

CitizenCentral S3 CH1 final transcripts

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

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

intro [00:00:17] It's good that Europe is ambitious in climate policy.

intro [00:00:20] We should be ambitious, but also realistic.

intro [00:00:23] Our task is to learn to live within the boundaries Mother Earth has given us.

intro [00:00:27] Only united, we can defend our values. We can 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. Practically every initiative leader we speak to tells us how complex it is to make the ECI clear to those who they approached to sign their initiative. Some Europeans are hardcore fans of the ECI, and many others, sadly, have never heard of it. Raising awareness of the ECI is something we take very seriously at the ECI team, and that is why, recently, the very first 'EU Democracy in Action – Have Your Say with the European Citizens' Initiative' Toolkit was piloted in secondary schools, a toolkit that soon will be available for all European educators, but also a great opportunity to speak about the many efforts to make the ECI common knowledge of Europeans and a well-known tool of participatory democracy in the EU.

We will start with the voices and opinions of several young Europeans on the ECI. Then, we will meet an MEP that took part in a ECI campaign back in the day. We will see how the ECI team works hard to make the tool known by as many Europeans as possible, and we will also have a word with the English teacher that has piloted the Toolkit in Poland. If you're into participatory democracy, stay tuned, because today we speak about how to make the ECI common European knowledge.

First of all, those of you listeners that follow the podcast regularly will recall our special youth chapter of last season to celebrate the European Year of Youth. Back in the day, we gathered a group of randomly selected under 26-year-old Europeans and spoke about voting and their ideas on how democracy works. But we also asked them specifically about the ECI. Some knew it backwards. Others had never heard of it. But most agreed generating more awareness of the tool would make it a way of taking part that would be a hit with younger Europeans. Here are some of their thoughts and opinions.

YOUTH [00:03:09] The mechanism of ECI is unknown by most of European citizens.

YOUTH [00:03:15] No, it's the first time I heard of it. So, I... like... I don't know about it at all.

YOUTH [00:03:23] It has to be promoted. The government has to basically push its own people to be interested in politics. And I think the only way, the only way to reach it is basically to prove them that they can make a difference. And not just to say it, but basically to let them also be a part of it.

YOUTH [00:03:42] Yeah, it's a great initiative and I think it gives people hope.

YOUTH [00:03:44] It's something that schools don't teach. So, you don't... like... look for information and you don't really know what's happening in Europe or which tools are available to you.

YOUTH [00:03:59] I mean, I think obviously it's a great initiative, because it shows that people can be a part of change, part of, you know, changing certain things.

YOUTH [00:04:08] I would really love to have real discussions. That's cool.

YOUTH [00:04:13] Actually, I think it's a great mechanism to foster participation. If people knew about it, it would be mind-blowing and people will definitely engage with this. Like, for sure.

Manex [00:04:27] We often speak about how one or another initiative was part of the discussion of the European Parliament, but till date we have not spoken about how the members of the Parliament perceive the ECI. Loránt Vincze welcome to CitizenCentral. Please tell us more about yourself and what you do.

LORANT [00:04:48] I am Loránt Vincze, and I am a member of the European Parliament, I'm representing Romania and especially the Hungarian community from Romania, as they elected me on their party list. And I am also president of the Federal Union of European Nationalities, which is the umbrella organisation of national minorities from all over Europe and the wider Europe. And here in the European Parliament, I am working in the Constitutional Affairs Committee as its vice chair, then in the Home Affairs and Justice, the LIBE Committee, and as well, the Petitions Committee. And besides this, I am also involved in different international delegations like the one that deals with the relationship with the UK after their Brexit and the relationships with the United States and India.

Manex [00:05:40] Great, Loránt. But what is your relationship with the ECI?

LORANT [00:05:44] Well, actually, yes, I know the European Citizens' Initiative from inside and from the outside because myself, I coordinated a citizens' initiative and I can tell you it's a unique opportunity in life to be engaged with the topic and ask for the support of 1 million people, and then ask from the European Commission to act and propose legal acts on behalf of the of the citizens. And I think that is the main gain of this tool, that it makes it possible for the citizens from all over Europe to be able to propose policy in the EU, policy that can have a wide range of activities of topic from environment to economics and other areas of European policy. And... yeah... you can look at it from a longer perspective. Already, this policy tool has been there for some time, and we can see how this evolved, how the citizens were able to engage. But actually, it's the basic democracy at its best. The fact that 1 million citizens from at least seven Member States of the EU are able to propose to the EU that they adopt a legal act... even the Parliament has less power sometimes. So, the initiator of laws is the European Commission. That is why all the requests go to the European Commission, even with the successful citizens' initiatives. So, from this point of view... yeah... the citizens can have a strong say.

