



Policy Proposal on

Mobilization of Citizens' Engagement

A Perspective on ECI Reform and Engagement Tactics Targeting Young Europeans

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STUDENT FORUM MAASTRICHT

Student Forum Maastricht (SFM) is an annual student conference held at the Maastricht University Campus in Brussels. The conference is organized by students from Maastricht University in cooperation with different partner organizations. The participants are under- and postgraduate students from all over Europe with diverse academic backgrounds. Based on problem statements provided by European Commission representatives, they develop policy proposals for pressing topics within the Commission. In this process the students receive input and insights from experts from NGOs, academia and the business sector relating to the topic. The 2018 edition of SFM took place from April 19th to 22nd. For more information on Student Forum Maastricht, please visit: www.student-forum.eu



Executive summary

Youth Disengagement with EU Politics is growing at an increasing rate. As citizens constitute the core of a functioning democratic system and the Youth of any society an important part to engage, it is of crucial importance for the future of the EU to reach out and engage the Youth in European politics. In order to tackle this problem, this proposal sets out two different strategies. First, current tools of citizen engagement, such as the European Citizen Initiative (ECI) need to be reformed. We have identified the following areas to which attention ought to be paid: (a) the consideration and proceedings for successful ECIs; (b) the accessibility of the ECI as a tool; (c) the reconsideration of the restrictive time-frame; (d) the assistance provided by the Commission for ECI organizers. Second, and in order for these tools to be used, the Youth needs to be mobilized to be interested and engage in EU Politics. This proposal sets out that such aim can be achieved by a) initiating a Website Design Competition to improve the ECI Website and create awareness; b) Social Media Campaign and the creation of a Database Website; and c) Means of Direct Engagement such as a European Summer School or the EU-matter Network.



Introduction

As part of Student Forum Maastricht 2019, the working group 'Our EU: The Mobilization of Citizens' Engagement' analyzed the malaise of low civic engagement in EU politics. In order to limit the scope of the topic the policy proposal will focus on The European Youth.

Currently, general political apathy and citizen disengagement is growing. Evidence of this can be found when looking at the turnout in the European elections in 1979 was of 61.99% (European Parliament, 2014). Since then, a steady decline has characterized the voting turnout over the decades with only 49.51% in 1999 and 42.61% in the most recent one in 2014. While low voting turnout might not be in direct relation to general political disengagement of youth in EU politics, it definitely stands analogous to a broader contemporary issue of an absence of committed and politically active European citizens, including the youth (age 16-26). This is problematic given that younger generations are particularly important to a vivid democratic system of engaged and enthusiastic participating citizens.

The UN 2016 Report on Global Youth Civic Engagement outlines the problem in following way:

"In part due the complexities involved in democracy and institution building, there is often no mechanism for the meaningful inclusion of young people in the new and emerging political landscape. As such youth are often still not fully involved, represented or regularly consulted." (UN, 2016)

Hence, it is of utmost importance that the youth is integrated and young political participation acknowledged as well as incorporated in the European political landscape. In this way, we have identified the importance of tools and means through which direct and indirect political participation is facilitated in order to encourage participation and demonstrate that voices need to be heard in a vital democratic system.

In the EU, one such tool that allows direct participatory engagement of the population is the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). The ECI is a tool meant to increase direct democracy by enabling citizens' participation in the EU legislative process. It was introduced as part of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2012 in Art 11 (4) TEU and provides citizens with the opportunity to invite the Commission to submit a legal act of the Union for the purpose of implementing the Treaties. A citizens' committee must acquire the support of



a million EU citizens on a specific issue in order to submit a successful initiative. This issue will then receive a public hearing in the European Parliament and receive a formal response from the Commission.

