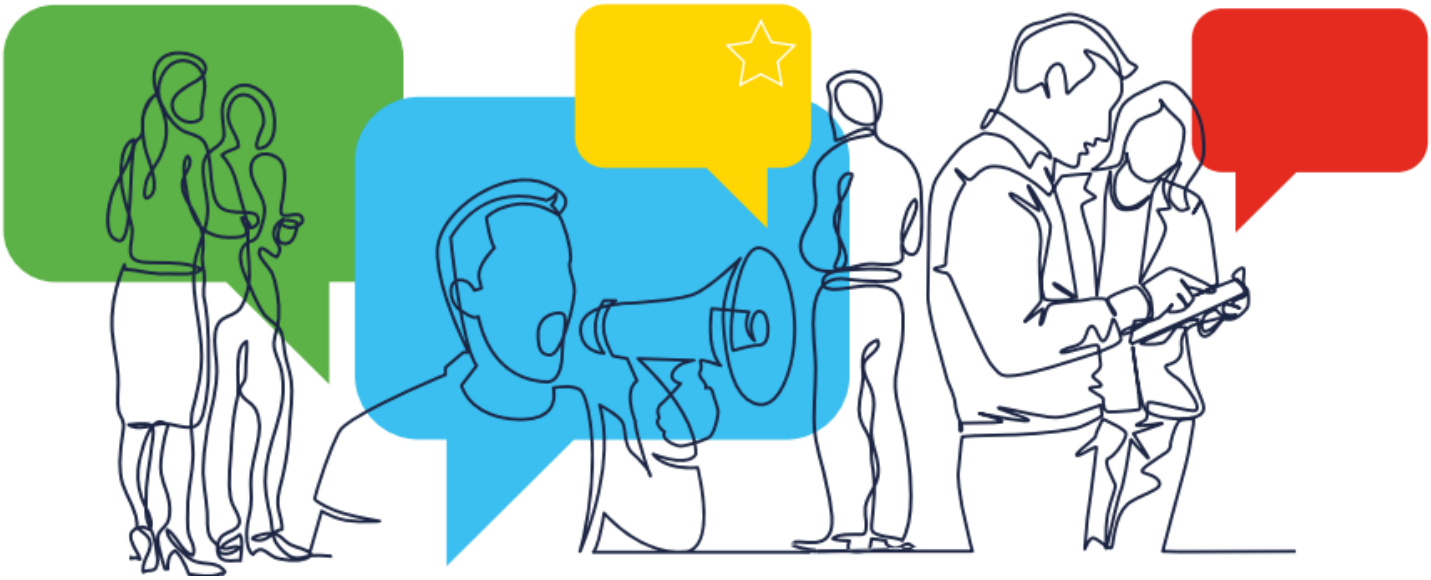
SUCCESS STORY

EUROPEAN CITIZENS´ INITIATIVE FORUM

Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of the Regional Cultures



LEARN - DISCUSS - CONNECT - SEEK ADVICE



About Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of Regional Cultures

“Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of Regional Cultures” is the eleventh European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) that successfully collected the required support. It called for EU cohesion policy to

- Ensure equality for those regions with national, ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics that are different from those of the surrounding regions;
- Ensure equal opportunity for these regions to access various EU funds;
- Guarantee the preservation of their characteristics and their proper economic development, prevent economic backlog and sustain economic, social and territorial cohesion, to sustain the EU’s development and maintain its cultural diversity.

Preparations for the initiative began as early as 2011, even before the first ECI Regulation entered into force. Over the course of the campaign, the organisers mobilised communities across Europe and ultimately gathered over one million verified signatures.

After the Commission initially refused to register this initiative in 2013, it was finally registered on **7 May 2019**, in a qualified manner. The initiative was registered with the understanding that the initiative aims at proposals from the Commission for legal acts setting out the tasks, priority objectives and the organisation of the Structural Funds and provided that the actions to be financed lead to the strengthening of the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the Union.

The initiative faced a slower start compared to other successful initiatives. To address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the campaign, the collection period was extended by one year, to 4 April 2021 [in line with Regulation (EU) 2020/1042, Decision C(2020) 9226, and Decision C(2021) 1121]. Despite these obstacles, the initiative achieved a remarkable milestone, gathering **1,269,351 verified statements of support.** Minimum thresholds were met in **eight Member States**.

The valid initiative was formally submitted to the European Commission for examination on **4 March 2025** (press announcement). The Commission responded by publishing a Communication outlining its position on **3 September 2025**.

