

Too Far to Reach? Explaining Low Croatian Participation in the European Citizens' Initiative

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Abstract

This article explores the dynamics of Croatian citizen participation in the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), with a particular focus on explaining the notably low level of engagement since Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013. The study establishes a quantitative baseline of Croatian involvement in ECIs and presents qualitative insights from focus group discussions with students of political science, journalism, and European studies, as well as interviews with CSOs who have participated in ECIs. By combining these methods, the article identifies key barriers and opportunities for increasing Croatian engagement in ECIs. The analysis seeks to understand why Croatian citizens participate significantly less in ECIs compared to broader EU trends. The findings point to a lack of awareness, perceived ineffectiveness, and procedural complexity as major obstacles, while strong CSOs' involvement and targeted communication strategies emerge as critical factors for improving participation. This research contributes to the broader discourse on participatory democracy in the EU by addressing the challenges faced by newer member states such as Croatia.

Keywords

citizen participation; Croatia; European Citizens' Initiative; European Union; participatory democracy

1. Introduction

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon, was envisioned as a means of enhancing participatory democracy within the EU. As a transnational mechanism that allows EU citizens to directly propose legislative action to the European Commission, the ECI is generally perceived as a unique tool for citizen engagement in the policymaking process. If an initiative garners one million signatures from at least seven different EU member states, the European Commission is requested to consider the proposal,

though it retains discretion over whether to act. As an essential link between EU citizens and supranational decision-making, the ECI offers an important bottom-up participatory mechanism that complements the representative democratic processes within the EU. From the outset, the ECI was met by high expectations, being envisioned as a groundbreaking tool for fostering a vibrant European public sphere and bridging the EU's democratic deficit.

Since its establishment, the ECI has attracted substantial academic interest. A growing body of literature has focused on assessing the effectiveness of the implementation of this instrument (Anglmayer, 2015; Boussaguet, 2016; Bouza García et al., 2012; Sangsari, 2013), identifying its main limitations (Glogowski & Maurer, 2013; Weisskircher, 2020), evaluating the ECI's potential impact on building up a European civil society (Conrad, 2016; De Clerck-Sachsse, 2012; Glogowski & Maurer, 2013; Kaufmann, 2012), strengthening the EU democratic system (Greenwood, 2019; Sangsari, 2013), mobilizing stronger citizens engagement (Monaghan, 2012), or even enhancing a positive image about the EU (Gherghina & Groh, 2016). A somewhat limited number of studies investigated the factors leading to its lower or greater use (Kentmen-Cin, 2014), especially at the level of individual member states.

However, the empirical record of the ECI has been more sobering. Despite its potential to democratize EU policymaking, participation in ECIs has varied significantly across member states (ECI Forum, 2024). While certain initiatives have managed to gather widespread support, many have struggled to meet the signature thresholds. This inconsistency in participation poses questions about the accessibility, visibility, and effectiveness of ECIs as a tool for citizen participation, particularly in newer EU member states such as Croatia, where engagement remains notably low.

Since joining the EU in 2013, Croatia has demonstrated a rather low level of citizen participation in ECIs. Croatia's share of 0,58% of signatures in all successful ECIs from 2013 until 2024 (ECI Forum, 2024) appears low in absolute terms but is better interpreted on a per capita basis, relative to its population share of approximately 0.85% of the EU total. Nonetheless, when considering the ECI's initial promise to act as a catalyst for active European citizenship, such modest participation signals a broader underperformance relative to expectations. The reasons behind this limited involvement among Croatian citizens are complex and multifaceted, potentially tied to a combination of socio-political, cultural, administrative, and institutional factors. This article seeks to address this gap by analyzing the dynamics behind Croatian citizens' low engagement in ECIs and exploring potential pathways to increased participation.

Croatia is selected as a critical case study for several reasons. As a relatively recent EU member state with a post-socialist democratic tradition, Croatia offers a valuable lens to understand the challenges of building participatory democratic practices through supranational instruments such as the ECI. Its persistently low levels of participation, despite formal opportunities for engagement, make it a revealing case for exploring the barriers and limitations of transnational participatory democracy within newer EU member states.

The primary aim of this article is to explain the factors behind the low level of Croatian citizens' participation in ECIs. To this end, the article addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How does Croatian citizens' participation in ECIs compare quantitatively to that of other EU member states since Croatia's accession?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of ECIs among civil society organizations (CSOs) and young Croatian citizens, particularly students involved in ECI-supporting projects?

RQ3: Given the limited participation, what barriers to ECI participation are identified by these actors?

RQ4: What structural, cultural, and institutional factors may account for Croatia's comparatively lower engagement in ECIs?

In addressing these questions, the article aims to contribute to the broader discourse on participatory democracy within the EU and provide actionable insights into how ECI participation can be strengthened in Croatia.

The findings identify a lack of awareness, perceived ineffectiveness, and procedural complexity as major obstacles. Strong CSOs' involvement and targeted communication strategies emerge as critical for improving participation.

Thus, while the ECI was designed to democratize EU governance and foster active citizenship, Croatia's persistently low levels of participation illustrate the challenges of translating this normative ambition into tangible political engagement. Understanding this gap between aspiration and reality is crucial for evaluating the ECI's broader effectiveness as an instrument of participatory democracy.

The article is structured as follows. First, a theoretical framework and literature review will provide an overview of existing research on participatory democracy and citizen engagement within the EU, with a particular focus on ECIs. Next, the article will present a descriptive statistical analysis of Croatian citizens' participation in ECIs since the country's accession to the EU. The subsequent section presents qualitative insights from focus group discussions with students of political science, journalism, and European studies, who have been involved in ECI-supporting projects, as well as interviews with Croatian CSOs involved in ECIs. Taking into account the methodological limitations of this research, the findings will then be synthesized to discuss the multifaceted factors influencing Croatian citizens' engagement in ECIs. Finally, the article will conclude with recommendations for improving citizen participation and suggest directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Participatory democracy refers to a model of democracy where citizens are directly involved in the decision-making process, rather than solely through their elected representatives (Barber, 2004; Pateman, 1970, 2012). This concept emphasizes the inclusion of citizens in governance beyond traditional voting mechanisms, providing platforms through which they can express their preferences and influence policy outputs. Within the EU, participatory democracy is embedded in the legal framework, notably through Article 11 of the Treaty on the EU, which underscores the role of citizens and civil society in shaping EU policy.