While it promises to be a viable mean for political engagement, there are two main existing problems with it that build the cornerstones to our proposal. Firstly, the existence of it is widely unknown. In other words, the tool for political engagement is there but the knowledge and enthusiasm to make use of it is not. Secondly, there are crucial flaws in its system that prevent and deter a popular usage. The aim of this proposal is thus twofold:

1. How can general youth engagement in EU politics be increased and awareness about participatory tools such as the ECI promoted/augmented?
2. How can the inherent flaws in the ECI system be improved in order to increase its popularity and usage?

In order to tackle this issue, the following is proposed:

1. Having identified crucial flaws in the current set-up and structure of the ECI, we suggest a set of points for optimization with the goal in mind to:
 - a. Reduce its complexity and make it more user-friendly in order to encourage more usage
 - b. Increase awareness about its existence among the European youth
2. Upon the belief that the issue of low civic engagement among young European citizens stems from the simple fact of a lack of knowledge, alternative strategies and ideas on how to increase and foster the means and tools for European political engagement are suggested.

The ECI and its Flaws

Since the launch of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) in 2012, 80 different citizens' initiatives have been submitted by citizens' committees on a host of issues. Although these citizens' initiatives have collectively gathered the support of over 9 million EU citizens (ECI Campaign, 2019), only 4 campaigns have received the minimum amount of signatures needed in order to be forwarded to the European Commission and no legislation has been proposed as a result of any initiative. The relation of the small amount



of citizens' initiatives that have been started since 2012 and their low success rate reflect some of the difficulties citizens face when attempting to engage with the ECI or similar tools of participatory democracy. These difficulties include the demanding 12 month time-frame allocated to citizens' committees to collect signatures, the fragmented nature of existing support mechanisms for citizens' committees, and the lack of an efficient user-friendly system in order to launch initiatives.

Of the few citizens' initiatives that have succeeded in collecting large amounts of signatories, Right2Water (Right2Water, 2019) was submitted by the European Federation of Public Service, a prominent collection of trade unions, and another was launched by Slow Food Europe (End the Cage Age, 2019), an NGO with a presence in over 160 different countries. This underlines the inherent difficulty of launching successful initiatives for citizens and collecting the statements of support they require if they are not affiliated with civil society organizations or trade unions.

The ECI publishes basic information on its website (ECI, 2019) regarding every initiative submitted by citizens' committees for consideration, but the lack of specific information made public relating to each initiative submitted undermines the ECI's transparency and accessibility. Although the ECI website lists all initiatives that have had their requests refused for registration, the rejection of all 22 initiatives so far are justified with the exact same wording:

The proposed citizens' initiative falls manifestly outside the framework of the Commission's powers to submit a proposal for a legal act of the Union for the purpose of implementing the Treaties. (ECI, 2019)

Every rejected initiative receives a Commission's reply stating the reasons for refusal of registration, but as this is only provided in the original language of submission by the citizens' committee and the reasons why are not summarized on the website, it is difficult for citizens to swiftly gain information, if at all, as to why initiatives have been rejected. Furthermore, the lack of an obligation on citizens' committees to disclose their total number of signatories damages the ECI's transparency and the potential for research to evaluate its success as a tool for engaging citizens with participatory democracy. As it stands, the only figures available regarding unsuccessful citizens' initiatives' statements of support are those that have been disclosed voluntarily by 18 of the 44 closed citizens' initiatives since 2012 (The ECI Campaign, 2019). Monaghan (2012, p292) describes how the ultimate success of the ECI and its ability to empower citizens ultimately depends on

'the ways in which societal actors use the initiative', but the lack of transparency regarding signatures, the limited time frame that citizens' committees have at their disposal and the inaccessible justifications of the Commission behind rejecting initiatives restrict citizens' ability to utilize the ECI, which ultimately limits its potential as an instrument of citizen mobilization.

