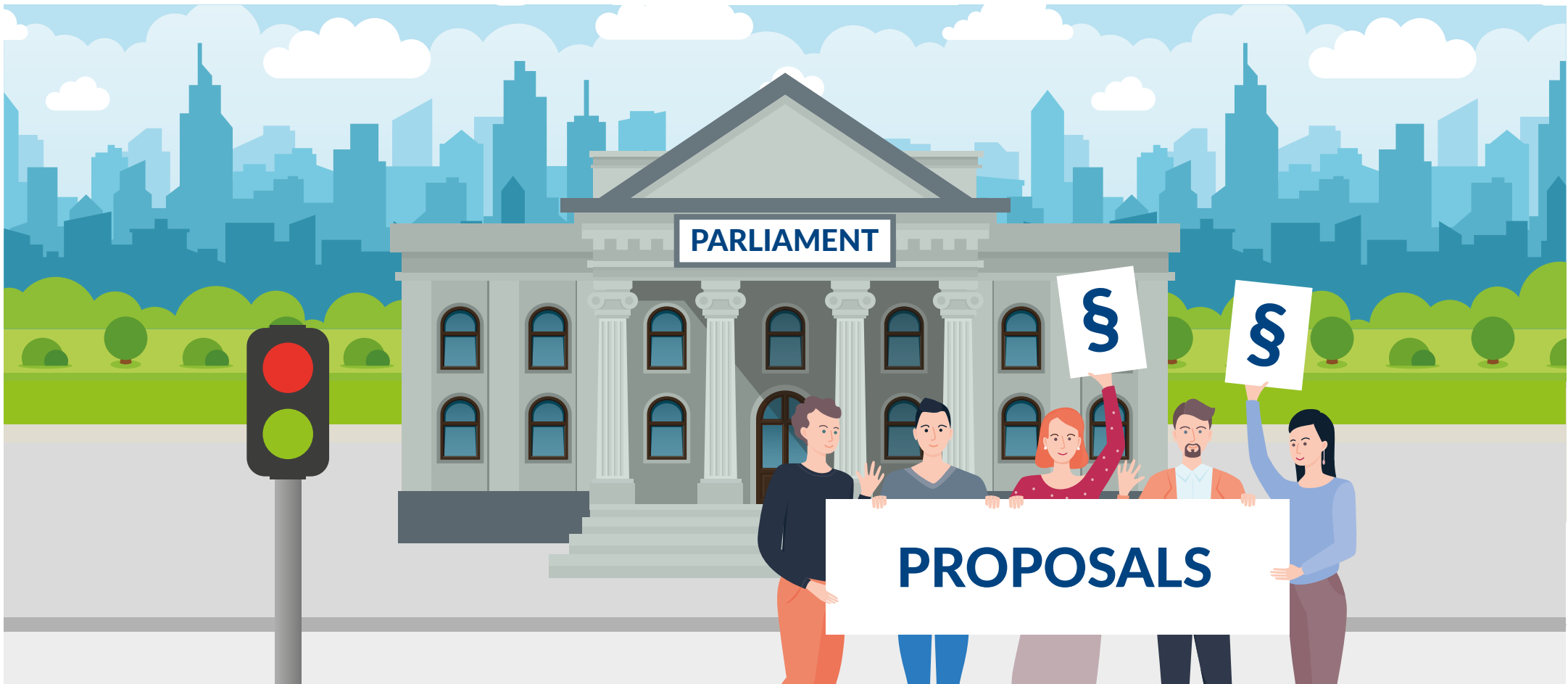


shortcut



Agenda initiatives

Citizens determine the political agenda

Issue 10 – May 2023

shortcut
What it's all about

Agenda initiatives reinforce democracy

Agenda-setting is a vital aspect of democracies. Which items make it to the agenda? What ideas have a chance to become law? No matter whether it is a question of environmental protection, public services or civil rights: Agenda initiatives enable citizens to participate in determining the political agenda.

Agenda initiatives entitle the electorate to propose topics it wants to see debated in parliament and/or passed as a law. Parliament is obliged to react to such proposals. More and more countries all over the world are adopting this democratic tool. Two European countries—Finland and Latvia—have shown how successful agenda initiatives can be.

In Finland, the privatisation of the water industry was blocked. In Latvia the constitution was amended – it is now possible for the parliament to elect the president in an open, non-secret ballot. There has even been an equivalent at EU level since 2012, the European Citizens' Initiative.

Over 70% of the Latvian population used the Latvian initiatives' online platform. 83% of the Finnish electorate believes that this tool has improved democracy in Finland: living, practical proof that successful agenda initiatives raise the acceptance of, and trust in, the political system.



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How it works

A step-by-step guide to agenda initiatives

PHASE 1:
Preparation

PHASE 2:
Implementation

PHASE 3:
Procedure in parliament

AGENDA INITIATIVES PROCEDURE

1. Preparation
Creation of a Citizens' Committee, formation of alliances, definition of demands
2. Registration of the initiative
3. Collection of minimum number of signatures
4. Submission and checking of signatures
5. Hearing and decision on adoption or rejection by a representative, democratic body

THE AGENDA INITIATIVE IN LATVIA

1. Preparation

Determination of topics, deliberation and concretisation of the agenda text, creation of an alliance of NGOs.

→ NGO ManaBalls.lv provides support with communication and campaign work.

2. Registration of the initiative

Application for registration with the Latvian parliament. Latvian parliament checks the coherence of the proposal.

