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The European Citizens' Initiative is set to bring a critical change in the way citizens engage with the European Union – the Commissioner responsible, **Maroš Šefčovič**, details the expected impact

ECI – a first for participatory democracy

ON 1 April 2012, a new phase of European democracy began with the official launch of the European Citizens' Initiative. Thanks to the ECI, for the first time, the 500 million citizens of Europe have the opportunity to directly influence European policy-making and put the issues that matter to them on the legislative agenda. The ECI is an important step towards greater citizen participation in the EU project, and a real opportunity to create pan-European debates about the subjects that matter.

Let me start with a brief reminder of what the ECI is. One of the innovations of the Lisbon Treaty, in a nutshell the European Citizens' Initiative, allows citizens to propose an initiative to the European Commission if they gather at least one million signatures of support from across the EU.

There are, of course, a few rules and regulations to be followed – initiatives must be proposed by a committee composed of at least seven EU citizens old enough to vote in European Parliament elections and living in at least seven different member states, for example, and must cover areas where the European Commission has the right to submit legislative proposals. There are certain thresholds that need to be reached in terms of the number of signatures by country as well, but if all the various criteria are met, each and every ECI has the potential to finally make it onto the EU statute book – no mean achievement given the complexity of European decision-making.

Scale

Of course, citizens' initiatives are not new – several member states and regions have a long and successful history of citizen-led democracy. But what is so different about the ECI is the potential scale and reach of

successful initiatives – it is not just the million or so signatories who stand to benefit, but the 500 million EU citizens in 27 member states. As a result, it's not surprising that there has been a lot of interest in the ECI and, as expected, several organisers were ready to submit their proposals on the very first day.

In fact, so far we have received 14 proposals, including eight on 1 April, and six have already been registered on the official ECI website. This means the Commission considers that the proposed initiatives fall within the various rules for eligibility as defined in the citizens' initiative regulation and that they can now begin the process of collecting their million signatures. Given that initiatives can be in any policy area where the Commission has the right of legislative initiative, it is not surprising that the subject matters of the various ECIs are diverse. The very first to be registered concerns increased mobility for citizens within the EU, while others cover animal welfare, the right to vote, sustainable water use and mobile telephone roaming charges.

A few have also been rejected because they do not meet the criteria to be registered, for example, a proposal calling for an EU ban on nuclear power which was rejected because the

Commission has no right to propose legislation that would be in contradiction with the objectives of a treaty, namely the Euratom treaty.

The process in each case is the same, however: once a proposal is received it is sent to the relevant services within the Commission to decide – on a purely legal and not political basis – whether it is eligible or not. For some, this is easy – there is a considerable body of EU legislation on mobility, for example, which shows clearly that the Commission has the right to act in this field. Since some initiatives also combine areas covered by different Commission services, it can sometimes be more complicated, but as long as the core demand in the initiative is within the rules, we are usually able to register it. So far, we've averaged about six weeks between receiving a proposal and agreeing on its eligibility (well within the two-month limit set out in the regulations).

Enthusiasm

I think it's important to recognise that there have been teething problems, however. The model software that the Commission's IT services have produced to help proposers collect signatures online has not worked as well as we might have expected – though we are working hard on improvements (and there is no obligation on the part of proposers to use it, or indeed to collect signatures online at all). Some member states have also been slow to put the necessary structures in place to authenticate the signatures. Neither issue has dampened the enthusiasm of potential organisers, however, and we continue to receive a steady trickle of proposals.

So far, I'm happy to say, my prediction that the ECI would not, as many critics suggested, be hijacked by interest groups and lobbyists has been proved correct. Each citizen committee behind an initiative has to declare its interests and financial backers, and while it is perfectly acceptable for companies or organisations to support initiatives, they cannot launch them. Thus, while one major ice cream manufacturer and two NGOs are happy to lend support to the initiative on better welfare for cows, it is not their initiative. According to media reports, some lobbyists in Brussels have suggested that their clients use the ECI to try to influence the Commission, but this is misleading – they can support initiatives, but any proposal that clearly was not to the wider benefit of EU citizens as a

whole would have no chance of leading to a Commission proposal. The checks and balances we have put in place make it impossible for the system to be abused in this way.

Awareness

I would suggest that the biggest issue we face at the moment is in fact public awareness of the ECI – too few people at present even know of the existence of the ECI, not to mention what they can actually achieve with it. There was, as expected, a flurry of activity around 1 April, and again in mid-May when the first initiatives were approved, and I'm sure we'll have more still when the first initiatives reach the one million signature mark. But there is much that we can do – at European, national, regional and local level – to promote ECIs more effectively, and I hope that we will see more people take up this opportunity to set the legislative agenda in the years to come.

'Europe' is often accused of being remote and disconnected from the reality of people's lives, and the ECI will, I hope, go some way towards dispelling this myth. For the European public, the proof of whether the ECI works or not will come when the Commission decides (or not) to make a legislative proposal on the basis of an ECI. We hope that there will be some ideas put forward that can be turned into real legislation. But there is no guarantee that this will happen for any number of reasons. Some initiatives may fail to collect enough signatures in time, others may prove too limited. And, of course, because it is ultimately the European Parliament and Council of the EU who adopt the legislation, amending it where they see necessary, there is never any guarantee that what the Commission actually proposes is exactly what becomes law.

Truly pan-European

But regardless of whether an ECI is ultimately successful and leads to a Commission proposal, each and every ECI will, I believe, contribute profoundly to the increasing 'Europeanisation' of national discussion. ECIs by their very nature concern issues of importance to people across the EU, and will bring together people from all walks of life and from all four corners of Europe around that shared interest or concern. It will be a first opportunity for a truly pan-European debate between citizens, about the things that matter to them.

It's important that we build on that discussion, that we recognise that any issue that manages to federate support from a million people or more is worthy of consideration and reflects genuine concerns of citizens. I'm convinced that ECIs will help us to legislate better, to see not only what issues are of importance but also how they affect citizens' everyday lives – and thus how we can improve them more effectively on the ground. If we can achieve that, then we can truly say that our experiment in citizen-led democracy has been a success.

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