

CitizenCentral CHAPTER 2 transcript

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Speaker 6 [00:00:24] None of the European nations will be part of the G8.

Speaker 7 [00:00:29] 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. COVID has had a major impact on ECI campaigns, but in times of adversity, communities got closer. It was the civil servants who were recognised as the true heroes of our time. And it is the son of two civil servants who is currently carrying out an ECI. Adam, tell us who you are, where you are from and what your ECI is about.

Adam Mazoyer [00:01:40] I am Adam Mazoyer and French, as you can probably tell from my accent, I'm 26 years old and a former student. Our initiative is the 'Civil Servant Exchange Programme,' which intends to launch a Europe-wide scheme that will offer 30 million civil servants working across the EU the right to gain work experience in another Member State. So, it can be seen as, what we unofficially call it, an Erasmus for civil servants. This voluntary exchange would take place in a similar service for a period between 2 and 12 months so that the participant can observe and learn how they work in other Member States, first to experience what it means to be European, because we deeply believe that the European Union is first a union of people before being a union of states, and second to develop a constant exchange of know-how with similar workers. So, for example, Swedish fire fighters can learn how Spanish fire fighters deal with forest management, or German nurses can learn from Bulgarian nurses how they treat patients and what medical practices they perform.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:02:49] How did you become so passionate about this topic, and how did you find out about the ECI?

Adam Mazoyer [00:02:54] Regarding the ECI, it was easy for us because we were students and learning about the European Union and the European institutions and law in a certain way. So, we were already used to this idea of a European initiative. One of my friends had the idea for this exchange, and we were thinking about how we could get involved in that; how could we help in practice? We were thinking about taking the Erasmus and making it much broader; how could we continue with this experience and bring people together from different nationalities? Sharing is important, and we wanted to see how we could develop that for civil servants.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:03:35] Have your parents signed up? What do they think of your ECI?

Adam Mazoyer [00:03:39] My parents are very happy. If this had existed when they were younger, they would probably have done it.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:03:49] People may be asking themselves: why do civil servants need their very own mobility programme?

Adam Mazoyer [00:03:54] In a lot of ways, you can learn from each other. Take fire fighters, for example: with climate change, we will have more and more fires in northern countries. However, they are not specifically used to that. But in southern countries such as Italy or Spain, they're used to this. So, having those types of exchanges will help public services in general, providing more training.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:04:19] Adam, why are you such a convinced European?

Adam Mazoyer [00:04:21] That's a good question. I've been a convinced European for years, I would say, because I think differences between countries could be more of an opportunity to learn than a burden in a lot of ways. I believe as Europeans we don't, in general, understand how lucky we are to have the European Union. And that is why I want to continue it. And that is why this programme is here, to make civil servants feel what it is like to be European. Of course, having a million signatures would be the best, but we're also trying to raise public and political awareness on this matter. Just having a political debate about it or bringing this idea out would be kind of a success for us.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:05:08] Well, thanks a million, Adam, for being with us on CitizenCentral. Best of luck to you getting those one million signatures. All the best.

Adam Mazoyer [00:05:15] Thank you very much.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:05:19] Open the newspaper or watch the evening news, and you have seen how many civil servants are already having to work transnationally. But last summer, fire fighters were teaming up well beyond national borders. And that's why, to get an expert opinion on transnational civil service, we reached out to the Federation of European Fire Officers Association to speak to Jakob Vedsted Andersen. He's a board member of the Danish Emergency Management Organisation and the executive director of the Greater

Copenhagen Fire Department. Jakob, thank you so much for joining us on CitizenCentral.

Jakob Vedsted Andersen [00:05:52] Thank you very much for having me.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:05:54] So, you have a fire officer development programme about to come out next year. Can you tell us exactly what it's about and how you got it going?

Jakob Vedsted Andersen [00:06:01] Actually, we're doing the first Officer Development Programme, as we call it, in March next year. We have for several years discussed how to establish a common development programme across the European countries because we see great potential in a joint focus and in developing leadership within the Fire Rescue Service. Because when we look at the challenges we'll be facing in the future, we see a great need for a great network, for great exchange of knowledge, in order to learn and be more efficient as a fire service. We also see into a future where the challenges that we face as a Fire Rescue Service will be even greater. So, we need to focus on how we can share and inspire each other to create an even better fire service in our own country. That is why we are focusing on developing a programme for the European fire offices across Europe.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:07:01] Is it true that being prepared is a fire fighter motto?

Jakob Vedsted Andersen [00:07:05] Absolutely. That is part of our DNA. You can say that we need to be prepared before it happens because when it has already happened, it's too late. And there's a lot of experience throughout Europe in the fire and rescue services. That is also what we're trying to share with this development programme.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:07:23] Jakob, had you ever heard of the ECI before we called you?

