

European eParticipation Developments

From ad hoc Experiences towards Mass Engagement

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Abstract: *This article looks at the challenges surrounding the development and mainstreaming of actions in the area of eParticipation in the EU. It analyses the experience of recent years, especially that from the eParticipation Preparatory Action, and looks at the latest policy initiatives which affect further developments in Member States and the EU.*

Keywords: eParticipation, eGovernment, deployment projects, Framework Programme, eParticipation Preparatory Action

Empowering citizens to participate in public decision-making processes through the use of digital technologies could be one definition of eParticipation, although a rather narrow one. We would like to add that mass engagement of citizens in such processes has great transforming powers which may affect all important aspects of political and public operations. It is therefore important to understand how the eParticipation field is maturing over time and what are the challenges and opportunities for mass engagement.

There is today a wealth of experience and approaches in the field of eParticipation throughout the EU. Most of them are very recent since it is only in the past five years or so that this issue emerged as a distinct field of activity for decision-making. The diversity of approaches and the growth of popularity amongst parts of civil society and decision-makers pose some challenges. How can eParticipation move beyond ad hoc cases and applications, to allow public institutions and citizens to move on more stable ground? How can we meaningfully practise eParticipation at EU level, given the complexity of languages, political cultures and institutional developments? Finally how can eParticipation best serve the relationship between the EU and its citizens? In this article we attempt to analyse one part of possible answers to the above, which relates to the European Commission's actions in recent years while looking at possible future developments.

There has been an increase in public eConsultations in the EU at all levels of government. It is very likely that this trend will continue to grow in pursuit of greater transparency and accountability. A generalised eConsultation practice feeds directly into processes of eLegislation for law drafting or amendment purposes. At the same time public institutions are being re-organised transforming themselves to e.g. eParliaments, eMunicipalities, etc. Even further, the use of digital technologies in the application of laws in courts presents new experiences in the form of eJustice. We see therefore that eParticipation is the starting point of a far reaching transformation of institutional and political functions.

A recent study has illustrated the great variety of practices but also their fast growth within EU Institutions and among Member States ("Study and supply of services on the Development of eParticipation in the EU", European Commission, November 2009")

At EU level there is a long experience of programmes supporting eParticipation developments. The Framework Programmes for Research have been funding research projects for more than ten years now. The eTen and CIP ICT PSP programmes have also funded eParticipation deployment projects, while the eParticipation Preparatory Action has for three years (2006 – 2008) supported

trial eParticipation projects in real life conditions. These programmes have helped to bring together the key stakeholders in this field. Given the multi-disciplinary character and the complexities involved (multi-lingualism, issues at local, regional, national and EU levels, etc) these programmes helped to consolidate the eParticipation landscape and enabled more structured cooperation.

1. Digital technologies and the citizens

This relationship has been approached for a long time as either citizens in their role as consumers and workers (private life and business sphere), or as the supply of eGovernment services (public sphere). eParticipation developments have illustrated that policy making and political processes are increasingly deeply affected by digital technologies, making these technologies political technologies too. We shall examine some basic features of these developments to help us understand the challenges involved.

First, the scope of public goods and services changes over time. When we take a long term view we can see how state monopolies of the 19th century gave way to "new" services in the 20th century which led to, e.g., basic education and health services for all citizens, state monopolies of electricity, transport or telecommunications. Towards the end of the 20th century, issues like environmental preservation or consumer protection emerged as issues for all citizens for which the state needs to take action. Today we should re-think the definition of public goods and services within a digital context. Broadband access of all citizens as a right, not as a privilege, is for example one case which illustrates this point. Recently Finland has become the first EU Member State to legislate on this.

Equally important however is to re-examine the model of producing public goods and services. We move away from silos of public activities towards models of public-private partnerships and even more towards active engagement of citizens and civil society. This active engagement of citizens as "users" of public services is one of the catalytic impacts of digital technologies on public sector organisations.

We also see the emergence of citizen-driven public services, customised and personalised. Therefore the model of producing public services and the re-definition of public services feed one another and they have to be seen as a spiral evolution.

Second, because of the above, it is important to note a time gap which exists in the adoption of new digital technologies. While citizens and businesses can use the latest technologies very quickly, public sector organisations are often very slow to do the same. This time gap poses some challenging questions. Can the public sector continue with "business as usual", in offering transactional services, making policies and promoting democracy when its "clients" move at a very fast pace of digital change? Is the so called "democratic deficit" also a reflection of the fact that citizens are technologically more advanced than the average public sector organisation?