The Commission has expressed its wish to 'implement real, meaningful participatory democracy, providing citizens with the possibility to become protagonists of political action within the Union' (Van den Brande, 2017) and considers improving the ECI a potential means of doing so. This is exemplified, for instance, in the issuing of the Regulation on the European Citizens Initiative on March 27 2019 (hereafter referred to as the Regulation) which repealed the Regulation 211/2011 and introduced numerous improvements to the ECI. The presence of civil society organizations such as NGOs in successful citizens' initiatives reflects some of the early fears surrounding discussions of the ECI prior to its adoption in 2012. According to Monaghan (2012, p291-294) various interests and citizens argued that the instrument could disproportionately advantage civil society organizations over citizens and enhance the role of elite citizens. Although Van den Brande's report (2017) issued by the European Commission recognizes that in order to mobilize citizens, 'citizens need to feel that they are the protagonists of policymaking and not just the passive recipients', more could still be done to make the ECI easier to use and a more accessible tool for citizens looking forward to influencing European policy making.

The EU has taken certain steps to improve the accessibility and efficiency of the ECI, including the European Citizens' Initiative Forum (2019), which was developed specifically to assist citizens launching or considering a citizens' initiative campaign. The ECI Forum provides a platform for citizens to share their ideas, network with other citizens, exchange best practices and seek legal advice on their initiatives. Unfortunately, the forum platform is not clearly indicated or promoted on the ECI website and upon registering on the ECI Forum, the Authors found that only 449 citizens had registered to use the platform. This reflects a wider lack of awareness surrounding the ECI and the potential for the benefits of deeper integration between the ECI Forum and the ECI website. Van den Brande (2017) has acknowledged the potential of new instruments such as the ECI to enhance participatory democracy and how 'the Union's institutions appear



to be slow in fully embracing these opportunities', but more concrete action could be taken to improve the instrument.

The low amount of citizens' initiatives launched since 2012 and the insufficient signatures of those launched reflect the broader issue of the need for a more user-friendly interface for ECI. From the very beginning of debates relating to the ECI in the European Parliament, the Committee on Petitions (European Parliament, 2009) called for the ECI to be 'clear, simple and user-friendly' in order to succeed. The present lack of integration of existing support resources relating to the ECI, the lack of transparency surrounding citizens' initiatives submitted and the fact that no legislative proposal has been proposed by the Commission in response to a citizens' initiative demonstrate some of the current issues with the ECI.

Suggested Administrative Improvements for the ECI

In consideration of the aforementioned issues that arise from the very architecture of the ECI, and in light of the 2019 ECI Regulation which will gain legal effect as of January 1 2020, the authors recognize that in order for the ECI to become a truly accessible tool for the political participation of citizens within the context of EU politics, some steps ought to be taken by the European Commission.

We have identified the following areas to which attention ought to be paid: (a) the consideration and proceedings for successful ECIs; (b) the accessibility of the ECI as a tool; (c) the reconsideration of the restrictive time-frame; (d) the assistance provided by the Commission for ECI organizers.

Consideration and Proceedings for Successful ECIs

Experience with past ECI attempts shows that although some initiatives have successfully collected the requisite 1 million signatures as outlined in Art 11(4) TEU - examples are the ECIs: Righ2Water, One of Us, or Stop Vivisection - a concrete implementation has not yet been reached, perhaps with the exception of the evaluation of Directive 98/83/EC in response to the Right2Water ECI. In order to appreciate the effort invested by the citizens and to enhance the discussion around the ECI, it is recommended that additional and



extended measures are enforced in response to initiatives that have fulfilled the required conditions but have not been implemented.

The authors recommend that, the European Commission shall ensure that a meeting of 30 minutes with the initiators and the related Commissioner or cabinet representative shall take place prior to the public hearing as required by Art 14 (2) of the Regulation. In the meeting the rationale of the idea can be discussed and the Commission shall present its reasoning in the consideration of the initiative, regardless of its decision to take action. Moreover, a public hearing inside the Commission between supporters and interested takes place in which the audience can be informed about the outcome of the Commission's decision and the initiative's aim.

