

CITIZENCENTRAL - SEASON 2 CH1 transcript

Speaker 1 [00:00:11] That Europe finds itself at the front of the storm is not something new.

Speaker 2 [00:00:15] The world of tomorrow will be a different place.

Speaker 3 [00:00:17] It's good that Europe is ambitious in climate policy. We should be ambitious but also realistic.

Speaker 4 [00:00:23] The task is to learn to live within the boundaries Mother Earth has given us.

Speaker 5 [00:00:26] Only united can we defend our values and protect the interests of our citizens.

Manex [00:00:41] Hello there, and welcome to CitizenCentral, the podcast series about the first transnational democracy instrument in the world, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). Celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2022, the ECI gives people the chance to pitch their own EU policies to the European Commission by gathering one million signatures from seven EU states. My name is Manex Rekarte Cowie, and on CitizenCentral I'll be finding out how the ECI works, how you can launch or support an initiative, and what drives people to give up their time and energy for a cause they care deeply about. In today's episode, we will kick off in Brussels, where Omar Perez is asking the Commission to create a European scheme of plastic bottle return compensation with his ECI, 'Return the Plastics.' Then we will head over to Berlin to meet Brigitte Hartmann, who with her ECI, 'The Green VAT,' is asking the Commission for a tax improvement plan for sustainably produced goods. Plastic is everywhere. Probably a top reason behind the first ECI we will discover in today's chapter. Omar Perez, thanks for joining us on CitizenCentral. Please tell us a little bit more about yourself.

Omar [00:02:12] Thank you very much, Manex, it's a big pleasure to be here. My name is Omar Perez. I'm representing the 'Return the Plastics' initiative. The main motivation is the current state of plastic pollution and how it's affecting not only the environment but also our everyday life with the presence of microplastics and the mismanagement of plastic in general.

Manex [00:02:30] So, what are you asking the European Commission for?

Omar [00:02:33] The implementation of an EU-wide deposit system to recycle plastic bottles and to install these reverse vending machines pretty much in all supermarkets. This will allow consumers to bring their plastic bottles to supermarkets, drop them in these machines and get a little voucher out of it.

Manex [00:02:51] Omar, why plastic bottles?

Omar [00:02:53] We started with the bottles, especially PET bottles, because the technology for their recycling is already more mature than the recycling of older types of packaging. Proving the concept that plastic recycling can be done in this way and can have a positive impact would be enough evidence to extend it to other types of plastic packaging.

Manex [00:03:12] Some of our listeners might be a little surprised because this type of scheme currently exists in some Member States, right?

Omar [00:03:20] Well, it does exist in Germany, and it exists in Sweden and the Netherlands, and it is proving to be very successful. The recycling rates of plastic have been going up. Consumers are very happy with the value that they're getting out of plastic. Our question is simple: why don't we grab that great idea that is already working and expand it all across Europe? That would be beneficial for us as consumers, but even for producers in terms of compliance with the Single-Use Plastics Directive.

Manex [00:03:46] Omar, this will obviously entail a cost. Who should pay for this?

Omar [00:03:50] What we are suggesting here is that the polluter should pay. In this case, it would be the producers of plastic that should allocate money for it. Paying will also encourage the producers to shift their packaging strategy to something a little bit cheaper or something a little bit more sustainable. But this voucher will encourage a kind of circular economy towards the recycling of plastic. And that's very interesting.

Manex [00:04:16] How has the campaign kicked off?

Omar [00:04:18] The campaign started earlier this year. We have learned many things in terms of crafting our communication, in terms of getting our message out there. We are a group of friends that believe we should fight plastic pollution, and for us to get involved in an initiative like this, to get the institutional support but also the support of all like-minded organisations, has been a great experience. And yes, we're going to carry on working towards the million [signatures], and we're going to keep putting our message out there.

Manex [00:04:42] What would you tell opposers or people that simply don't care?

Omar [00:04:46] People that don't care usually care more about the pragmatic facts such as, 'What is in this for me?' I think that highlighting the value that people can get out of returning the plastic while contributing to plastic pollution and the environment is a message that can reach the heads and the hearts of the people that might not care.

Manex [00:05:05] I remember such a scheme in Spain from my childhood, and it no longer exists. So, what does the ideal future look like?

Omar [00:05:12] Well, the ideal future for us is that people will be actively collecting these plastic bottles because they know they can return them. On your particular story, you were very happy just to carry this plastic today to the supermarket because you knew that 10 plastic bottles would give you enough to buy an ice cream; regardless of the contribution you had made towards recycling back in the day, you had that in your head. You knew that when you saw a plastic bottle, it was good to take it to a certain place to get something out of it. And I think that this is an ideal future for us: to have the consumer actively recycle those plastic bottles, return the plastics and get value out of it.

