

CHALLENGES OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION AT EU – LEVEL DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EUROPEAN CITIZENS' INITIATIVE¹

Andreea Ligia DRUGĂU-CONSTANTIN

*Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania
andreea.drugau@amp.ase.ro*

Andra Karla ANGHIEL-SIENERTH

*University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania
andrakarla@ymail.com*

Abstract: One key factor in achieving the modernization both of a country and of a supra-national organization is to have functional mechanisms that facilitate the participation of citizens. This paper aims to explore the efficacy of the European Citizens' Initiative and its development during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study begins with the theoretical framework covering both several theories on the topic of civic engagement and the legislation ensuring the functioning of the European Citizens' Initiative. It continues with an analysis of the initiatives that were submitted to conclude if the mechanism is successful. The case study focuses on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on both the functioning of this mechanism and on the characteristics of the proposed initiatives. The article does not study the impact of the approved initiatives or the relevance of their subject; it only analyses the success rate of this mechanism in terms of approval and the effects of the pandemic on the procedure and on the specificity of the initiatives.

Keywords: civic participation, European citizens' initiative, European Union, COVID-19 pandemic

JEL Classification: D70, D79, D89

DOI: 10.24818/ARAS/2022/3/1.01

1. INTRODUCTION

This quantitative analysis tries to reflect whether the active citizenship through the mechanism of the Citizens' Initiative is as effective and well implemented as it is at the declarative level. The study tries to reveal the effects of the pandemic on the procedure and on the specificity of the initiatives.

We will first focus on the theoretical framework covering both several theories on the topic of civic engagement and the legislation ensuring the functioning of the European Citizens' Initiative. The theories on civic engagement are mainly focused on the fact that the core of the European construction is now represented by the active citizenship because of the consolidation of participatory democracy.

The study continues with a quantitative analysis of the initiatives that were brought about linked to the mechanism of the Citizens' Initiative, with a focus on the changes determined by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

As previously mentioned, the theoretical framework will cover both theories and legislative provisions linked to the subject of our study.

¹ The topic was presented at the conference The 4th International Conference on Economics and Social Sciences Resilience and economic intelligence through digitalization and big data analytics, June 10-11, 2021, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

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Citizenship and public participation are seen as the key to political action in modern societies. Therefore, our research will review the mechanism of civic engagement in the EU. Can this European tool improve civic participation? Can we see a proper implementation of the initiative in the pandemic crisis?

By definition, civic engagement refers to a set of actions, measures, and efforts, based on a sense of belonging and a concrete activity consumed in the local, regional, national, or international community (Tolbert, 1998; Schofer, 2001). We think that at the European level, civic participation is strengthened by joint actions and involvement in decision-making. From this point of view, perhaps the most important resource that we can analyze is the European Citizens' Initiative.

Studies on civic engagement revealed three dimensions of civic behavior: rational choice, social capital, and civic voluntarism. While researching this topic we found that access to resources, positive evaluations of the benefits of involvement, informal networks, and mobilization seem to be important links to most types of civic activism and play an important role in influencing levels of participation, especially in European Union (Pattie et al., 2003).

In the rational choice model, economically rational actors maximize their benefits from any activity while minimizing their costs (Downs, 1957). So, it seems that participation is linked to people's expressive attachments. The scientific interpretation argued by many researchers over the years is based on feelings and attachments. Practically, citizens need to make rational choices to have best result for themselves and as well for common wellbeing. To highlight the importance of connections and personal involvement in the individual decision related to participating in civic or joint actions, we have to mention the idea that the basic forms of interaction through which individuals pursue their interests or satisfy their desires are closely related to some form of obligations that imbalance of power to disapproval of/ opposition to imbalance of power or approval/ legitimation of imbalance of power with the final result imbalance/change in relationship/social structure or balance/ institutionalization of relationship/ social structure (Appelrouth, S. and Edles, L. D., 2015).

Another relevant theory is the model of social capital. We hold the idea that joining and participating in local organizations helps to stimulate a sense of trust in others, generating safety, success, wellbeing, etc. (Putnam, 1993). We can notice the lack of coagulation at the level of civic engagement in the case of Romanian civil society and the poor results of the common and civic actions. Wide differences in the consolidation of democracy suggest that other factors, such as cultural factors, must also be considered when we are facing social capital. Several studies on Romanian civic engagement have indicated a slow evolution to the democratic values (Dragoman, 2006).

In the model of civic voluntarism, a socio-economic aspect of participation is prominent. In this case, we consider as highly relevant Verba's research on the importance of education in civic involvement: better educated people, with a high standard of living, from the middle class of society, are more prone to civic participation (Verba, S. et al.). In countries with high civic involvement, we can see a more intense activity in terms of citizens' initiative.