Third, this issue becomes even more acute when we consider the young generation. Europeans up to e.g. 30 years old never lived without Internet and mobile phones. These people learned how to socialise, complete their studies and find a job with the use of Internet and recently also with the use of social networking technologies, like web2.0. But when it comes to public administration and policy-making, old structures and practices still prevail in the majority of institutions, services and policy-making processes. This generation factor creates an extreme unbalance which makes the quest for progress very urgent.

Fourth, the enhanced interactivity of social networking technologies encourages participation and creativity. People not only set up a profile on a social network, but use it to organize their social agendas; to make shopping decisions after consulting their network; to get travel advice; to look for jobs with the help of specialised business networks, and so on. Apart from "Web 2.0 for fun" and "Web 2.0 for business and services" we now see "Web 2.0 for politics". There are growing numbers of politicians, political organisations, citizens and civil society organisations who are moving into the social networking environment for political activities. With the growth of social networking technologies, citizen-led initiatives can create a wave of change in EU politics.

2. eParticipation actions at the EU level

Today digital technologies make it possible to have massive citizen participation in policy making and political processes. Digital technologies also make it possible to simplify decision-making processes and to demystify legislative texts, thereby enabling ordinary citizens' involvement. These technologies can help visualise arguments and impacts of proposed decisions, monitor decision-making processes and enable citizens to find out what decisions are being taken and when it is appropriate to act. They can empower decision-makers and citizens alike for more informed and democratic engagement.

At EU level, there has been continuous support and progress over the past 15 years or so through a large number of projects. We mentioned above the triptych of research, deployment and real life trials which have been supported by the EU programmes.

Under the Research Framework Programmes 5, 6 and 7 a large number of technological issues have been addressed and a wide range of eParticipation services have been tested. In Framework Programme 5, a significant number of projects were launched in order to promote and enable the online participation of all stakeholders in decision making. The projects covered topics like the improvement of the interaction between citizens and public administrations, on-line mediation systems for citizens and their representatives, the enhancement of the former's participation in e.g. urban planning, the launch of e-voting and e-deliberation practices, etc.

In Framework Programme 6, it was recognised that better policies require better and more participatory decision-making processes. Continuing the research efforts launched in the 5th Framework Programme, the IST eParticipation projects in Framework Programme 6 aimed to develop advanced concepts, tools and solutions for the use of Information and Communication Technologies in legislation, deliberation and political processes at local, regional, national and EU levels. Work performed by FP6 projects included for instance the creation of virtual workspaces for elected representatives so they can be active "on the move", reducing the distance between citizens and the systems of laws and regulations, or participation of citizens in policy evaluation.

A new set of projects has been launched under the 7th Framework Programme, focusing on mass participation and policy modelling techniques.

Technology however on its own is not enough. For this reason, European research programmes have been enhanced with policy support programmes like the eTen and CIP ICT PSP programmes where large pilot projects and networks have been funded over the past five years. It is very encouraging to see that most Member States cooperate closely to address many of the complex and great challenges of the EU's public sector, such as cross-border public eProcurement or cross-border mutual recognition of electronic identities.

3. The experience from the eParticipation Preparatory Action

In 2005, the European Parliament made a budget amendment for a Preparatory Action to be launched in 2006. The action aimed to promote the use of Information and Communication Technologies in legislative and decision-making processes, within parliamentary and government environments, aiming at enhancing the participation of citizens and contributing to better legislation and policy-making. For 2007 and 2008, the European Parliament renewed and increased its support to the eParticipation Preparatory Action.

The eParticipation Preparatory Action as a real life small scale trial experience has helped to address some of the key obstacles encountered in this field.

The first obstacle is the lack of awareness and information for the citizens about what is being decided. Most citizens learn about political decisions which have already been taken, or are about to be taken, via the mass media. Some of the eParticipation projects help to overcome this obstacle by "fighting the fog" on citizens' awareness. Enabling citizens to know what decision making processes are underway and which ones may be of interest to them is already the first step in getting them involved. Moreover, this has to be presented in an everyday language that citizens

understand. Demystifying the legislation or decision making process is a challenge which digital technologies can help to overcome successfully.

A second obstacle to participation is the expertise and knowledge sophistication often required to make a contribution to arguments, be involved in the debate and actively engage with the content formulation. Unless citizens have access to simple, clear facts to form their own opinion they may find it impossible to participate. They need to know to whom to address their views and that their views will be heard. They finally want to do this without having to spend a lot of time. After all, citizens are neither consultants nor legislators and have their daily lives to live.

