

A MOMENT FOR THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS' INITIATIVE

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For much of its existence, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) has been described as a promising but underused instrument, a "hidden gem" of European democracy. Introduced in 2012 to give citizens a direct agenda-setting role at European Union (EU) level, it often struggled with visibility, accessibility, and political impact. That moment appears to be changing.

In recent months, a series of high-profile campaigns have brought the ECI into the global spotlight. The 'My Voice, My Choice' initiative on abortion access mobilised millions of Europeans and triggered a landmark response from the European Commission. The 'Ban Conversion Practices' initiative has gained momentum following a successful hearing in the European Parliament, while the 'Stop Killing Games' campaign demonstrated how online communities can mobilise rapidly across borders to defend consumer rights. The 'Justice for Palestine' initiative became the fastest-growing ECIs to date, reaching one million signatures in just three months.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the ECI is no longer a niche participatory tool. It is becoming visible and political and reflecting a broader shift in how citizens engage with European democracy. At the heart of this shift is the emergence of a new generation of ECI campaigns that are more strategic, more connected, and more effective than their predecessors. Several trends stand out.

Cross-border mobilisation in practice

While the ECI was always designed as a transnational instrument, recent campaigns have begun to fully realise this potential. Organisers are building genuine pan-European coalitions, coordinating messaging across countries, and engaging supporters beyond national contexts.

This reflects a deeper transformation that citizens are increasingly mobilising around shared European issues, rather than treating EU politics as distant or secondary.

Issue-based, values-driven activism

Recent ECIs are centred on highly salient and tangible issues such as abortion rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and consumer protection. These are not abstract policy debates, but questions that directly affect citizens' lives. As a result, campaigns resonate more strongly with the public, attract media attention, and generate broader political engagement. The ECI has become a vehicle for value-driven political mobilisation.

Digital-first campaigning and community-building

A defining feature of this new wave of ECIs is the use of digital tools and platforms to mobilise supporters. Campaigns are increasingly leveraging social media storytelling, online communities, content creator strategies, and decentralised organising methods.

The 'Stop Killing Games' initiative, for example, demonstrated how platforms such as Reddit and Discord can be used to mobilise over one million supporters around a specific issue. Similarly, 'My Voice, My Choice' employed a disciplined and transparent communication strategy that engaged

supporters throughout the campaign, while the 'Ban Conversion Practices' initiative demonstrated how content creators and influencer networks can be strategically mobilised to translate complex rights-based issues into accessible, shareable narratives. These approaches mark a shift from traditional advocacy towards more dynamic, participatory forms of campaigning.

The professionalisation of ECI campaigns

ECI organisers are increasingly operating with the mindset and tools of political strategists and even marketing minds. This includes strategic planning, clear messaging, branding, coalition-building, and data-driven outreach. This professionalisation has significantly improved the quality and effectiveness of campaigns, allowing them to compete for attention in a crowded political landscape. It also signals that the ECI is no longer used only by niche advocacy groups, but by actors capable of shaping public debate at European level.

A breakthrough moment with 'My Voice, My Choice'

Among recent campaigns, the My Voice, My Choice initiative stands out as a turning point for the ECI. By mobilising citizens across Europe around the issue of abortion access, the campaign succeeded in placing a politically sensitive and highly contested topic on the EU agenda. The European Commission's response, which was to recognise abortion care as healthcare and therefore allow existing EU funds to support access, marks a significant step in the evolution of the instrument.

Beyond the specifics of the policy outcome, the campaign demonstrated the full potential of the ECI to shape political discourse, attract

international attention, and influence institutional priorities. It showed that citizen mobilisation at European level can be both visible and consequential.

What this means for European democracy

The recent evolution of the ECI offers important insights into the future of participatory democracy in the EU.

First, the ECI can be understood as a "democratic thermometer", measuring the issues that resonate most strongly with citizens across the Union. The growing number of successful initiatives suggests that citizens are increasingly willing to engage with EU-level decision-making.

Second, the ECI is fostering transnational civic space. By encouraging cooperation across borders, it strengthens European civil society, supports coalition-building, and contributes to a shared sense of political agency.

Third, the ECI represents the "offensive" dimension of democratic resilience. While much of the EU's democracy agenda focuses on defending institutions against external and internal threats, instruments such as the ECI actively empower citizens to shape political outcomes from the inside out.

The next phase

As the ECI gains visibility and momentum, expectations are shifting. With more than 24 million signatures collected since its introduction, the instrument has demonstrated its capacity to mobilise citizens. The challenge now lies in ensuring that this mobilisation translates into meaningful political impact.

This requires strengthening the post-signature phase of the ECI process. Clear timelines, structured dialogue with EU institutions, and

transparent follow-up mechanisms could help ensure that successful initiatives lead to tangible outcomes. Greater involvement of the European Parliament and other institutions could also reinforce the political weight of ECIs, while improved coordination with national and regional levels would allow demands to be addressed more effectively across governance layers. Importantly, these developments should build on the strengths already demonstrated by recent campaigns.

After more than a decade of gradual development, the ECI appears to be entering a new phase. A new generation of organisers is using the instrument in ways that are strategic and digitally savvy. Campaigns are becoming more visible, more professional, and more politically confident. As a result, the ECI is no longer just a niche mechanism, but an increasingly relevant part of the European democratic landscape. The next chapter of the ECI will be defined by whether European institutions are prepared to continue matching this new level of citizen engagement with equally meaningful political action.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA), of its Members, or the author's institution.

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