As the first transnational participatory tool in the world, the ECI intends to foster a more inclusive and citizen-centred form of governance (Dogan, 2011). As part of the EU's broader strategy to enhance legitimacy and reduce the "democratic deficit" (Føllesdal & Hix, 2006), the ECI is designed to function as an

institutional bridge between EU citizens and supranational decision-making. Despite its innovative nature, the actual impact of ECIs in fostering widespread citizen participation remains contested, with concerns about its complexity and effectiveness (Boussaguet, 2016; Bouza Garcia & Greenwood, 2014; Longo, 2019). In practice, the ECI's promise has often fallen short, particularly in newer member states such as Croatia, where engagement levels remain low. This highlights the relevance of examining how Croatia's specific socio-political context shapes its citizens' participation in ECIs. Understanding why Croatia deviates from the broader EU ambitions requires situating its case within broader theories of political participation and civic engagement, while also identifying Croatia-specific barriers.

Theories of political participation and civic engagement provide a critical lens for understanding the individual-level, organizational, structural, and institutional factors that influence citizen involvement in democratic processes. The civic voluntarism model is one of the most influential frameworks (Verba et al., 1995), proposing that political participation is shaped by three primary factors: resources (time, money, and civic skills), psychological engagement (political interest, efficacy), and recruitment networks (organizations that mobilize citizens). This model offers valuable insights into understanding individual and organizational barriers that may prevent Croatian citizens from participating in ECIs, such as limited awareness, perceptions of low responsiveness of EU institutions to citizens' demands (external political efficacy), and weak mobilization networks. In Croatia, these weaknesses are compounded by historically low civic skills levels and limited recruitment by CSOs for EU-level participatory mechanisms.

Numerous studies have identified structural barriers to participation. Putnam's (2000) work on social capital emphasizes the importance of trust, networks, and civic norms in fostering collective action. According to Putnam, societies with higher levels of social capital are more likely to engage in civic and political activities. This theoretical insight is particularly pertinent to Croatia, where empirical evidence suggests a persistently weak tradition of collective civic action. In the Croatian context, persistently low levels of interpersonal trust and underdeveloped civic traditions—legacies of the post-socialist transition—pose significant barriers to citizen mobilization for transnational participatory mechanisms like the ECI. Empirical studies have documented widespread societal mistrust, including towards CSOs, and a historically weak culture of civic engagement, both of which hinder effective utilization of EU-level participatory instruments (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Bovan & Baketa, 2022).

Similarly, Dalton's (2008) concept of "engaged citizenship" underscores the role of post-materialist values, in which individuals are more likely to engage in non-institutionalized forms of participation, such as signing petitions or participating in initiatives like the ECI, if they value self-expression and individual empowerment. However, Croatian political culture, shaped by economic insecurities and institutional distrust, may limit the prevalence of such post-materialist engagement (Bovan & Baketa, 2022). Thus, Croatia may be less fertile ground for the non-institutionalized forms of political action that ECIs require, compared to older member states.

Recent sociological literature has also explored how perceived cultural distance from political elites and institutions can shape citizens' willingness to participate. Citizens may perceive EU-level actors as socially and culturally distant, reinforcing their belief that "people like them" are not taken seriously in Brussels (Manning & Holmes, 2014; Noordzij et al., 2021; Visser et al., 2023). In newer or less-integrated member states such as Croatia, this emotional distance, often rooted in class, education, or regional divides, can

amplify existing distrust and disengagement from EU participatory mechanisms. These findings offer important conceptual tools for understanding why even informed or politically active citizens may feel alienated from transnational democratic instruments like the ECI.

Fuchs and Klingemann's (1995) theory of "political culture" also provides a useful framework for understanding varying levels of civic engagement across EU member states. Their work suggests that historical, cultural, and institutional legacies shape the degree to which citizens feel connected to and empowered by democratic mechanisms. Given Croatia's relatively short experience with democratic institutions and its relatively recent EU membership, lower engagement with supranational participatory instruments like the ECI aligns with these theoretical expectations.

Other authors have highlighted additional structural challenges contributing to low levels of participation in ECIs in different EU member states. These include limited media coverage, low levels of trust in EU institutions, and a general lack of civic education focused on the EU's participatory mechanisms (Bouza Garcia, 2015). Furthermore, Motti-Stefanidi and Cicognani (2018) note that although young people are generally more inclined towards non-institutional forms of political participation, they remain largely unaware of the ECI as a tool for influencing EU legislation, despite their increasing interest in political issues at the national and EU levels. The case of Croatia, marked by limited civic education on EU participatory tools (Bajkuša & Šarić, 2021), exemplifies these broader structural obstacles.

To address these issues, scholars such as Greenwood (2019) and Alemanno (2020) have proposed reforms to make the ECI more accessible, including simplifying the signature collection process, increasing institutional support for organizing committees, and promoting the ECI more vigorously across member states. While these reforms are yet to be fully implemented, they reflect a growing consensus on the need to adapt the ECI to better serve its intended purpose of enhancing participatory democracy within the EU.

Since the introduction of the ECI, numerous studies have sought to evaluate the effectiveness of its institutional characteristics in promoting citizen participation. According to Bouza Garcia and Greenwood (2014), the ECI has faced significant institutional challenges in achieving its democratic potential. They argue that while the ECI was envisioned as a tool to bridge the gap between EU institutions and citizens, its procedural complexity, legal restrictions, and the high threshold of signatures have limited its accessibility to ordinary citizens. Similarly, Boussaguet (2016) notes that only a small percentage of ECIs have successfully gathered the necessary signatures to trigger a formal response from the European Commission, thus raising questions about the initiative's overall effectiveness.

In Croatia, these general barriers—complexity, procedural hurdles, and lack of visibility—intersect with local factors such as limited media attention to EU affairs, weak civic infrastructures, and citizens' emotional detachment from EU-level governance (Ilišin, 2007).

In terms of participation trends, studies have shown that ECI engagement tends to be higher in older, more established EU member states, particularly those with a stronger tradition of civic activism and participatory politics (Monaghan, 2012). In contrast, participation in newer member states, such as those from Central and Eastern Europe, including Croatia, has remained consistently low. One key reason for this, according to Greenwood and Tuokko (2017), is the lack of visibility and public awareness of the ECI mechanism in these

countries. Additionally, they argue that institutional barriers, such as the lack of support from national governments or CSOs, have further impeded the successful mobilization of citizens in these regions.