Jakob Vedsted Andersen [00:07:27] No, not until I heard it from you.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:07:29] What exactly do you think of this ECI?

Jakob Vedsted Andersen [00:07:31] It's a very good initiative. I think we're all a part of the European Union. We are citizens and we face the same challenges as well.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:07:39] Well, if Adam manages to get his programme up and running, we will pass your phone number on to them. Thank you so much, Jakob, for being with us on CitizenCentral.

Jakob Vedsted Andersen [00:07:47] Absolutely, that would be great. Thank you very much for having me.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:07:52] Now, understanding the extent of the civil service can be complex. It reaches far beyond schools, hospitals, courts and town halls, and for new Member States joining the European Union, there's a lot to learn! There are many changes in the ways of working for thousands of civil servants. That's why we're off to Bulgaria now to meet Pavel Ivanov, the executive director of the Bulgarian Institute of Public Administration.

Pavel Ivanov [00:08:18] So, the name of the institute was Institute of Public Administration and European Integration. These two played a huge role during the accession of Bulgaria to the EU. We are also running a project together with our Polish, Latvian and Hungarian colleagues. I believe that we should have more of these kinds of projects. We have to work more closely with the other Member States. For example, Bulgarian participants, people from the Ministry of Transport or the National Security Agency work not only with their counterparts but also with other officials; so these are top-level senior civil servants. I believe that if people are organised, they can change. They can change the legislation. That is where we need civil society to be more active. Civil society is only active if something wrong happens. So, basically, we need to have a strong civil society, even without something wrong happening. I aim to involve more international institutions, European institutions, and that is very important for the country here. One of the things that I see here after COVID is that people somehow try to work together more. People are happier to participate and to meet other people. For civil servants, I see that unity, the idea of coming and working together, is happening.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:10:05] For young people being brought up today in Europe, the EU is meant to be a borderless continent where they can travel freely and live and work where they choose. But in making that choice, do you keep your civic rights? That is exactly what our next guest is trying to achieve with the ECI 'Voters Without Borders.' Rosalie van den Brink wants every European to have voting rights in the Member State where they reside. Rosalie, tell us where you are joining us from today.

Rosalie van den Brink [00:10:32] Thank you for having me. I am joining you from Vienna, Austria, where I am now living.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:10:37] Where are you from?

Rosalie van den Brink [00:10:38] I'm originally from the Netherlands. I did my Erasmus here, and I've decided to stay and do my Master's from next semester on.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:10:47] Any plans to go back to the Netherlands? Or do you see your future in Vienna for a while?

Rosalie van den Brink [00:10:50] For a while in Vienna, and we'll see where the next exchange semester will take me.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:10:55] And what age are you?

Rosalie van den Brink [00:10:56] I'm twenty-four.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:10:58] Did this experience of living in Vienna inspire you to join this ECI?

Rosalie van den Brink [00:11:03] Yes. The first time I got here was right around the national elections in Austria, and it was the first sort of realisation that that elections in another country where you live for a while or for longer can have such an impact. So, that definitely sparked an interest in the ECI.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:11:24] So, with that, tell our listeners about your ECI, 'Voters Without Borders.'

Rosalie van den Brink [00:11:30] 'Voters Without Borders' is an ECI that wants to increase democratic rights for EU citizens. As of now, EU citizens living in a different Member State than where they're originally from can vote on a municipal level and on a European level, but they cannot participate in regional elections and national elections and referendums, and we think that's an issue because it sort of feels that you have to exchange your right to freedom of movement and your European experience for more difficulty with voting or for your voting rights in general and being disenfranchised. That's what we want to address on a European level.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:12:08] Remind our listeners why this is the case, why they can only vote in local and European elections and not in national elections.

Rosalie van den Brink [00:12:14] Voting rights are still connected to your nationality so depending on where your passport was issued, that is where you can vote. Then, the Treaty of Maastricht outlined the rights you have as an EU citizen, but that is still connected to your passport as well as your nationality. So, that is the most important in this case.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:12:37] I know a lot of the international community here in Brussels; people who have been here for many years, over 10 years, for example, who came perhaps to do a Stage with the European Commission, and 10 years later, they realise that they're still here. They might have a family, and many are contemplating obtaining Belgian nationality just so that they can vote in the national elections.

