**CITIZENCENTRAL - SEASON 2 CH2 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] Welcome to a new chapter of CitizenCentral, the podcast series all about the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI). If you do not know this tool of direct democracy, let me run you through it in a nutshell. This is the tool allowing European Union citizens to come up with new ideas for EU laws that can spark a debate across the Union. 2022 is a year that will indeed be remembered for many reasons, but also the year that put the spotlight on our younger generation with the European Year of Youth. And that is why, as the ECI is also celebrating ten years of existence this year, today's episode of CitizenCentral has a special focus on young people and how they make use of the European Citizens’ Initiative. We will engage with quite a few young Europeans and ask them about democracy, taking part and their engagement in policymaking and the European institutions. But we will also reach out to experts in social studies and other organisms of democratic participation to get their take on how youth sees policy, lawmaking and in general being part of democracy. I am Manex Rekarte Cowie, and you are listening to CitizenCentral. To kick off the chapter, let me introduce you to our group of young collaborators, thanking them all for giving us their take on European democracy.

**Ines** [00:02:13] My name is Ines. I am Portuguese, and I am currently a student.

**Antero** [00:02:18] My name is Antero. I'm 22 years old. I am studying Political Science at the University of Tartu.

**Josephine** [00:02:24] My name is Josephine. I'm French, but I am studying in Spain.

**Negev** [00:02:28] My name is Negev. I'm 23 years old. I'm currently a student, studying Law and Politics at the European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder) in Germany.

**Emma** [00:02:38] My name is Emma. I'm 23 years old, I'm from Stockholm, and I have a bachelor's degree in Political Science and Economics.

**Davor** [00:02:46] My name is Davor. I'm from Croatia. I am 22 years old, and I am studying English and Croatian here in Osijek.

**Elisa** [00:02:53] My name is Elisa Martinez. I'm 20 years old. I’m from Spain, and I am currently studying for a bachelor’s degree in Communication and Digital Media.

**Elsa** [00:03:02] My name is Elsa. I'm 23 years old. At the moment, I am finishing my master's in Law at Maastricht University.

**Stefany** [00:03:09] I'm Stefany Iova. I'm 26 years old. I am from and based in Bucharest, Romania.

**Manex** [00:03:18] We will engage with our young collaborators throughout the chapter, but to greet our first expert guest, we’ll head over now to Cologne, Germany. Daniela Vancic from Democracy International, thanks so much for joining us on CitizenCentral.

**Daniela** [00:03:33] Thanks, Manex, for the invitation.

**Manex** [00:03:35] Please tell us who you are, what you do and where you come from.

**Daniela** [00:03:38] I am the European programme manager at an NGO called Democracy International, and we're based here in Cologne, Germany. I myself am an American with a Serbian background. Here at Democracy International we're really about direct democracy, democracy that goes beyond elections. That means more direct citizen participation. And that's exactly where the ECI comes in. Twenty years ago, when the ECI was just an idea at the last European Convention, it was really the founding members of Democracy International that were lobbying for the inclusion of such an instrument like the ECI, inspired quite a bit by the Swiss models of direct democracy. So, you could really say that the ECI is really in the DNA of Democracy International.

**Manex** [00:04:23] Daniela, for this special youth chapter, we have engaged with a group of under 26-year-olds from different Member States, and our very first question is: if they vote, at what level and how important is it for them?

**Josephine** [00:04:38] Yes, I do, but only for my country, France.

**Antero** [00:04:42] I need to vote so my interests are represented overall. I think the last time I voted was in 2021.

**Josephine** [00:04:50] I don't vote at a European level. I think voting is really important, and if you just randomly vote, then there's not really a point to it.

**Emma** [00:04:57] I had the privilege of voting once at each level. Of course, I vote whenever I can. I think it's a duty as a citizen; part of the privilege of living in a democracy. So, I think everyone should take that seriously.