Manex [00:07:19] The first 'EU Democracy in Action - Have your say with the European Citizens' Initiative' Toolkit was just piloted in Poland. It has been very well received. So,

would you say we need to reinforce education on democracy and participation? Why is engaging younger citizens so important in your opinion?

LORANT [00:07:37] I believe that citizenship education is overall very important in the schools and the fact that it is the European Commission who proposes such education tools is great, because few people know about the European Citizens' Initiative. I believe even less among the young people. Young people like to be active. They have all sorts of ideas, but maybe they don't really have the knowledge how to channel their energy and their commitment towards some policy issues, and the citizens' initiative can be such a way. Though it's not easy. So, I would say it's not for high school students to start a citizens' initiative, but they should be able to recognise one, and they should be able to know 'what is that what I sign', when I got a request from an NGO or from some ad on the Facebook. So, I think knowing about these opportunities, what does it mean? What does it imply? It is important and probably we should do even more. So, it is great that the Commission is launching this this project, but it has to be done in a very strong cooperation with the Member States, because I feel that the Member States are not directly interested in promoting the citizens' initiative. So here, the Commission needs to have a partnership with the Member States, so that indeed this Toolkit is included in the school curricula and people from school can learn about it.

Manex [00:09:09] We will reengage with MEP Vincze a little bit later in the chapter, but now it's time to head over to Poland to speak with someone that has taught about the ECI. Malgorzata, welcome to the podcast and please tell our listeners a little bit more about yourself.

Malgorzata [00:09:26] It's a real pleasure for me to be invited for the interview. My name is Małgorzata Malczyk and I live in and work in Warsaw, in Poland. I'm an English teacher in the Juliusz Słowacki high school in Warsaw. I am also responsible for the international cooperation of our school.

Manex [00:09:47] So, this was a pilot test. But how did the 'EU Democracy in Action – Have Your Say with the European Citizens' Initiative' Toolkit go with your students? And what would you highlight from this experience?

Malgorzata [00:09:59] It went very well, and I have to highlight a few very interesting points about this EU Democracy in Action Toolkit. First of all, I liked its practicality, its flexibility, because you can use it in various subjects, not only while teaching civics or history, for example, English as a foreign language classes. It is also prepared for the needs of young students or teenagers. It is very useful, I would say, in all European schools, because from my experience, from my contacts with other teachers and comparison of the various curricula, I might draw a conclusion that in most schools in Europe, teaching about the EU does not have a lot of attention. There is not enough time for this. Mostly it's just learning some dates, facts, timelines, names. So frankly speaking, this is very boring for students and for teachers as well. Also, I would say the Toolkit bridges some kind of gap between a lot of material that is available on official websites of the EU institutions, which are written in formal, difficult-to-follow language. And here, we have practical tasks that are well prepared for the target audience, for young students, so they can see a link between the institutions and their everyday needs in their everyday life.

Manex [00:11:40] How knowledgeable were the students on the European Union in general before starting with the Toolkit? There must have been diverse levels of knowledge there.

Malgorzata [00:11:49] We started with some lead-in exercises, checking the knowledge that they have of the EU. And in all these classes it turned out that we, I mean adults and students, take the EU for granted. It is there. It is something. It is as obvious as the air we breathe or the water we drink. But they don't know much how it works, what it is, and what democracy actually is. Because they hear the word democracy, but they do not know how they, these particular individuals, are involved in it. That they can have their say. That every individual person matters. So, from this material that I piloted, they extended their knowledge, but they also felt more connected to the European Union. They also got more involved in analysing the needs of the society. My students are very involved in all charity actions, so, working on this European Citizens' Initiative first looked similar to some charity campaigns. But then, when they explored the materials and how the EU institutions work, what is necessary to pass a law, not just to raise a charity campaign, that, for them, was the most difficult part, to distinguish between these two areas. And I think, thanks to the Toolkit, they could learn what the differences are, what they need to do as citizens within the political framework. Also, what they liked and what I liked in this Toolkit was the possibility for discussion. And also, they liked the critical thinking aspect of this material, because it was not 'you have to memorise this information', then you have to, I don't know, revise it, repeat it, write something at a test. But they had a chance to comment. They had the chance to ask questions. It was also developing for the teacher, because I don't know everything. So, it was also educating for me. And I think it's good because if it works like some kind of peer teaching, not only students or peers in that case, but also teachers to some extent.

