

## MEETING OF THE CROSS-PARTY GROUP OF MEPs ON EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP

Wednesday 5 October  
Strasbourg, European Parliament

### MEPs present at the meeting:

**Domènec Ruiz Devesa**, MEP (S&D), AFCO Rapporteur on European Electoral Act Reform  
**Fabio Massimo Castaldo**, MEP (Non-attached)

### Speakers and attendants:

**Suzana Carp**, ECIT Board  
**Clemens Hauser**, Freiburger Wahlkreis 100%  
**Niccolò Milanese**, Director European Alternatives & Citizens Take Over Europe  
**Alejandro Peinado García**, Parliamentary Assistant of Domènec Ruiz Devesa (S&D)  
**Elina Pinto**, Europeans Throughout the World (ETTW)  
**Juliette Raulet-Descombey**, Parliamentary Assistant of Pascal Durand (Renew Europe)  
**Martina Rubino**, ECIT Youth Taskforce  
**Tony Venables**, ECIT Founder

### **Introduction**

On 5 October, a new meeting of the Cross-Party Group of MEPs was held in Strasbourg, organised by the [ECIT Foundation](#), initiator of the European Citizens' Initiative [Voters Without Borders](#) (VWB), with the support of a number of external speakers who are experts on voting rights and campaigning.

The main objectives of this meeting were to discuss the presentation made to the **Committee on Petitions of the European Parliament** (PETI) on 8 September 2022 by **Suzana Carp** (ECIT Board) and **Martina Rubino** (ECIT Youth Taskforce) on the ECI, its achievements and its future, and also to discuss the **next steps** that the MEPs can take in the coming months concerning the main topics of voting rights and European citizenship.

### **Main topics in the agenda**

1. The future of *Voters without Borders* European Citizens Initiative
2. *Proposals for a European electoral reform and voting rights*
3. *Launch of a new ECI on EU Citizenship Education*

## THE SESSION

### Interventions of the ECIT Team

The session was opened with welcoming and opening remarks by ECIT Founder, **Tony Venables**. In his speech, he emphasised the necessary attention that needs to be paid to linking the topic of **European citizenship** with that of the **European elections (2024)**, in order to give an extra push in achieving the results hoped for by the Group. The hope is also to broaden the spectrum of action of the different committees within the EP regarding European Citizenship. He has also added how ECIT is planning to make the organisation of the group's work more professional, thanks to support from the **Friedrich Naumann Foundation** which would approach other political foundations to contribute financially. The aim is to have a **senior consultant** in place and the capacity to organise **quarterly meetings in 2023**; in this way, the group might achieve the status of an **official intergroup** after the 2024 European elections.

**Another aim is also to have the group co-organised with the office of one of the MEPs.**

An element of fundamental importance for this discussion was the input regarding the **European Citizenship Statute**, promoted by ECIT. There is currently a revised version of this with **30 articles** on different topics related to citizenship. The aim is to bring together scattered elements approved by an Initiative [Report from the European Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs](#) (AFCO), by the [PETI Committee's Opinion Report on Citizens' Committees](#) and by the recommendations given by citizens at the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE).

A second intervention was carried out by **Suzana Carp** (ECIT Board), concerning [ECIT's presentation at the PETI Committee](#), representing almost 9000 citizens who signed the ECI *Voters without Borders*. ECIT is aware of the failure to collect the million signatures, but despite that, the ECI and the group of young people who worked on it have still achieved important results. Among those:

- the involvement of a team of **young people** on issues of representative democracy;
- a remarkable **library of knowledge and development of campaigning tools** (including a 40-page [Advocacy Paper](#), several submissions to the European institutions);;
- an [analysis](#) of the five Member States which **disenfranchise overseas citizens**;
- the creation of a **network of organisations** across Europe;
- **support and interest** from **MEPs, Government** representatives, **Heads of State**;
- more.

These results were reported to the PETI Committee, which decided to **refer the ECI's follow-up to the AFCO Committee**, together with our **request** to the European Parliament for drawing up an **Own-Initiative Report** on voting rights, appearing as a great result to us.

Moreover, in the light of the Conference on the Future of Europe, where some ideas from citizens have made it through to the conclusions of the Conference with less quantitative

signatures but more qualitative debate, we believe that the ECI as an instrument has to be revised to include a lower overall threshold and more qualitative criteria for success.