**Davor** [00:05:08] I vote on all levels. I really think it's something very important, especially for younger people.

**Elisa** [00:05:15] I’ve only got the chance to vote once in my life. That's all my experience so far with voting.

**Davor** [00:05:22] To have a say in what is going to happen in the next term.

**Josephine** [00:05:25] Yes, I hope every single time.

**Elsa** [00:05:27] I do. Indeed, I think it's a very important citizen act.

**Ines** [00:05:31] It's extremely important, even if people are going to cast a blank vote.

**Emma** [00:05:34] When I vote, I vote on all levels.

**Elsa** [00:05:36] Voting is crucial in our democracy.

**Emma** [00:05:38] Looking forward to voting many times.

**Daniela** [00:05:40] That's really great. I'm really glad to hear that.

**Manex** [00:05:42] Yes, it kind of contradicts what everyone thinks, that young people don't vote. But why do you think online initiative platforms have huge youth participation, but voting polls often show otherwise?

**Daniela** [00:05:55] Here in Europe, even though at the European level it could be better, we also look at how many people know about the ECI. Unfortunately, still too few, but voter turnouts are going up for European elections. Last time, we had a record-high voter turnout, especially among young people. That's a really good and positive trend. There are a lot of people who are kind of fed up with the traditional things that also come with democracy. And if we don't modernise our democracy, we see that there's a lot of frustration, and people feel that they're left out of the process. We also need all these different varieties, ways to get involved in democracy, and elections are one thing. They are, of course, the most consequential, right? They have a direct effect on how society is going to be shaped and how governments will then be making decisions. But in between those election cycles, I think we also need the different varieties and ways, and we also need to get involved in democracy because sometimes some people might want to get involved in different ways. It could also be that elections are just not cutting it for them. We really need to stress the importance of that, too. But if we say, ‘Just come on out every four years,’ and then they don't hear from you, you kind of lose people in the process, right? Activism is necessary in their mind. You need to give them more opportunities to be able to get involved.

**Manex** [00:07:01] This demography is super-technological. Everything happens so fast. Do you think that the regular four- or five-year cycle of politics or the two-year cycle of an ECI is too long for young participants?

**Daniela** [00:07:14] We're really living in this on-demand kind of world, but our democracy, unfortunately, hasn't always caught up to this. And young people get that because they're at the forefront of this on-demand kind of lifestyle. I mean, there's a reason why membership in traditional political parties is going down because young people are just not interested in joining parties anymore as their main way of activism in between elections. I think that's exactly why there's just so much potential for youth in the ECI because it totally fits with this on-demand kind of life we live; you find a topic you're interested in, go in and sign it, find the next topic of interest and go in and sign it. There's a topic that is urgent and it's not there? Go in and register it. And so it fits in perfectly, I think, with this developing society that we're living in.

**Manex** [00:07:57] Some of them did know about the ECI, others did not. But we explained to them how it works and then asked them what they would like to see becoming an ECI.

**Negev** [00:08:08] Greening of cities, demolishing streets, evolving cities into car-free areas.

**Josephine** [00:08:13] I love pets, and I don't understand how you can think thatapet is an object and you just leave them on the side of the road or you abandon them in the forest.

**Antero** [00:08:21] You should be able to have free tap water wherever you go, like in restaurants and so on.

**Elisa** [00:08:27] Maybe something related to how these new technologies to reach everyone, and everyone should be able to use them in a correct way.

**Stefany** [00:08:36] Make education more accessible, inclusive, and include all histories, not just the main history.

**Elisa** [00:08:43] Now that I know, I would be thinking, ‘Oh, maybe this could work.’ Yes, now I will think about it much more.

**Daniela** [00:08:49] Yes, really great ideas. Look at all these great, creative ideas. The tap water one, that's interesting. That was the first ever successful ECI, right? The right to water, for which the EU then introduced the new EU Water [Framework] Directive. Inclusive technology? First, I was anticipating that there would be something about some digital dimension or more inclusive technology. I think that's also really great, and it totally fits with this youth perspective of just how our societies are developing and becoming a lot more digital.