Registration refused

26/07/2013

Initiative registered

07/05/2019

Start of signature collection

07/05/2019

Signature collection period closed

07/05/2021

Including COVID-19 extension

Initiative submitted to European Commission

04/03/2025

Initiative answered by the European Commission

03/09/2025

Hints and tips for future organisers

Here are some key tips from the organisers of “Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of Regional Cultures” to ensure that your campaign is successful:

Choose the members of your group of organisers wisely

Each member should ideally act as the lead campaigner in their country or region.

Rely on volunteers first

Engage passionate activists before hiring professional staff, filling gaps only where necessary.

Think beyond legislation

An ECI may not always lead directly to new laws, but it can raise awareness, put neglected issues on the EU agenda, and build lasting networks.

Tailor your messages

Use authentic, locally resonant content, delivered by respected voices, rather than relying on generic messaging.

Stay persistent

Success requires resilience in the face of legal, political or practical challenges. Make use of webinars and workshops organised by the ECI Forum to learn from experienced organisers and prepare for potential obstacles.

Discover more about this initiative in a blog post by one of its organisers, Attila Dabis.*(https://citizens-initiative-forum.europa.eu/citizens-experiences/blogs/ingredients-success-think-strategically-tailor-your-messages-and-be_en)*

The strategy behind this initiative

Preparation

“Since we were among the first ECI’s, there were no practical examples we could have used as a source of inspiration.” - Organiser of Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of the Regional Cultures

The organisers of the initiative started preparations in 2011, before the first ECI Regulation entered into force. During this preparation period, the organisers had clear objectives in mind and focused on carefully formulating their initiative. It was essential for the organisers that the initiative aligned with the EU Treaties as well as addressed the grievances of the communities living in “national regions”. Additionally, the organisers actively engaged with experts in EU law to ensure that the Commission could not dismiss the proposal on the grounds of lacking competence.

“We also sought to articulate our goals in a way that would resonate with communities across Europe, regardless of their relative economic development.” - Organiser of Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of the Regional Cultures

The preparation phase was not easy for “Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and the Preservation of Regional Cultures” as the first registration request was refused on 26 July 2013 by the European Commission. The refusal’s justification was that the demands of the initiative fell outside the Commission’s powers to propose EU legal acts. That Commission decision was challenged before the European Court of Justice, which upheld the partial registration of the proposal (press release). As a result, getting the initiative formally registered took several years and finally happened on 7 April 2019.

Building a network of partners and volunteers was essential to the success of this ECI. This initiative had the support of 20 organisations and 60 municipalities. The organisers also gained the support of several umbrella organisations such as the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), the European Free Alliance (EFA) and the European Language Equality Network (ELEN).

Building an online presence was also crucial for this initiative because signature collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in-person events were, therefore, impossible. The organisers built a multilingual website with background information on the initiative, the demands of the initiative and resources. The organisers also built their online presence on social media: Facebook (8,400 followers), Instagram (345 followers), X (formerly Twitter) (649).