Citizenship is a central political concept from a theoretical perspective (Almond, G. A. and Verba, S.), active citizenship refers to some collective actions and engagement in society. *Active Citizenship-For a better European Society* is a European confirmation that certifies, since 2012, that "active citizenship is the glue that keeps society together" (European Economic and Social Committee website). So, active citizenship is a broad concept, crucial to the welfare of society which means respect for the rule of law, democracy, justice, tolerance, rights, and freedoms of others. Volunteering is one important element of active citizenship, with benefits for volunteers and society at the same time.

The promotion of activism at European level can also be identified in the launch of the platform *together.eu*, which invites people to meet, debate, and take action to the development of Europe (Platform Together website). Also, *European Youth Ideas* is a platform designed as a link between young people and the European Parliament. In this case we can note the opportunity for young people to actively participate in European democratic life. All these actions are signs of the need and desire to involve citizens at the European level. It is a reality that in all European societies, digital activism has started to play an increasingly important role to mass mobilization.

As already mentioned, the main engine of active citizenship is education (Mattijssen, T., et al., 2019). Before the Citizens' Initiative was promoted at the European level, there were people who argued that it will create new exclusion mechanisms. Their opinions were based on the lack of respect for social equality and the lack of a strong sense of belonging. Therefore, most citizens are excluded due to the distinction between active and non-active citizens (Milana, M., 2008). There are recent ethnographic data that show us all the details of the experience encountered by the young people involved in social change (Banaji, S. and Mejias, S., 2020). Critical perspectives are also directed to the authorities, referring to the fact that governments fail to find adequate mechanisms to connect with active citizens. (De Wilde, M. et al., 2014).

3. REGULATORY FRAMEWORK OF THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS' INITIATIVE

One important way for the EU to manage a democratic civic engagement is to improve the functioning of this relatively new mechanism - European Citizens' Initiative. This European tool was introduced by the Lisbon Treaty and was created to be an instrument exclusively used at the European Commission level, meant to enable citizens to propose legislation. European Citizens' Initiatives has been institutionalized by the European Citizens' Initiative Regulation in April 2012 (Warleigh A., 2007).

The main documents that refer to this mechanism are: Treaty on European Union, Article 11(4) and Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Article 24. The reader should bear in mind that from Article 11 TEU and Article 24 TFEU, the European citizens' initiative should be considered in the context of other mechanism too. The relevance of this strategic mechanism is clearly strengthened by the possibility of citizens to bring certain issues to the attention of the institutions of the EU.

The functioning of this mechanism is done in accordance with the provisions of the Regulation (EU) 2019/788. The COVID 19 pandemic determined the adoption of new regulations, in order to adapt the mechanism to the condition brought about by the pandemic - Regulation (EU) 2019/1799. An important aspect provision in this sense was the extension of the deadlines for collecting signatures by 6 months.

Regarding the possibility to use this tool, according to the legislative provisions, one million citizens who are nationals in any European country, from at least a quarter of Member States can submit actions at this level. It is stipulated in Treaty of the European Union, Article 11(4) that, in order to submit any proposal on important matters citizens have to obtain a number of signatures (Regulation (EU) 2020/1042). So, citizens around EU have to collaborate and to turn decision into actions.

In order to make the mechanism more accessible, the Commission should provide some practical support to citizens and groups of organizers, in particular on those aspects of this Regulation within its competence as the Regulation mentioned. The assistance that the Commission could provide in the legislative direction may contribute to the accessibility of the procedure. Therefore, citizens have the possibility of to support initiatives online or in paper form by providing only the personal data set out in Appendix III of the Regulation 2019/788. By simplifying the procedures, the EU tries to bring citizens closer to the initiative and to stimulate civic engagement at the European level.

Regarding the online collection systems, the Regulation (EU) 2019/788 ensures that organizers do their separate online collection system in accordance with the technical specifications. Again, new norms regarding the collection of signatures online were adopted, in order to facilitate the process of obtaining signatures much limited by the pandemic situation.

In order to launch the European Citizens' Initiative, a few steps are followed. It seems to be a streamlined procedure, but at the same time it is difficult to achieve it without a good organization and civic involvement at the European level. There are 6 steps: first of all, a group of organizers should be set up, composed of at least 7 EU citizens living in 7 different EU countries. Thus, people need to team up with persons across Europe that have the same determination to endorse the cause. The second step concerns the registration of the proposal and its acceptance by the Commission within 2 months. The third step means obtaining the support, on paper or online, of 1 million people from at least 7 EU countries. The fourth step is the validation of the endorsements. Designated authorities in all EU countries carry out checks to certify the number of statements of support collected, over a period of 3 months. The fifth step involves submitting the initiative together with the

endorsements and funding obtained for it, within 3 months. The last step is to get an answer. After the examination of the initiative if the Commission considers it as appropriate, it will put forward a formal proposal (European Citizens' Initiative website).