**Manex** [00:09:16] Technology is definitely something that defines this generation, but technology also means pace. If we were to rewind four years ago today or even two years ago, the world was just a different place.

**Daniela** [00:09:30] A four- or five-year cycle, or maybe even a two-year cycle isn't exactly on demand; it's really about having the variety in between those cycles, as I mentioned. I think that's the secret: introduce more and various ways of allowing people to get involved in between those cycles. Introducing the ECI is already a great start because it allows people to have the opportunity to set the agenda instead of waiting for an election to choose a person who will maybe vote in favour of a certain animal rights initiative and so on, and it gives the people a little bit more power to decide on issues directly and put those issues forward instead of maybe connecting with a person and waiting for them to bring an issue forward.

**Manex** [00:10:10] We asked our group what they would think about lowering voting age or ECI participation age.

**Antero** [00:10:19] In Estonia, the voting age comes from the local municipality elections – the age of 16. So, I have voted since the age of 16. When you have the option from an early age, even if you don't do it at 16, then maybe by 18 you finally understand the benefits.

**Josephine** [00:10:34] When you're under 18, you're not mature enough on the subject.

**Negev** [00:10:37] I myself support the idea of voting at the age of 16. Younger people are mostly always put aside, thought of as not competent to comprehend politics.

**Josephine** [00:10:57] I think it would be completely counterproductive to give a right to vote to people who are not really aware of what's going on.

**Stefany** [00:10:53] Complicated. Very complicated. Because some of them already work. They pay taxes. It's their right to vote as well.

**Emma** [00:10:59] With citizens’ initiatives, a really good thing would be to lower the age and make it possible for younger Europeans to vote as well.

**Elsa** [00:11:06] I think people are interested in politics younger and younger, so I feel we should give them a voice to express themselves because they feel 16 is around the age where you start reading about politics and more globally, about the world that surrounds you.

**Ines** [00:11:20] Politics and law should be a part of what you learn in high school.

**Manex** [00:11:24] Very interesting answers, very diverse, like this generation. But do you think that lowering the age of participating in an ECI would help with the actual participation?

**Daniela** [00:11:36] Yes, I definitely think lowering the age to sign an ECI and involving the youth aspect more in the ECI would encourage participation in it and would really foster this kind of youth development. First of all, young people are so much more aware than ever before, and we are living in the age of information. Even politicians are sometimes not as aware as constituents on certain topics because of the people who take up these activism roles and interest in certain issues. Today anyone can become an expert on something. And young people really demonstrated this in climate, biodiversity and social justice, too. I think these are some of the top topics that youth has really showed their interest in. But if you can connect the issues to democracy, I think it's easier for young people to get involved because it's a bit harder to connect to a candidate or a politician as there's also that level of trust you need to build. But people can get behind issues because that's what they trust and that's what they've been interested in, maybe for years and years. And that's what the ECI and other initiative instruments do: they really put the issues back at the core of democracy rather than a political personality.

**Manex** [00:12:46] Talking about the issues, we had to reference activism. So, we asked them if they consider themselves activists and whether that activism occurs online or offline. Here's their take:

**Emma** [00:12:57] I prefer doing it physically. I did do some stuff online from time to time, but most of the time I try to volunteer for physical things and not just stay in my eco-chamber online in a world where things seem perfect and as if everyone is an activist. But you also need to go out there and go to the NGO you're trying to support, or the causes you like, and be like, ‘Hey, I have these resources. This is what I can do for you. Can I do something and help you guys out?’

**Elisa** [00:13:27] I am on change.org. Every time I see something related to climate change or social activism, I like to engage with it.

**Stefany** [00:13:39] In Eastern European countries, in the Balkans, we're still talking about a minimum wage of €300 a month. When people have to live in these conditions, and struggle, and live paycheck to paycheck, I think it's really hard for them to care about other stuff as well. Sometimes being an activist and having the time to dedicate yourself to certain things is a luxury.