Longo (2019) provides additional important insights into the ECI as a tool for enhancing citizen participation within EU governance. His analysis highlights several key challenges associated with the ECI. First, Longo points to e-democracy limitations, emphasizing the difficulties of engaging a diverse European citizenry through digital platforms—a problem also relevant in the Croatian context, where low public awareness and technological barriers exist. He also underscores low civil society participation, noting that significant public and NGOs' involvement is crucial for ECI success, aligning with the role of NGOs identified in Croatian campaigns. Lastly, Longo criticizes the cumbersome role of the European Commission, which complicates the transition from successful ECI campaigns to legislative action, echoing concerns about the perceived ineffectiveness of ECIs. His advocacy for reforming the ECI process to make it a more viable democratic tool complements discussions around the broader democratic deficit and Euroscepticism, offering a foundation for considering reforms that could improve engagement and participatory democracy in both Croatia and the EU at large (Longo, 2019).

Regarding the organizational aspect of ECIs, CSOs are often seen as essential intermediaries between citizens and EU institutions, but their ability to truly represent and mobilize the public is increasingly questioned. Kohler-Koch (2010) introduces the concept of “astroturf representation,” where CSOs claim to speak on behalf of citizens but, in reality, lack strong grassroots connections. Many of these organizations, particularly those operating at the EU level, are highly professionalized and well-integrated into policymaking networks, yet remain detached from everyday concerns of ordinary citizens. This creates a paradox: While CSOs are expected to bridge the gap between the public and decision-makers, they often reinforce democratic deficits by engaging in symbolic rather than substantive representation. Instead of broad civic participation, EU funding structures tend to favour established, well-resourced organizations, making it even harder for smaller, more community-driven groups to gain influence. In Croatia, the relative weakness of grassroots-driven CSOs and shrinking space for civic action (Freedom House, 2024; Narsee et al., 2023) further limits their potential to mobilize citizens for ECIs effectively.

Building on this critique, Albareda (2018) examines whether CSOs function as genuine transmission belts that channel citizens' interests into policymaking. His findings suggest that only a small fraction manages to strike a balance between grassroots engagement and policy influence. Many CSOs, while technically well-equipped to interact with decision-makers, struggle to involve their members in shaping their positions. This professionalization trend, reinforced by financial reliance on EU funding, often pushes them away from grassroots activism and towards a more technocratic, elite-driven advocacy model. In the case of ECIs, this raises an important question of whether low participation in Croatia and other member states is purely a result of public disengagement, or it is also a symptom of civil society's limited ability to mobilize citizens in a meaningful way. If CSOs are to truly empower citizens, they must find ways to reconnect with their base and ensure that participation is not just a procedural formality but a driver of real democratic engagement.

Based on the literature review and empirical findings, the analytical framework for examining the low level of Croatian citizen engagement in ECIs is structured across four interconnected levels: individual, organizational, institutional, and structural. This multi-level approach reflects both general barriers identified in existing research and Croatia-specific obstacles revealed through qualitative data.

At the individual level, key determinants include civic literacy (awareness and understanding of ECIs), digital skills, prior experience with political or civic engagement, and perceptions of internal and external political efficacy—that is, beliefs in one’s ability to influence politics and in the system’s responsiveness. As highlighted in the focus group discussions, low familiarity with ECIs, emotional distance from EU institutions, and perceptions of limited impact collectively hinder citizens’ motivation to engage.

At the organizational level, CSOs serve as crucial intermediaries for public mobilization, but their effectiveness depends on financial, administrative, and human resources, as well as their capacity to develop targeted strategies and form coalitions. In the Croatian context, as shown in CSO interviews, many organizations participate in ECI campaigns only passively or as national partners, lacking the resources or transnational networks to take a leading role in mobilization.

At the institutional level, procedural complexity and legal uncertainty remain significant barriers. The European Commission’s discretionary power in following up on successful ECIs, combined with limited institutional support at the national level, contributes to perceptions of futility and reduces the incentive for sustained engagement. Croatian CSOs expressed scepticism about the responsiveness of EU institutions and noted the absence of meaningful government support or public co-financing mechanisms.

At the structural level, broader socio-political and cultural conditions—including low levels of trust in institutions, weak traditions of civic activism, minimal civic education on EU participatory tools, and limited media coverage—create systemic obstacles. These factors are particularly pronounced in Croatia’s post-socialist context, where social capital remains underdeveloped, and civic engagement is often fragmented or confined to narrow activist circles.

These four levels collectively shape the feasibility and intensity of citizen engagement in ECIs and provide a framework for analyzing Croatia’s comparatively low participation (see Table 1).

Table 1. Analytical framework for explaining low Croatian participation in ECIs.

Level	General Dimension	Croatia-Specific Challenges
Individual	Civic literacy, political awareness, efficacy perceptions	Low awareness of ECIs, weak internal/external efficacy, political disengagement
Organizational	CSO capacity and mobilization strategies	Weak CSO–EU linkages, fragmented sector, low mobilization in ECI agenda-setting
Institutional	Procedural rules, legal barriers, EU responsiveness	Complex procedures, Commission’s discretionary power, perceived lack of policy impact
Structural	Civic culture, trust, media visibility, civic education	Weak civic traditions, low social capital, limited media coverage, minimal EU-focused curricula

So far, there have been no studies on the scope of engagement of Croatian citizens in ECIs or the factors influencing their engagement. This article aims to contribute to the literature in this field by shedding light on specific challenges of engaging in ECIs in new EU member states, with potential theoretical and practical implications, especially in the context of EU efforts to promote citizen participation and active civil society in candidate countries pursuing EU accession.

3. Methodology

This exploratory study adopts a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Clark, 2018), combining both quantitative and qualitative data to gain a comprehensive understanding of Croatian citizen participation in ECIs. The quantitative component involves the descriptive analysis of existing statistical data on Croatian engagement in ECIs since the country's accession to the EU. This data provides a baseline for understanding overall participation trends and allows for comparisons with other EU member states.

Concurrently, the qualitative component of the study draws on insights from four interviews with representatives of prominent CSOs in Croatia, complemented by three focus group discussions with 25 students. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, the study leverages the strengths of each approach—quantitative analysis ensures broader generalizability, while qualitative methods provide depth and contextual understanding of the findings.

