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Web Startups Empower Grassroots Politics

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[\[PDF\]](#)

Giving a voice to regular citizens is crucial for the success of the EU. In some European countries, web platforms collecting initiatives and signatures have spurred increased levels of interest and participation in the political process. At the official EU level, however, the “European Citizens’ Initiative” [website](#) has failed so far to produce even one initiative that meets all requirements.



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Latvian law mandates any proposal with more than 10,000 signatures to be discussed by the Parliament. Online platform www.ManaBalss.lv (which translates as “My Voice”), a start-up by twenty-four year old [Kristofs Blaus](#), is igniting grassroots political engagement in Latvia, a country that has one of the lowest levels of trust in government institutions. With a score of 54 in the [Corruption Perceptions Index](#), the country is ranked among the six most corrupt in the European Union. The website allows citizens to create petitions and e-sign existing ones. Nearly five decades of Soviet communism and two more of Russian-style “oligarch” politics had weakened Latvians’ faith in the political process. Thanks to Mr. Blaus’ website, this all could be changing.

Other EU countries are already using similar platforms. Finland’s “[Open Ministry](#)” is a successful online platform for the “Citizens’ Initiative Act,” where proposals such as banning fur farming or allowing gay marriage have successfully gathered the required 50,000 signatures and been sent to the Parliament for voting.

At the executive level in the European Union, the lack of success of the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) is understandable. Requirements such as collecting one million signatures from at least seven member states within one year prevented any initiative to meet all conditions. Heavy technical language and bureaucratic hurdles in the European law-making process added to the lack of interest in the program.

The issue is particularly sensitive in Europe where important EU Institutions are not perceived as particularly democratic. Martin Schulz, the president of the European Parliament, noted in March 2013 that the directly elected Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) do not have legislative initiative power and that the European Commission does have that power: “This is an undemocratic mix of legislative and executive powers. We need to

reform the commission and parliamentarise Europe.” European news outlets quickly picked up his remark likening the EU’s institutional set-up to a “[Frankenstein monster](#).” Currently, the European Commission – the EU “government” – is the sole institution in the Union that can initiate legislation.

The EuroPoint: For good or bad, the Internet is now reaching deeper into the world of politics in the EU and changing it with participatory activities that revitalize the term democracy.

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