3. Collection of minimum number of signatures

Signature collection starts. Quorum of 10,000 signatures. No collection deadline required.
→ NGO ManaBalls.lv provides digital online collection platform and supports the initiators.

4. Submission and checking of signatures

Checking by Latvian parliament within one month.

5. Decision by the Latvian parliament

Rejection or adoption of the initiative. In the event of adoption: Referral to the responsible committee and invitation of the initiators to the first committee meeting.

Comparison of three agenda initiatives

SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES

Latvia: 84 attained a quorum. 50 were implemented. 2,113 submitted initiatives; to date, 70% of the electorate has visited the initiatives website.
→ The constitution was amended as a result of the initiative in favor of an open parliamentary election of the Latvian president.

Finland: More than 1,200 submitted initiatives; 62 attained the quorum and four were implemented. 83% of Finnish voters say that the agenda initiatives improve democracy in Finland.
→ The initiative in favor of equality for single-sex marriages was the first successful initiative – 167,000 signatures.

EU: In 10 years, more than 14 million EU citizens have participated in a European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). Eight initiatives have attained a quorum, to three of which have been attributed a concrete effect.
→ The ECI Right to Water resulted in the amendment of the EU Drinking Water Directive.

INTRODUCTION YEAR

Latvia	2011
Finland	2012
European Union	2012

NUMBER OF INITIATIVES SUBMITTED*

Latvia	2.317
Finland	1.367
European Union	88

PARTICIPATION AGE**

Latvia	16
Finland	18
European Union	16

* Status 2022

** Status January 2023

DIVERSITY OF TOPICS

In **Latvia**, there are no predominant topics. They range from ban on genetic engineering to improvement of the vaccination policy, as well as local topics (revival of the Latvian operetta).

In **Finland**, the predominant topic areas are health, welfare, housing & civil liberties, civil rights, & law and order.

At **European level**, the predominant topics are animal welfare and environmental protection – especially in the case of successful initiatives.

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Good to know

Agenda initiatives are the rule rather than the exception

Country	First introduced	Population in millions	Min. number of signatures	Percentage of electorate	Collection deadline in months
Austria	1921/1963	8,4	100.000	1,19%	8 days
Italy	1947	61,6	50.000	0,08%	6
Italy*	1970	61,6	500.000	1,06%	3
Spain	1978	47,2	500.000	1,37%	6
Romania*	1991	19,9	500.000	2,50%	No info
Slovakia*	1992	5,4	350.000	6,48%	None
Poland	1997	38,6	100.000	0,26%	3
Lithuania	1998	2,9	50.000	1,72%	2
Romania	1999	19,5	100.000	0,50%	3
Portugal	2003	10,3	75.000	0,86%	No info
Slovenia	2005	2,0	5.000	0,25%	3
Netherlands	2006	16,8	40.000	0,23%	None
Bulgaria	2009	7,1	200.000	2,82%	3
Latvia	2011	2,0	10.000	0,50%	None
Hungary*	2011	9,8	200.000	2,04%	4
EU	2012	447,4	1.000.000	0,25%	12
Finland	2012	5,2	50.000	1,20%	6
Croatia*	2014	4,2	100.000	10,00%	15 days
Hungary*	2016	9,8	100.000	1,02%	No info
Denmark	2018	5,7	50.000	1,19%	180 days

* Agenda initiative in conjunction with direct democracy elements

Agenda initiatives Latvia and Finland show the way

Latvia and Finland demonstrate how agenda initiatives can enrich the political landscape. Whether it is a question of banning lynx hunting or revising maternity leave laws, citizens have a say in setting the political agenda and improving democracy. 2,213 initiatives in Latvia, 64% were implemented. 1,200 initiatives: 83% of Finns believe that their agenda Initiative has improved democracy. This success was not a coincidence. In Finland, successful initiatives are not merely voted on in parliament—they must be dealt with before the end of a government's term of office, so they even take precedence over other topics. In Latvia, there is close cooperation between parliament and the non-partisan NGO ManaBalls.lv, which provides a digital collection platform online, advises citizens' initiatives in legal and practical matters, and helps with communication. Signatures can be collected digitally and without any problems in both countries.

By contrast, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is mostly unknown. It is neither widely used nor does it initiate public debate. Obviously, the challenges it faces are different from those of tools used in only one country: 24 different official languages, the sheer geographical size of Europe and the lack of a pan-European public are large obstacles—and there is a lack of real effectiveness or encouraging success stories as incentives. Despite the progress made in the effort to make the ECB more user-friendly, it is still relatively difficult to raise support via digital means. Consequently, the ECI (still) tends to be a tool for organised civil society rather than individuals.

It has been shown in practice that easily accessible agenda initiatives can enable citizens to set agendas, initiate discussions and shape policies. Ideally, citizens receive support during organisation. Successful initiatives are digital. And finally, the clear commitment of political decision-makers—which includes implementing initiatives—is essential for their success.

Agenda initiatives strengthen democracy and give citizens a voice. They must be easy to access, digital, and above all have an impact.



shortcut *More on the subject*

Agenda initiatives on the internet

The online platform of the Finnish agenda initiative: <https://www.kansalaisaloite.fi>

The online platform of the Latvian agenda initiative: <https://manabalss.lv/>

The online platform of the European Citizens' initiative: <https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/en>

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The future of democracy



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The shortcut series presents and discusses interesting approaches, methods, and projects for solving democratic challenges in a condensed and illustrative format. The Bertelsmann Stiftung's project New Democracy publishes it at irregular intervals.