European Citizens' Initiative

How to collect statements of support

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OVERVIEW

Once the Commission officially registers your initiative, it is time to start collecting statements of support (signatures) from EU citizens.

The goal is to reach at least 1 million signatures, including a minimum number in at least seven Member States, in the 12 month-period starting from the date of registration. Statements of support can be collected on **paper forms and/or online.**

Signatories need to be **EU citizens** (Member State nationals) **and old enough to vote in European Parliament elections** (18, except in Austria where the voting age is 16).

Statement of support forms

As an initiative organiser, you must use specific forms which comply with the models for the statement of support form set out in Annex III of the European Citizens' Initiative Regulation, and which include all required information regarding the proposed initiative. That information must be identical to the information on the proposed initiative published on the European Citizens' Initiative official register website.

Language conditions

Organisers can collect statements in any Member State, in any official EU language.

However, the information on the proposed initiative given in the form (points 5 to 7 in Annex III of the Regulation) must be in **one of the languages** in which the proposed initiative is published on the official register website. For example, if a proposed initiative is only available on this website in English, then the text of the initiative on the statement of support form can only be in English.

The field names on the form can be in any official EU language.

Data requirements

Citizens who want to sign an initiative will be asked to provide some personal data in the forms – the data collected in these forms differ from one Member State to another.

When signing an initiative, the **data** citizens are required to provide **depend on the Member State they come from (national of and/or resident in)**. Some Member States will verify nationals or residents only while others will verify both nationals and residents. National authorities are responsible for verifying the validity of signatories' statements of support and for certifying the number of valid statements collected in each country (organisers are required to collect a certain number of signatures in at least seven EU Member States). The required data therefore correspond to what each Member State considers necessary to verify a statement of support.

The differences between EU countries regarding requirements can make the collection of statements of support complicated. As an organiser, do not forget to:

1. Train the partners who are helping you collect the statements of support – make sure they know all the rules concerning different requirements and when a signature is considered valid.

2. Always collect more than 1 million signatures in case some are judged to be invalid – for example, an extra 10 %.

Although the organisers and competent national authorities are required under the European Citizens' Initiative Regulation to ensure that data protection is fully assured, you should also take into account that online and paper forms may look daunting to citizens because of the personal data required to sign an initiative. In some countries,

signatories may be reluctant to provide all the personal data required because they are worried that their data will be misused or even sold.

While collecting statements of support, you should:

1. Make sure citizens know that the privacy of their data is taken very seriously, for example by explaining the data protection rules and that the online system is secure and certified.

2. Explain to citizens the importance of filling in the form completely – if they omit information, their statement of support will not be accepted.

More information on data protection.

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COLLECTING SIGNATURES ON PAPER

Initiative organisers should focus on collecting signatures not only online but also offline. Some initiatives have managed to collect numerous amounts of support through face-to-face campaigns.

While the most efficient way of signing is online, it may only be possible to reach certain signatories offline, at events, conferences or at the premises of supporting organisations. You can also start gathering signatures on paper if your online collection system is not ready or encounters technical difficulties.

Here are recommendations for collecting paper signatures:

Use the right form

In order to collect statements of support on paper, make sure you use specific forms according to the Member State the signatories come from (country of nationality or country of residence depending on the Member State). There are two ways you can prepare for this: (1) You can take the forms directly in either Part A or Part B of Annex III of the Regulation and pre-complete them before handing them to citizens; or (2) You can use the customised forms for each country available in your 'organiser account' on the European Citizens' Initiative website. Download these pre-completed forms by choosing the country, so that only the required fields are included, the language of the form fields and the language of the initiative's content.

The second option is recommended, as the pre-filled form will enable you to understand what type of data citizens from different Member States need to provide when signing your initiative.

Each form includes the Member State to which it will be sent for verification, and remember: **only citizens from that Member State can use this particular form to sign an initiative!**

Prepare your own guided forms

Since paper forms can be difficult to use, you should think of ways to carefully and clearly guide citizens in filling out the form without omitting any information which could invalidate their signature.

