



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

SECRETARIAT-GENERAL
Directorate A – Strategy, Better Regulation & Corporate Governance
SG.A.1 – Policy Priorities & Work Programme

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

22 FEBRUARY 2024

1. Agenda and objectives

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

The objective of the meeting was to discuss with the national authorities competent under Regulation (EU) 2019/788 on the European citizens' initiative (ECI) matters of implementation related to:

- the latest ECI developments, including the state of play of the citizens' initiatives;
- the review report of Regulation (EU) 2019/788;
- updates on recent IT developments;
- the state of play of the ECI communication campaign.

Germany requested to raise under the final point of the agenda ('any other business') questions in relation to sanctions for individuals that potentially fraudulently sign an ECI.

The PowerPoint presentations from the meeting are available on the ECI website: https://citizens-initiative.europa.eu/expert-group-meetings_en

2. Points discussed

3.1 General ECI developments

The Commission services provided an overview of the citizens' initiatives registered since the Expert Group meeting of 6 June 2023 as well as the valid initiatives and the initiatives pending submission. The **key figures** (up to 22 February 2024) show that 40 new initiatives were registered since the new rules started to apply in January 2020; the two-stage registration procedure was used in 11 of these cases; only one request for registration was refused; 11 initiatives are currently collecting statements of support and 4 initiatives will start collecting statements of support soon. On 6 February 2024 there was the first partial registration under the revised Regulation.

The Commission services also highlighted the four **successful initiatives** replied to in 2023 and recalled that two initiatives registered under the old Regulation and having over one million verified statements of support were still pending submission to the Commission for examination. In this context, participants were informed that the judgment of the Court in Case C-54/22 P, *Romania v Commission*, concerning the registration decision of the Cohesion

Policy initiative would be delivered on the date of this meeting and links to the [judgment](#) and [press release](#) are included in these minutes.

The participants were informed about the state of play with respect to the **modification of Annex I** to Regulation (EU) 2019/788 to comply with European Council Decision (EU) 2023/2061 establishing the composition of the European Parliament for the 2024-2029 parliamentary term. The Commission recalled that the new thresholds will not affect initiatives that are already registered. It will only be relevant to those initiatives registered on or after the date on which the new parliamentary terms begins. When the new thresholds become applicable, the Commission will send information to this Expert Group and to ECI organisers. The Commission will also publish information on the new thresholds in the ECI newsletter and on the ECI website.

As a final point related to the ECI regulatory framework, the participants were asked whether changes had occurred or are planned in their Member State in relation to the lowering of the minimum age for supporting ECIs. None of the participants mentioned anything in response.

3.2 Review report of Regulation (EU) 2019/788 on the European citizens' initiative

The Commission services provided an overview of the review report regarding the application of Regulation (EU) 2019/788 on the European citizens' initiative, adopted by the Commission on 6 December 2023 – see the related presentation. The Commission services presented the main findings of the review process that took into account the feedback collected from ECI organisers, national authorities, citizens, as well as the views of the other EU institutions, in particular the recommendations included in the EP resolution of 12 June 2023.

The actions the Commission announced in the report with a view to further improving the functioning of the ECI were presented. Specifically in relation to one of these actions, taking also into account the EP recommendations, the Commission services revised the Member State guidelines in order to further support Member States in the implementation of their obligations in the ECI process. The changes introduced aim to ensure increased transparency of the outcome of the verification process (in particular if the proportion of validated statements of support is lower than usual). The document was shared with the Expert Group for comments. By the deadline of 16 February 2024, one Member State replied recognising the necessity of the revision but cautioning against any additional requirements which would result in a disproportionate increase in the administrative burden on the authorities. The Commission services underlined that the revisions are intended to provide further clarifications and indications as to when further information may need to be provided to the organisers rather than additional obligations. No further points were raised during the meeting. The revised version of the guidelines is available on the ECI website: [Revised Guidelines for Member States Feb2024_final.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#).

In the ensuing discussions, Estonia requested information about ECIs that generated legislative impact. The Commission services referred to the examples of legislative acts adopted in response to the 'Right2Water' and 'Ban glyphosate' ECIs – which led to the revision of the Drinking Water Directive on the one hand; and to enhanced transparency of the authorisations in the food chain, on the other. The Commission is also implementing a number of other follow-up actions in response to successful ECIs – the information is available on the webpages of each successful initiative. The Commission services also underlined that legislative proposals in response to successful ECIs need to follow the

standard better regulation guidelines and that the subsequent interinstitutional negotiations require time as well.

3.3 Update on IT developments

The Commission services gave an overview of the recent IT developments. Since the last Expert Group meeting, seven new ECIs started using the central online collection system; Member States successfully validated the statements of support for the ‘Fur Free Europe’ ECI and uploaded their Annex VI in the file exchange service. Users’ satisfaction with the central online collection system remains high.

As regards the use of eID, 17 Member States now offer the possibility to their citizens to use eID to support an initiative (with six more preparing for its use). The support via eID remains nevertheless relatively low, but growing, as a percentage of the total support collected.

In the context of the periodic review of the ECI Regulation, the Commission services mentioned the study carried out by an external IT research team analysing the possibilities for embeddable solutions for the central online collection system that the Commission could offer to ECI organisers. Reference was also made to the action listed in the ECI review report related to the continued improvement of the central online collection system. In this context, a usability and accessibility project was launched by the Commission in January 2024. Its conclusions are expected in the second quarter of 2024 with implementation of its findings in the second half of 2024.