**Daniela** [00:14:06] Yes, that's interesting. I also like the girl who challenged a little bit the stereotype that youth live in the online sphere, [saying] that she also really tries to get out of the online sphere and out of her eco-chamber and be physically present. I’m really glad to hear that from her, and also about change.org. This is a petition platform, right? These have been really popular in the last years because people have been inside, reading the news a lot more. And then it's easier for petitions to go viral; they're sharing this and you're signing this petition. Things are being shared on social media. That's exactly what we want to do with the ECI; that these initiatives also go viral and that people sign them as well. And if you allow 16-, 17-year-olds to do that, then you will, of course, have millions more people that could potentially sign. Change.org, for example, doesn't ask for a minimum age requirement. And I can guarantee you that there are probably lots of 16- and 17-year-olds that are signing these kinds of green initiatives, climate initiatives, like the one that the girl mentioned. Then about the Eastern perspective: maybe they want to be active citizens, but at the same time, the living standard might not be totally up to par to what they need. So, that's why it's just as important that we also always think about making sure that societies have a decent standard of living because only then can you expect the people to be active citizens. If you're expecting a level of activism from them, they're going to need to have a decent standard of living as well somehow. I mean, the things we talk about are a little bit privileged, right? We should also focus on bringing people to a decent standard of living, and then we can also make our democracies a lot more inclusive because people can start taking part in these discussions that we're having about climate, about car-free zones and things that are not really the first thing on the priority list of struggling families.

**Manex** [00:15:52] So, what do you think we can do to make the ECI a smash youth hit?

**Daniela** [00:15:55] That would be the dream, right? That this is daily, kitchen-table talk. I would say first and foremost – because this is also a youth-focused podcast episode – definitely lower the age: encourage and pressure Member States to lower the age. Work with famous people that young people would know, such as influencers, TikTokers and so on. We can put all of the finances and support into communication campaigns that we want, and that's good. We should do that. But on the other end, we also need follow-up for the ECI, and that's also important.

**Manex** [00:16:29] Daniela, thank you so much for joining us on CitizenCentral.

**Daniela** [00:16:32] Thank you very much, Manex, I appreciate it.

**Manex** [00:16:35] For this special chapter, we also wanted to gather some data-based information on this demography. That is why we will now head over to sunny Madrid to meet a social analyst who has done lots of research on this demography. Paco Camas, please tell us a little bit more about yourself.

**Paco** [00:16:53] My name is Paco Camas, I'm from Spain, and I recently joined the public affairs team at Ipsos as a research director of public opinion. Ipsos is the third largest company in the world in market research and also in public opinion research. What I try to do is mainly understand what's happening in the public sphere and try to share that knowledge with our clients and society.

**Manex** [00:17:25] Paco, as an overall kickoff, how did young Europeans feel in this European Year of Youth?

**Paco** [00:17:32] Well, that's a very good question. I would say that there is growing concern about future generations’ engagement with the EU. But the important thing right now is that the pandemic and the war seem to have increased the support towards EU membership. 65 % of Europeans today think that their country's EU membership is a good thing, and that's the highest figure in more than 50 years. It's quite a lot. And they feel very, or at least fairly, attached to the European Union. Only a minority, just 7 %, do not feel European at all.

**Manex** [00:18:19] From your work, how important is politics for this demography?

**Paco** [00:18:24] What we know is that the great majority of young people do discuss politics with friends or relatives. And according to our surveys, 25 % say that they do it frequently. But it's also true that a majority say that they don't understand much or anything about the EU.

**Manex** [00:18:43] Paco, what can we do at the ECI to make our tool a smash youth hit?

**Paco** [00:18:48] Actually, I don't know. I mean, you want people to try the initiative because you know that once they try and like it, you have to be where young people are; they are on Instagram, using mainly visual language. Rather than direct contact, I would recommend using connectors. Maybe influencers could do the work. But be close to them. That's the key thing in order to promote engagement.