For example, you can add on the back of the form a one-page summary including a summary of the initiative, guidance for signing, and the address to send signed forms to. Printing them double-sided allows you to have the description on one side and the form on the other.

Three tips to avoid invalid signatures

There are three main things organisers must keep in mind to ensure the form is valid:

→ CAPITAL letters must be used.

→ All columns must be filled out if you choose the customised forms. Otherwise, the required columns must be filled out.

→ Indicate how many people can fill out the form.

Tips

An event provides a great opportunity to collect support for your initiative. Here are a few tips for maximising the collection of paper signatures at your events:

→ Identify a specific place at the event where member(s) of your organising committee can focus on making sure citizens fill in the paper forms correctly.

→ Print out an A3 eye-catcher, to attract citizens to your cause, and an A3 'sample' paper form to guide citizens on how to support your initiative.

→ Make sure you have a secure place to store the filled-out forms (e.g. a locked storage space).

→ Print postcards or business cards for those who are interested in your cause but want to sign the initiative at a later stage.

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COLLECTING SIGNATURES ONLINE

Statements of support are mainly gathered online. Building a good online collection system is a fundamental part of running a successful initiative.

Organisers who wish to collect statements of support online must build an online collection system, accessible through their website, that responds to the broad **security and technical requirements** set out in Article 6(4) of the Regulation on the citizens' initiative and to the detailed **technical specifications** set out in specific regulation (Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 1179/2011).

These requirements are necessary to ensure that the data from citizens will be securely collected and stored in the system.

As you are the organiser, you must have an online collection system capable of ensuring that:

1. Only real people (not computers) may submit a statement of support form.

2. Data provided online are securely collected and stored.

3. Statements of support can be produced in a form complying with the models set out in Annex III of the Regulation.

Three steps for initiative organisers to collect online statements of support:

1. Choose the software (an option is to use the Commission's free software).

2. Find a service provider to host the system (the Commission also offers this service free of charge if you use its software) – the data must be stored in the territory of an EU Member State.

3. Certify the online collection system with the competent authority in the Member State where the data will be stored.

You can build the system using the Commission's free software or other software of your choice.

Advantages of using the Commission's Online Collection Software and hosting service:

1. Free of charge and open source – already complies with all the relevant requirements.

2. Free hosting services on the Commission servers in Luxembourg.

3. Technical support and training offered by the Commission.

4. Certification procedure will be more straightforward and easy to facilitate.

However, please note that:

1. If you want to use the Commission hosting service, you cannot start the process of building the online collection system before requesting registration of your initiative and receiving confirmation that it will be registered.

2. The software offers some customisation features (e.g. logo, background colour, social media links, etc.) but you cannot add other features (e.g. no option to retain signatories' contact information as part of the solution offered – however, you may redirect signatories to your website where you can collect such information as long as you comply with the applicable data protection legislation).

See a demo of the Commission software.

Using a private software and/or a private hosting service can offer you more flexibility (in terms of timing for your preparation and additional features) **but will require greater human and financial resources**.

Extra efforts are needed to guarantee security and compliance with the regulation, and it may be more difficult and take longer to acquire certification from the authorities.

Certifying your online collection system

Once the online collection system has been built, you must have it **certified by a competent authority in the EU country** where the data will be stored.

You can obtain certification either **before or after registering** your proposed initiative. However, you must obtain the certificate from the competent national authority and confirmation of the registration of the initiative by the Commission **before starting to collect signatures online.**

Certification is required even if you use the Commission software and servers! However, in that case, the certification process is facilitated and the Commission will support you.

The **certification procedure may vary** from one Member State to another and will also depend on the software and hosting provider used. Verification may include vulnerability and/or penetration tests, or even on-site audits, if necessary.

Since national authorities could take up to **one month** to certify the system, **you should start planning the development of** **the online collection system quite a long time before the formal registration** of your initiative. The Commission's online collection software can be tested in an offline mode version prior to the formal registration of the initiative.

To request certification, you need to provide appropriate documentation to the competent authority. Even if the requirements to be fulfilled by the systems are common across the EU, Member States are still free to decide how to verify the compliance of the systems.

Once you receive the certificate, do not forget that you must **publish a copy** on your website.