One million EU citizens can use their signature to ask the European Commission to draft a legislative proposal. But, as our study demonstrates, the media prefer to report on the EU’s democracy deficit much more than on this participation instrument, the European Citizens' Initiative. As the Commission has acknowledged itself, the citizens' initiative is overly complicated.

Since the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) was introduced in 2012, some 8 million Europeans have supported individual initiatives. But, of the 67 citizens' initiatives that have been submitted, only four have been successful. The public has hardly any awareness of this participation instrument and its concrete initiatives.
At present, the bureaucratic hurdles for gathering signatures are too high. The initial enthusiasm of civil society organizations is being dampened by the complicated processes. To start with, the European Commission has only authorized initiatives under very strict conditions. The concrete political changes have been rather limited. As a result, there is hardly any media coverage about this participation instrument.

An analysis of 84 online and print media sources in 14 EU member states shows that, on average, less than one article on the European Citizens’ Initiative appears in each media source per year. Relatively speaking, there is still a lot of media coverage in Germany, Austria and Luxembourg. In contrast, hardly any media attention is paid to it in the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and Denmark.

There is a certain degree of media coverage in Germany and Austria. But there is almost none at all in most other EU member states. One cannot say there is a European public awareness of and as a result of the European Citizens’ Initiative.

The media find democracy deficit more exciting than ECI

The media write almost nine times as much about the democracy deficit of the EU than about the European Citizens’ Initiative. The European Commission enjoys 500 times more media coverage, and the European Parliament 170 times more.
The media report almost nine times more about the democracy deficit of the EU than about the European Citizens' Initiative. And this happens even though the ECI is meant to be an instrument for counteracting precisely this deficit.

"The European Citizens' Initiative doesn't get through to citizens, so they don't perceive the EU's steps toward democratization," says Dominik Hierlemann, an expert on participation at the Bertelsmann Stiftung and co-author of the study. "This is partly due to the fact that this participation instrument is overly complicated and hardly has any impact."

Different opinions on the Commission's reform proposal

The Commission's reform proposal envisions several technical improvements and reductions in bureaucratic hurdles. But many members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and organizers of individual initiatives want more. In its present form, the process ends too abruptly following a public hearing in the Parliament. After spending months gathering signatures, the activists suddenly feel abandoned. They want to see a change in the mechanism of how the EU bodies deal with the results. "The reform proposal is a good first step, but is too technical," Hierlemann says. "There still hasn't been enough light cast on precisely how the citizens' initiatives are supposed to have an impact."

In the study "More Initiative for Europe’s Citizens," the authors provide details on five reform options that could help raise public awareness about the European Citizens' Initiatives. For example, additional enhancements could be made to the public hearing, which has hardly attracted any public attention so far. Having a debate in the European Parliament would raise public awareness about citizens' initiatives – in addition to giving the Parliament and the individual MEPs an opportunity to enhance their public profiles. What's more, Brussels isn't the only important place. Indeed, a discussion about concrete citizens' initiatives must also take place in Berlin, Paris and Warsaw.
The study also demonstrates that the successful citizens' initiatives have also been able to expand their European networks. The reform of the European Citizens' Initiative can also mark the start of giving fresh thought to new forms of citizens' participation and a better "architecture of participation."
Factsheet 2/2018: Ten Things to Know about the European Citizens' Initiative

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