In three years of implementing the eParticipation Preparatory Action these activities resulted in 21 projects covering a wide range of policy issues, such as health, consumer protection and environment. 20 of these projects were trial projects while one project, MOMENTUM, was a support action which helped the coordination and collaboration amongst the 20 projects.

The projects addressed a range of decision-making bodies - from local and regional to national and EU level -, and a range of tools, services and digital technologies applications which enable citizens' engagement, help to improve the outcome of law drafters' work, and increase transparency of decision-making in all public environments.

These projects have involved citizens and institutions in new forms of interaction, addressing real on-going decision-making processes. Some overall figures of the achievements of all 21 projects:

- these projects have trialed eParticipation solutions, tools and services in more than 30 pilot sites;
- there were 70 MEPs who have been actively involved (about 10% of all MEPs);
- almost all national parliaments have been involved;
- more than 50 public administrations at local and national level from Member States;
- finally, NGOs involved in the trial projects have reached more than 100,000 citizens.

Based on the analysis performed by project MOMENTUM (MOMENTUM, June 2009) we can see some of the main features of the projects.

In terms of the geographical dimension of participants, partners from 18 EU Member States have been active in the eParticipation trial projects. Partners coming from Italy, the UK, Greece, Spain and Germany display a high level of participation (see figure 1).

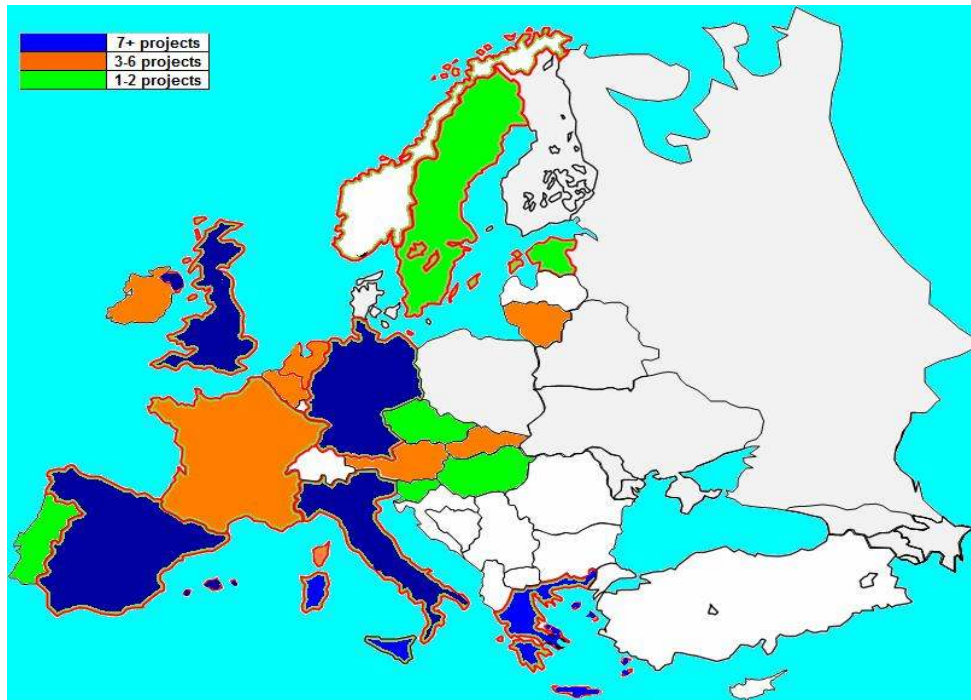


Figure 1: country representation map (MOMENTUM White Paper, June 2009)

Regarding the languages used in the pilot trials 15 different languages have been used (see Figure 2). The result of the analysis of the projects is that the most common language is English that is used not only for localization reasons but for promotion and dissemination of the pilot results as well. Italian and Spanish are also very popular mainly due to the fact that many pilot trials are being carried out in these countries. An overview of the language use in the pilot trials of the eParticipation projects is given in the figure below.

