

CitizenCentral CHAPTER 1 transcript

Greta Thunberg [00:00:06] We have been sacrificing our education to protest against your inaction.

Speaker 2 [00:00:12] Ask the EU to stop caging animals.

Speaker 3 [00:00:15] To reconcile the economy with our planet.

Speaker 1 [00:00:18] Set a timeline for fossil fuel phase-out.

Speaker 3 [00:00:21] To master the challenges of the digital age.

Speaker 2 [00:00:24] None of the European nations will be part of the G8.

Speaker 1 [00:00:28] It is about where we want to go and who we want to be.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:00:40] Hello there, welcome to CitizenCentral, a podcast series all about the first transnational democracy instrument in the world, the European Citizens' Initiative. Brought about back in the Lisbon Treaty, the ECI gives people the chance to pitch their own EU policies to the European Commission by gathering one million signatures from seven EU states. My name is Méabh Mc Mahon. I'm an Irish reporter in Brussels, and on CitizenCentral I'll be finding out what exactly the ECI is, how you can launch or support one, and what drives people to give up their time and energy for a cause they care deeply about. Now, in CitizenCentral we will be checking in with experts and academics to get their take on ECI proposals; law professors too! Professor Alberto Alemanno, can you remind our listeners how the ECI came about?

Prof. Alberto Alemanno [00:01:33] The genesis of the European Citizens' Initiatives goes back to the 2003-2005 convention that was tasked to establish a constitution for the European Union. At the time, a group of citizens, notably coming from Germany, tried to sell the idea of a petition system. They basically sold the idea of the conventional treaty that was established at the time. As we all know, that convention was not successful in having its own constitutional treaty adopted because we had referenda in France and Germany that fed into what we now call the Lisbon Treaty, the last reform of the European Union treaties from 2007 to 2009. And 95 % of the original treaty, including the ECI, remains in the Lisbon Treaty. That's because, in 2012, a regulation was adopted to allow the European Citizens' Initiative to become actionable, and in 2012, two ECIs were registered. I am very proud to say that I was one of the citizens registering the first ECI, and it was about the single tariff. So, the idea was to ask the European Commission to propose the phasing out of international roaming charges to avoid having citizens pay extra money when making or receiving a call outside of their own country. The idea came from my students in one of my European law classes in Paris, and they urged me to think about an initiative that we could register by taking full advantage of these new instruments. And to make a long story short, a couple of very entrepreneurial students said, ok, let's create some momentum, let's register such and such an ECI, and we immediately realised all the limits and difficulties in actually running these instruments.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:03:47] So now I know why you know so much about the ECI; you were one of the first people to get involved in one. But as a professor, Alberto, do you think it's an effective tool?

Prof. Alberto Alemanno [00:03:55] The ECI has enormous potential because it is one of the few instruments that allow citizens to initiate some possible policies that might then be taken up by the European institutions, by the European policy cycle, in a way which is quite unknown to most of the Member States. So, citizens are allowed to set the agenda by starting a new initiative, new ideas. In the past, ECIs have been used to break the monopoly of the European Commission by drawing attention to members of the European Parliament and sharing ideas with them.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:04:37] All right, Alberto, I knew you would give us some great insights into the ECI. If you're ok with it, I might be in touch again for other chapters of CitizenCentral. Thank you so much for your time.

Prof. Alberto Alemanno [00:4:49] Thank you!

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:04:51] As Alberto pointed out, anyone can launch an ECI. On this first chapter of CitizenCentral, we'll catch up with Paula Reyes, who is doing a PhD in the beautiful city of Salamanca, Spain, and is currently one of the leaders of the 'Fridays for Future' ECI that calls for more ambitious goals from the EU to fight climate change; a topic on everyone's mind right now, especially since a sobering report this past summer from the IPCC predicted more severe weather in the coming years and put the blame for rising global temperatures on human activity. Paula, thank you so much for joining us on CitizenCentral. Tell us about yourself.