Manex [00:05:54] Congratulations on the initiative, it is a very clear demand. Best of luck with the signature collection.

Omar [00:06:01] Thank you very much, Manex. That's exactly what we're striving for.

Manex [00:06:07] As Omar mentioned, such schemes exist in some Member States. That is why now we will head over to Lithuania, not known to be a big recycling country until such a scheme was introduced. Rasa Tumaševičiūtė, thanks for joining us on CitizenCentral.

Rasa [00:06:26] Thank you so much, Manex, it's a really big pleasure to participate.

Manex [00:06:30] Please tell us more about yourself.

Rasa [00:06:32] I work in policymaking in Lithuania, but my main topics are circular economy, plastics, economy, green growth and organic waste.

Manex [00:06:44] So, Rasa, how did Lithuania become a collecting and recycling nation?

Rasa [00:06:49] What do we mean when we say recycling? Because we're mostly talking about collecting; when we talk about plastic collecting, we have a really amazing deposit return system for PET bottles, and it's around 15% of all the plastic packaging entering our economy in our country. So, basically, I think it is not enough, we need more. You know, you are just trying to seek more all the time. But still, there is a lack of recycling plants. For example, from a deposit return system, we are moving our PET bottles to be recycled not in Lithuania but to another European Union country.

Manex [00:07:27] So, ideally, what are the next steps, Rasa?

Rasa [00:07:31] We probably have to create recycling plants because it will be harder to calculate those things after 2023. The European Commission actually has new rules on how to calculate recycling numbers, and these will be accounted for only if your collected packaging goes straight to the recycling plant. But yes, we have a really good collecting system, and PET bottles are really clean, so basically it is really easy to recycle them.

Manex [00:07:59] How did this scheme arrive in Lithuania?

Rasa [00:08:02] People didn't recycle; they didn't do it because it wasn't really important in Lithuania. Then, six years ago we introduced a deposit return scheme for different cans, bottles, glass bottles, not only plastics, and [you were given] 10 cents per packaging. So, basically, in Lithuania we don't like to waste our money. Everyone has some kind of spot in their apartment where they collect bottles and then they go to the shops and drop them off at the machine, getting some kind of check, and they get their 10 cents back.

Manex [00:08:45] Did [the scheme] have a lot of pushback?

Rasa [00:08:48] Supermarkets tried to refuse it because it's so expensive. They had to buy machines, they had to create a system, and it was a huge push. They didn't want to do it, but we had public opinions, and so supermarkets were forced to participate.

Manex [00:09:05] And, Rasa, how is this paid for?

Rasa [00:09:07] Last summer, I went to our deposit return system administration, and there is enough money to support the whole system. When you sell the things you collect, they are clean. Everyone needs them because they're clean. You know, it's impossible to get clean PET just from recycling because it comes with some kind of residue and so on,

and we're seeing a lot of changes after the Single-Use Plastics Directive. We just have to use some kind of recycled material, for example PET, in new bottles production.

Manex [00:09:45] In your opinion, what is the best way forward?

Rasa [00:09:49] Maybe we will implement some kind of product passport. This means that you will know exactly what your plastic packaging is made from. So, basically, when it goes to market, you know where it will end up.

Manex [00:10:02] Had you heard of the ECI before I called you?

Rasa [00:10:06] Yes. You find people who are thinking the same way as you. When we're talking about an environmental topic, people always think, 'Oh, I'm doing this alone. I don't know if anyone is doing the same,' and they think that it's a good way to do that.

Manex [00:10:19] OK. So you'll be signing, right?

Rasa [00:10:21] Yes, for sure. I will go sign the petition.

Manex [00:10:24] Thank you so much for joining us on CitizenCentral.

Rasa [00:10:27] Thank you so much, Manex. Actually, I'm really happy that we can have this kind of podcast and that we can share citizens' opinions and do the things we want to do, creating a better society and a better environment for all Europeans.

Manex [00:10:46] Our regular listeners know that we love to gather citizen opinions on every topic we touch upon. So, now we'll head over to the Netherlands to meet a marketing professor who knows a lot about recycling psychology.