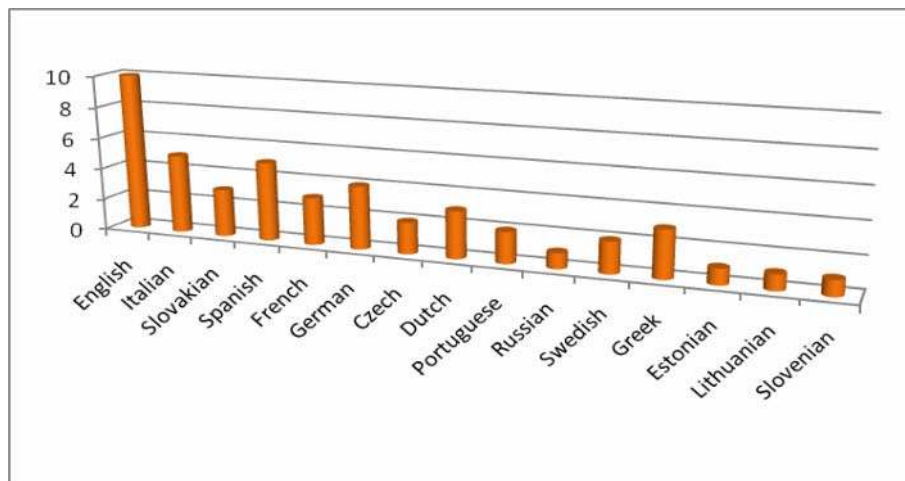


Figure 2: Languages used in the pilot trials (MOMENTUM White Paper, June 2009)

When we look at how these projects are positioned on the legislation phases chain (formation of legislation proposals, drafting of legislation, implementation of legislation and impact of legislation) we see that about 60% of the projects addressed the first two phases while a smaller number of them only addressed impacts (see Figure 3). This on one hand may be due to the fact that participation is perceived as more interesting when decisions have not been made yet but it may also be due to the fact that it is technologically more challenging to assess impacts and therefore the scope for participation there is smaller.

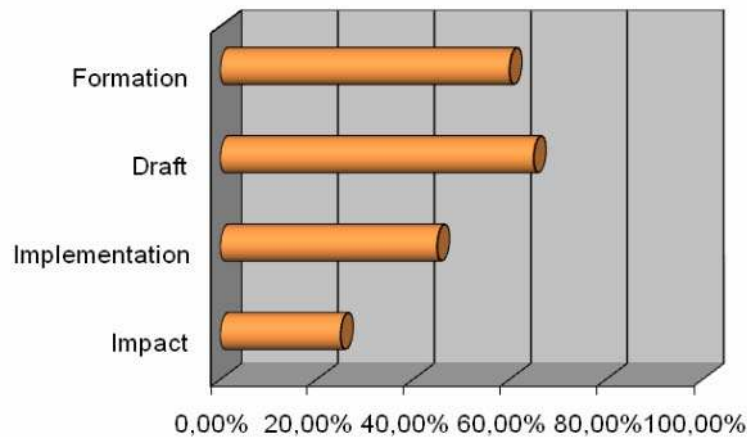


Figure 3: Phase of Legislation Process (MOMENTUM White Paper, June 2009)

When we look at whether the projects addressed legislation issues at local, national or EU level we see that national level issues is the least addressed level (see Figure 4).

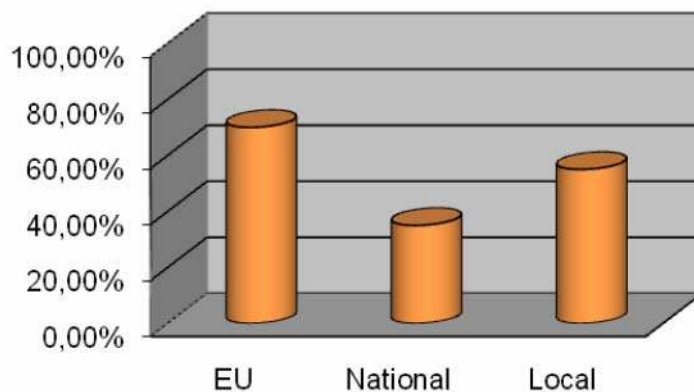


Figure 4: Legislation Level (MOMENTUM White Paper, June 2009)

The technologies used in most of the projects are regarded as state-of-the-art technologies of the past few years. The tools used are neither futuristic, nor legacy applications. In most of the cases, projects stick with already established, well-known mature and popular systems, that are in the field for quite some time. Those systems are mostly based on Web 2.0 techniques that have been able to “open up” a project to a wider audience and in this manner make a pilot quite active and a talking point of the internet community.

This fact reveals that there is no actual great innovation happening in the field of information systems for eParticipation at the moment. While there are adequate tools and technologies to be used for delivering the various services to the audience, this does not mean that further eParticipation developments do not require further technological advances.