Paula Reyes [00:05:30]. Hello! I am an industrial engineer, but I realised when I started working that the world needs to change. I then started working in environmental management with 'Fridays for Future.' I have learned a lot, and I am the head of the environmental education project.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:05:54] Can you remind us, please, of the four big asks of your European Citizens' Initiative?

Paula Reyes [00:05:59] We want the European Union to add its national determining contribution strategies under the Paris Agreement, to achieve an 80 % reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 in order to reach net zero by 2035. We also want them to add that to European climate legislation. This is more ambitious than the actual goal of the Green New Deal because the actual goal is to decrease internal emissions by 60 %. The location of where goods are produced is not taken into account, therefore these emissions are not taken into consideration. This is an issue as we import quite a lot. International flights and sea transportation are not counted in those emissions. We want a tax code, a carbon cap regulation that this tax will be applied at European Union borders. In other words, imported products will be taxed according to the amount of greenhouse gases emitted during production. Companies that have environmental commitments can then compete with international brands, which right now they cannot do. We propose that no free trade agreement be signed with partner countries that do not follow a 1.5 % compatible path according to the Climate Action Tracker. And the last important part, especially for me, is that the EU develop free educational material for all Member State curricula on the effects of climate change.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:07:59] So, these are the four big asks of your ECI, and we know the science, but in my daily work I speak to industry. To get their support for your ECI, what would you say to them?

Paula Reyes [00:08:08] We have two different scenarios because we have small companies that don't have the knowledge or the money to adapt to climate change. And then we have the big companies. They are strong enough to adapt to climate change and even to mitigate the effects. I think the power is in us, as people. We are used to voting today, and then in four years we are so quiet, believing that the government is going to do everything for us, but we have to use the power that we have in our everyday life. We have to use it to be a powerful community of people committed to climate change and work really hard to pressure the government and to pressure these big companies to change their ways and to change the system because the way they are working and the legislations that are established are not enough to change their reality. To be comfortable now, we cannot risk the future. I dedicated almost two years of my life to this ECI. To the people at home, it takes five minutes to help us achieve these dreams. They only need three minutes to sign the petition and then two minutes to share it on their social media or in messaging groups. In this way, those kinds of actions, even though it seems simple, are political actions. The web page is eci.fridaysforfuture.org, and there you can sign the petition, and you can follow our social media to know more about our initiative and campaigns. Remember, every day you take your children to school and pay for lessons such as music, English etc., so that they can have a good future. However, a good future is only possible if we are ambitious with climate goals.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:10:33] Ok, Paula, thank you so much for your time. Thanks for sharing your story and all that information on your ECI with us here on CitizenCentral. Best of luck.

Paula Reyes [00:10:42] Thank you!

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:10:44] Let's now get some insight into this ECI and bring in policy expert Annika Hedberg from Finland. Annika is the head of Sustainable Prosperity for the Europe Programme at the European Policy Centre. Annika, thanks for speaking to us here on CitizenCentral.

Annika Hedberg [00:10:59] Thank you so much for inviting me.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:11:01] Do you think the emission reduction plan could be more ambitious? What sectors do you think will find the transition more complex and why?

Annika Hedberg [00:11:08] The reality is that 2030 is around the corner, and already achieving a 55 % reduction will be a major effort. But obviously, the EU Member States know the direction we're heading towards and our interest to find ways to reduce our emissions as quickly as possible in Europe. What we do here is not enough alone, and it's essential that we use all means possible to engage in a race to the top. What we need to do in Europe, and more important than perhaps looking at increasing targets at the moment, is to achieve the 55 % reduction by 2030 that the Member States agreed to. And I fear that, unfortunately, EU Member States have tended to be pretty good at setting goals, but they tend to fall behind in implementing. So, it's essential that the stronger focus now be put on implementation, and we need to ensure that the policies and financing are fully aligned with our climate goals.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:12:03] I guess it's because industry is pulling back. Do you think industry is ready to make the shift?

