poverty (*article 153 of TFEU*). It denied, however, that it had an *appropriate legal basis* to pursue any 'legal rights act' that would allow harmonisation of member states' laws.

We therefore crafted a new ECI proposal asking the EU to initially promote *“initiatives such as ‘pilot studies’...and examination of different models of UBI”* to improve member states’ social security systems. However, the long-term objective remained the introduction of the UBI *“to offer to each person in the EU the unconditional right...to having his/her material needs met...a life of dignity as stated by EU treaties.”* It was registered in January 2013.

After victory, hard times: getting ready to collect signatures online

The acceptance of our ECI was indeed a small victory. But energy and resources were lost in the battle. After the first rejection and subsequent scaling back of demands, some organisers lost hope and quit the project, including our Italian partner who was supposed to help build our campaign website. Many of those still involved doubted that our revised ECI proposal would be accepted, making it harder to motivate them to prepare to campaign. Consequently, our campaign website, social media channels and online collection system were not ready when the ECI was finally registered. Supporters couldn’t sign our ECI!

The online collection system (OCS) which allows people to sign with secure software, was particular challenging to make operational. First, because we had no idea if our ECI would be accepted and as it was the Christmas holiday season, we weren’t prepared to start the signature collection process. Second, although the OCS could be hosted free of charge by the Commission in Luxembourg and we were helped by Commission staff, complying with security requirements was much more complex and time-consuming than we expected. Third, training with the Commission’s security managers failed twice because of bugs in the training DVD. Several additional weeks were lost.

As a consequence of challenges with the OCS, we were only able to collect signatures in March – two months after the 12 month signature collection countdown had officially started. We considered it unfair to lose two months of collection time so asked the Commission for a deadline extension. Extensions had been granted due to similar OCS problems to ECIs registered before 31 October 2012. But because our ECI was registered 14 days later, we were denied an extension – which we think was an arbitrary decision.

This period of waiting for signature collection to begin was frustrating for both us and our supporters. Why was it not possible to sign an ECI when it usually takes just a few clicks to launch an online petition? Even worse, we didn’t know *when* the OCS would be functional. This uncertainty made campaign preparations much harder. We did not feel in control of our own campaign. When the OCS was finally ready, we had to resort to improvisation. To avoid similar situations in the future, we urge a change in the ECI regulation. Organisers should be given full control over the launch of their ECI. Ideally they should be able to choose the launch date within a certain timeframe, starting after the OCS is operational and certified.

Lack of harmonisation of personal data requirements creates an OCS nightmare

New problems appeared once supporters could finally sign our ECI. To begin with, we received many emails asking why supporters had to provide personal data such as ID numbers. Many people were uncomfortable with this so did not sign our ECI. This is largely due to the fact that most people were unaware of the ECI’s existence and its legal rules.

Personal data requirements which varied widely between countries led to even more confusion. One source of complexity is the distinction between *citizenship* country and *residence* country. This does not make sense to many people and led some EU citizens to be denied the right to sign our ECI. While we understand and generally stand behind the idea of having some personal data to support the signatures, it should not be too complicated. Therefore, all data requirements should be harmonised as much as possible between member states. Ideally, the country of residence should be irrelevant; only nationality should matter.

Many people were also confused because they did not receive an email confirming their signatures. Several people asked us if we could check if they had already signed. This is something we legally and technically cannot do. Providing some documentation to ECI signatories would help answer questions and concerns we received about the OCS.

Creative solutions to complicated paper signature collection forms

The paper signature collection forms were not easier to use than the OCS. According to our local Spanish coordinators: *“It’s difficult to know how many signatures per page there are, too many fields, people distrust giving their address, and generally are unable to fill with ‘one capital letter per square’.”* To get around these difficulties, our local activists discovered tricks. For example, our Dutch campaigner explained *“The best way to prevent mistakes was to fill in the forms on behalf of the signatories, which I must say, is often humiliating for them.”* Other activists produced their own forms to collect the required data and then later entered it online themselves. Doubts remain as to the legality of this approach.

In general, national ECI authorities were available and responsive, but often unable to help because they lacked sufficient information about ECI rules. Since national authorities cannot help organisers and the Commission cannot provide user-friendly paper forms, more flexible rules are needed to empower organisers to produce their own tools without the fear of breaking the law.

