



MINUTES OF THE ONLINE MEETING OF THE EXPERT GROUP ON THE CITIZENS' INITIATIVE

22 OCTOBER 2020

1. Approval of the agenda

The Chair (Rudiger Boogert, Head of Unit SG.A.1) introduced the agenda of the meeting.

The agenda was approved without changes.

2. Nature of the meeting

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss with the national authorities competent under Regulation (EU) 2020/788 on the European citizens' initiative (ECI):

- The latest developments regarding the implementation of Regulation (EU) 2020/1042 on temporary measures concerning time limits for the collection, the verification and the examination stages for citizens' initiatives;
- the state of play of ongoing citizens' initiatives;
- the recent IT developments around the European citizens' initiative;
- the state of play of the ECI communication campaign and the ECI Forum.

The meeting was not public and was held in a virtual format. Two observers from the European Parliament were present at the meeting.

3. Points discussed

3.1. Implementation of Regulation (EU) 2020/1042 on temporary measures for ECI in context of COVID-19

The Commission (Silvia KERSEMAKERS, SG.A1) gave a short introduction of the temporary rules, adopted by the European Parliament and the Council on 15 July, on a proposal from the Commission, concerning the possibility to extend the time limits concerning the collection stages, verification stages and the examination stages of citizens' initiatives negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis. The rules, laid down in Regulation (EU) 2020/1042, grants to initiatives, the collection of which was ongoing on

11 March, when the World Health Organization declared that the COVID-19 crisis had become a global pandemic, a six months extension. The Commission can decide on a further extension for ongoing initiatives, provided that the criteria for such extension, as defined by the Regulation, are fulfilled. Initiatives, the collection of which would be ongoing on that moment, would then benefit from a three months extension.

After explaining the criteria for the extension of the relevant time-limits, Silvia KERSEMAKERS explained the methodology to assess if and when these criteria would be fulfilled. For a reliable and transparent assessment, it is vital that the Commission can rely on verifiable data from the Member States. The Regulation therefore requires the Member States to regularly provide, on request, data on the measures that they apply in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Commission relies on two sources of information, i.e. the weekly ISAA questionnaire, which contains three specific questions regarding ECI, and the ReOpen website, which is regularly updated. Unfortunately, since the start of the collection end of July, only half of the Member States provide regularly feedback through the ISAA questionnaire. The Commission (Rudiger BOOGERT, SG.A1) therefore reminded Member States of their legal obligation, to allow the Commission to come to a comprehensive assessment of the situation ‘on the ground’, and to justify its decision on the need for a further extension.

He invited the Member States to provide feedback on the used methodology and the latest assessment of the Member States data by 30 October, and to alert their contact points in their administrations and ministries to ensure that regular feedback is provided on the questions on ECI in the ISAA questionnaire.

3.2. Latest developments around the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) including state of play of citizens’ initiatives

The Commission informed the Expert Group about the state of play of citizens’ initiatives.

Registration phase: five initiatives registered under the new rules; one registration request being processed. One group of organisers set up a legal entity for the purpose of managing their initiative (*‘Freedom to share’*), an option now available under the new Regulation.

Collection phase: eleven initiatives in the process of collecting statements of support, some of them having benefitted from an extension of the time limits under Regulation (EU) 2020/1042. The collection phase for two newly registered initiatives is yet to start (start date to be set within six months of the registration date). The groups of organisers of all initiatives registered in 2020, with the exception of one initiative, are using (or have indicated they will use) the Commission’s central online collection system.

Examination phase: two initiatives having successfully gathered the required numbers of statements of support submitted to the Commission for examination: *‘Minority SafePack’* (next step: Commission’s answer by 15 January 2021) and *‘End the Cage Age’* (next step: meeting between the Commission and the group of organisers scheduled to be held on 30 October 2020, to be then followed by a public hearing at the European Parliament). A third successful initiative (*‘Stop extremism’*) is expected to be submitted soon.