The rationale for combining interviews and focus groups was to examine the four key factors influencing citizen participation. Interviews with CSO representatives primarily focused on organizational factors, whereas focus groups centred on individual-level determinants. Both methods were also employed to explore institutional and structural challenges to citizen participation in ECIs.

CSOs were selected for interviews based on their policy expertise in ECIs that successfully met the EU-level threshold of one million signatures but failed to collect the required minimum of 8,000 signatures in Croatia (see Section 4). By focusing on unsuccessful initiatives, rather than successful cases, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the persistent challenges these organizations encounter in mobilizing citizens for ECI signature collection in Croatia. The semi-structured interview protocol included questions on CSOs' experiences with ECIs, their motivations for participation, organizational challenges in citizen mobilization, institutional barriers to engagement, and structural obstacles to broader public involvement.

However, it is important to acknowledge that selecting only CSOs involved in unsuccessful campaigns introduces a potential selection bias. These organizations may be more likely to highlight barriers and limitations rather than enablers of citizen mobilization, which should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

Moreover, all interviewed CSOs were Croatian-based organizations that participated as national-level partners in larger ECI campaigns initiated primarily by Brussels-based actors. They were not primary agenda-setters but rather supporters at the national level. This distinction suggests that Croatian CSOs, although engaged, have limited strategic influence in shaping or steering ECI campaigns. This national-level positioning may contribute to the relatively low mobilization success observed in Croatia.

Focus group discussions were conducted with students of political science, journalism, and European studies who were involved in projects supporting ECIs. The qualitative data aim to explore the underlying perceptions, motivations, and barriers that influence Croatian citizens' participation in ECIs. These students were selected because of their involvement in projects aimed at supporting ECIs, which positioned them as informed participants capable of offering valuable insights into engagement dynamics. The participants were chosen using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring that each individual had direct experience or

knowledge of ECI-related activities. The final group consisted of 25 students who had participated in ECI-promoting projects in Croatia.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the focus group participants, as students in political and civic fields, constitute a more politically informed and civically engaged subgroup compared to the general Croatian population. This introduces a sample bias that may limit the generalizability of the findings. Their perspectives are valuable for understanding engagement dynamics among politically aware youth but may not fully capture the broader public's knowledge, attitudes, or motivations towards ECIs.

Key questions and areas of discussion were focused on awareness and understanding of ECIs (how familiar are participants with ECIs, and what do they know about the mechanism's function within the EU's participatory framework?); perceptions of participation (what motivates or discourages participation in ECIs?); how do students view the role of citizen-led initiatives in shaping EU policies?); barriers to engagement (what factors, such as lack of awareness, trust in institutions, or the perceived complexity of ECIs, impede participation?); potential for increased involvement (what solutions do the students suggest for increasing public awareness and participation in ECIs, particularly in Croatia?).

These focus group discussions were semi-structured, allowing for both guided questions and open dialogue. Conversations in interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a theory-driven approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method identified recurring patterns and themes related to the students' perceptions and experiences with ECIs. Factors contributing to varying degrees of citizen engagement with ECIs, as operationalized in the analytical framework of this study, served as a deductive codebook toolkit to categorize interview and focus group data into thematic groups.

Given the limited academic research on ECIs, the purposeful sampling of graduates in political science, journalism, and European studies aligns with the exploratory nature of this study. These students are more likely to offer valuable insights into democratic challenges and barriers associated with ECIs due to their advanced knowledge and interest in political processes compared to the general public. While their perspectives may not be fully representative of the broader population, their specialized academic background enables them to articulate well-informed and coherent opinions on ECIs.

While the mixed-methods approach provides a comprehensive perspective, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged:

1. Limited sample size: The qualitative data are drawn from a relatively small sample of 25 students, which is not fully representative of the broader population of Croatian citizens and civil society. The experiences and views of politically engaged students might differ significantly from not only those of the general public but also from other student cohorts, leading to a potential bias in the findings.
2. Geographical and academic bias: The focus group participants come from academic disciplines that are inherently more likely to engage with political and civic processes. This may result in a skewed understanding of the general public's awareness and engagement with ECIs.
3. Reliance on existing quantitative data: The quantitative analysis relies on available data from European reports on ECI participation. While these data are useful for identifying trends, they may not capture more nuanced or recent developments in Croatian citizens' involvement.

4. Temporal scope: The data and focus groups reflect a snapshot in time, particularly focusing on ECIs up to 2024. Any subsequent initiatives or changes in political dynamics are not covered, limiting the temporal relevance of the findings.

In sum, while the study may offer valuable insights into Croatian citizens' engagement with ECIs, the findings must be interpreted within the context of these limitations and the exploratory nature of this research. Future research with larger and more diverse samples, as well as longitudinal studies, would help to further validate and expand upon the insights presented here.

4. Croatian Citizens and ECIs: Overview of Key Trends and Civil Society Involvement

Since Croatia acceded to the EU in 2013, participation in ECIs has remained relatively low compared to other EU member states. Despite the existence of various ECIs addressing issues relevant to Croatian citizens, overall participation has not reached expected levels. According to recent data from the *2024 European Citizens' Initiative Infographic* (ECI Forum, 2024), Croatia's contribution to ECI campaigns has been minimal, with only a small percentage of the population actively supporting initiatives. This indicates both a lack of awareness and a possible disconnection between Croatian citizens and EU-level participatory processes. While Croatia is relatively new to the EU, these low numbers underscore the need for improved outreach and education about ECIs.

The latest official reports from the European Commission show that the 10 successful ECIs as of 2024 have collectively gathered nearly 13 million signatures, underscoring the growing importance of unified citizen engagement across the EU. This marks an increase from the previous year, reflecting both the relevance and mobilizing power of ECIs. Notably, the initiative *One of Us* leads the group with 1,695,328 verified signatures, followed closely by *Right2Water*, which accumulated 1,673,181 signatures. The latest successful initiative, *Fur Free Europe*, ranks third, amassing 1,502,319 signatures (see Figure 1). These figures reflect broad public support for a variety of causes, ranging from pro-life issues to environmental protection and animal rights (ECI Forum, 2024).

