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## 14. Central Public Online Collection Platform for the European Citizens' Initiative

Joerg Mitzlaff

*Editor's summary: This ECI was created by IT experts to improve the ECI instrument itself. Specifically, it asks the Commission to create a single centralised, user-friendly and transparent online ECI platform. The current online collection system (OCS) is cumbersome and poorly designed. Ironically, this ECI campaign ended when its organisers realised they could not raise sufficient funds to succeed using the current flawed OCS.*

### **A centralised platform for all ECIs to facilitate citizen participation**

We want to enable all European citizens to participate in European politics. Therefore we must provide a “low barrier” online ECI tool which works instantly and without technical expertise. In particular, we ask the European Commission to provide an *Online European Initiatives Platform* where citizens can register new initiatives and collect signatures. This platform will provide an overview of all initiatives which can be broken down by topic, country and popularity. Moreover this platform should allow ECI organisers to contact their supporters and allow citizens to discuss and debate initiatives. Until a final decision on an ECI has been made, it should also transparently show the current stage of each initiative and who is in charge of the next step.

### **Official OCS neither well-designed nor sufficiently tested**

We chose to make use of the ECI in order to put the digital dimension of the ECI instrument on the political agenda and improve the ECI itself. The ECI is the first instrument of transnational participatory and digital democracy in the world. However, it still remains in its infancy. Both EU citizens and institutions need to apply a “learning by doing” attitude in order to constantly improve the ECI and make it an effective democratic tool of citizen participation.

All originators of this ECI have an IT background and thus have amassed extensive experience with successful online petition platforms like [www.openpetition.eu](http://www.openpetition.eu) or as software developers in IT companies. As early as 2012, after having analysed the official Commission-provided ECI online collection system (OCS), it quickly became clear that both its legal rules and concrete implementation were not designed to be user-friendly. It had also not been sufficiently tested. This was particularly surprising and disturbing since over half a million Euros of EU funds were spent on this OCS.

### **Evidence demonstrates that the official OCS is the biggest obstacle for every ECI**

ECI organisers who have used the official OCS indicated that its weaknesses were one of the biggest problems they encountered running their campaigns. In particular, the OCS was not sufficiently accessible to users and possessed design flaws that led to sizeable signature losses. Delays in repair stole valuable time from many ECI campaigns and cost them significant funds. ECI organisers spent tens of thousands of Euros to *correct* OCS deficiencies. The Commission's decisions to extend the signature collection deadline for some ECIs and host the OCS on its own servers in Luxembourg did not solve these problems. These are only temporary offers available to some ECI campaigns. They don't touch the OCS design itself.

## **One public online collection platform for all European citizens**

Every individual ECI must certify its own OCS in a member state. It must then invest disproportionately large amounts of time to get the system running. This creates burdens for both national authorities and individual ECI campaigns.

Instead we need *one* public online collection platform for all ECIs. This would include the server where data is stored and the software which allows EU citizens to sign online. Both need to be easily available to all future ECI organisers. The ideal system would include a single centralised online collection platform, perhaps hosted on Commission servers, where signatures are stored. All front-end material would then reside on individual campaign websites. This would eliminate the expensive risk assessment and duplicate paperwork currently required from each ECI. It would also simplify and reduce costs for certification by national administrations.

We believe that the ECI's potential to democratise the EU is in danger if the online signature collection system is not fundamentally remediated. Both the general ECI implementing regulation and the technical regulation laying down technical specifications for the OCS pursuant to *Regulation (EU) No 211/2011* need to be revised to allow a single ECI collection platform.

## **The internet as a source for democracy**

The internet has helped us to find appropriate members for our ECI citizens' committee. There is an IT community interested in making the ECI OCS work. However, given the ECI's current provisions, we faced an enormous need for funds to organise a successful ECI. We also tested, explored the details of the OCS and observed the enormous difficulties that other ECI organisers encountered in using it. We concluded that it was impossible for us to invest any more resources in our ECI campaign unless the OCS was improved.

## **Protect citizens from excessive personal data requirements**

We also call for the removal of identity card requirements to support an ECI. There is no doubt that more citizens throughout the EU would likely use the ECI if personal data requirements were limited to name, address and birth date. Citizens are becoming more sensitive about the data they provide in public. This attitude has increased since Edward Snowden's revelations of widespread online state surveillance.

It should be noted that although the *European Data Protection Supervisor* determined that ID card numbers were not necessary for the ECI, 18 member states still require them. The fact that it works in nine member states without such excessive data requirement shows that ECIs could work without them.

*Joerg Mitzlaff is a member of the citizens' committee of the ECI Central Public Online Collection Platform For The European Citizens' Initiative and initiator of [www.openpetition.eu](http://www.openpetition.eu)*

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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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This book contains contributions from 16 ECIs,  
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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