Rosalie van den Brink [00:12:55] Yes, people often stay a lot longer than they anticipated. I, for example, only moved here for an Erasmus semester and was supposed to go back, but I ended up staying for longer. So, I'm wondering what this will bring for my future. Luckily, my country, the Netherlands, doesn't disenfranchise me after a certain period abroad, but five EU Member States do that. So, people living abroad for a certain amount of time can lose their voting rights for the period they're abroad in their home country as well, which makes them sort of stuck in a place where they don't have any rights at all.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:13:27] Tell us about your involvement with this ECI. How has the journey been so far and what have you achieved? Have you sparked a

big debate about this already amongst friends, amongst family, amongst contacts?

Rosalie van den Brink [00:13:39] Working on an ECI is really interesting because, first of all, it is not very well known. But then you find that working on a big issue such as voting rights has a lot of counterparts in different European Member States, other organisations that are quite small and quite dispersed across the EU but are fighting for similar goals. So, it's great to connect with those people. Starting a debate from an ECI in my friends and family circles, I'm adamant about talking to as many people as I can, but on a bigger spectrum, I think it's quite difficult. I think some ECIs have a very clear message, but with voting rights people are often a bit more taken aback by such a big issue. But it is really important, especially with my friends in Erasmus circles or people who want to go abroad: they are now starting to think about this and how it might impact their future as well, taking up studies abroad and seeing where it takes them.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:14:39] Do you find that for those who do on Erasmus, the so-called Erasmus generation, it's kind of a no-brainer that this should be a right? And for the older generation perhaps not so much?

Rosalie van den Brink [00:14:48] Regarding my generation, especially, we are born with open borders. That is completely obvious to us. When the borders closed during COVID, I was like, 'What do you mean I can't go across?' So, that's completely new, and I think people of my generation often take it as a given that it is possible, and they have such a drive to go to a different EU Member State, learn another language and have a different experience. But with voting rights, you start to think about it once it sort of happens. So, when there are elections back home and you suddenly have to register as a voter abroad or when there are elections and your friends are discussing who to vote for, then you start to think, 'OK, why is it not possible for me? Why can't I join in this democratic discussion?' I think it is quite important for the older generation as well because we encounter a lot of people who have been living abroad for many years already and have concerns that we will probably have in the coming years. For example, what happens with your pension? What happens if I want to spend my retirement in a different EU Member State?

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:15:50] How long do you think somebody should reside in a country before they get voting rights?

Rosalie van den Brink [00:15:54] I think there is a European directive stating that after five years, an EU citizen has the right to permanent residence. So, I believe this would be a good target to keep.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:16:06] If your ECI, 'Voters Without Borders,' is accepted, what do you think should happen with your home country's right to vote?

Rosalie van den Brink [00:16:12] For us, it's important that people have a choice. So, with EU elections, people have a choice where they want to vote. I could choose if I wanted to vote here in Austria or in the Netherlands, and that

would then be registered so I couldn't have a double vote. I think that would be a good solution. And then there is a similar system that keeps track of that.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:16:31] So lovely to talk to you today on CitizenCentral. Thank you so much for your time.

Rosalie van den Brink [00:16:35] Thank you for having me.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:16:40] Well, we've got the latest there from Rosalie, so let's bring in an EU expert now and speak to Tobias Lock, a German based in Ireland. He's a Jean Monnet professor of EU law at the National University of Ireland, in Maynooth. Toby, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast. How are you?

Tobias Lock [00:16:56] I'm very well. How are you?

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:16:58] Very well and happy that I can speak to you and hear what you think of this ECI.

Tobias Lock [00:17:04] Well, it's an interesting ECI, because it touches on a real gap that we have in EU citizenship. Everyone who has an EU passport, who has the nationality of any EU Member State, is also an EU citizen, and that allows us to move from one Member State to another and live there. We have a right to vote, but only in local elections and in the European Parliament elections, and this ECI wants to give to us – to those of us who have moved to another Member State and live there and have made a life there – the right to vote in national elections, which are still in most Member States, if not all, the most important ones.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:17:46] And why is it not the case?

Tobias Lock [00:17:48] It's very difficult to say; there is no clear evidence. I think that when the Member States introduced EU citizenship in the Maastricht Treaty, one of the reasons they didn't give people who've moved to another Member State the right to vote in national elections was political. I don't think politicians thought it was a particularly good idea to allow foreigners the right to vote. But I also think that there's a legal background to it, especially in Germany, where the Constitutional Court negotiated that you cannot extend the right to vote even in local elections to foreign nationals. I think that is where the German government, at least, would have gotten cold feet. They would have said, 'We can deal with local elections, but we have to change the Constitution.' However, national elections are a different kettle of fish, and therefore we don't want to go there. And I can imagine that maybe similar considerations played a part in other Member States.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:18:46] A different kettle of fish, indeed. It's funny, though, isn't it, Toby? Because so many young people as well are growing up in a borderless continent, and they're used to using the euro. When they travel around, they have the freedom to move between the Schengen zones. They don't even have to show their passports; but voting rights are just not a given.