Annika Hedberg [00:12:08] Actually, that's the positive message I would like to get across. I think that industry is making major efforts. I think there's a lot of buying in industry and there are a lot of businesses that are calling for high ambition, and they want to have a stable framework in which to operate. While the EU budget and EU spending concerning national budgets are very small, they cannot solve all the problems alone. It's a key instrument for us to get to 2030. However, I'm not fully convinced that it is sufficiently aligned with the goals we have set. I do see enormous gaps still in the policy and financing framework that we have created. So, we're not always sending out the right signals for the businesses, for industry, and also in trying to leverage private funding for the priority areas that we have identified. So, I think that how we use EU tools to signal where we want to go is very important, and funding and financing is one example of this.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:13:02] Thank you so much for your time, your expertise and analysis.

Annika Hedberg [00:13:06] Thank you.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:13:09] At CitizenCentral, we love catching up with and chatting to real citizens, so let's head now to the south of Germany to speak to Freidrich, a retired physicist who after working in the car industry for years, became a climate activist at the ripe age of 65 with 'Grandparents for Future.'

Freidrich Zywitz [00:13:26] I started on Twitter six years ago, and I must admit, I didn't know too much about climate change, but I learned a lot from the deniers. And then Greta became known, and I was fascinated by this girl. She displays so much emotion and such a clear message. And I felt it very deep in my heart. So, a couple of months later, in the summer, I attended my first demonstration, and I had a sign that said 'Grandparents for Future.' And the kids were so friendly, they loved it. The local press shot a photo of me, and they also loved it. So, I felt it was a good thing. And then we had WhatsApp groups; the question was, how could we reach people above 60 years of age? As you know, they are conservative. They don't want to know anything about climate. There was a demonstration all over the world with 1.5 million people that was so great. I watched it on Twitter. It started in New Zealand, then it was in Europe, then in the United States; almost all over the world. I'm not a climate scientist, but I'm a physicist. And what is very simple to me is the greenhouse gas effect and the curve that is shown in the news, and you can easily study this by satellite. They measure what comes from the sun and what escapes the earth. There is a difference, and that's climate. So, in the end, it is very easy. The next point is the argument that the climate changes all the time. Yes, it is true, but that's cherry-picking. Thousands of scientists came together and compared their results. And there is only one conclusion: climate change is manmade, and if we can cause it, we can also fix it.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:15:29] Although it only takes about five minutes to sign an ECI, launching one is another story. And gathering those one million signatures is time-consuming, but sometimes it's worth it. And you might just come back for more. Well, that was the case for our next guest, Helmut Burtscher-Schaden, a PhD in biochemistry who launched a successful ECI on banning glyphosate a few years ago. Now he's turning his attention to saving bees and imposing biodiversity with a new ECI asking to reduce the use of pesticides in agriculture while protecting pollinating crucial bees. Helmut, thank you so much for joining us at CitizenCentral. First of all, tell us about yourself and your ECI.

Helmut Burtscher [00:16:11] I work at an Austrian environmental NGO, Global 2000. We are part of Friends of the Earth, and the ECI is called 'Save Bees and Farmers.' And this is

what it aims for by reducing pesticides because we aimed to use all the energy that we took from our first ECI to reach the goal of getting rid of pesticides.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:16:35] So, essentially, Helmut, you can't get enough of ECIs!

Helmut Burtscher [00:16:38] Yes, it sounds a little bit like that. The first ECI that I was involved in was very interesting and also very successful because we got the one million signatures within less than five months. And we also got a really good response from the European Commission: they responded to our second demand, which was to reform the authorisation procedure for pesticides in Europe by legislative proposal. This made it necessary for the chemical industry to open their studies at the beginning of an authorisation procedure in Europe. I am not sure that this time we'll also make it because I think the pandemic made it quite difficult to get signatures, compared to our first ECI.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:17:27] But why is that? Because of the lack of physical contact? You would have thought that with the pandemic, with so many people online working remotely, they would have had more time perhaps to dedicate to reading and learning and then, in the end, signing up to such a thing.

