



## **BRIEF REPORT OF THE STUDENT DEBATE CIRCLE ON EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP**

Held on Friday 11 December 2015 at Maastricht University

### ***'European Citizens' Initiatives (ECIs): A Breakthrough or the Illusion of Inclusion?'***

On 11 December 2015, the Student Debate Circle on European Citizenship entitled 'European Citizens' Initiatives (ECIs): A Breakthrough or the Illusion of Inclusion?' was held at Maastricht University and was organised by ECIT Maastricht. The main topic of the debate was the European Citizens' Initiative, however, the conference was also an introduction to the topic of the current asylum and migration crisis and its implications for European citizenship. There were some dozen participants only because it was exam time. The discussion, however, was excellent. Pamela Piech, the coordinator of ECIT Maastricht welcomed the participants and introduced the guest speakers, Dr Peter Téglás, researcher at ECIT and Mr Nour Khatib, a Board Member of Not Just a Number (NJAN). This was followed by a brief presentation by Pamela Piech about ECIT on the organisation's key objectives and initiatives. In her presentation Pamela Piech also talked about ECIT Maastricht and its main goals. The presentation ended with a short description of ECIT's latest activities and the presentation of the draft statutes.

This was followed by an excellent presentation by Dr Peter Téglás, who outlined some of the key challenges to the effectiveness of ECIs as an instrument for transnational deliberative democracy. The presentation was based on his paper entitled '*The European Citizens' Initiative – (Un)successful Tool of Deliberative Democracy; Present State and Future Perspectives*', as published on the ECIT website (<http://ecit-foundation.eu/involvement/involvement-publications/>).

After the presentation the participants began an interactive discussion on the main points made by Dr Téglás. The debate was loosely based on the following questions:

- What are the reasons for the deficiencies and poor results of the ECIs? What can be done to increase their efficiency?
- What are the prospects of ECIs becoming an important tool for deliberate democracy?
- What is your view on the role of ECIs in creating a democratic and participatory European citizenship?

According to the students, very few people are aware of the existence of ECIs, and those who have heard of it, know very little about its benefits and how it works. It has been agreed that this lack of basic knowledge about the ECI is hindering prospects for deliberative democracy whereby ordinary citizens can influence the EU policy-making process. It is therefore important to raise awareness of this tool among the general public, but also among the Institutions.

Despite identifying it as an important tool, the ECI was criticised by some participants for its lack of effectiveness. As some students have pointed out, this might explain the decreasing number of submitted ECIs. Introduced in the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009, the ECIs started to operate only on 1 April 2012 and their number has been lower and lower each year. This might be, as one of the participants explained, due to the relatively high number of rejections by the European Commission and also due to the growing distrust of citizens towards the EU. Indeed, so far only 3 ECIs were successful.<sup>1</sup> Out of 49 submission; as of the end of 2015, only 29 made it to the stage of registrations and only the ECI 'Right2Water' has been relatively successful. So far, the Commission declared about 40% of ECIs as falling outside its competences. This poor record undoubtedly undermines the public trust in ECIs. The fact that many ECIs are rejected is a reason for concern. The main problem identified by the students was that there is no guarantee that after the hard work of initiating a campaign for a particular ECI and gathering 1 million signatures that that ECI will be accepted. This might be a discouraging factor to many potential organisers. Indeed, the Commission does not have an obligation to accept an ECI and to propose legislation as a result.

Moreover, there is no instrument of appeal if an ECI has gathered 1 million signatures. The only option is to try again on another occasion. There are also various technical problems. First of all, it is required that the ECI is backed by a million signatures and is supported by a minimum number of signatories in at least 7 of the Member States within one year of its registration. Moreover, for an ECI to succeed, a strong campaign is needed, which requires resources which ordinary citizens simply do not possess. Those obstacles, according to some of the more critical students, are the reasons behind the rather disappointing results so far. On the other hand, some participants claimed that the requirement that the ECI needs to be backed by one million signatures makes the ECI more representative and therefore, more democratic.

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<sup>1</sup> The ECIs which have been successful include "Stop vivisection", "One of us" and "Water and sanitation are a human right! Water is a public good, not a commodity!". For more information go to: <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/initiatives/successful>.

