

Bridging the Gap? Opportunities and Constraints of the European Citizens' Initiative

BOOK REVIEW

Editors: **Maximilian Conrad, Annette Knaut and Katrin Böttgers.**

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Reviewer: **Auðunn Arnórsson, D.E.E.A.,** Politics and Administration

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This volume, issued in the academic publication series “Europäische Schriften” by the German Institut für Europäische Politik in Berlin, is primarily based on contributions originally prepared for the panel “The European Citizens' Initiative: Strengthening European Democracy?” at the 7th General Conference of the European Consortium for Research (ECPR) in Bordeaux in Autumn 2013. The “Icelandic contribution” to this publication is that one of the editors and two of the authors are attached to the University of Iceland.

As is common with this kind of volumes the papers assembled in it are of varying quality and readability. But the editors make an effort to create one logical whole out of the contributions and summarize conclusions. The book offers a critical, although cautiously optimistic outlook on the possibilities and limits of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), the new instrument of trans-national participatory democracy in the European Union which was introduced with the Lisbon Treaty. The volume combines theoretical discussions regarding the nature and contribution of the ECI with empirical perspectives on the experience of the first initiatives (petitions), which have been brought on the way since April 2012.

As the editors state themselves, the overarching ambition of this volume was to assess the role and potential of the ECI in the broader context of the EU democratic deficit, that is: what role the ECI can play in bridging existing and/or perceived gaps



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between citizens and the (supra-national) EU institutions. The ECI started out with high hopes for becoming an instrument of direct or participatory democracy that would allow citizens of the EU member states to “set the agenda” for the decision-making institutions of the Union. From the outset, the ECI was thought to be able to ‘relieve the pain’ of the so-called democratic deficit and to build a bridge between citizens and the EU policy making. On the other hand, researchers have pointed out (inter alia in the volume under discussion here) that the ECI would remain a “toothless tiger” due to the fact it is in reality no instrument of direct democracy, since it fulfills only an indirect agenda setting function, and would therefore only be used by well-connected European elites and activists. The contributions in the book reflect these discussions.

Skeptical observers have remarked that the ECI could be considered ‘dead on arrival’, not least with regard to the sharp decline in new registrations of initiatives and the Commission’s seemingly restrictive exercise of its gatekeeper role in the EU’s legislative process. The contributions in this volume, however, tend to suggest otherwise. In terms of raising awareness for contentious issues, the highlighted cases of the three ECI initiatives which have made it furthest so far (*Right2Water*, *Stop Vivisection* and *One of us*) have, according to the authors, already had considerable success. And they even state that cases of rejected initiatives seem to support the notion that the ECI can be a highly relevant tool for transnational civil-society networking, agenda setting, communicative power generation, and indeed for an increasing politicization of the EU legislative process as such. From that point of view, they conclude that the ECI “may very well only have just begun to show its bridge-building potential.” Time will tell if this is justified optimism, or just wishful thinking.¹

As regards the conclusions of the book, they highlight that as a participatory-democratic instrument it is difficult to classify the ECI. Critically, the ECI has so far only partially met the high expectations made by the scientific side, but also of activists and organizers of the Initiative. Similarly ambivalent is the conclusion of the volume: while the ECI is deemed to have great potential for contributing to democratization of the EU’s decision-making culture, the experience gained in the first three years highlights that a thorough reform is needed, if the instrument is to live up to expectations in the long run. In other words: the ECI must change in various ways (some ideas for such reforms are indeed discussed in the book) if it is to become a meaningful instrument for citizens’ participation in the EU legislative process.

And as we are in an Icelandic publication – discussing efforts to ‘relieve the pain’ of the perceived democratic deficit in the EU, it is worth spending a thought on the democratic deficit in the EEA in this context. It has been argued that the latter is actually double, in comparison with the EU itself, as the possibilities of democratic scrutiny of EEA legislation are much more limited. The ECI is designed to at least try to involve the public in the EU Member States more directly with EU policy making. This effort is well analyzed in the book discussed here. By contrast, any such involvement of the citizens

in the 'EFTA pillar' of the EEA (i.e. Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein) is 'by design' not possible. But this is of course another topic, outside the scope of the book.

Notes

- 1 One thing seems at least to be clear after the EU referendum in the UK in June this year (i.e. after this volume was published): the ECI – or indeed any other efforts to 'bridge the gap' between citizens in the individual EU member states and 'Brussels' – has not been successful in reducing UK citizens' feeling of disconnect with the EU.