**Manex** [00:19:17] Thank you so much for popping in to CitizenCentral.

**Paco** [00:19:19] Thanks for the invitation, Manex.

**Manex** [00:19:22] Many ECIs have considerable support from youth. Many are future-looking and beyond, and youngsters are often more knowledgeable and engaged in European politics. Among those who know the ECI, the million signatures is the key milestone. But sometimes, even when the million is still far away, success can shape up through having raised a topic and shown European policymakers that a certain topic is of importance to the citizens. That is the case of the ‘Fairosene’ European Citizens’ Initiative, which in 2019 asked the Commission to end the aviation tax exemption in the EU; this ECI only raised 76 000 signatures but was equally successful as the idea was picked up in the ‘Fit for 55’ package and has become a clear objective of the Green Deal. Tassos Papachristou and Timothée Galvaire, welcome to CitizenCentral.

**Tassos** [00:20:20] Thank you for having us, Manex. Glad to be here.

**Manex** [00:20:22] First of all, please tell us more about yourselves.

**Timo** [00:20:25] Hello, everyone. My name is Timo. I come from northern France, and I work at the European Parliament.

**Tassos** [00:20:30] Hey, everyone. My name is Tassos, I come from Greece, and I too work as a trainee at the European Parliament.

**Manex** [00:20:35] Please tell us about ‘Fairosene.’ What exactly were you asking for?

**Timo** [00:20:39] So, we were asking the European Union to introduce a tax on aviation fuel because for now there is no such tax, meaning that airlines do not pay taxes for the fuel they use for their planes.

**Manex** [00:20:51] Okay. And when you started, did a million signatures seem like something easy?

**Timo** [00:20:55] To my mind? Yes because I thought it was such a good idea. At first, it did seem like a good idea. And because it sounded like a good idea, we thought, or at least I thought, that it was going to be super easy to get the one million signatures. It was going to take a couple of weeks maximum. And this is why we started. Retroactively speaking, however, without being so naive about our chances, we would never have started it because if you start with the mindset that you're going to lose, then you often don’t do it.

**Manex** [00:21:25] Please tell us the story. Your campaign ended, but then suddenly you were in the headlines.

**Timo** [00:21:29] We stopped the campaign when the von der Leyen Commission was formally introduced in December 2019, and part of the introductory speech of the President was the introduction of a tax on aviation fuel. So, we had only collected 76 000 signatures over six months, and we said, ‘All right, this is over.’ We didn't win per se. But the fact that an ECI invites the Commission to launch a legislative proposal, which the Commission President announces herself, is a win for us, I guess. And that's how the campaign ended.

**Tassos** [00:22:03] But we wanted to continue this effort focused more broadly on the transport sector and how to decarbonise it as a whole. And then we launched this very small youth-led NGO, and we advocated for sustainable policies for the whole transport sector.

**Manex** [00:22:15] I actually watched and read several of your interviews to prepare this interview today, so could you please explain to our listeners what ‘citizen lobbying’ means?

**Tassos** [00:22:25] Citizen lobbyist is maybe a step further from being an activist because other than campaigning, you also try to influence institutional players. It's a very important part of the process, and you can't have one without the other.

**Timo** [00:22:37] Obviously, civil society lobbying is extremely important, but I believe it's also important for citizens to take a bit of time and help these civil society organisations. Yes, I really think lobbying is not a bad word per se, and everyone can use it. And if you have enough time, everyone should use it. It's not enough to watch the news; you also need to try to influence things that you really have at heart.

**Manex** [00:23:00] Tassos, Timo, thank you so much for being on the podcast. It is such an inspiring story.

**Tassos** [00:23:06] Thanks for having us, Manex. Glad to be here.

**Manex** [00:23:14] 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 do 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'm Manex Rekarte Cowie, and you've been listening to CitizenCentral.