This imposed 1 million threshold, when the EU's population has decreased with the loss of the UK, has been proven to prevent groups of young citizens, interested in politics but without large human and financial resources, from being able to concretely take part in this instrument. More improvements could be envisioned, such as streamlined requirements for signatures across the MS, as currently they vary making it more difficult in some cases than in others.

At the PETI Committee hearing, **Martina Rubino** (ECIT Youth Taskforce) had the opportunity to briefly emphasise the need to pay attention to the issue of so-called "*studenti fuorisede*" in Italy: young people who live in a city different than their city of residence to study. The last Italian elections, held at the end of September, showed a high rate of abstentionism, particularly in the regions where most of these students come from. The problem, in addition to an acknowledged lack of interest and trust from part of the population towards politics, is however accentuated by the **difficulty or impossibility** these students have **in voting**; in fact, no Italian law provides a solution other than to return to their city of residence and vote there. This requires money and time that not everyone can afford, and in fact **infringes on the right to vote** of almost 5 million people (about 10% of the electorate). All this was pointed out to highlight the need for actions related to those proposed by the ECI and to show how, even within national borders themselves, the right to vote of European citizens is being restricted and challenged by outdated legislation.

### Answers from the MEPs

**MEP Fabio Massimo Castaldo** (Non-Attached) responded to the two statements. A first suggestion was to have **ECIs assessed** not by a political body, but by **an independent/legal one** (e.g. Court of Justice). He also mentioned the need to proceed with a **bottom-up approach** to give perspective to citizens' proposals; in this case, he referred to the creation of a **platform reminiscent of CoFoE**, which the Commission seems to be engaged in creating. Furthermore, he showed interest and support for the ECIT Statute, which he sees as a useful tool to make the **acknowledgement** of this type of rights **clearer** but also **binding**. One of his suggestions in this regard is to use Estonia as an example of good practice for **e-voting**. He mentioned how, in countries like Italy, voting by post created problems with timing and fraud; therefore, this innovative type of voting could be a possibility in the case of the Italian situation and the difficulty/impossibility of voting at the moment for millions of people. Finally, he showed support for ECIT's proposal for Parliament to have its Own-Initiative Report.

**MEP and AFCO Rapporteur Domènec Ruiz Devesa (S&D)** then gave his comments. First of all, he emphasised his interest in the ECI *Voters without Borders* proposals. However, he highlighted that while they could be facilitated at the level of European electoral law for European elections, this is certainly not the case for the rest of the proposals; this is because it would require a **greater effort** at the level of **national parliaments and governments**. Then

moved on to the subject of the **one million signature threshold** required for ECIs. As also analysed by the *Voters without Borders*' team, ECIs that manage to obtain a lot of signatures have previously built up a **large and strong international network**, which should be capitalised on and expanded further. One suggestion to bring young people closer to politics is a symbolic proposal that, however, could have an effect: send a copy of the **Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union** to all young people turning 18, to encourage them to learn about rights, citizenship and politics at European level. Concerning the Cross-Party Group, MEP Devesa commented that it should not necessarily be set on becoming an intergroup, as this status did not bring many advantages. Finally, he has expressed his support to the idea of an **Own-Initiative Report in AFCO** as a follow-up of *Voters without Borders*.

### Interventions from civil society's representatives

A proposal by **Niccolò Milanese** ([European Alternatives](#)) was to link the **ECIs** with the **citizens panels** used at the Conference on the Future of Europe; in this case, a lower number of signatures would be required to have the proposals discussed in at least one citizens panel. Moreover, he has also welcomed the emphasis placed by the President of the Commission in her State of the Union address on **defending democracy**; however, there is some regret for not mentioning specifically what kind of reforms are intended to take this plan forward.

**Elina Pinto** ([Europeans Throughout the World](#)) pointed out that although **mobile citizens** are the most affected by the issue of **voting rights**, they are at the same time the most **underrepresented**. She also emphasised the importance of **digital resources**, which are considered crucial by mobile citizens when it comes to elections; representation of mobile EU citizens has not been strong enough and lacked resources: hence, it is an issue that must really be addressed into the European agenda.