4. INITIATIVES SUBMITTED BEFORE COVID-19 AND THEIR OUTCOME – FAILURE OR SUCCESS

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the initiatives that have been submitted, in order to conclude if the mechanism has more successful stories than failures. The article does not study the impact of the approved initiatives or the relevance of their topic; it only analyses the success rate of this mechanism in terms of approval. First of all, we have to point out that the analyzed period is until March 2021.

The success rate is measured based on a quantitative analysis; more explicitly, it shows how many of the proposed initiatives were approved and which were the most popular domains.

According to the information provided by the website of this mechanism (https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/home_en), from the date of its establishment by the Lisbon Treaty (2009), in terms of numbers and categories, 76 initiatives were registered, and they were divided into the following domains:

- *Agriculture*
- *Business and Economy*
- *Consumers and Health*
- *Culture and Media*
- *Digital Economy and Society*
- *Employment and Social Affairs*
- *Environment and Climate*
- *External Trade and Relations*
- *Justice and Fundamental Rights*
- *Maritime and Fisheries*
- *Regional Development*
- *Research*

We have to mention that 101 registration requests were submitted, but online 76 among them were registered, the others being rejected to registration due to different reasons.

Because the aim of this section of the paper is to measure the success of this mechanism in terms of numbers, we have to mention that there were only five successful initiatives.

In order to have a brief image, the European initiative since its emergence, had: 101 registration requests – 76 registered initiatives – 5 successful stories. If we make a simple estimation, 5 initiatives of 76 initiatives represent a successful rate of less than 10%.

5. CHANGES IN THE MECHANISM DURING COVID-19 AND THE MAIN TOPICS APPROACHED IN THE PROPOSED INITIATIVES

The European Parliament and the Council decided in July 2020 that the most relevant measure that has to be taken for the progress of the mechanism during the pandemic was linked to the extension of the collection periods.

In this section we will underline which were the main topics considered in the initiatives proposed after the emergence of COVID-19 Pandemic. The period that we considered relevant for the analysis in this chapter is *March 01, 2020, to March 01, 2021*.

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The total number of initiatives during the above-mentioned period was 13. Regarding the categories that these initiatives belong to, according to the official data (https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/home_en), we have:

- Business and Economy: Right to Cure (1)
 - Consumers and Health: Right to Cure; Pro-Nutriscore (2)
 - Culture and Media: Freedom to Share; Minority SafePack (2)
 - Digital Economy and Society: Freedom to Share; Civil society initiative for a ban on biometric mass surveillance practices (2)
 - Employment and Social Affairs: Start Unconditional Basic Incomes (UBI) throughout the EU (1)
 - Justice and Fundamental Rights: Civil society initiative for a ban on biometric mass surveillance practices; VOTERS WITHOUT BORDERS, Full Political Rights for EU Citizens.; Minority SafePack – one million signatures for diversity in Europe (3)
- Regional Development: Minority SafePack (1)
- Research: Right to Cure (1)

We have to mention that some of the initiatives were considered relevant for several categories and, therefore, they were included in more than one domain of interest.

In what concerns their status, we have the following situation:

- Ongoing: 5
- Unsuccessful collection: 3
- Withdrawn: 2
- Verification ongoing: 1
- Valid initiative: 1
- Answered: 1

We can conclude after reviewing these data that the specificity of the approached topics was not influenced by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic – we could have imagined that initiatives in the field of health would prevail. It is also difficult to decide on this matter because, as already mentioned, every initiative is included in more than one category.

6. CONCLUSION

We agree with other researchers that it would be best for the EU institutions and national governments “to have tangible political changes that give citizens the perspective that they are participating in and influencing decision making in Brussels.” (Boucher, S., et al., 2019)

The importance of active citizenship and of civic participation is recognized at the European level by the introduction of the mechanism of Citizens’ Initiative. This mechanism was introduced at EU level by the Lisbon Treaty and since its emergence a number of 101 registration requests was reached. Of all the registered initiatives, we only have six successful initiatives that were answered.

During the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 - March 2021) 13 initiatives were registered, which indicates that the number of registered initiatives per year stayed almost the same as in the pre-COVID-19 period. Overall, the mechanism has had a considerably low success rate if we look at the numbers but considering that it is a mechanism only in its first decade of existence, it can still improve in terms of effectiveness. Also, it is difficult to give a verdict, because we have not compared this mechanism with a similar one (for example, those established at the national level) to see a comparison in terms of numbers.

It is important to strengthen this mechanism in order to ensure a higher degree of involvement of citizens in the future of Member States and of the European Union.

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