Manex [00:14:14] We will talk a little more with Małgorzata in a while. But picking up on her insight there, teachers do also learn from students, as most of us do, from colleagues at work. I personally have learned a lot about the ECI from a following guest, a colleague, and part of the team that works at the ECI in Brussels, a team that does many things, including making the Toolkit more well known. Silvia Kersemakers, such a pleasure to have you on the podcast and please tell our listeners a little more about yourself.

Silvia [00:14:43] Thank you for having me, actually. I am pleased to feature in one of the episodes on the podcast. So, my name is Silvia Kersemakers. I come from actually originally the Netherlands, but I've been living in Belgium already for more than 20 years and since 2019, I work in a team on the ECI, the European Citizens' Initiative and now for a couple of years also as team lead here in Brussels.

Manex [00:15:05] Raising awareness of the ECI is something we are told by many of the ECI enthusiasts, also the leaders. So please tell us more about how this is done in the team.

Silvia [00:15:16] So one of the things that we do here and in Brussels is raising also the awareness of the European Citizens' Initiative as a tool. We know from Eurobarometer statistics that three out of five people still don't know about it, and we would like to increase that. There are number of things that you can do, and particularly young people you would like to attract, because it's about engaging as active citizens. We see how engaged these young people are, and they have real concerns, and they would like to participate in the agenda setting. Right. And for us here in Brussels, teaching about democracy goes hand in hand with the ECI, because the ECI is a way actually for the citizens to share their concerns and to help shaping that agenda here in Brussels.

Manex [00:16:02] What exactly does the Toolkit include and what can students learn from it?

Silvia [00:16:07] I think what is important in the package that we provide to the teachers, and also to the students locally in the schools, is that, as it is an entry point to the European Citizens' Initiative, there are four modules actually that we prepared. So, the first one is about how the EU works, the European values; and the second module will be indeed about how democracy in the EU works. We have different levels of different tools of democracy, the participatory one like the ECI, and of course representative democracy as we all must go to vote for the European elections next year. So that's the second unit. And then there are two units that allow a teacher to actually teach about what the ECI is, about, how it works, and what makes actually a good ECI, because they need to collect 1 million signatures, and actually how to start. And then the final one, I think that's the most nice one for youngsters, that they get their own hands on it and learn more on how to make a good campaign, how to invest in communication skills, how you can learn to persuade people to join you in this journey. And of course, as the cherry on the cake, to just film your own ECI. I think it's a very nice way for youngsters to get involved.

Manex [00:17:16] We just spoke with Małgorzata and indeed this part of the Toolkit was exciting and also revealing of the talents of the students. But other teachers may be listening. How can they check out the Toolkit and give it a go?

Silvia [00:17:29] For the teachers that listen to this podcast, I would like to say go and visit our ECI website, where you can find all the materials. You will find some very nice materials there that you can teach on your own pace. You can also pick out the things that you think are relevant for your pupils. And even if you have not the time to spend on the four units, take out the bits that you think are still nice to pass on to your students for their future life.

Manex [00:17:57] But is it only for younger citizens and teachers? Can the rest of us take a peep?

Silvia [00:18:02] Everybody is free to have a look. It's not only for the youngsters. We have also other materials on our website for those who want to dive more into this. We have also an ECI Forum, where we have an online course which goes much more deeper into the ins and outs of the ECI and particularly for people like students, say... they like going there. So, there's a lot of other material that you can find on our ECI website.

Manex [00:18:25] So what is the plan to get lots of young Europeans engaged with the Toolkit?

Silvia [00:18:31] What I think is also very nice for youngsters that participate, there is something that they can win with it. There is a competition that we launch in relation to the Toolkit, and the competition will also be launched in the autumn and people can just record their own video on an ECI, on a topic that they like, and, if they win, they can come with their class, or at least a group of seven, because the ECI is a group of seven, with their teachers, they can win a visit to Brussels. So, there is something also nice to gain with it, and then we will tour you around here in Brussels. But as long as that is all in preparation, please visit the website and find out more about the ECI itself, about the tool kit, about the competition. And check it out.

Manex [00:19:19] Fantastic, Silvia. Thanks so much for jumping on this CitizenCentral chapter.

Silvia [00:19:24] Thank you so much, Manex.

Manex [00:19:26] Time to return to Małgorzata, picking up on her last insight. Yes, teachers can learn a lot from students, but when a teacher is engaged, the students follow.

Małgorzata [00:19:35] Yes, of course. And it is also educating for the teacher because the task that requires making a video, it is included in one of the lesson plans, gave me a lot of information about some students. I mean, I found out some were natural born directors, some were excellent actors. Some had really interesting ideas about the script, about the screenplay. So, this allowed for creativity in the classroom. And they liked it very much. They had excellent ideas.

