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## ***Experiences of ECI Campaigns:***

### **1. Water and Sanitation are a Human Right! Water is a Public Good, not a Commodity!**

Jerry Van den Berge

*Editor's summary: The first ECI to collect one million validated signatures was started by the European trade union federation EPSU to put the human right to water and sanitation on the EU agenda and prevent the liberalisation of water services. Although its ultimate impact is uncertain, public support for the campaign led the Commission to remove water from the EU concessions directive. This unusually well-prepared, professionally managed and well-resourced ECI attracted a diverse coalition of partners and major media attention. Yet, like other ECIs, it struggled with an inadequate online signature collection system, intrusive ID requirements and limited citizen awareness of the ECI.*

#### **An ECI to put the human right to water and sanitation on the EU agenda**

The *European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU)* took on the challenge of using the ECI to put the human right to water and sanitation on the European agenda and demand its implementation in European legislation and policies. Specifically, it asks for:

1. Guaranteed water and sanitation services for all in the European Union.
2. Human rights above market interests: no liberalisation of water services.
3. Universal access to water and sanitation for all.

Europe's public service trade unions have long promoted quality public services for all. Water is a public service because it is fundamental to life and health; no one can live without it. They have also supported the recognition of the human right to water and sanitation, as well as having pushed for states to provide these public services in a transparent, accountable and participatory manner. The United Nations recognised this right in 2010 in *UN resolution A/RES/64/292*. However, many EU member states abstained from the final UN vote and the European Commission has not taken any serious steps to promote its implementation.

Water is a limited natural resource and a public good. We want to safeguard water resources for future generations. Given that water is a natural monopoly, this ECI asks that water services are not liberalised and are exempt from internal market rules. Workers and citizens have experienced negative effects from the liberalisation of public services – such as job losses, price hikes and inequality of access. Liberalisation has not created a more equitable, sustainable and just society.

The ECI is a powerful, albeit limited, tool. Even if an ECI receives the required number of signatures and complies with all the regulations, the Commission can still decide to reject the initiative. The ECI must be seen for what it is: an agenda-setting tool for citizens to initiate a Europe-wide debate on a certain topic and turn the attention of the Commission, as well as the media and general public, to the subject.

### **The ECI *Water is a Human Right!* has been an undeniable success on several levels**

First, it demonstrated that the ECI as an instrument can work. ECI success is doable and EPSU and its supporters have done it!

Second, it has been a political success. Politicians have reacted to our proposal. Michel Barnier, EU Commissioner for the Internal Market, made an explicit reference to our ECI when he decided to remove water from the scope of the “concessions directive”. It has also triggered a discussion in many member states and among citizens who used our ECI to express their concerns over liberalisation in general and the privatisation of water services in particular. People want public service and environmental interests to prevail over commercial ones.

Third, it has been a success for EPSU and other supporters in terms of recognition, acknowledgement, reputation and visibility. Over three million people have visited the [www.right2water.eu](http://www.right2water.eu) website. Our press work and participation in major events have been quite influential.

### **Alliance building with diverse groups drove success**

To achieve this successful ECI campaign, we needed a broad range of supporters. We were joined by all kinds of organisations from across the political spectrum: many social and environmental NGOs and development organisations, but also women’s organisations, churches, public water companies and municipalities. Major supporters included: EAPN, EEB, EPHA and WECF. All shared a common interest: the human right to water and sanitation must safeguard this essential service for all, reduce poverty, improve public health, achieve sustainable water resources management and promote gender equality. In addition, several “public figures” agreed to be ambassadors for the campaign. A list of major supporters can be found on the [www.right2water.eu](http://www.right2water.eu) website.

### **Suffered from the ECI’s “teething pains” as one of the first campaigns**

Campaigning was more difficult than we had anticipated. We had the advantage of extensive experience campaigning on water issues in cooperation with NGOs. It was also good that the “right to water” is a simple and fairly clear message. However, the fact that water supply or sanitation was not “a problem” to EPSU members in several countries made it harder to mobilise people than we had expected.

The fact that we were among the first ECIs brought both benefits and challenges. It certainly helped to generate media attention. But we also had to spend a huge amount of time explaining the ECI instrument. As the first ECI to collect signatures both on paper and online, we suffered from the lack of testing of both systems. The European Commission was not fully prepared when we launched our online signature collection system and we, without a doubt, lost several thousand signatures because of its failings!

### **Challenging but essential to campaign in national languages**

The need to address people in their own language was a big challenge. We started with eight languages on our website, which was a lot to manage. Then we added two more languages. Fairly soon it became clear that one must campaign in people’s native language. We were fortunate to

have volunteers to translate articles and documents into other languages. The Finnish and German unions created their own websites, which was very helpful. Several affiliates set up Facebook sites. Importantly, the campaign in Greece, Lithuania and Hungary only took off after we provided relevant information in Greek, Lithuanian and Hungarian.