And I guess it's just very frustrating for young people. We can see that with Rosalie: she lives in Vienna, but she's from the Netherlands, and for her, she thinks it should be a given. Are there any countries in the EU where you do have this right?

Tobias Lock [00:19:14] Well, I am not aware of any country in the EU that universally extends the franchise to foreign nationals or even just EU nationals who live there permanently. That area of nationality law and also the right to vote are very idiosyncratic, and they differ from Member State to Member State. But as a rule, almost all Member States restrict the right to vote in national elections and national referendums. So, you do have large proportions of populations in the EU who are excluded from the right to vote, even though they currently live in the Member State concerned; they pay their taxes there, they pay their social insurance contributions and all sorts of things, but they can't vote. And they can't stand for election either; that is the other side of the right to vote. You should have the right to vote, the active right to cast the vote. You should also have the right to stand for election in the country where you live.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:20:08] So, tell me, do you think this ECI will fly?

Tobias Lock [00:20:12] Well, I don't know whether it'll get one million signatures. I personally wish them good luck. It's a great topic and I enjoy this.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:20:21] Well, great. Thanks a million. Thanks for joining us.

Tobias Lock [00:20:23] Thank you.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:20:26] Well, as we saw in our first chapter, gathering one million signatures seems easy at the start. But then campaigning is tricky. Getting people to sign is often a big challenge. But since 2020, there's been what's called the ECI forum: a powerful tool to support all ECIs, giving advice and information to organisers before, during and after the process of launching and implementing an initiative. To find out more, let's bring in Assya Kavrakova. Assya, thanks so much for being with us on CitizenCentral.

Assya Kavrakova [00:20:58] The pleasure is entirely mine.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:21:00] First of all, tell us about yourself, who you are and what you do.

Assya Kavrakova [00:21:05] I'm Assya Kavrakova, the director of the European Citizen Action Service. We are a European association. This year marks our 30th anniversary; 30 years of empowering citizens to exercise their rights. So, what we campaign for is a democratic and citizen-centric union where the rights of European citizens are at the heart of the European project, and we support European citizens to exercise both their EU-related rights, the ones linked to the freedom of movement in the EU, and their participation rights. This is where, in the whole picture, the European Citizens' Initiative comes in,

because this is a very central right, which provides the opportunity to citizens to put issues on the agenda of the European Union.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:21:53] Assya, if one of our listeners wants to register an ECI, where should they start? How do they go about this process?

Assya Kavrakova [00:21:59] First, of course, it is very important for anyone who wants to launch an ECI to decide if the European Citizens' Initiative is the right tool for them. And then your second step should be to check if there are any ongoing initiatives on this subject because if there is an ongoing initiative, then you'd better join it. You have to make sure of one very important thing: that whatever you want to achieve in terms of legislation falls within the competencies of the European Union. So, if you are in doubt, you can ask our legal experts for advice. If they tell you that yes, you can go ahead, then you can start with the official registration process.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:22:44] What tools exactly are you offering to initiative leaders at this ECI forum?

Assya Kavrakova [00:22:50] What we are managing is the European Citizens' Initiative Forum, which is an online, collaborative, multilingual platform for organisers which they can use to have access to plenty of very rich learning materials. There is also a 'Connect' function that allows you to connect with other users of the forum, which you may find to have similar thoughts or intentions on the subjects of your concern. And last but not least, the 'Seek Advice' section, which allows organisers and also all citizens interested to get very specialised tailored advice on fundraising issues, campaigning issues and also the legal basis of their initiatives.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:23:37] Is it used by many leaders?

Assya Kavrakova [00:23:39] At present, one-third of the registered initiatives have benefitted from this advice because, of course, it is difficult to know what falls within the competence of the European Union if you do not have a legal background.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:23:52] What is the secret to a successful ECI?

Assya Kavrakova [00:23:55] A campaign well-prepared in advance is crucial for the success because one million signatures is easier said than done.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:24:03] So, you have to be very hands-on.

Assya Kavrakova [00:24:05] Many things can happen internally in your network. Many things can happen in the environment around you; you need to keep a certain level of flexibility so that when you see that something is not going according to your plan, you can immediately set up an alternative plan.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:24:22] Thank you so much, Assya, for being with us.

Assya Kavrakova [00:24:25] Thank you.

Méabh Mc Mahon [00:24:28] 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.