Manex [00:20:10] It is always exciting to discover hidden talents of the students when working on applied tasks like these. How about their feedback? What did the students mention once they had completed the Toolkit?

Małgorzata [00:20:22] When I interviewed my students after piloting the whole material, they stressed that they actually learned a lot about the EU institutions. They learned a lot about the democracy. They saw the link between what they hear in some political campaigns, or what they see on television, and their own lives. They also saw the practical links between their experience. For example, most of them have already travelled abroad to various countries. When they hear the word Schengen, they think, okay, so it means I can go anywhere in Europe. And then they found out, 'No', not 'anywhere', it's not that easy. When they hear the word treaty, they imagine, again, a volume of texts to go through, but then they have all explained clearly and briefly and adapted to the comprehension of young people and to their needs. So, this is what they also stressed as useful practical knowledge that they got from this material.

Manex [00:21:29] I know you produced a video. How did it go? What was it about?

Małgorzata [00:21:34] They decided to produce a video that was to accompany the campaign in which they demanded from the EU institutions to pass a law which would require all the companies producing pet food to include natural and healthy ingredients.

Manex [00:21:54] Congratulations, Małgorzata. These insights are amazing, and I can only imagine what it was like for the students.

Małgorzata [00:22:02] Thank you very much.

Manex [00:22:05] And now returning to MEP Loránt Vincze. I guess you have heard about the Toolkit, but what you must know is that when students understand the tool, they love it. Some do mention similar tools at their national level, but for others, it is genuinely empowering.

LORANT [00:22:22] Well, I was informed about this Toolkit and I imagine that it speaks a lot about participatory democracy, how the citizens can get their hands on this tool. I hope it makes some kind of parallel with the national tools that are at their disposal because it's not a singular instrument. Many Member States have this petition and referendum request system. And, yeah, I'm happy to hear that young people like it when they discover it. What

is this about? And they try to use it at maximum. Of course, it's also important not only to prepare these initiatives and be part of it, and sign it, and have this huge awareness... activism... around it, but also to see what is the results. And here we have problem... institutional problems. The fact that with the many citizens' initiatives that went through, only a few managed to gather 1 million signatures and even less got the final positive answer from the European Commission.

Manex [00:23:28] Another thing you should know is that at the ECI, we literally celebrate when the tool is mentioned in the Parliament's discussions. But I wanted to ask you, how is the tool perceived in the Parliament? Is it seen as very disruptive?

LORANT [00:23:41] Well, I am sure that the European Parliament is on the side of the citizens, not only because we are the only elected institution of the European Union, but because on our own as well, we try to influence the European legislation. We do it, but we have less means to start initiatives that are then taken on board by the European Commission. So here we are at the same level as the citizens with the European Citizens' Initiative. So, we are partners in it with the citizens, and we are ready to help them and there are big debates. The whole ECI tool started in the European Parliament with an idea from the European Parliament. The Member States and the Commission were not really happy. They were reluctant in giving a green light to this initiative and since many things happened the tool changed, the regulation changed, and now we are in the process of evaluating the past four years of the initiative with the report in the European Parliament that I am responsible of, and we try to see what went well, what went wrong, what should be changed in the legislation. And the Commission on their side will do the same evaluation this year and maybe they will make changes to the regulation. But it is important for us in the Parliament that all the initiatives come here and there is a public hearing, a debate, where the initiators are here, experts are here, and members of the Parliament are here, the Commission is represented, and we manage to have a debate on the topic and to formulate some conclusions. The Parliament also has the possibility to have a plenary resolution on an initiative, so that the House can say, 'yes', we are behind this initiative, or not, we don't consider it important. And as well, we would like to have the same kind of involvement of the Parliament when the Commission makes up its mind about an initiative. Whether they start and they propose a legal act or not, we want it to come back to the European Parliament, that the Commission makes its explanations and that we make an assessment, and we make a resolution in the end as well, so that the circle is, you know, closed and everybody has the opportunity to be sure that the citizens were heard, and they get an answer that they can understand. Sometimes the different documents of the Commission and the explanations are not enough, or not detailed enough, so that people... citizens... can understand what happened with their very simple idea on a certain topic.

Manex [00:26:13] Partners in democracy. I love how you lay this out. Thanks so much for joining us on CitizenCentral.

LORANT [00:26:20] Thanks for the invitation.

Manex [00:26:36] This brings this chapter of season three of CitizenCentral to an end. Thanks to all our guests and, of course, to you for listening. If you want to learn more about the ECI and these initiatives, please check out our SHOWNOTES. I hope you have learned a little bit more about how the ECI works and how it causes change for all of us in Europe. I am Manex Rekarte Cowie and you have been listening to CitizenCentral.