A point was also made about making ECIs more user friendly, for example by providing translations of ECI texts or by allowing citizens to sign at the age of sixteen (instead of the age of eighteen as it is now). The online collection system, although very secure, can also be very frustrating for organisers precisely due to data protection requirements. The organisers of an ECI are not allowed to keep the emails of the supporters of a particular ECI campaign after the ECI is submitted. On the other hand, there is the issue of privacy rights. As stated by some of the participants, in the contemporary world of increased intrusion in the everyday life of citizens, data protection is essential.

In the end, the discussion about the ECI has led to a broader reflection about the state of democracy in the EU. The students pointed out that the EU decision making process, to a large extent, has been captured by influential lobby groups. It is in this context that the ECI emerged, precisely to counterbalance the influence of corporate lobby groups and to give ordinary citizens more power. The ECI is aimed at transforming the relationship between civil society and the EU Institutions by allowing citizen mobilisation. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen the appeal of ECIs to EU citizens and increase their effectiveness so that they can become a truly transnational tool for deliberate democracy, as it has been envisaged.

Despite the broad criticism of ECIs due to its lack of effectiveness, only one participant stated that it is not a significant tool considering that policies can be effectively influenced on national level and cooperation between civil society groups from different countries already exists. All other students agreed that a tool for transnational deliberative democracy, such as the ECI, is important and much needed today, but it should be reformed to become more effective. The transnational character of ECIs enhances the sense of shared European identity and it is an important aspect of European citizenship. For it to be more successful in the future, more awareness spreading is needed. A campaign to inform people about the ECIs combined with long-term European civic education is required for ECIs to make greater impact in the future. Educational programmes on European rights and European citizenship more broadly should be part of university and school education in all EU Member States.

Thus, the potential of ECIs is not lost. As argued by our guest speaker, Mr Nour Khatib, the tool could be used to further the campaign for more rights for refugees and to influence policies on refugees related matters. It could also empower minority groups across the EU to fight for their rights. This is already taking place. Last year a group of citizens from Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, France and UK started the European Asylum Initiative calling for a more humane, fair and coordinated response to the ongoing refugee crisis.

(The first part of conference ended with a 15 minute tea/coffee break.)

Having thoroughly discussed some of the most significant challenges to the ECI, as well as possible ways of reforming it during the first debate, after the break we moved to our second topic, 'The Implications of the Asylum and Migration Crisis for European Citizenship'. It was an introductory debate to the next conference planned by ECIT Maastricht for February/March. This part of the conference began with Mr Nour Khatib's talk about his experiences as a refugee and his perception of European values. Then the discussion moved to the topic of European identity and integration of refugees into European societies. The participants deliberated on the idea of common values shared by Europeans and the

refugees, such as democracy, human rights and human dignity. These principles were said to be universal to both Europeans and refugees, despite obvious cultural and religious differences. These values should also be at the heart of a broader, democratic and inclusive European citizenship. We also discussed how the refugee crisis revealed the existing divisions between states and further intensified them. More solidarity and a sense of shared goals between EU Member States is needed when dealing with such challenges as the refugee crisis. Thus, European citizenship as advocated by ECIT could be an answer to the crises facing Europe today.

In the context of the migration and asylum crises affecting our continent, European citizenship seems to be becoming rather inward-looking. Nationalism and xenophobia are on the rise, right-wing parties are gaining more and more popularity and instead of greater openness, Europe is turning inwards towards Fortress Europe. Moreover, in the current climate, Europe's minority groups are feeling more and more marginalised and disenfranchised. European citizenship open to all, based on human rights and democratic principles would help to foster a sense of belonging among Europe's minority groups and would help them to integrate into European societies. As noted by the students, we do not want segregated societies. Our guest speaker also mentioned that European citizenship could be a solution to the problem of growing radicalisation of young Muslims throughout Europe, which is often a result of their marginalisation and a feeling of being excluded. This, in turn, fuels the xenophobic sentiments visible in Europe today. By enabling the members of minority groups to enjoy full citizenship rights we would create a more participatory, inclusive and democratic Europe.

In the end, Pamela Piech thanked the guest speakers and the participants for their contributions and proposed another conference in the near future.