Helmut Burtscher [00:17:41] This is something that may be true to some extent, but our plan for the ECI was to come out with stories, to go to the media, to make press conferences. And all this was not possible when there was a lockdown. Then we found that people were not interested. Everywhere in the media, there was only one big issue, which was, of course, an issue that changed the lives of everyone. And it was really difficult to get into the media.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:18:10] What a challenge. I know as I work in the media – I work as a journalist for Euronews – how tricky it is to crack into the media because, of course, as journalists, we get spammed with emails every single day. So, it is also about capturing the hearts of the journalists in question, who can then pitch the story to the newsroom. Of course, with COVID dominating the headlines all around the continent, I'm sure it has not been easy for you.

Helmut Burtscher [00:18:33] On the one side, yes. There are so many people, though, that did sign our ECI. And of course, we also got some political reactions to this ECI and maybe to the process of the global discussion. As you know, one month after we started, our main demand was to reduce pesticide use by 80 % by 2030. And then the new European Commission came out with the European Green Deal, and one of the most popular goals of the European Green Deal was to significantly reduce pesticides. This was the first step in December 2019. And it was the first time that the European Union was even talking about reducing the use of pesticides, not only reducing the risk. Then we were waiting for the 'Farm to Fork' strategy. How significant would that be? And with a 50 % reduction, this was more than we ever would have expected one year before.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:19:41] Do you think that insects are the least cared about type of biodiversity? Remind our listeners why the bee population is suffering so much.

Helmut Burtscher [00:19:50] Many people think only about honeybees because they are the most prominent, they are most often seen in nature as they are cultivated by men. We are losing insects of all kinds, but bees are at the centre of the discussion because they are so pivotal to the whole ecosystem. The other reason why I think it's a good attitude to use them as a key symbol for biodiversity is that they have a very important economic role.

The last report of the IPBES¹ gave some numbers, billions of dollars that bees are providing for agriculture. It's about more than honey. When you're talking about bees, it's apples, it's fruits and vegetables. Eighty per cent of the plants out there are dependent on pollinators. Therefore, it is clear to everyone that bees are necessary for us to survive. The first idea when we started this was to save biodiversity, save bees. But in our discussions, it was clear that we can only achieve this together with farmers because farmers have to step into this transition to another kind of agriculture. In fact, what we see is that the decline of bees goes hand in hand with the decline of small-scale farms because they provide diverse agriculture, but it is they that have to close their doors. In the European Union every three minutes one farm has to close. So, this is what is happening now, with a system that is supporting big farms and making it very difficult for small-scale farmers to survive.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:21:55] I guess the question is if people are listening and they want to sign your ECI, but they also want to make a difference as a consumer, what advice would you give to them? What can they do?

Helmut Burtscher [00:22:05] Of course, it makes a difference not only for your health but also for the ecosystem. If you're supporting organic farming, if you're buying organic products, if all Europeans would say we want organic products, or at least 80 % organic, the European landscape would look completely different from that alone. Organic food is more expensive in its production. But this doesn't help you as a private consumer when you're in the supermarket and measuring the cost; it is not viable to buy everything organic. I think this is something that we should change within the system. So, if the Common Agricultural Policy would just support this kind of farming, I think it would work well.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:23:02] Thank you so much. It was lovely speaking to you. Thanks for the chat and best of luck.

Helmut Burtscher [00:23:07] Thank you.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:23:10] Well, let's get more on this ECI and bring in an expert on pollinators. We'll head off now to UCD, the University College of Dublin, and speak to Dr Dara Stanley. She's an ecologist and a well-known lecturer and researcher in Ireland. Great to have you with us here on CitizenCentral.

Dr Dara Stanley [00:23:28] Thank you very much for having me.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:23:30] Can you tell us about yourself and your work?

Dr Dara Stanley [00:23:32] My research to date has focused on pollinating insects. These are bees and flies, butterflies, moths, and other insects that interact with plants and particularly flowers, helping them to reproduce.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:23:45] When it comes to synthetic pesticides, do you think they'll be gradually phased out? Or what do you think should happen?

