



BRIEF REPORT OF THE STUDENT DEBATE CIRCLE ON EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP

Held from 2.00 pm – 4.00 pm on Friday 11 December at ELTE University in Budapest

Kriszta Kovács from the Law Faculty welcomed everyone to this first event and thanked Barbara Horvath for the organisation and invitations. She welcomed in particular the two speakers.

Tony Venables explained that ECIT had been set up recently in Brussels as a public foundation specialising in the area of European citizenship. The aim was to establish student debate circles in a number of universities beginning with Maastricht, whilst contact was being made with Athens (Greece), Sussex (UK) and Bologna (Italy). For this approach to work, there had to be some shared interest by the university and the students. This could differ from one university to the next, but he considered there could be three motives to setting up a student debate circle:

- A student debate circle could bring more awareness of the impressive amount of research related to European citizenship. The attention given by policy makers to this theme was certainly insufficient. ECIT could help give the research greater impact with the EU Institutions by making the results of the student debates known to them.
- There was a certain responsibility on the part of universities to give more priority to this first transnational citizenship of the modern era to combat the rise in nationalism which was spilling over into racism and xenophobia. European citizenship was part of the search for European values and solidarity.
- A student debate circle should not detract from core formal studies but could be of added value because of the multi-disciplinary nature of a citizenship of rights, participation and belonging. Debates could bring together students of European Studies, Law, Political Science and other related disciplines. European citizenship as a complex question, far from resolved, is intellectually challenging and could therefore contribute to the quality of the university and its students.

He suggested that a European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) could be launched asking the European Commission to do more to encourage European citizenship.



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Anna Unger provided the audience with an excellent PowerPoint presentation of this agenda-setting instrument, based on her own experience and the analysis of the current state of play of ECIs presented in Peter Téglás' paper available on the Facebook event page and the ECIT website. She began by putting forward some general observations about the distinction between participatory and representative democracy before explaining the origins of ECIs in the Convention on the Future of Europe which produced the abortive constitutional treaty. Several ECIs were attempted before they became official and there was scattered experience with this type of instrument at national or regional level. Finally, under Article 11 of the Treaty of Lisbon, the new right was introduced whereby over one million citizens from a significant number of the 28 EU Member States (in practice a minimum of 7) could put forward a demand to the European Commission to propose a draft European law within its legal competence. After the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in December 2009, there followed a period of consultation with civil society organisations before the regulation on ECIs was adopted by the EU and came into force on 1 April 2012.

The early promise of this new instrument has yet to be realised given the disappointing results from the first three years of operation. Early enthusiasm has diminished and now very few new ECIs are being put forward. This appears to be due to three main factors:

- Of over 40 ECIs attempted nearly half were rejected at the outset by the Commission as being outside its legal competence for reasons which were not always entirely evident.
- For organisers the regime was too complex with different national requirements for signature collection and many lacked the necessary structures and funding to meet the one million target.
- There were doubts even with successful ECIs (only 4 so far) that they would be properly followed up by the Commission, which was not obliged to act.

Tony Venables made the point that proposals by civil society to improve and simplify the regime had been taken up by the European Parliament and its Rapporteur, György Schöpflin, and that negotiations would start on reforms in early 2016. It was too early to give up on this instrument and even unsuccessful ECIs could make an impact.

In the discussion one of the students pointed to the danger of ECIs becoming a frustrating substitute for genuine participation because it was so difficult to make them work and the Commission was under no obligation to follow them up. Another suggested that a pre-requisite for ECIs to work was more education about Europe, not just in universities but also schools. Polarised political debates, particularly in Eastern Europe, made the climate for ECIs difficult.

On the other hand, there was consensus that the idea of an ECI calling on the Commission to make more of the potential offered by European citizenship was worth considering. The ECI instrument was well adapted to such themes where it was not a question of seeking an immediate result so much as setting an agenda to start a longer-term trend. The participants also advised that any ECI should make it clear that European citizenship was no threat to national citizenship and a fully compatible additional dimension.

Tony Venables thanked the organisers for their hospitality and the ten participants for an interesting discussion. He suggested that everyone should consider a possible follow-up with proposals for an ECI on European citizenship – if it came from Hungary it could get interest and support in other EU countries.