Other factors were media attention, gaining the support of “celebrities”, and especially campaigning capacity. In the countries where we were most successful, all these factors were in place. The best example was Germany. A broad coalition was formed under the guidance of a strong trade union and the association of Germany municipalities and cities. Information was available in German and we attracted media attention. In January 2013, a well-known comedian, Erwin Pelzig, spoke on mainstream TV to support the ECI. Many people promoted the ECI in their own towns, workplaces, sports clubs and families. In Germany alone, 1.3 million signatures were collected.

### **Campaigning demanded significant resources**

This ECI was fundamentally “carried” by trade unions. For unions with limited capacity, this posed a big challenge. They needed to remain focused on day-to-day issues, especially difficulties stemming from austerity-related policies. For other unions, the ECI has been a massive success, earning them recognition for pursuing this cause.

A campaign of this nature is resource intensive. EPSU spent 140,000 Euros on this ECI. Fortunately, EPSU had the foresight to reserve funding for it. It also claimed staff resources. Over an 18-month period, total staff time was equal to approximately 1½ full-time persons. At some moments, 2-3 colleagues worked full time on it, with others assisting as well. Unions and other organisations contributed to the campaign at national and local levels.

### **ID requirements cut support in half**

The personal identity number requirement was a big obstacle. In fact, it was the biggest barrier to collecting signatures in France, Italy, Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. Without this requirement, the number of signatures in these countries could have been at least doubled.

### **Rules for hearing in the European Parliament unclear**

Within three months after submitting the validated signatures, we met with the European Commission and presented our ECI in a hearing in the European Parliament.

The meeting with Commissioner Šefčovič and the staff of the relevant Commission directorates went very well. However, since the rules for the ECI hearing were not clear, the organisation of the hearing took quite some time and debate.

One point of contention was the participation of outside experts. The Commission had always promoted the idea that ECI organisers could ask for the support of experts during the hearing. However, the parliamentary committee that deals with the topic is in charge of organising the hearing. Since the Parliament could not come to a consensus on this point, we were not allowed to invite experts to the hearing.

Looking back, we were satisfied with the hearing. But this is largely due to the boldness with which the chair of the Parliament's *Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee* handled its organisation. Amendments to the ECI regulation should ensure that all ECI organisers know what to expect and face an equal treatment, regardless of which committee organises the hearing.

### **A final assessment**

On 19 March 2014, the European Commission issued a formal communication with its response to our ECI. They affirmed the overall message of our ECI that water and sanitation are a human right, but did not offer any new policy proposals.

Due to the engagement of so many organisations and people, our ECI has made sure that discussions on EU water policy will never be the same again. Given this commitment by people to support the demands of the ECI, we find the reaction of the Commission lacks ambition. We regret that there is no specific proposal for legislation recognising the human right to water.

In our view, the rules need to change here in so far as any successful ECI should at least lead to a legislative proposal by the European Commission which would then go to the European Parliament and Council. Our successful ECI makes clear that citizens want to make use of participatory democracy at EU level. However, the new ECI instrument must become more binding and fine-tuned in order to really strengthen the urgently needed democratisation of the EU.

### **Recommendations to future ECI campaigns**

The ECI must, however, prove its usefulness on three levels. First, it must prove itself as a democratic tool. Second, the Commission must react positively to our ECI and implement the human right to water and sanitation. Third, we must see if a significant step toward a paradigm shift from growth to sustainability and from a market-based approach to a rights-based approach can be made.

In summary, here are our recommendations to future ECI campaigns and institutions:

1. To campaign successfully, a broad coalition is necessary. Everybody needs to give a helping hand and commit to dedicating time and resources.
2. Spreading the message is not enough. People ask "why?". So each person helping in the campaign should be able to explain the issue. They should also explain how the ECI works and that it is not an ordinary petition.
3. Websites in the national language are necessary. Social media is helpful as one campaign tool, but is not sufficient by itself.
4. Action and campaign plans are needed at all levels: EU, national and local.
5. The ID card requirement in some member states is a big barrier that should be removed.
6. ECIs should be given either 18 months or alternatively have the option to ask for a six month extension, for example if they have collected 3/4 of signatures.
7. Any successful ECI should at least lead to a legislative proposal by the European Commission which would then go to the European Parliament and Council.

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Table 1 – Offline versus Online Collection – Preliminary Figures September 2013