When a successful initiative does not result in the change of legislation or the adoption of a legal act, the Commission should receive a second chance to consider to implement the initiative. Hence, if a proposal was declined while having reached the requisite amount of signatures, it would be automatically included as an issue to consider in the Annual Work Program of the following year. As a result, changed circumstances and a differing political climate can be more easily taken into account.

The authors recommend that every citizens' committee be required to reveal the number and origin of statements of support at the time of submission of their initiative following their 12 month collection period. This is currently required of all successful initiatives that meet the one million signature requirement, but unsuccessful initiatives are not required to disclose such information and this undermines the ECI's transparency. Requiring all citizens' initiatives after twelve months to disclose how many statements of support they received and from which Member States they originated would not infringe on citizens' personal data rights and would facilitate research into the ECI as a successful tool in engaging citizens with participatory democracy.

Whereas the European Parliament, legitimized through its role as the representative body of the European demos, is an intrinsic part of the legislative process, it is recommended that the parliament be included in a debate around the proposed idea of each respective ECI. Thus, a successful non-implemented initiative should be included in the Agenda of the respective Committee of the Parliament working on related issues. The Parliamentarians are therefore able to discuss the topic and use their expertise to modify or continue work on the proposal in their channels. If a majority of members of the European Parliament reach a consensus, they may issue a resolution on the issue.



The Accessibility of the ECI as a Tool

The Commission should ensure accessibility of the registration process of an ECI, in terms of, *inter alia*, administrative complexity, while maintaining the legal and technical accountability of the process. So far, the official registration of an ECI as described by the Commission in its dedicated website, appears as not user-friendly in terms of directions or guidance through the navigation of the legal procedures that ought to be followed for the registration of the ECI.

In the case that a citizens' initiative is deemed inadmissible by the European Commission and it is refused request for registration, the Authors recommend that the European Commission provide a brief summary in the 'Reason for Refusal' section on the ECI website. Furthermore, the Commission ought to publish their official reply stating the reasons for refusal of each citizens' initiative not only in the official language in which it was submitted, but also in at least one of the procedural languages of the European Commission. This measure would ensure greater transparency on rejected requests for initiatives for all citizens and would improve the tool's accessibility for all EU citizens.

In order to ensure coherence in the signature collection process, it is essential for the officials to propose equal requirements for the ECI organizers in regard of the required data for the signatories. As it was to be in accordance with the previous Regulation N211/2011 of the European Commission, the requirements for the ECI initializing committee differed largely based upon country of origin and/or identity documents. Of crucial value here is to make notice of uniform legal requirements to the national data and the very process of ECI registering, *i.e.* uniform identity document, up-to-date means of security measures, etc. The Commission ought to take steps in order to remedy the complexity of the administrative measures that are required for the successful registration of an ECI and to simplify the process for the signatories of the EU member states as they are currently rather restrictive. Improving the general stance behind the process will essentially affect the number of those who are likely to engage in the EU 'direct democracy' tools.

Furthermore, the European Commission has provided by far the opportunity for citizens to discuss, cross-check and consult each other, however, it brings about hindrance for optimization of launching an ECI since the existing ECI Forum is presently available in a separate website that is difficult to locate. This forum, albeit crucial in the sharing and

disseminating of relevant information on legal and technical procedures, ought to be better integrated in the online platform of the European Commission and the page of the ECI itself.

The point here is that the non-official European Commission resources, such as the forum above mentioned, are more susceptible of being used by the ordinary citizens interested in the 'deliberative democracy' tools. The peculiarity of the online collection system undoubtedly stands as the fundamental obstacle to implementing 'user-friendly' policies into the ECI system. The official register website should be redesigned to accumulate information, legal advice, and communication channels with the authorities within one online page to speed up the ECI registration and facilitate citizens' engagement with the ECI process. Therefore, it is recommended that a combination of the official ECI application website and existing unofficial sources on the ECI is carried through.

It is vividly seen that the current ECI collection system needs maintaining the transparency of collecting the signatures. In terms of introducing 'user-friendliness', the suggested reforms here are primarily installing a real-time countdown of signatures and clock showing the time left till the deadline expires.