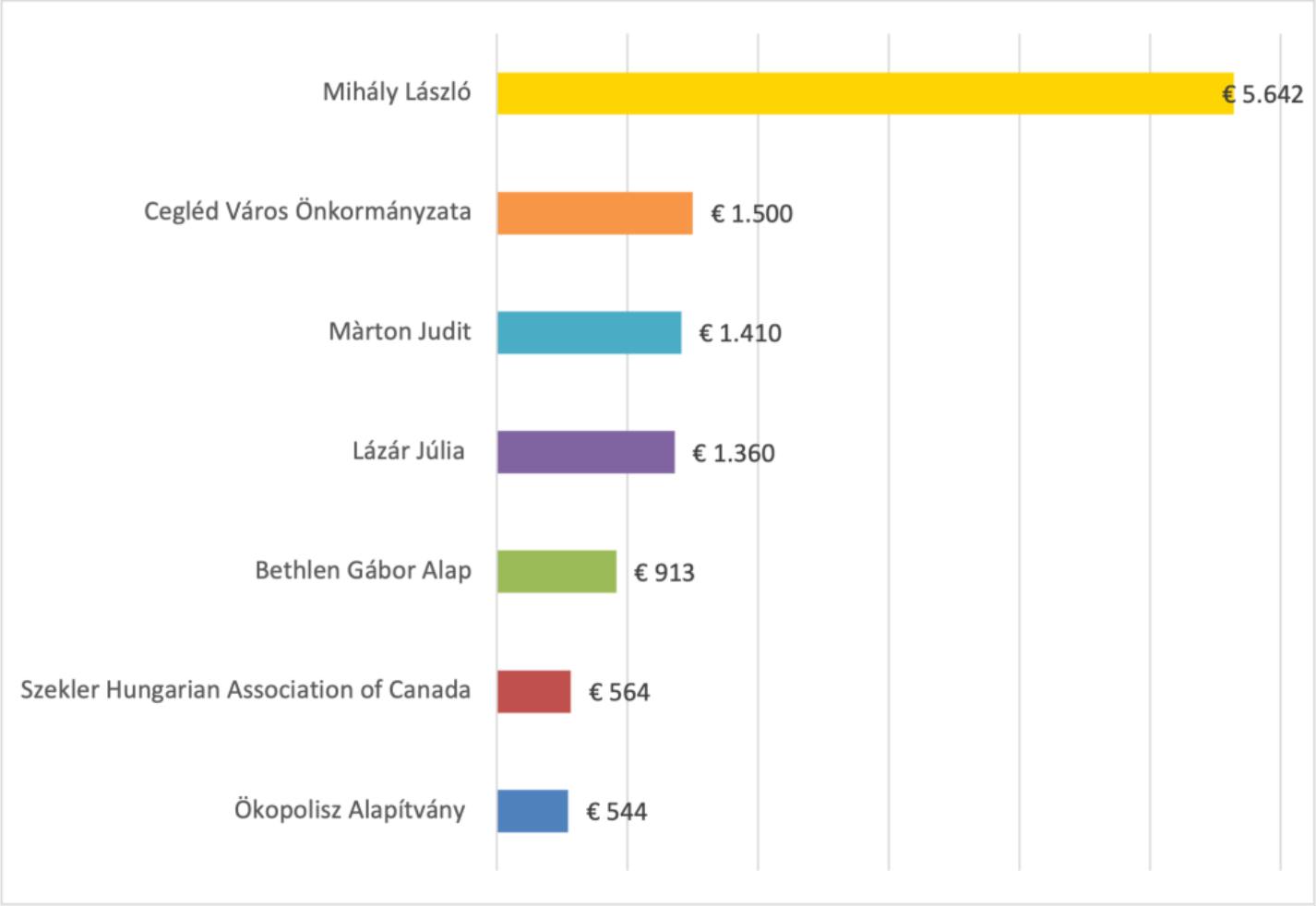
Note

For ECIs registered after 1 January 2020, organisers have up to six months from the registration date to begin collecting signatures, allowing time for preparation. Before this change, initiatives were required to start collecting signatures immediately upon registration by the European Commission.

Fundraising and Resources

Overall, the organisers of the “Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of Regional Cultures” initiative collected EUR 11,933 of support and funds.

Sources of funding (€)



Note: Further information on this initiative's support and funding is available on its dedicated Commission's webpage. Only contributions about €500 per sponsor are required to be reported.

Campaign strategy and signature collection plan

Hungary was identified by the organisers as one of the main countries to target for signature collection, reflecting its strong historical sensitivity to the situation of national minority regions. In addition, the organisers identified relevant national regions across the European Union that could help the organisers surpass the required signature threshold in their respective member states, ensuring that they reached the minimum of seven countries with qualified support. These included, for example, Catalonia and the Basque Country in Spain, Flanders in Belgium, the Gaeltacht in Ireland, and Szeklerland in Romania, among others.

"Our experience showed that when the right messages are developed with local partners and delivered by respected local figures - politicians, celebrities, influencers -social media networks can dramatically boost signature counts." - Organiser of Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of the Regional Cultures

The campaign functioned as a series of **"mini-campaigns", adapted to local contexts**. For the organisers, storytelling and interpersonal skills proved absolutely essential. Facts and figures alone were not enough to inspire people to take action. Instead, the organisers had to convey their message in a way that connected emotionally with audiences from diverse cultural, social, and political backgrounds. This meant crafting authentic, relatable stories in local languages that highlighted the real lives and struggles behind the initiative.

The organisers also recognised that storytelling driven by empathy and lived experience can capture the nuance of human emotion. Human insight was crucial in uncovering the deeper motivational layers that prompt individuals to sign a European citizens' initiative. In an age flooded with information, audiences often feel overwhelmed or disengaged. Well-crafted, authentic stories helped cut through the noise, making people stop, reflect, and ultimately decide to support the cause. This experience showed that storytelling was not just a communication tool; it was the heartbeat of the campaign.