3.3. IT developments on the ECI by the Commission (brief introduction on the new system and the Member States' test campaign on the use of the File Exchange Service)

The Commission informed the Member States about the URLs of test initiatives they can use to give support online using test data. This can help them cross check the rules that the Commission implemented (e.g. for the ID document or for the eID). The first environment¹ uses the Member States' eIDAS acceptance nodes allowing them to test eIDs, whereas the second environment² uses the Member States' eIDAS production node allowing them to test with real eIDs.

The Commission also presented the state of play on the implementation of the formatting rules and checksum rules for ID documents for the 18 Member States that require a Type B support form. The Commission indicated that all the rules received from Member States were implemented and asked the Member States that did not reply to the Commission's request on checksum rules to get back in due course. It was emphasised that the benefit for Member States is better quality data, allowing easier post-validation of successful initiatives.

The Commission presented the current number of support via eID on the three new initiatives that started under the new regulation using the Central Online Collection System. Although the support via eID represents a low percentage of the total support, it clearly represents a significant amount for some Member States (e.g. Estonia and Belgium).

Regarding the File Exchange Service, an update on the test campaign with Member States launched on 2 October was provided. Support will continue after that formal end date of the test campaign (6 November). The Commission stressed the test is simple and should not take more than 30 minutes. To note that a few Member States were not able to access their credentials (not a major issue for this test campaign, but this will have more impact in case of a real initiative). The Commission reminded the Member States of the importance to keep a backup of their credentials, as well the necessity to keep every new version of these credentials and to inform immediately the Commission in case of loss or change.

3.4. ECI communication activities

a. The Commission informed about the state of play of the **ECI communication campaign**. Communication activities continued despite the public health crisis, aiming both at raising awareness and building the community of multipliers. All physical events planned in the context of the communication campaign were cancelled and the promotion moved online. Social media promotion has been reinforced, and several webinars were organised, including a dedicated session for the Europe Direct Information Centres. An 'ECI Ambassadors' programme will be shortly launched.

b. An important milestone will be the online **European Citizens' Initiative Week** (16-20 November 2020). The objective of the event is to share ideas and experiences on how to make the reformed European citizens' initiative a success and to discuss how to sustain citizen engagement in the COVID-19 context. Vice-President Jourová will open the ECI Week, followed by panel discussions throughout the week involving representatives of EU institutions, advisory bodies and other entities, civil society

¹ <https://webgate.acceptance.ec.europa.eu/ECI-OCS-4/public/#/screen/home>

² <https://eci.ec.europa.eu/ACC3/public>

organisations and other stakeholders, as well as representatives of current and past initiatives.

The Commission indicated that registrations had just started and warmly encouraged members to [register](#) to the various sessions and spread the information to interested colleagues, relevant stakeholders and ultimately citizens.

c. The Commission also updated members on the recent developments on the online collaborative platform known (the '**ECI Forum**') which offers independent advice on practical and legal aspects of running a European citizens' initiative.

The new revamped version of the European Citizens' Initiative Forum went online on 7 January 2020, with all static content having been reviewed. The user survey carried out earlier this year showed high satisfaction regarding comprehensibility and user-friendliness. Most useful features/content: 'Learn' section: guidance notes, videos with tips and tricks for successful campaigning; the introductory video; and the 'Seek Advice' function.

2020 highlights:

- Introductory video on homepage, translated and subtitles in all EU languages
- Enriched content: restructured 'Learn' page, organised thematically; 3 additional videos, including from 2 of the most recent successful initiatives; 10 discussion threads; 15 blog posts; 6 guidance notes
- 3 webinars hosted and recordings published; all webinars' recordings (10) reviewed and highlights published
- 30 enquiries under 'Seek Advice' promptly answered

The Commission encouraged members to explore the Forum and join the discussions where they can usefully contribute.

4. List of participants

- Representatives from the European Commission
(Secretariat-General, Unit SG.A1 and DG Informatics, Unit DIGIT.B.2.006)
- Representatives of the following Member States:
Austria; Belgium; Bulgaria; Croatia; Czechia; Denmark; Estonia; Finland; France; Germany; Greece; Hungary; Ireland; Italy; Latvia; Lithuania; Luxembourg; Malta; Netherlands; Portugal; Romania; Slovakia; Slovenia; Spain, Sweden
- Observers from the European Parliament (AFCO and PETI Committees).