Between 2013 and 2024, Croatia contributed 75,827 signatures to the 10 successful ECIs, which represents 0.58% of the 12,975,370 total signatures collected across all EU member states during this period (see Table 2). The initiative *Right2Water* is also included in this analysis since the collection of signatures lasted until September 2013, after Croatia's entry to the EU.

When comparing total signatures from ten successful ECIs relative to member state populations (2012–2024), Croatia's share stands at just 2%. This places Croatia among the lowest both in absolute numbers of signatures and in per capita participation. A standout example of high per capita engagement comes from Malta, where 8.9% of the population participated in ECIs, particularly the *One of Us* initiative. This level of participation suggests that smaller states can mobilize effectively when campaigns are well-targeted. Hungary, with a 7.2% engagement rate, also demonstrates the importance of tailored, national-specific campaigns that resonate with the local populace. By contrast, Croatia's low per capita engagement, combined with its minimal contributions to successful initiatives, highlights the challenges of mobilizing public support for ECIs in the country.

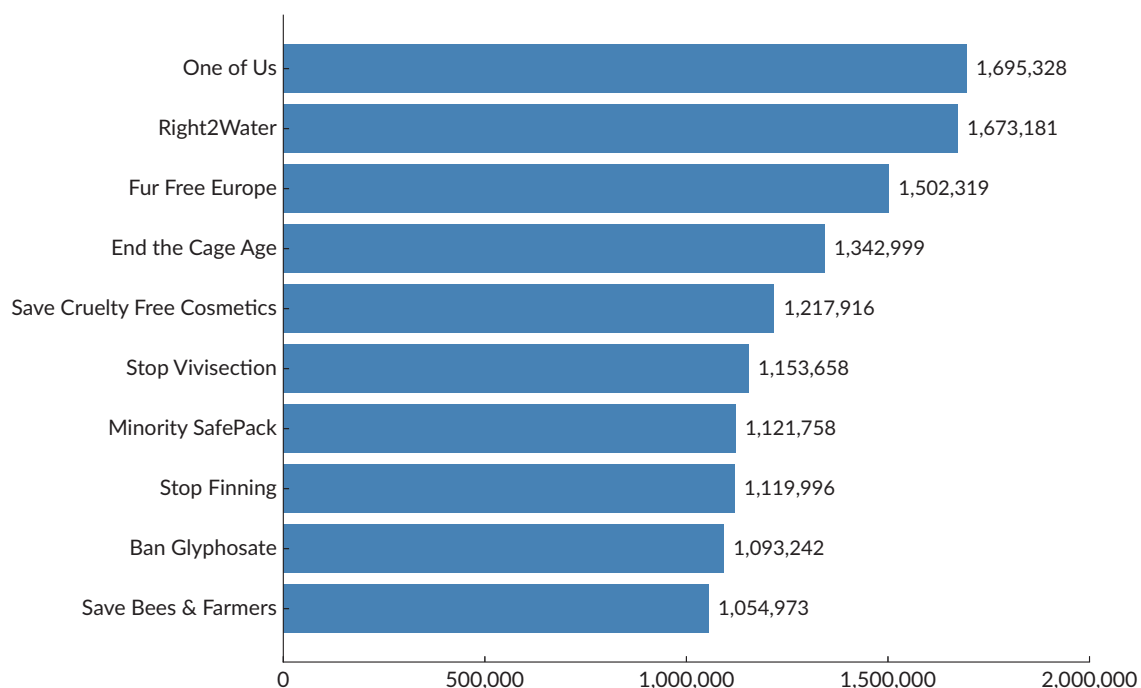


Figure 1. Total number of verified signatures for 10 successful ECIs (2012–2024). Source: ECI Forum (2024).

Table 2. Signatures collected by 10 successful ECIs (2012–2024).

Country	Signatures
Germany	4,473,404
Italy	1,903,618
France	1,052,160
Hungary	691,904
Spain	657,579
Poland	522,145
Romania	480,965
Netherlands	457,262
Belgium	314,761
Austria	253,158
Slovakia	237,730
Sweden	236,074
Czechia	228,771
Finland	207,619
Denmark	195,464
Bulgaria	185,462
Portugal	169,270
Greece	153,522
Latvia	103,982
Croatia	75,827
Ireland	71,416
Slovenia	67,839
Lithuania	64,105
Malta	48,237
Luxembourg	36,616
Estonia	22,368
Cyprus	14,462

Source: ECI Forum (2024).

These comparative figures suggest that Croatian citizens are either less informed or less motivated to engage in ECIs than citizens of other EU member states. Structural challenges, such as a lack of media coverage and civic education on the ECI process, may contribute to this trend. Thus, greater efforts are needed to raise awareness about the ECI as a tool for citizen participation in EU decision-making processes.

When it comes to reaching the signature threshold for successful ECIs between 2012 and 2024, Croatia ranks in the middle among EU member states (see Figure 2).

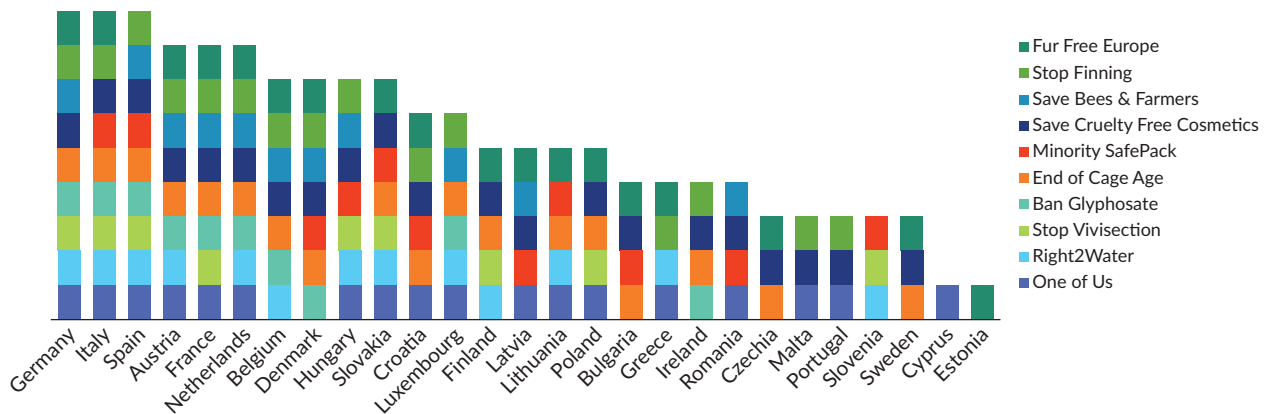


Figure 2. Successful ECIs that reached the signature threshold in each member state (2012–2024). Source: ECI Forum (2024).