Parallel Avaaz campaign dramatically accelerates signature collection

In the final weeks of the campaign, with the launch of a parallel online petition on *Avaaz.org*, we witnessed an impressive acceleration of signature collection. The *Avaaz* petition invited supporters to sign on the official ECI site. Contrary to our initial expectations, many people signed *both* on *Avaaz* and the official ECI form. This clearly demonstrates that a much simpler and user-friendly signature collection system would greatly benefit future ECIs.

Our ECI ended on 14 January 2014 after having collected 285,000 signatures and reaching the required minimum signature thresholds in six countries. Because we did not collect enough signatures, our ECI was considered 'obsolete' and national authorities so far have refused to certify our signatures. However, we can bilaterally discuss with the competent national authorities if they nevertheless are prepared to verify the signatures. This would enhance our experience of the “closing procedure” of an ECI, in case we decide to later launch another ECI (e.g. in 2015).

Even though we did not collect one million signatures, we believe that our main goal – to raise awareness on the issue of UBI – has been successfully met. Moreover, we are proud and happy for having been one of the first groups of citizens to use the ECI. However, as this article explains, we have endured many failures using this democratic tool.

The fact that we lowered our ambitions with the second registration left the impression that the ECI only opens a very narrow window to new ideas (i.e. those not already inside the current framework of the EU treaties). The ECI could have more impact if EU treaty amendments could be proposed with an ECI and then a referendum organised in case of victory, as is the case for Switzerland's citizens' initiatives scheme.

We can only regret that the ECI was not designed in a way more friendly to grassroots activist groups with limited financial resources. Our hope remains that EU institutions will listen to and take into account the feedback from all of the courageous early ECI organisers.

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www.basicincome2013.eu

Table – Offline versus Online Collection – Final Figures January 2014

<i>Country</i>		<i>Signatures Collected</i>			<i>Country Quota</i>	<i>Relation Paper/Online</i>
<i>Code</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>on Paper</i>	<i>Online</i>	<i>Total</i>		
AT	Austria	440	8,055	8,495	14,250	5% / 95%
BE	Belgium	2	19,008	19,010	16,500	0% / 100%
BG	Bulgaria	10,677	30,006	40,683	13,500	26% / 74%
CY	Cyprus	-	112	112	4,500	0% / 100%
CZ	Czech Republic	446	4,126	4,572	16,500	10% / 90%
DE	Germany	3,526	37,765	41,291	74,250	9% / 91%
DK	Denmark	383	2,817	3,200	9,750	12% / 88%
EE	Estonia	22	4,862	4,884	4,500	0% / 100%
EL	Greece	1	2,868	2,869	16,500	0% / 100%
ES	Spain	2,001	23,419	25,420	40,500	8% / 92%
FI	Finland	141	1,504	1,645	9,750	0% / 91%
FR	France	2	37,413	37,415	55,500	0% / 100%
HR	Croatia	1	12,193	12,194	9,000	0% / 100%
HU	Hungary	1	14,513	14,514	16,500	0% / 100%
IE	Ireland	-	1,170	1,170	9,000	0% / 100%
IT	Italy	6	4,525	4,531	54,750	0% / 100%
LT	Lithuania	-	221	221	9,000	0% / 100%
LU	Luxembourg	1	629	630	4,500	0% / 100%
LV	Latvia	-	154	154	6,750	0% / 100%
MT	Malta	-	194	194	4,500	0% / 100%
NL	Netherlands	-	20,337	20,337	19,500	0% / 100%
PL	Poland	5	4,760	4,765	38,250	0% / 100%
PT	Portugal	2	6,869	6,871	16,500	0% / 100%
RO	Romania	4	4,078	4,082	24,750	0% / 100%
SE	Sweden	-	9,601	9,601	15,000	0% / 100%
SI	Slovenia	-	9,255	9,255	6,000	0% / 100%
SK	Slovakia	1	6,351	6,352	9,750	0% / 100%
UK	United Kingdom	2	10,109	10,111	54,750	0% / 100%
EU	<i>Signatures</i>	17,664	276,914	294,578	1,000,000	6% / 94%
	<i>“Significant” Countries</i>	0	5	5	7	

Bold numbers mean that the Country Quota is reached.

Source: basicincome2013.eu/en/statistics.htm

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