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The Citizens' Initiative is Only the Beginning



On 1 April, Europe will turn over a new leaf! For the first time in history, citizens will be given a tool to set the political agenda across the continent with the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). It is hard to overestimate the importance of this achievement that can open a new era in European and transnational democracy. The only real way to tackle the growing crisis of confidence that dominates European politics is for a more democratic Europe and a stronger involvement of citizens at all levels. The possibility to influence the EU's political agenda will encourage citizens to engage and lead to more European discussions and debates. These debates among citizens as well as between citizens and political institutions can pave the way to the badly needed emergence of a European public space. The forthcoming months will have to answer two important questions: How will citizens use this instrument and how will institutions embrace it? In several meetings during the past months, we have met an impressive number of initiatives that are in the starting blocks. Many of them are already well prepared, with international networks behind them. However, the real litmus test will be how issue based grass roots initiatives manage to use the instrument. When we were designing the implementation rules of the ECI in the European Parliament, we tried to make it as citizen friendly as possible. Nonetheless, organising an initiative in at least seven member states and collecting one million signatures will remain a challenge for the networking, fundraising and promotional capacities of any organiser. We hope that many citizens can be encouraged to take up this challenge. The even more crucial question concerns the attitude of the European Institutions towards this new participatory instrument. The readiness of decision makers and bureaucracies to embrace citizens' participation as a chance for a more legitimate process of policy formulation rather than as threat to their position in the power structure is still surprisingly low. The ECI allows citizens to raise issues. That is great. But if their proposals die away without a real impact, the ECI will fail and foster frustration instead of dedication. Thus it is really up to the authorities to fulfil the promise that has been given to the citizens. While being cheerful and excited about the new opportunities, we should make it clear that the

right of initiative is just a first, important step on the way towards a true Europe of the citizens. Even after the collection of one million signatures, it is still entirely up to the European Commission to actually start turning a specific cause into legislation. Between a technocratic way of policy making that tries to exclude transparency and participation, and a populist, nationalist rollback, there is just a thin path that will allow Europe to protect and develop its economic, social and cultural achievements in the framework of globalisation. It is the way of democracy. We have to turn European integration from a project of elites into a project of all citizens. We need to constitute more participation and democratic legitimacy for decision making on the European level. In the long run, we will either have a Europe of the citizens – or no common Europe at all.

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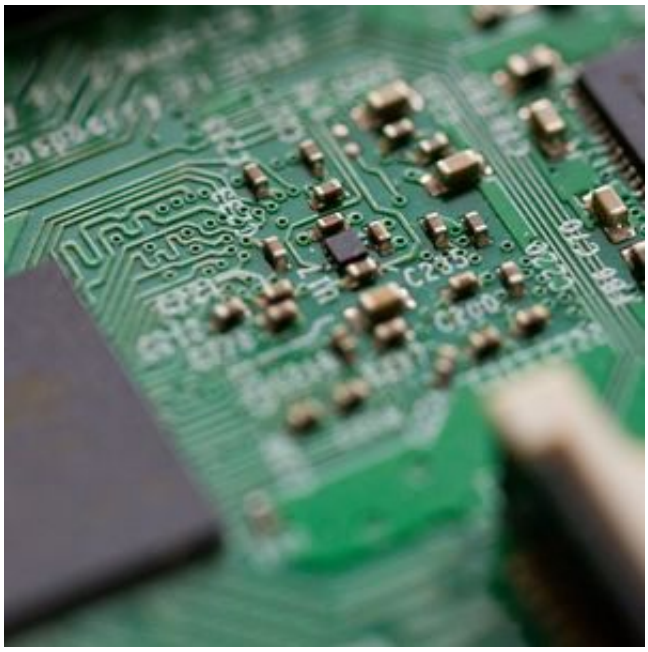


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