In Croatia, the successful ECIs that received significant support reflect a focus on diverse causes, with a particular emphasis on animal protection and minority rights. For example, initiatives like Fur Free Europe, Save Cruelty Free Cosmetics, Stop Finning, and End the Cage Age, all of which are aimed at protecting animals from exploitation and harm, garnered notable support. These initiatives align with broader European trends, where animal rights campaigns have consistently mobilized substantial public backing.

In addition to these animal welfare initiatives, Croatia also saw engagement in campaigns related to minority protection, such as the Minority SafePack initiative, which sought to improve the rights and protections of ethnic minorities across Europe. Another significant, albeit more controversial, initiative that received support was One of Us, which focuses on anti-abortion advocacy and reflects a strong pro-life stance that resonates with certain segments of the population. This diversity in supported causes shows that Croatian citizens are engaged with a wide array of social and ethical issues, from protecting vulnerable groups to addressing moral and religious concerns.

The success of several ECIs in Croatia can be closely linked to the presence and active involvement of well-established NGOs, particularly in the area of animal protection. Initiatives such as Fur Free Europe, Save Cruelty Free Cosmetics, Stop Finning, and End the Cage Age have all benefited from the backing of dedicated animal protection NGOs, which have been instrumental in mobilizing support and raising public awareness about these causes.

These NGOs, through their strong networks, strategic campaigns, and effective use of social media, have played a crucial role in gathering the required number of signatures to pass the threshold in Croatia. Their involvement not only increases the visibility of the initiatives but also provides the necessary organizational

infrastructure to facilitate large-scale participation. This pattern suggests that Croatian citizen engagement in ECIs tends to be more robust when there is strong NGO backing, particularly in areas like animal rights, where these organizations have a long-standing presence and influence.

This reliance on NGOs reflects broader trends seen across Europe, where CSOs often act as key drivers of successful ECIs by channelling public sentiment into coordinated action and ensuring that citizens are informed and motivated to participate.

Based on the latest data from the European Commission, only 18 Croatian citizens took part in organizing committees of ECIs, as key structures tasked to initiate and represent the ECIs, placing it in the middle range compared to other EU member states (Figure 3).

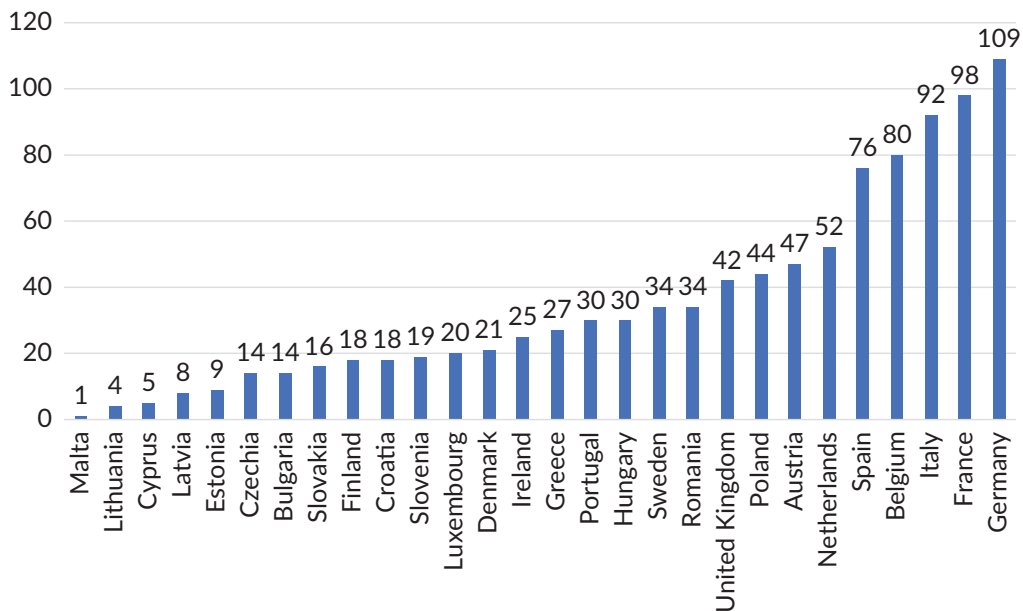


Figure 3. Number of ECI organisers by country of residence. Source: ECI Forum (2024).

While Croatia’s participation is higher than several smaller countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, it still trails significantly behind countries such as Germany (109 organisers), France (98), and Italy (92). This suggests that while there is a growing interest in organizing ECIs within Croatia, the level of civic engagement and organizational capacity remains moderate. Croatia’s involvement is comparable to countries like Finland and Slovakia, both of which also have a similar number of ECI organizers. Strengthening awareness and building organizational support within civil society could further enhance Croatia’s role in initiating EU-wide citizen-led campaigns.

The data indicate that while Croatian citizens are involved in ECI campaigns, mostly due to strong mobilization by relevant CSOs around sensitive and emotional topics, there is still considerable room for growth in terms of public engagement and awareness about these participatory mechanisms.

5. Croatian CSOs and ECI: Mobilization Potential and Structural Barriers

CSOs in Croatia play a complex role in the ECI process, reflecting both their mobilization potential and their structural limitations in acting as transmission belts that channel citizens' interests into policymaking. The findings from the four CSO interviews highlight a recurring challenge: While CSOs recognise the ECI as a theoretically valuable participatory tool, its practical implementation is perceived as burdened with obstacles, leading to limited engagement at the national level.

