

Allow me to briefly put the European Citizens' Initiative into context. This is the year of the citizen and all EU institutions are seeking to engage with the citizens. The Commission has launched a Citizens' dialogue where Vice President Reding and other members of the College engage in discussions with citizens all over Europe.

While we may be coming out of the crisis, there is a real need to address the legitimacy of EU actions and how the Institutions are seen outside Brussels. We have come a very long way in the last 4-5 years and we may have regained some of the trust of the markets, but we must work hard to regain the trust of the citizens. We are not always understood and many do not see us as an essential part of the solution to their day to day problems. It may be obvious to experts and leading politicians that without Europe all Member States were threatened and many would have fared much, much worse. This is not to say that we do not recognise the hardship stemming from the crisis, but only to say that without the Commission and the other EU institutions' action, it could have led to the break-up of the Union and resulted in a much deeper crisis.

It is in this difficult environment that the new Instrument has come into life. It allows citizens to set the agenda for the EU. But let's also be proud of what the EU is doing and has achieved. While there are Member States which domestically have similar instruments like the ECI, the EU and in particular the Commission has a policy of transparency and consultations, plus a structured dialogue with the citizens that is unsurpassed by any of our Member States. The EU is in some areas clearly ahead – but we are not often perceived in this way. We need to do more and do it differently, so the institutions can be given the right credit for the efforts done.

In the last few years the focus of the EU has shifted from legislative work in the classic sense to crisis management and the adoption of a framework for economic coordination. In this new framework the Commission, in particular, has been given a central role with major responsibilities. It is therefore imperative that we are seen as acting in the interest of our citizens, that we listen, not just talk and that we seek to address their most pressing concerns such as jobs, education, environment, etc.

The new ECI is an important element in these efforts. It does not change the formal roles of the institutions. The Commission still has the right of initiative and the European Parliament and the Council are our legislators who ultimately decide what becomes EU-law. It is therefore an agenda setting instrument that through its transnational character helps us move beyond the very inwards and national nature of the debates held in all Member States even when the discussion is about European affairs.

The Commission is committed to take all the ECIs that succeed very seriously and give full consideration to the issues raised and the suggestions made. I am of course not in a position today to pre-judge what the Commission will say to any ECI – that is a political decision belonging solely to the 28 members of the College under the Presidency of Jose Manuel Barroso.

Let me then turn to the situation as we see it today:

The citizens' initiative came into force on 1 April 2012. Despite a hesitant start, this new transnational tool of direct democracy is now fully up and running.

There are 17 proposed citizens' initiatives registered with the Commission, 15 of which are now collecting online. They cover a wide range of issues such as the environment, mobility, telecommunication, media, citizens' rights, animal welfare, etc. This is an encouraging number, which we expect to grow over the next weeks and months, as we continue to receive requests. I believe this demonstrates citizens' enthusiasm for and commitment to their new right.

In addition, two initiatives have announced that they have reached the required number of signatories, one million overall and the minimum thresholds in at least 7 Member States.

Even if the statements of support still need to be verified, this is a very positive and encouraging result for the future of the tool.

Of course we are still learning, and we will no doubt need to reflect on how we can continue to improve the citizens' initiative in the coming years. This is inevitable given the scale and innovative nature of the project.

The current challenge in the implementation of the citizens' initiative is the verification of statements of support by the competent national authorities. A first initiative has already started to submit their statements of support for verification. We are working closely with Member States to ensure that this step goes as smoothly as possible.