The European citizens' initiative Central Online Collection System Explained

Sylvia Kersemakers, European Citizens' Initiative Team Leader:
Hello my name is Sylvia Kersemakers, I'm leading the team that is managing the European Citizens' Initiative. We engage in activities like the registration of initiatives and the subsequent steps, we provide information and guidance to organisers and citizens, and we do a lot of communication activities to make the ECI better known, but did you know that as of 2020 we also offer the possibility to ECI organisers to collect their statements online through our own Central Online Collection System?

Several organisers have already used it since then; and as of 2023 this system will be the only system that the organisers can use for the online collection.

In this video Jerome Stefanini who with his team has developed and is managing this system will tell you more in-depth about this system and he will also reply to feedback from organisers that have already used it.

Johan, organiser of the Civil Servants Exchange Programme ECI:
I think that the system of the European Commission to collect signatures is a really good tool, because simply it's a free tool that allows people without resources and without the possibility to create their own collection system to have one, and to be able to launch an initiative without resources at the beginning, so it allows many more people and citizens to launch initiative.

Jerome Stefanini, the IT officer responsible for the system at the Commission:

This advantage will continue to be provided and now the 2020 ECI Regulation obliges the Commission to provide free of charge systems to all organisers.

However, I would say that being free of charge is only one of the advantages of the online collection system provided by the Commission.

Here's what we're talking about.

We are talking about citizens who connect to an online system and who will have to leave their personal data to support an initiative.

So, what can and should be expected of such a system?

The first thing is that it should be available around the clock.
The second important advantage is that this system can perform efficiently and accept multiple statements of support simultaneously in peak times.

For example: we know that initiatives have more than one year to reach one million signatures, but in some cases, there have been more than 500,000 signatures coming in in just a few days, and it is important that the system can hold in such time.

The third important point in my view is that the system must give users and citizens the confidence to leave their personal data, because this is one of the characteristics of the ECI: it asks citizens to give their names, ID number, address, date of birth etc. This personal data can be a barrier for users to support the initiative.

There are also more advantages, e.g. the possibility to sign with an electronic signature, and we see countries like Belgium, Estonia, Italy, The Netherlands and Portugal are the best in this.

Francesco, organiser of the Civil Servants Exchange Programme ECI:

We believe that the system provided by the European Commission is essentially great because it provides all the tools we need, especially as it's GDPR compliant it's, already encrypted it provides everything we need, just that, and it's immediately simple, easy to use, people just need to go there and click in a matter of not even 30 seconds they could have their signature out there, so I would say the system for collecting signatures is really great, it's perfect.

Jerome Stefanini:
The European Commission's system is, in my view, the one that offers the most guarantees in terms of security for citizens.

Why is that?

First of all, we have an obligation under the personal data regulations to implement a system, which has been designed with security on our minds, so the entire system was conceived with the idea of data security.

What does this mean in practice?

The citizen data are end-to-end encrypted, meaning that from the moment the citizen provides their data to the moment the data is provided to the Member State for verification the data is encrypted and even if a hacker manages to get inside the well-protected system of the Commission, they will only obtain encrypted data.

The design of the system is the first important factor for security, but the second is on the level of the organization. Before the current regulation we saw organizers with no experience in computers, people who wanted to promote a cause, whether it was animals or football or anything else, who were not trained in data protection or information security. We were asking them to keep and protect the keys for the software of their systems in secure vaults, before handing over the statements of support to the Member States.This responsibility that was placed on the organizers, who were of course of good will, but had no expertise, is now transferred to the Commission.

So that's another good news, not just for the citizens, but also for the organisers, who are relieved of this responsibility.

Kerry Postlewhite, campaign manager of the Save Cruelty Free Cosmetics ECI:
If you use the Commission system that you are further removed from the metrics and from the insight that would otherwise come from having your own data collection system and obviously it's really helpful to successful campaigning to see those metrics and to have those insights in real time, so we can estimate why signatures in a certain country have gone up over a period of time, because we know what might have been happening in a different country to drive those signatures, but we aren't so close to the metrics that we can be really accurate about that.

Jerome Stefanini:
The Commission's online collection system provides organisers with a lot of data and statistics.

First, there is real-time data, which everyone can access and which consists of the number of signatures that has been gathered, and each time a citizen supports this initiative the system shows an increased figure.
We also have the map of Europe with the number of statements of support of citizens in each country, so organisers can see which are the countries where they still have to make an effort to collect supports.

These are the top most important data for me.

Then, there is another tool at the organisers' disposal, the patterns of traffic to the site: Where are people connecting from? At what time do they connect? How did they get there? Did they arrive there following a Google search, a Facebook search, from the Commission's site?

All this gives organisers an indication about the citizens who support their initiative - where they come from and what type they are.

These tools allow organisers to monitor the number of signatures on a daily basis; but organisers also have monthly reports, and can ask to be provided with daily or weekly reports about the number of visitors who connect to the site.

Yes, indeed, all data is anonymized, we never pass on any personal data to the organizers, so this is data about the place from which the supporters have signed, how did they connect to the system, the number of supporters per day, per month, and the sites from which supporters were redirected to the central system.

Antoine, organiser of the EcoScore ECI:

It's quite difficult to sign, because the European Commission's website to collect signatures is not so attractive. It's better than a few months ago, so it's improving, but it's not so attractive.

Jerome Stefanini:
I would say that beauty is a subjective criterion, like attractiveness, and I do not claim that the system of the European Commission is the most beautiful; what I claim is that it's simple,

it's reliable, and it's efficient; and that it ensures the protection of personal data. All online collection systems ensure precisely the same fundamental criteria to allow citizens to vote.

Still, certain initiatives will collect only 1000 signatures after a year and others will collect more than 1 million or even almost 2 million. Which means that it is not the tool that will make people support the initiative, the tool makes it possible to sign, it is the campaigns that will make people sign. I believe that the advantage of the online collection system is that it is there to serve democracy.

We want the information there to be very clear, that citizens understand why they want to vote; and not to add there other information, which in my opinion is not needed, in any case not for the exercise of the democratic right to support a European citizens' initiative.

Indeed, there are a number of possibilities to personalize the collection site, for example you can put your logo, you can choose the colours, and you can also put a congratulatory message. There are some customizations that are done.

The online collection system allows organisers to collect signatures and we ensure that it is as reliable and as secure as possible, but the success of their initiative will depend on them, it will depend on strong campaigns, on their communications.
The success of the initiative will depend on them. I think they should be aware of that. We will do everything to help them, but it is up to them to put the effort where it should be, and it's up to them to win support.

Sylvia Kersemakers, European Citizens' Initiative Team Leader:

Thank you, Jerome for providing us with all these insights on the COCS, and I hope you, viewers, now have a good understanding of what the system is about and how it can serve you in your online collection campaign. I really encourage you to have a look at it and take advantage of its use and the service that we provide with it.
I also would like to inform you that there is a lot of more information on our website and on the ECI Forum which is also there to provide you with legal advice, with campaign advice and is offering a wealth of other learning opportunities in case you would like to organize an Initiative yourself, so explore and take the initiative!