One of the key insights from the interviews is the widespread scepticism among Croatian CSOs regarding the effectiveness of ECIs in achieving tangible policy change. CSOs expressed strong reservations about the real impact of ECIs, arguing that while these initiatives successfully raise awareness and mobilize citizens across borders, they rarely translate into concrete legislative action at the EU level. The interviewee pointed out that despite meeting the signature thresholds, the European Commission often sidesteps legislative follow-up, undermining the credibility of the instrument in the eyes of both CSOs and citizens. As stated by CSO4: "It is difficult to identify truly successful initiatives if success is defined as achieving actual policy change rather than just collecting signatures....The Commission finds ways to avoid implementing legislative proposals, which sends a particularly bad signal to citizens." This reinforces the notion that procedural success does not necessarily translate into institutional responsiveness, contributing to widespread disengagement. This critique aligns with Kohler-Koch's (2010) argument that EU-level participatory mechanisms often suffer from a democratic paradox: While designed to empower citizens, they ultimately reinforce the dominance of institutional actors, leaving CSOs in an ambiguous position—expected to mobilize public support without promising policy influence.

Furthermore, CSO engagement with ECIs in Croatia appears to be largely passive or incidental rather than strategic. CSO3 described a scenario where ECIs are primarily initiated by large Brussels-based advocacy networks, with national organizations playing a secondary role in implementation rather than in agenda-setting. This dynamic reflects Albareda's (2018) findings that many CSOs operate more as technical intermediaries rather than genuine grassroots mobilizers, limiting their ability to truly connect with citizens and amplify their voices in policymaking. The interviewee from CSO2 also noted that while their organization is structurally capable of supporting ECIs, there is a prevailing passivity in engaging with such initiatives, partly due to limited resources and a lack of prioritization of ECIs in their advocacy work. This passivity is not only institutional but also cultural. CSO2 points out the lack of internalised participatory culture and emotional distance from EU-level issues: "Participation in processes involving European issues is still very weak. I believe that civic awareness and understanding that citizens can influence something that will become a topic in distant Brussels have not truly taken root." This illustrates a deeper emotional and cognitive disconnect between Croatian civil society actors and the supranational political space.

A significant structural constraint identified by all interviewed CSOs is the precarious financial and organizational environment in which Croatian civil society operates. CSO1 emphasized that the shrinking civic space, increasing bureaucratic burdens, and financial precarity of NGOs in Croatia make a long-term commitment to ECIs particularly challenging. This reflects a broader issue in EU civil society participation: While CSOs are expected to function as vital actors in participatory democracy, their capacity to engage in sustained mobilization is often hindered by the very institutional frameworks that claim to support them. The interviewee from CSO3 underscored this dilemma, stating that their organization has to carefully

choose where to invest its limited mobilization capital, as unsuccessful ECIs risk “wasting” public engagement efforts that could be directed towards more impactful advocacy strategies.

Another key barrier to effective CSO mobilization for ECIs in Croatia is the lack of coalition-building and cross-organizational coordination. While the interview from CSO2 acknowledged the existence of thematic networks such as the Green Forum, they noted that collaboration among CSOs in Croatia tends to be project-based rather than focused on sustained policy advocacy. This fragmentation limits the potential for large-scale citizen mobilization, reinforcing the challenges identified by Kohler-Koch (2010) regarding the difficulty of building durable, grassroots-driven advocacy efforts within EU civil society structures.

Despite these limitations, some positive examples of CSO-driven effective ECI mobilization do exist. CSO1 recounted their experience with the People4Soil initiative, in which signature collection was successfully integrated into broader project activities, leveraging existing outreach mechanisms to enhance public engagement. This case highlights that when ECIs are embedded within broader, well-resourced advocacy campaigns, they can serve as effective instruments for citizen mobilization. However, such success stories remain the exception rather than the rule.

Overall, the Croatian CSO experience with ECIs reflects broader theoretical concerns about the role of civil society in EU participatory democracy. While CSOs have the potential to act as transmission belts between citizens and EU institutions, their ability to do so is constrained by structural and institutional limitations. The findings from this study suggest that without stronger institutional support, better financial sustainability, and a clearer link between ECIs and policy outcomes, Croatian CSOs will remain hesitant to invest significant resources in mobilizing citizens for this mechanism. Future efforts to enhance ECI participation in Croatia should focus on addressing these systemic barriers, ensuring that ECIs function not only as symbolic participatory tools but also as meaningful drivers of democratic engagement.

6. Findings From Focus Group Insights: Students’ Perceptions of ECIs

The focus group discussions revealed varying levels of awareness and differing attitudes towards ECIs among students of political science, journalism, and European studies involved in supporting ECI projects. While most participants were familiar with the concept of ECIs, there was a general sense that ECIs were perceived as distant or ineffective tools for influencing EU policies. Many students expressed limited awareness of how ECIs function beyond the basic process of collecting signatures. Those who had engaged more deeply with ECIs as part of their projects reported a growing understanding of their potential as democratic mechanisms, particularly in addressing issues of public concern.

While overall scepticism was shared across focus groups, students of political science displayed somewhat higher familiarity with EU participatory mechanisms and perceived ECIs as more accessible, whereas journalism students emphasized the emotional and informational distance from EU-level decision-making. These disciplinary differences suggest varying engagement dynamics even within politically engaged subgroups.

While many students acknowledged the formal democratic potential of ECIs, they questioned their practical impact on policy outcomes. However, there was a clear sense of scepticism about whether these initiatives

can truly lead to legislative action, particularly given the long timeframes and complex processes involved in translating citizen action into policy outcomes (FG1). Overall, participants were divided, with some valuing the opportunities ECIs present for engagement, while others viewed them as largely symbolic efforts with limited practical impact.

Students' perceptions largely reflected a low sense of external political efficacy (belief that EU institutions would not respond to citizen initiatives), whereas their internal political efficacy (belief in their own ability to act) remained relatively higher, especially among those already civically active.

Several barriers to participation in ECIs emerged during the discussions. The most frequently cited challenge was the lack of awareness about ECIs among the general public. Students pointed out that, despite being politically engaged themselves, even they had not encountered sufficient information about ECIs prior to their involvement in specific projects (FG1). This suggests that the broader Croatian public may be even less informed, thus reducing overall participation rates.

Another major issue identified was the perceived ineffectiveness of ECIs. Many students were sceptical about the ability of a single signature or even a collective campaign to bring about substantial change. This scepticism was compounded by the long duration of the ECI process, from collecting signatures to legislative consideration. Students perceived bureaucratic hurdles as discouraging factors, which they associated with reduced motivation to engage, particularly among younger cohorts (FG2).

The complexity of the ECI process was also seen as a barrier. Some students found the technical aspects of registering and supporting ECIs, as well as the legal requirements involved, to be overly complicated, which could deter less-informed citizens from participating. Additionally, students highlighted emotional detachment from EU-level processes, which many people perceive as remote from their daily lives and concerns.