**Clemens Hauser** ([Freiburger Wahlkreis 100%](#)) explained how it is possible to advance democracy through **symbolic elections**. It is an important instrument to mobilise all residential people, even - and especially - without the right to vote. This is useful to then show politicians how many people, if they could, would have voted for them; in this way, **disenfranchised citizens** are able to **participate symbolically**: it gives - or should give - a boost to politicians, who seeing such support should feel obliged to do something for these people who "voted" for them.

### Answer from MEP Devesa

MEP Devesa then took the floor to mention the possibility for the creation of a **Roadmap on towards Universal Suffrage**: the aim would be to **improve the voting rights** and capabilities of European citizens across borders, including at **regional and national level**; this is certainly more difficult, but he emphasised the need to consider it sooner or later. Furthermore, he mentioned how residents from third countries should also at least be involved in local elections. He also brought to light the fact that the issue of voting rights has an impact on

several dimensions; obviously, Member States cannot be “forced”, as this is not an exclusive competence of the EU, but an important move could be for **Parliament** to affirm its **support** for this cause, to at least open a debate. However, this seems difficult to implement for the 2024 elections; in particular, it is an **institutional difficulty**: unanimity must be reached in the Council, and then the national governments must ratify. To achieve the goal by the 2024 elections, the Venice Commission should be fulfilled by the end of the Czech Presidency (December 2022) and then obtain government ratification in early 2023.

In this case, a **fast-track negotiation** was preferred: the focus was on the **joint constituency** and the **gender dimension**; everything else was set aside. However, should the negotiation fail by January, everything would be put back on the table and the whole package would be negotiated in view of the **2029 elections**, having more time and, thus, scope for action.

A **pilot project** could also be launched, in case the agreement is not reached in time. If the Council grants it, an institutional project could be envisaged and then be taken over by civil society - or be worked on in parallel with the institutions.

## Last reflections

**Suzana Carp** then emphasised again ECIT’s support for a **symbolic election** for the **transnational list**, to show how some MEPs are already going in that direction: this would become an element of strategy for those who are in favour of them. Moreover, this would create a kind of expectation and pressure towards the institutions to have this achieved by 2024.

Finally, the long and detailed meeting was closed by the last but still relevant and important remarks of **MEP Devesa**. He suggested having a **launch event** for this **symbolic election**: it would be preceded by a **press conference** to make the election better known, raise awareness and encourage participation. Finally, the topic of **citizens' education** was explored: among the proposals that emerged at the conference was one for a minimum standard regarding the EU. As education is a supporting competence (Art.6 TFEU), the Union cannot demand harmonisation of laws from the member states; in this sense, what has been proposed by Devesa is that the Commission send a recommendation on the subject: develop a non-compulsory module of **demonstrative European citizen education**. However, the Commission appears to be very much against - even if in this case being developed within the framework of supporting competences, it would not conflict with subsidiarity. In this case, ECIT’s proposal for an ECI on civic education might appear helpful. Otherwise, another proposal brought forward is to include a teaching module on European citizenship - more specifically on **Common European History** - as **compulsory** for all those participating in **Erasmus and European Solidarity Corps programmes**. In this case, therefore, one could try to make the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) and Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) coordinate their work together.

## Conclusion

The discussion, scheduled for only one hour but lasting two, was fruitful, with exchanges of ideas and proposals that will be worked on immediately. Sincere thanks go to **MEPs Castaldo and Devesa** who took part in the conversation, adding proposals and points of view; to the civil society organisations - **Freiburger Wahlkreis 100%**, **European Alternatives**, **Europeans Throughout the World** - who enriched the conversation with important insights; last but not least, to **MEP Yana Toom (Renew Europe) and her office** for their constant help, even from afar, in organising the meeting in the European Parliament.

All the topics touched upon are the focus of the **Annual Conference** that **ECIT** has been organising for years now and which in 2022 will see its seventh edition on **29 November**. It will take place at the **Press Club** in **Brussels**, throughout the whole day; it will feature interventions from **civil society**, **academia**, and **institutional representatives** who will dialogue with **citizens** to develop ideas and proposals on the above-mentioned topics. Those interested in participating (in person or online) can **register by filling out this [form](#)**.

For any advice, questions or proposals on the topics touched upon during the meeting or on our activities, please contact us at the address: [info@ecit-foundation.eu](mailto:info@ecit-foundation.eu)