Dr Dara Stanley [00:23:50] The issue around bees and pesticides is something that has been on the agenda for a while now. And I suppose pesticides are interesting. When

¹ [Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services | IPBES secretariat.](#)

people talk about pesticides, they often think of just insecticides; these are compounds that are used to kill insects. But actually the term 'pesticides' is broader, and pesticides include insecticides, but also fungicides that are used to control fungal diseases of plants, and herbicides that are used to control weeds. But pesticides, while targeting crop pests or weeds or fungal diseases, also come into contact with all of the other organisms that are present in farmland, for example, the earthworms in the soil, the carabid beetles that are eating crop pests or the pollinators that are pollinating crops. A lot of this biodiversity or a lot of these wild animals and insects are providing services back to agriculture. So when pesticides are applied to crops to protect them from crop pests, these other organisms can also come into contact with them. And that's where we've begun to realise that there are some issues. So, originally a lot of pesticides were assumed to be relatively safe for bees and other pollinators. But we've begun to realise over the last years that this might not be the case. Of course, some pesticides are registered. There's a whole suite of tests they have to go through for human health, for environmental health and so on. But traditionally, these tests were only based on something we call LD 50. These are tests where the pesticides are applied to bees; if they are at levels where 50 % of the bees die, then they are deemed to be unsafe. But what we've realised now through all the research that has come out is that these levels, which are used for pesticides initially registered to look at their safety, need to be a bit more stringent. So, it is important to look not just at honeybees, but also at other bees, bumblebees and solitary bees because we have a wide diversity of species in the EU. In Ireland, for example, we have 99 bee species. So, it's important to look not just at the honeybee, but at other bees as well because not all bees respond in the same way.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:25:50] Could you remind our listeners what food worldwide could look like without bees?

Dr Dara Stanley [00:25:56] Approximately 75 % of all of the crops that we grow globally benefit in some way from pollination largely by insects. These include things like food crops, nut crops, seed crops, apples, all of our berries, beans, peas. I often say to people that we wouldn't have coffee or chocolate; we wouldn't have a lot of the good things in life if it weren't for insects pollinating crops. In some instances, pollination services are managed, but the vast majority of pollination services in Europe and elsewhere are not provided by managed pollination; they are provided by wild pollinators. The other option is to mechanically replicate, and the only way of doing this is for humans to do it, which requires getting a paintbrush and transferring from one flower to another. And that's simply not sustainable or possible on the scale at which we currently produce our food.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:26:47] Thank you so much for joining us on CitizenCentral and sharing your expertise.

Dr Dara Stanley [00:26:51] No problem. It was great to chat.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:26:56] The daughter of one of the very first Greek organic farmers was studying sociology in Germany when she inherited the family farm in southern Greece. She wasn't really into farming, but her motivation was pretty high. So, to finish off our first chapter of CitizenCentral, we had to ask Sheila Darnos what the differences between ways of farming are, how agriculturists see what she's doing and what happens when you break the monograph culture, quit the pesticides and turn a patch into a food forest.

Sheila Damos [00:27:27] Traditional farming, the way they used to do it 100 years ago in Greece, was much more regenerative. You tried to create a complete ecosystem. You plan, for example, to support species in between your crop trees that are producing this organic matter or that are fixing nitrogen, supporting the biodiversity in your farm. I was speaking with some young farmers in my region, and when they told me, 'I didn't know I can farm without all these chemicals,' I was shocked, and this is what I want to change. People should at least know that they have the choice and also know how successfully you can farm without all this. For me, this is the future also for regenerative farming, to have a healthy social ecosystem, to have healthy relationships with your customers; resilient relationships. Seeing all this biodiversity, I think it is something unconsciously inside of human beings: we just feel calmer and more in harmony if we're in a biodiverse place rather than if we're in a monoculture.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:28:38] Well, that brings this edition of CitizenCentral to an end. Thank you so much to all our guests and of course to you for listening. And if you fancy finding out a little bit more about any of these ECIs, check out our show notes. You can also take a look at the ECI website or follow the ECIs' individual social media channels. And of course, if you want to propose a brand new ECI, you can head over to the ECI forum to learn more about how to get started. I'm Méabh Mc Mahon, and you've been listening to CitizenCentral.