The Reconsideration of the Restrictive Time Frame

Pursuant to Art 8(1) of the EU Regulation on the ECI issued by the European Parliament and the European Council in March 2019, all signatures and/or support statements ought to be collected within a period of 12 months, commencing from a date chosen by the ECI organizers. An analysis of the 18 closed citizens' initiatives out of 44 that have publicly disclosed the amount of support statements received during their 12 month collection of statements reveals that the average amount of signatories gained by an initiative is approximately 195.000 (ECI Campaign, 2019), which is significantly lower than the one million signature mark required for a successful initiative. Additionally, a number of initiatives have been withdrawn prior to the 12 month limit. In consideration of the high amount signatures that ought to be collected in order for an ECI to be considered by the Commission, and in light of the burdensome administrative complexity of the ECI process, it is hereby recommended that the collection period is extended from 12 months to 24 months. The extended collection period shall allow for the organization to construct a viable plan of action and take the necessary steps for the collection of the requisite signatures.



The Assistance Provided by the Commission for ECI Organizers

In recognition of the complexity of the ECI process, and to further strengthen the accessibility of the tool, we recommend to extend the support and involvement of the European Commission in the following way:

We recommend that a direct-assistance support by members or representatives of the European Commission is implemented for organizing groups of ECIs. To reach that goal, it is strongly recommended to implement online chats for those who are willing to join the network of supporters. People could get directly in touch with experts that do not impose undue burden on the organizers (e.g. travel, time, costs) for getting ideas and feedback about their ECI. The authorities ought to utilize such online networks for mutual contact and consultations of the ongoing signatures, legal procedures and liability enquiries. This could be implemented in connection to the suggestions about centralizing all internet-websites into one. Additionally, to get a reputable feedback and more in-depth information, participants should be furthermore offered the opportunity to also meet personally with the mentioned representatives.

EU matter - Raising awareness of the ECI and Political Participation

Raising awareness of tools already available for citizen engagement is essential for the mobilization of political participation. As established in article 18(1) of the Regulation, the EU Commission endeavors to spread more information about the ECI, therefore the tools outlined below are suggestions on how to raise awareness. The instruments are targeted at those above voting age, predominantly a younger generation. The suggestions are focused on being creative, innovative and to have the maximum reach with the youth as a target group. Furthermore, these have been designed as a template with the aim of being replicated across EU member states.

Website Design Competition

As discussed in the section above, it is clear that the ECI needs to become more user-friendly, so as not to alienate those who want to be more politically engaged but deem the means of engagement difficult to use.

As described in the previous section, the website is one of the several aspects of the ECI that is not user-friendly. The main aim of the website redesign competition is that it is supposed to raise awareness of ECI by engaging with the youth in a creative way that

facilitates their active participation. Then, once the submissions are in these will be tested by the public, so the public will be able to vote for the best submission.

The competition element will mobilize the target group to create a new product that is both user-friendly and a method to increase awareness of the ECI, therefore, the youth will feel empowered to adopt the ECI tool and start their own initiatives.

Campaign

Campaigns are often perceived as one of the main way of interaction with the public in order to organize, to mobilize and involve people in the discussion, to educate the public and to change behaviors. It is also the tool that seem to be used in the ECI process as to attract a direct political participation in the form of the signature gathering, therefore can be enhanced upon through the strategy change oriented on the youth population.

