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## **The dynamic tool for direct democracy in the EU: Learning from the first two years of the European Citizens' Initiative**

**An overwhelming number of ECI campaigners and stakeholders from various institutions and organisations met at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to discuss the lessons learned so far and to draw up a list of recommendations to make this instrument for direct democracy more effective and user-friendly.**

ECI Day 2014, the third such event, was organised by the EESC in partnership with the: Committee of the Regions, European Citizens Action Service, Democracy International, Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe, The ECI Campaign, EurActiv and Euronews. Stimulating discussions, inspiring speeches and a positive atmosphere marked the conference which sought to highlight the positive aspects of the ECI in order to ensure that it continues to develop.

During his opening speech, EESC president Henri Malosse said that "the ECI should no longer be treated as a gadget of the European Commission, but as a standard tool of the new model of EU governance". As the ECIs have mobilised an overwhelming number of new independent EU activists while introducing new topics to the EU that are outside the sphere of Brussels lobbyists, we finally have the opportunity to hear Europeans' concerns in a very direct manner.

As European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly said that "the ECI is the key to empowering EU citizens to take an active part in EU decision-making". The Ombudsman pledged to be vigilant as regards the way this tool is used. More than five million Europeans have already signed up to over twenty different ECIs with very interesting debates at national and EU level - a very encouraging indication of people's interest and active involvement.

Some of the issues discussed in the three ECI laboratories organised by the EESC include ECI campaigning, legal constraints and challenges, and the impact at political and institutional level in the EU.

**The dire need to reduce signature collection barriers, harmonise the process across Member States and increase impact possibilities were among the main common issues that stakeholders and campaigners would like to see resolved.** Furthermore, extending the signature collection time was given serious thought, as was drastically improving the terms for successful ECIs to be considered in the Commission's legal process for policy decisions.

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