Jenny [00:11:01] My name is Jenny Van Doorn. I'm a professor of Services Marketing at the University of Groningen, and I've been doing research on sustainability for quite a while. Many people think that we marketers are here to make people buy stuff they don't need, right? So, we basically contribute to destroying the world. Well, if marketing is so powerful as a discipline so as to make people buy what they don't need, then perhaps we can also steer people towards more sustainable behaviour. And that's basically my motivation. I did a study where we looked at cookies versus plastic bottles. We had people eat food in the lab, and they had the option of discarding it in a container where the remains would be used to power the local bus that went to the airport, which ran on food waste. If they thought it powered the bus, they were not only wasting more, but also felt good about it. We found the same holds true for plastic bottles. If people are told that the plastic bottles are reused or recycled into clothing, they'd rather pick the plastic bottles over the glass. I think it's a good initiative because the plastic mountain is not going to level off anytime soon, right? So, something needs to happen to make us aware of plastic and also make us use less of it. What you're seeing all around are these initiatives where plastic bottles are turned into clothing or old bread is turned into beer. And what we find in our research is that if your waste is turned into something useful, such as a sweater or even more useful beer, it can make people feel good about recycling, making them less cautious about avoiding waste. And in that sense, [they will] even use more plastic. So, yes, it is great if plastic packaging is brought back to the retailer, but it is much better if you, for instance, are able to bring your own containers from home and fill them with whatever you need, right? And I think this is very important. It is always better to avoid

waste, always better to avoid plastic so that recycling can only be second best. It makes it easy for people to avoid waste.

Manex [00:13:07] Now we will continue talking about sustainability from a totally different angle. So, let's meet Brigitta Hartmann, a taxing specialist on a mission to make sustainable consumption more accessible with her ECI 'The Green VAT.'

Brigitta [00:13:26] I'm Brigitta, I'm from Berlin, and I work for a fintech company specialising in the filing of tax returns in VAT.

Manex [00:13:36] So, Brigitta, what is 'The Green VAT' based on?

Brigitta [00:13:39] There have been a lot of people in the past who have been environmentally conscious and would have liked to buy more sustainably produced products, but everybody knows that they are more expensive. So, what we demand with this ECI is that the European Commission oblige all EU Member States to implement tax reductions for organic, sustainably produced or environmentally friendly products in Europe.

Manex [00:14:07] Brigitta, what product categories is this ECI for?

Brigitta [00:14:10] For all products that you can think of, for food as well as for clothes, washing machines or cars; every product that is produced in a sustainable way should be tax reduced.

Manex [00:14:24] So, instead of speaking to the hearts, you're speaking to the pockets.

Brigitta [00:14:29] If we reduced VAT rates for these products, then people would start to think twice about what product they would buy. If a sustainable product costs the same amount as a conventional product, then they think, 'OK, why shouldn't I buy this sustainable product?' And I can also achieve something just with my shopping behaviour. In this way, we would have a social/economic turnaround within the society. So, people will start to include this in their thoughts when they think of buying products.

Manex [00:15:00] It makes me wonder, Brigitta, if this is an ECI for the people or an ECI for the industries.

Brigitta [00:15:06] What we hope is that the economy will also start to see this and start to maybe change their way of producing or invest more in research, or change their products and change their production to more environmentally friendly methods. And this is what we hope the initiative will initiate.

Manex [00:15:29] There are many types of environmental taxes. How do you think this should be implemented?

Brigitta [00:15:34] In the end, the 27 EU Member States are responsible for implementing this law. But how they will do it is their decision, and maybe some states would also say that they'll raise the VAT for conventional products, which ultimately would be even more expensive.

Manex [00:15:55] So, in a way, you're empowering sustainability through tax.

Brigitta [00:16:00] I hope that more people will become aware that everybody can make a change, that every decision they make matters, and that everybody wants to care about the world. We all have this one planet, and we all have to live on this one planet, and we have a lot of problems on this planet.

Manex [00:16:21] It makes me think that this could also be a great way of measuring real greenness of goods.

Brigitta [00:16:27] Governments would have to check whether their products fulfil all the regulations, classify products depending on whether they are sustainable or not, and decide if they could have tax reductions or not. If this is done, I think it is one big process. But if this process is accomplished, then it would just be it, you know, so I think consumers would only have to make one decision in the end: 'What am I buying?'

Manex [00:16:54] What would you tell companies or people that oppose your ECI?

Brigitta [00:16:58] First, a lot of companies have already taken sustainability into account, and big companies have integrated it into their marketing. Everybody is trying to go green at the moment. On the other hand, if consumers say, 'I don't care about it, I don't care about climate change, I don't believe in it' or whatever, they could still buy whatever they wanted because for them nothing would change. So, I don't think you have to start an argument with them because they can still do whatever they want.

Manex [00:17:27] Brigitta, this is a really interesting approach. Best of luck, and thank you so much for joining us on CitizenCentral.

Brigitta [00:17:35] Thank you so much for having us.

Manex [00:17:38] Sustainability touches so many fronts. That is why we'll now head to Sweden to meet a professor and industry adviser on sustainable transformation and policy. Fredrik, thanks for joining us on CitizenCentral.