<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	1,455	<b>61,449</b>	<b>62,904</b>	14,250	2% / 98%
BE	Belgium	15,235	11,798	<b>27,033</b>	16,500	56% / 44%
BG	Bulgaria	-	1,600	1,600	13,500	0% / 100%
CY	Cyprus	2,874	681	3,555	4,500	81% / 19%
CZ	Czech Republic	1,500	6,098	7,598	16,500	20% / 80%
DE	Germany	<b>166,184</b>	<b>1,198,527</b>	<b>1,364,711</b>	74,250	12% / 88%
DK	Denmark	1,336	2,168	3,504	9,750	38% / 62%
EE	Estonia	287	944	1,231	4,500	23% / 77%
EL	Greece	14,100	<b>18,955</b>	<b>33,055</b>	16,500	43% / 57%
ES	Spain	28,720	35,825	<b>64,545</b>	40,500	44% / 56%
FI	Finland	6,064	8,550	<b>14,614</b>	9,750	41% / 59%
FR	France	2,500	16,436	18,936	55,500	13% / 87%
HR	Croatia	-	875	875	9,000	0% / 100%
HU	Hungary	270	<b>16,606</b>	<b>16,876</b>	16,500	2% / 98%
IE	Ireland	1,000	2,700	3,700	9,000	27% / 73%
IT	Italy	19,025	45,226	<b>64,251</b>	54,750	30% / 70%
LT	Lithuania	2,000	<b>12,070</b>	<b>14,070</b>	9,000	14% / 86%
LU	Luxembourg	1,367	4,052	<b>5,419</b>	4,500	25% / 75%
LV	Latvia	200	239	439	6,750	46% / 54%
MT	Malta	1,394	308	1,702	4,500	82% / 18%
NL	Netherlands	940	<b>20,909</b>	<b>21,849</b>	19,500	4% / 96%
PL	Poland	167	1,635	1,802	38,250	9% / 91%
PT	Portugal	1,096	11,388	12,484	16,500	9% / 91%
RO	Romania	1,300	1,779	3,079	24,750	42% / 58%
SE	Sweden	4,015	4,431	8,446	15,000	48% / 52%
SI	Slovenia	5,655	<b>15,670</b>	<b>21,325</b>	6,000	27% / 73%
SK	Slovakia	<b>10,319</b>	<b>24,068</b>	<b>34,387</b>	9,750	30% / 70%
UK	United Kingdom	600	7,888	8,488	54,750	7% / 93%
EU	<i>Signatures</i>	289,603	<b>1,532,875</b>	<b>1,822,478</b>	1,000,000	16% / 84%
	<i>“Significant” Countries</i>	2	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>	7	

Bold numbers mean that the Country Quota is reached.

Source: [www.right2water.eu/sites/water/files/Latest%20figures%203%20September%202013.pdf](http://www.right2water.eu/sites/water/files/Latest%20figures%203%20September%202013.pdf)

Table 2 – Collected and Valid Signatures – Final Figures November 2013/February 2014

<i>Country</i>		<i>Signatures</i>			<i>Country Quota</i>
<i>Code</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i># collected</i>	<i># valid</i>	<i>% valid</i>	
AT	Austria	<b>64,836</b>	<b>57,643</b>	89%	14,250
BE	Belgium	<b>40,912</b>	<b>40,549</b>	99%	16,500
BG	Bulgaria	1,602	1,406	88%	13,500
CY	Cyprus	3,561	2,924	82%	4,500
CZ	Czech Republic	7,986	7,575	95%	16,500
DE	Germany	<b>1,341,061</b>	<b>1,236,455</b>	92%	74,250
DK	Denmark	3,547	3,382	95%	9,750
EE	Estonia	1,245	516	41%	4,500
EL	Greece	<b>35,720</b>	<b>33,220</b>	93%	16,500
ES	Spain	<b>65,484</b>	<b>58,051</b>	89%	40,500
FI	Finland	<b>15,200</b>	<b>14,589</b>	96%	9,750
FR	France	22,969	17,247	75%	55,500
HR	Croatia	1,002	-		9,000
HU	Hungary	<b>20,107</b>	<b>18,245</b>	91%	16,500
IE	Ireland	2,959	2,513	85%	9,000
IT	Italy	<b>67,484</b>	<b>65,223</b>	97%	54,750
LT	Lithuania	<b>14,048</b>	<b>13,252</b>	94%	9,000
LU	Luxembourg	<b>5,698</b>	<b>5,566</b>	98%	4,500
LV	Latvia	450	393	87%	6,750
MT	Malta	1,703	1,635	96%	4,500
NL	Netherlands	<b>22,065</b>	<b>21,469</b>	97%	19,500
PL	Poland	4,807	3,962	82%	38,250
PT	Portugal	15,588	13,964	90%	16,500
RO	Romania	3,211	3,176	99%	24,750
SE	Sweden	12,258	11,579	94%	15,000
SI	Slovenia	<b>21,330</b>	<b>17,546</b>	82%	6,000
SK	Slovakia	<b>35,075</b>	<b>20,988</b>	60%	9,750
UK	United Kingdom	8,578	7,104	83%	54,750
EU	<i>Signatures</i>	<b>1,840,486</b>	<b>1,680,172</b>	91%	1,000,000
	<i>"Significant" Countries</i>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>		7

Bold numbers mean that the Country Quota is reached.

Source: [right2water.eu/sites/water/files/table%20number%20valid%20signatures\\_21.pdf](http://right2water.eu/sites/water/files/table%20number%20valid%20signatures_21.pdf)

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The text and tables in this file are a part of the book:

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**Edited by** Carsten Berg and Janice Thomson

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

2014, The ECI Campaign, Alfter (Germany)

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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