The Commission services also informed the Member States about an IT incident that occurred on 30 May 2023. The organisers of the initiative ‘Connecting all European capitals and people through a high-speed train network’ informed the Commission of a technical problem in the central online collection system concerning the signature of statements of support using the eID functionality. As a result of this, statements of support signed for this initiative using an eID were not recorded in the Commission’s system.

While the problem did not impact the availability of the central online collection system itself, and only concerned the eID functionality, the Commission considers it justified to grant appropriate compensation as the citizens that used the eID functionality were not aware that their statements of support were not recorded. The collection period for the initiative will therefore be extended by one full day. This means that the new end date for the collection of statements of support for the initiative will be 31 May 2024.

This approach is based on the solution outlined in the Information Note sent to this Expert Group on 11 May 2023 (regarding a different incident that occurred on 18 February 2023) and that was subsequently confirmed at the [Expert Group meeting of 6 June 2023](#).

If this ECI reaches the required thresholds (one million signatures with thresholds met in at least seven Member States), the Commission will rely on the cooperation and flexibility of Member States, in particular for the verification and certification of statements of support collected on the additional day.

3.4 Communication activities

The Commission services recalled the objectives of the ‘EU Take the Initiative’ campaign, launched in 2018:

- To raise awareness of citizens about the ECI as one of their key EU citizenship rights,
- To strengthen the network of multipliers and partners at national and local levels and provide them with high quality and easily accessible promotion materials to autonomously promote the ECI.

The Commission services referred to the 2023 [Eurobarometer](#) results on the awareness of the ECI (with the EU average of 64%) and gave an update of the main communication channels, such as corporate Commission social media, the [ECI Facebook group](#), the monthly [ECI newsletter](#) (with 140 000 subscribers) and the channels of other multipliers, including other EU institutions. Moreover, the [ECI Forum](#), managed by a contractor on behalf of the Commission, offers multilingual information and legal advice for organisers, specialised webinars, as well as an online course.

The Commission services recalled the information on the [educational toolkit](#) for secondary schools, launched in 2023 and available in all the official EU languages. It allows teachers to introduce the EU and the ECI in a playful way to their pupils (aged 16+). The aim of this toolkit is to increase awareness of the ECI among students, showing them a way to be active citizens.

The toolkit was accompanied by [a video competition](#) for secondary schools, ‘ImagineEU’, launched in October 2023. The competition builds on the concept of the ECI: pupils in the last two years of secondary education were invited to think of concrete ideas that could benefit citizens across the EU. In groups of up to 7 classmates (as in the case of an ECI), students were asked to present their creative ideas in a short video. Over 400 videos were submitted, out of which 388 videos that complied with the competition rules were published for public voting between December 2023 and January 2024.

In the final stage, a jury assessed the 50 most voted videos to determine the three winning teams. The selection was announced on 21 February 2024. The three winning teams come from France, Italy and Romania.

They are awarded a study trip to Brussels from 21 to 23 March 2024. During the trip, the teams will meet representatives of the EU institutions to learn more about how EU policies and laws are made and how EU citizens can get involved with the ECI.

In 2024, the Commission services will promote the ECI, via its contractor and with support of the ECI Ambassadors, in events in the seven focus Member States for the year: Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Croatia, Lithuania, Austria and Slovakia. The selected events include democracy festivals (e.g. in Germany), big public events such as youth festivals (in Belgium, Slovakia) or book fairs (in Lithuania, Croatia). Media activities (e.g. sponsored articles) are also planned in these countries.

The Commission services nurture the network of [ECI Ambassadors](#) (mainly representatives of civil society organisations, promoting the ECI on a voluntary basis) and a wider network of ECI multipliers. In order to provide updates and allow for networking, the Commission services regularly organise online meetings for the ECI Ambassadors network, the national contact points and other multipliers. The second physical gathering of this network on 6 March 2024, follows the 2022 meeting. The Commission services are also recruiting additional ECI Ambassadors.

Other communication activities planned for 2024 include a webinar targeted at teachers and a webinar targeted at Europe Direct centres, as well as social media promotions.

3.5 Any other business

Germany raised questions related to sanctions based on the fact that the ECI Regulation only provides for sanctions against groups of organisers (Article 5(6)), but not against supporters of ECIs (e.g. who sign more than once or use wrong data). In this respect, Germany enquired whether:

- (i) It is lawful to set up sanctions for individuals given that this it is not mentioned in the ECI Regulation.
- (ii) Other Member States have systems of sanctions against such individuals and if so, what experience they have in pursuing any potentially fraudulent actions.

In a brief exchange on this matter, the Commission services explained that the ECI Regulation does not prohibit Member States from introducing sanctions for individual supporters of ECIs. However, fraudulent support would be more likely covered by horizontal/general sanctions. As regards the lawfulness of specific ECI-related sanctions, this would need to be further assessed in consultation with the Legal Service also bearing in mind that ECI signatories may sign an ECI more than once unintentionally. Duplicate or multiple signatures from the same person are not counted in the verification phase. Two Member States mentioned that they do not have ECI-specific sanctions.

The Commission services proposed following up on the points raised through a short survey allowing the members of this Expert Group to inform on the situation in their Member State. The survey can be accessed at: https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/ECI_Sanctions_survey.

3. List of participants

- Representatives from the European Commission:

Secretariat-General, Unit SG.A.1 and Directorate-General for Digital Services, Unit DIGIT.A.4.

- Representatives of the following Member States:

Austria; Belgium; Bulgaria; Croatia; Cyprus; Denmark; Estonia; Finland; France; Germany; Greece; Hungary; Ireland; Italy; Latvia; Lithuania; Luxembourg; Malta; Netherlands; Poland; Portugal; Romania; Slovenia; Spain; Sweden.

- Observers from the European Parliament (AFCO and PETI Committee secretariats).