Campaign Strategy

The marketing campaign for raising awareness of the participatory actions is oriented on the virtual means of the communication due to the characteristics of the youth identity creation. In order to raise the efficiency and the quality of the services provided, the recommendation includes European Commission-based agency working on an evidence-based research of the marketing strategy and campaign. The social networking platforms might be a useful tool to create the environment for the establishing of the long lasting awareness and trust-based relationship between citizenry and the authority, as virtual platform has proven to be a useful tool for the organization and management of the participatory actions already existing. In particular, it was shown by 'Social Media Use and Participation: A Meta-analysis of Current Research' of 2015 conducted by Information, Communication and Society Journal which has established a clear significant (82%) relationship between engagement or participation and social networking sites use for this purpose (Boulianne, 2015). This analysis is specifically related to the target audience in question, as it was conducted by taking a random sample of the youth population. Nevertheless, acknowledging the fact of the disparities between the representatives of the target group on national, regional and local levels, it is an objective for the decision to play a role of the decreasing the gap between the youth of the various Member States. Leaving a decision on the implementation of the improvements to the current actions taken to the Commission, the recommended marketing campaign initiative can take a form of a triad comprised of:



Social Media Campaign Strategy

In the EU, around 88% of the young people aged 16 to 24 years have participated in social networks ("Are you using social networks?", 2019). Taking into account the information presented in the previous section and the fact that the current way of the establishing of media coverage and updates from the institutional representatives themselves to facilitate citizens' engagement has had limited success. The actions mentioned have been taken throughout platforms (for instance: Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and Twitter), which are the useful platforms for the participatory action, however the limited success might be caused by the necessity of the strategy redesign. In order to connect with a broader public it might be beneficial to re-consider the existing marketing strategy for the youth involvement, with the perspective of the consumer-centricity (a citizen as a consumer) in mind. If applied flexibly and based on the data available for the creation of the identity of the young European citizen, this perspective can build social incentives for the citizen to participate and to build upon the role which the institutions prescribe to them.

Database Website

Creation of a virtual database throughout various networking platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube and similar) comprised of the processes happening at the European level and participatory action tools available can be able to produce a positive result, if oriented at the target group in question. The results can be enhanced through including ongoing project of an extensive social media campaign for usage of the established information database. The Database in particular could attract young citizens with different incentives and levels of engagement through including means of contact with the special agencies or specialists for a more extensive look at the operational procedure of political participation means in general and ECI in particular, as well as through increasing the quality of the materials themselves.

Commercial Campaign Tools

Moreover, as established, in order to reach the youth across all cultural and social background, the commercial and political marketing tools available to the public (for example outdoors advertising, educational events and similar) might contribute not only to the participatory action initiatives within the younger generations. Once again, the

attention is brought to the consumer-centricity perspective, i.e. the citizen' role in the existing framework. The crucial factor therefore is to remind the audience of the existence of the European institutions and their role and action in each state, region and community.

Direct Engagement

European Summer School

"On my travels, I came across people who were not so different to me. I also learned to appreciate the little quirks that made them British, Italian, Spanish... I felt my mind broaden in ways I could not have imagined. I felt European."

Manfred Weber

The DiscoverEU program, launched in 2018, gives the possibility to 15,000 students to travel across the European Union by train during summer after their 18th birthday. The purpose of the initiative is to gather and reunify young people coming from different EU countries. However, apart from reinforcing the European identity among young generations, the train ticket is not an open opportunity for everyone. Even though the travel costs are covered, the other travel expenses (accommodation, food, social and cultural activities, etc.) are still under the responsibility of the participants. This means that the project has a smaller targeted audience, despite the claimed openness to each 18-year-old citizens. If the project's aim is raising awareness of the EU among all young people, it should be open to everyone, regardless of their social class. Moreover, the candidature of DiscoverEU relies on the motivation of student to participate and their personal knowledge of the EU (application quiz). In contrast, the creation of a European Summer School, based on the principles of DiscoverEU, would have the advantage to give the youth a broader chance to gain knowledge about the EU and their own identity within it.

"It is an investment in young people"

Through three European Summer Schools, located in three different EU Member States, European youth can experience five days of sessions including information about the EU institutions, decision-making simulations, an introduction to their rights to take initiative through the ECI as EU citizens, but also exploring countries and the local languages. Moreover, young people will get the chance to meet people of their age coming from the 28 different EU countries. The stay will also include social and entertainment activities to reinforce a stronger group spirit among participants. The budget should cover all expenses which enables a more diverse audience to participate in the project.