Despite the challenges, students identified several opportunities for increasing Croatian citizens' engagement with ECIs. The most frequently mentioned solution was enhancing communication strategies. Students emphasized the importance of using digital platforms and social media to raise awareness about ECIs, particularly among younger generations. Many believed that more targeted campaigns by CSOs and educational institutions could help bridge the gap in public knowledge about ECIs (FG3).

Students also saw potential in integrating ECIs into civic education curricula. By educating students about the role of ECIs in participatory democracy, schools and universities could foster greater engagement from a young age. Participants suggested that workshops and seminars on ECIs, combined with hands-on involvement in current initiatives, could significantly enhance citizens' understanding and motivation to participate (FG3).

Finally, students recognised the importance of institutional support in mobilizing citizens. They pointed to the role of strong NGOs in successful ECI campaigns, particularly in the realm of animal protection, where organizations had spearheaded efforts to collect signatures and raise awareness. Participants believed that stronger partnerships between the EU, national institutions, and civil society would likely facilitate more sustained advocacy and follow-up on ECI initiatives.

Overall, while students acknowledged the barriers to participation, they were optimistic that with improved communication, education, and organizational support, Croatian citizens could become more actively engaged in ECIs.

7. Concluding Remarks: Understanding of the Factors Affecting Croatian Citizens' Participation in ECIs

This study has examined the low level of Croatian citizens' engagement with the ECI, revealing a complex interplay of factors that influence participation. By employing a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative insights from focus groups and CSO interviews, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the barriers and opportunities for citizen mobilization in Croatia. The analytical framework employed in this study has highlighted four key dimensions—individual civic capacity, civil society's organizational capabilities, institutional constraints, and structural barriers—which collectively shape the extent and nature of Croatian participation in ECIs.

At the individual level, the findings indicate that Croatian citizens exhibit low levels of civic literacy and political efficacy regarding ECIs. The focus group discussions showed that even among university students, who are expected to be more politically engaged, the awareness of ECIs remains limited. The perceived lack of impact of ECIs further discourages participation, as many citizens doubt that their signatures will lead to substantive policy change. This supports broader theories of political participation, which emphasize that citizens are more likely to engage when they believe their actions can yield tangible results. The findings indicate that enhancing civic education and awareness could strengthen Croatian citizens' ability and willingness to engage with ECIs.

At the organizational level, Croatian CSOs play a critical but constrained role in mobilizing support for ECIs. While they possess the necessary advocacy experience, their engagement with ECIs remains largely incidental rather than strategic. The interviews with CSO representatives highlighted several barriers, including limited financial and human resources, competing organizational priorities, and the low perceived return on investment for ECI-related mobilization. Many CSOs choose to focus on other advocacy mechanisms that offer more direct influence over policy, such as lobbying national governments or engaging with EU institutions through formal consultation processes. This finding aligns with Albareda's (2018) argument that CSOs often struggle to act as effective transmission belts for citizen interests when institutional constraints and resource limitations impede their ability to connect grassroots activism with policymaking.

At the institutional level, the ECI's procedural complexity and non-binding nature emerged as major obstacles to greater citizen and CSO involvement. The interviews highlighted that the European Commission's discretionary power to respond to successful initiatives creates frustration among activists and contributes to public scepticism about the mechanism's efficacy. The lack of an effective follow-up mechanism further discourages participation, as citizens and CSOs alike struggle to see the long-term impact of their engagement. These findings echo broader criticisms of the ECI as a participatory tool, which scholars like Greenwood (2019) and Bouza Garcia (2015) argue often reinforces rather than reduces the EU's democratic deficit. The findings suggest that perceptions of unpredictability and limited institutional responsiveness may deter engagement, highlighting the relevance of ongoing debates about potential reforms of the ECI process.

At the structural level, broader socio-political dynamics in Croatia further constrain participation in ECIs. The findings indicate that weak social capital, low trust in political institutions, and a fragmented civil society sector create an unfavourable environment for transnational civic engagement. As Putnam (2000) suggests, societies with low levels of trust and civic engagement are less likely to mobilize around participatory mechanisms such as ECIs. Additionally, the media's limited coverage of ECIs means that most citizens remain unaware of ongoing initiatives, further compounding the problem. Addressing these structural barriers requires greater investment in civic infrastructure, stronger media engagement, and cross-sectoral collaboration between CSOs, educational institutions, and policymakers to create a more enabling environment for participatory democracy.

While this study has identified several key challenges to Croatian participation in ECIs, it has also highlighted potential pathways for improvement. Strengthening civic education programs, particularly at the university level, could help bridge the awareness gap and empower younger generations to engage more actively with ECIs. CSOs could also play a more proactive role in building coalitions around specific initiatives, leveraging their existing networks to facilitate citizen mobilization. On the institutional side, reforming the ECI's procedural framework to enhance follow-up mechanisms and ensure greater institutional accountability would help restore trust in the mechanism's ability to deliver policy change. Overall, the findings suggest that barriers at individual, organizational, institutional, and structural levels collectively influence Croatian participation in ECIs. These findings resonate with patterns observed in other post-socialist EU member states, where similar legacies of low trust, limited civic engagement, and weak transnational NGO linkages constrain participation in EU-level mechanisms. Croatia thus exemplifies a broader regional trend that highlights the need for tailored, context-sensitive strategies to strengthen participatory democracy across the EU.

Several areas warrant further research to deepen the understanding of factors that influence Croatian participation in ECIs. First, future studies should expand beyond student populations to include a more diverse sample of Croatian citizens across different age groups, educational backgrounds, and geographical regions. This would provide a more representative picture of public attitudes towards ECIs. Second, longitudinal studies could track Croatian engagement with ECIs over time, assessing whether recent public awareness campaigns or institutional reforms lead to increased participation. Third, comparative research with other EU member states, particularly those with similar post-transition political contexts, could identify best practices for enhancing participatory democracy in Croatia. Additionally, further research should explore the role of digital platforms and social media in mobilizing ECI support, examining how online engagement strategies might compensate for limited traditional media coverage of ECIs. Addressing these research gaps will not only inform more effective strategies for increasing ECI participation in Croatia but also contribute to broader discussions on improving participatory democracy at the EU level.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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