Fredrik [00:17:55] Thank you very much.

Manex [00:17:56] Please tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Fredrik [00:17:59] My name is Fredrik Andersson, and I am an associate professor of Economics at Lund University, which is in southern Sweden. I do research primarily on climate change. Climate change is linked to industry, and policy questions which type of policies we need to achieve a transition.

Manex [00:18:16] Fredrik, taxing has been a very effective tool in environmental policy, but could tax be used as a compensatory tool for sustainably produced goods?

Fredrik [00:18:27] If you look at environmental policies, the common starting point is that if you pollute, you pay. So, we have carbon taxes, we have a European emissions trading system to put the price on carbon, and there are environmental taxes as well. So, you're sort of trying to do that to some extent. You can, of course, always go further. There's always this idea that maybe we should tax pollution a lot more, unsustainable practices a lot more, and reduce taxes on labour. That will work in the short term, but it will not work in the long term. If the idea is that we are going to go from unsustainable to sustainable, once you reach the sustainable, you don't have a tax base. So, it could be a part of it, but it has

to be thought through quite carefully. Moreover, it also has to be given time to adjust. When you think about the transition, you always have to think about it in steps. So, you have to first prepare and give people a realistic choice. You have to think about how we can enable a transition. And then you go in with all the taxation.

Manex [00:19:20] But could it be reversed, Fredrik? Make tax improvement drive sustainability?

Fredrik [00:19:25] It can, but it has to be financed somehow, by still having those who pollute pay even more. In general, also, if you pollute, it's very easy to know how much you polluted and therefore how much you are going to pay. The other way around is usually much more difficult, which means that there will be a huge bureaucracy trying to figure out which other services or goods should have a lower tax rate because they are more sustainable. So, the reverse is much more difficult to implement than the policy of 'You pollute, you pay.'

Manex [00:19:54] So, if we want to live sustainably, we just have to pay more.

Fredrik [00:19:58] I don't think that living sustainably is always more expensive. I can give an example from my own life: I don't have a car. I use public transport. It's a matter of economy. I save money by doing that, and it's also faster. So, I save time. I save money. You change the consumption patterns, and you also change what we consume. Then services will be priced the same as today, or [they'll be] even cheaper.

Manex [00:20:19] Do you think we should work on other improvements before tax?

Fredrik [00:20:22] You are talking about agriculture. I think agriculture accounts for something like 10% of all our greenhouse gas emissions, and a lot of that is meat production. When you talk to people and you say, 'Well, you might have to have less meat production in the future,' a lot of them get upset: 'Don't touch my meat!' And then you say, 'Yes, but you know, 30% or 40% of all the meat we produce we don't actually consume. Can't we start there?' Then they agree with what might be a good idea.

Manex [00:20:44] What do you think we're lacking to become a more sustainable society?

Fredrik [00:20:48] If you look at it historically, we have changed our society enormously over the last century. Social changes, technical change, political change. These changes, which haven't been driven by war and conflict but by a political process, have always centred on a political narrative about the future, which is positive. What we now need is a similar narrative about sustainability; we say we're doing this because the society we will build is by far much better than the society we live in today. Then I think you can get a lot of people who are now sceptical to come on board. So, we have to think broader than just taxing. We have to look exactly where the problem is at.

Manex [00:21:21] Fredrik, had you heard of the ECI before I called you? And what do you think of it?

Fredrik [00:21:26] I'd heard it mentioned, but that's it. It is my personal experience that citizen initiatives are seldom representative of people in general. So, it is very often a small group of people who can hijack the process. I believe in representative democracy. I believe it is the role of the political parties and the politicians to feel or hear people, meet researchers and hear their ideas, and then canalise those into a political process. I know

that there's a cultural difference in Europe. How accessible are politicians? In Sweden they are extremely accessible, and they have to be. Again, being very Swedish, I believe in representative democracy, where politicians are very close to the people who elect them and allow themselves to be criticised. I hope the rest of Europe could adopt that political culture.

Manex [00:22:16] That might take some work. Thank you so much for joining us on CitizenCentral.

Fredrik [00:22:22] Thank you very much.

Manex [00:22:30] Well, that brings this edition of CitizenCentral to an end. Thank you so much to all our guests and, of course, to you for listening. And if you fancy finding out a little bit more about any of these ECIs, please check our show notes. You can also take a look at the ECI website or follow the ECIs' individual social media channels. And, of course, if you want to propose a brand new ECI, you can head over to the ECI forum to learn more about how to get started. I am Manex Rekarte Cowie, and you've been listening to CitizenCentral.