The European Summer School should be open to all potential first-time voters. Hereby, the lowest age depends on the voting age in each country and can vary between 16 (Austria and Malta) and 18 in most other Member States.

In contrast to the DiscoverEU's applications, which are based on the adolescent's own initiative to participate, the European Summer School will give out tickets based on a random drawing among all citizens within the 28 member countries within the defined age category. This enables the project to reach young people who are not yet engaged enough to take their own initiative to apply like required for the DiscoverEU project. The draw will select a higher number of participants than the accurate number of places available. A second draw will be held among those who confirmed their participation.

Setting up The EU-matter Network

With many measures to raise political participation in youth aimed at those already engaged with the EU, there is a need to expand the scope and target those who are not yet engaged. Raising awareness here is the basis on which we later on can generate political participation. This proves difficult when it comes to young people as the most obvious channel, education, is not of EU competence but of national competence.

This is why EU-Matter is built on the idea that even these two target groups interact with each other. Hereby, university students that are already engaged with the EU will be organized to give workshops in high schools where students may not have gained much knowledge about the EU. The workshops will be offered to high schools to create a mutual beneficial connection between the engaged and unengaged young citizens on a voluntary basis and therefore, without a need to intervene in the school curricula.

The workshops given in high schools should cover a basic introduction to the workings of the EU, show its relevance to the students and give them an overview of how to become an engaged citizen. It is also important to consider the divergence in local realities within Europe. Thus, there should be some flexibility for students to design their own workshops adjusted to their local reality. However, to ensure consistent quality of workshops in different regions we recommend the creation of a toolkit which provides a guideline to create workshops, a template for presentations, research material and information. Additionally, the Commission should establish a discussion forum where students engaged in the EU-matter network can exchange ideas and support each other in designing and executing the workshops.



To build a significant network of workshop groups and reach as many high schools as possible, it is recommended to build on an already established student network. Here, the International Exchange Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is an adequate starting point and could be used as a channel to institutionalize the project. The ESN is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the EU and based on the volunteer work of students.

Next to integrating international students into the local community, it also aims at 'providing an intercultural experience also to those students who cannot access a period abroad' (ESN, 2019). Furthermore, it has close contact with the youth that is experiencing Europe through their exchange. Therefore, it provides the ideal network in order not only to reach local high schools to offer workshops but also to mobilize university students who experience European values and would be interested to share information with others. Since the network is already integrated in Erasmus+ budget allocations, an increase in funds could provide an incentive for national and local committees to implement the concept of (EU Matter).

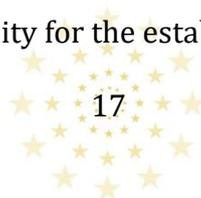
Conclusion

With the evidence discussed above, it becomes apparent that the tools that are currently available for citizen engagement need improvement. It is important to take into account that the existing strategies of the mobilization of the citizens' engagement have had a limited impact on the global trend of the disenfranchisement

The current format of the ECI is complex and inherently flawed. Political participation by citizens is facilitated with the effective tools. These are available but need to be amended to make them more accessible so that citizens of all ages and social background will be able to use these to get their voice heard. The ECI is a prominent method of political participation, and its usage complexities create a barrier for those who already feel engaged in EU politics and create an even bigger barrier for those who do not feel engaged. This proposal specifies that through the modification of the current ECI process it will become easier to use, encouraging more citizens to use it and therefore politically mobilize them.

In order to increase the political participation action efficiently, it is reasonable to address the citizen' lack of awareness of the tools of the political participation, as well as the misconception of the importance of the participation as a fundamental problem.

Such a perception gives an opportunity for the establishment of the strategy oriented on



both raising youth knowledge of the basic processes happening at the European level;
and underlying process of the usage of the particular existing tools.



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