Signature collection and verification process

The organisers of the "Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of Regional Cultures" initiative used the **central online collection system**. The organisers used their network of partners and volunteers to maintain momentum and continue promoting their campaign throughout the signature collection period.

The signature collection **closed on 7 April 2021**. After the extension of the collection period, the initiative ultimately collected 1,418,659 signatures in 27 EU Member States. In the formal verification process, national authorities validated a final figure of **1,269,351 signatures**. The required thresholds were reached in **eight Member States**.

Number of statements of support collected by Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of Regional Cultures per Member State

A visual map showing the distribution of signatures collected

Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of Regional Cultures reached the minimum thresholds in eight Member States. Source: European Citizens' Initiative website, 2025.

The check marks on the chart indicate the EU Member States where the **minimum threshold of signatures** required for supporting the initiative has been successfully met. The "Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of Regional Cultures" initiative reached the minimum thresholds in **eight Member States**. The full table with statements of support is available on the dedicated Commission's webpage.

Following the validation of signatures, the organisers strategically delayed submission to the European Commission, waiting for a new European Parliament and Commission to take office in hopes of a more favourable reception. The initiative was formally submitted to the Commission on **4 March 2025**, opening the six-month examination period.

Note

For initiatives registered after 1 January 2020, organisers must submit their initiative to the Commission within 3 months of receiving the last certificate of verification from the Member State authorities, including the number of valid signatures per country. Prior to this change, there was no deadline for submission.

Prior to the submission of the initiative to the Commission, the organisers shifted their focus to the less visible and more diplomatic phase of the European citizens' initiative process. This involved behind-the-scenes engagement with members of the European Commission and Members of the European Parliament.

The impact of this initiative

Formal submission and meetings with the Commission

Following the formal submission of the initiative on 4 March 2025, the organisers met with **Raffaele Fitto, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission for Cohesion and Reforms**, on 25 March 2025 (photo coverage).



Visit of representatives of the European Citizens' Initiative "Cohesion policy for the equality of the regions and sustainability of the regional cultures" to the European Commission

(© European Union, 2025)

European Parliament public hearing

On 25 June 2025, the European Parliament held a **public hearing** on the “Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of Regional Cultures” initiative (recording). The organisers presented the initiative’s objectives and engaged with the **Members of the European Parliament** (EP hearing highlights).

Plenary debate in the European Parliament

On 10 July 2025, the initiative was debated at the European Parliament’s plenary session (recording).

European Commission's formal response

On 3 September 2025, the European Commission a Communication, setting out its response to the initiative. The Communication assessed the merits of each of the initiative’s proposals as defined in the registration decision (press release).

The Commission reaffirmed its commitment to ensuring non-discriminatory access to Union funding and to enforcing equal treatment within cohesion policy. However, the Commission underlined that it lacks competence to define or recognise “national regions” or to alter national administrative boundaries. It further stated that no additional legislative changes are necessary, since the current Treaties and legal framework already provide sufficient protection for national minorities. In addition to ample possibilities for providing support to expand the list of regions in Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, as regional disadvantages are primarily determined by structural and economic factors, rather than cultural or linguistic specificities.

Moreover, the Commission has proposed a strengthened and modernised cohesion and growth policy in the framework of the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034. This framework is designed to ensure that Member States put in place adequate mechanisms to guarantee compliance with the Charter of Fundamental Rights and respect for the rule of law in national and regional partnership plans. Where these conditions are not met, the Commission made clear that corresponding payments would be withheld.

What helped this initiative achieve a successful collection of signatures?

Strategic preparations

The initiative's goals were articulated in a way that resonated with both affected communities and the broader European public. Tailor-made messages in native languages, delivered by trusted local figures, helped build momentum.

Focusing on online campaign methods

When COVID-19 struck, the campaign adapted quickly. Over 80% of signatures were collected digitally, using the Commission’s online platform. This ensured broad outreach while maintaining data security.

Being persistent

Despite scepticism, legal challenges, and the disruptions of the pandemic, the organisers remained steadfast. Their determination proved vital in overcoming obstacles and ultimately reaching the thresholds required for success.

Additional information

Additional information regarding “Cohesion Policy for the Equality of the Regions and Sustainability of Regional Cultures” is available on the dedicated Commission's webpage. For additional information on the follow-up of the initiative, please visit the following Commission's page.