In the projects concerned most efforts are put on synthesizing solutions out of already established tools (such as maps, information feeds, social networks, etc) and on modifying those tools and technologies accordingly in order to cover the needs of each case (project) and continue facilitating these needs as a sustainable solution that could operate over the years. In those terms, projects seem to have found the right combinations for building platforms that could be sustained and would not need major upgrades in the near future.

As the analysis has shown, most projects do rely on hybrid architectures, mixing commercial and open source tools and technologies in an attempt to take advantage of various products that exist at the moment. The following table presents at a glance the main findings of the survey performed for 2006, 2007, 2008 projects regarding the technologies and tools used and the deliberation themes.

Table1: Overview of Projects Consolidation Results

Projects	Technologies	Tools	Legislation Themes
DALOS	NLP, OWL, RDF Schema	GATE, T2K	Consumer Protection Law
LEGESE	XML, Webcasting	Public-I webcasting, 602xml, European Parliament live webcasting	Environment
LexiPation	MySQL, Apache, GIS	DEMOS discourse machine, webGIS,	City Renovation Urban Planning Environmental Legislation Public Transport Planning
LEX-IS	OWL, ePolling, Argument Visualization, .NET framework, MS SQL	ATC Portal Builder, DocAsset, Compendium	Social Issues, Human Rights
SEAL	OWL	MetaLex/CEN	
TID+	MySQL, Apache, Linux, PHP, Petition, Deliberation, RSS, Identity Management	TOM	
Demos@Work	XML, MySQL, Apache, PostgreSQL, Java	Joomla, SMF, Dspace	Harmful effects of smoking National anti smoking policy
CitizenScape	Web 2.0	Web 2.0 tools	Environnement Noise management Waste-management Regional-development
eCommittee	.NET Framework	Metastorm Provision, AT&T web conferencing service	Climate Change
FEED	OWL, XML, RDF, Webcasting, RSS, SPARQL, D2RQ, GIS, Ontologies	Public-I webcasting, DocAsset, Public-I eparticipation platform, Custom Ontologies, Maps and GIS, Debategraph	Energy and Environment
IDEAL-EU	MySQL, PHP	Drupal	Energy and Environment
VEP	PHP, MySQL, A/V Transmission Protocols	Drupal, Vanilla, DVTS, Skype, Adobe Connect Pro, Jabber Ejabberd	Blogging Financial Crisis Telecom Package
VOICE	HTML, XML	Joomla, SMF	Consumer Protection
eMPOWER	.NET Framework, LINQ, CSS, JQUERY Library, AJAX	DNN, Ammap Maps, Microsoft Visual Studio	Biodiversity Climate Change Genetically modified organism Mercury Waste Management Water Management
EuroPetition	Web2.0, Webcasting	Public-I Webcasting System, Bristol City ePetition System, Viewfinder, Web2.0 tools, Mashups	-
HUWY	Wordpress, Mediawiki	Wordpress, Mediawiki	Cyberbullying Child Abuse ID Theft File sharing Open thread
U@MareNostrum	MySQL, Apache, Web2.0, GIS, PHP, Java	JOOMLA, MapSrever, Web2.0 Tools, Gov2DemOSS e-democracy platform, GIS	Pollution Water Management Spatial Planning
VIDI	-	ESPER	Social Issues
VoiceS	HTML, XML, RDF, OWL, Ontologies	Joomla, Kunena	Consumer Protection
WAVE	RSS, REST Web Services, XML, Web2.0, .NET framework, SQL Server, AJAX, Apache, PHP, MySQL	Debategraph, Joomla, Drupal, Debian	Environment – Climate Change

4. Current state of play and future developments

Major recent political initiatives have underlined the importance of eParticipation. These are the Ministerial Declaration on eGovernment and the forthcoming Action Plan, the launch of the Digital Agenda and last but not least the Lisbon Treaty itself.

At the Ministerial eGovernment Conference in Malmö, Sweden, in November 2009 Ministers committed themselves to ambitious goals and indicated that they wish to speed up the development of eGovernment. In the Ministerial Declaration (<http://www.egov2009.se/wp-content/uploads/Ministerial-Declaration-on-eGovernment.pdf>), Ministers clearly highlighted the challenges of

- empower citizens and businesses
- reinforce mobility in the Single Market,
- enable efficiency and effectiveness,
- create necessary key enablers and pre-conditions for the above priorities

On the first challenge, the Ministerial Declarations explicitly states that:

"Our public administrations should jointly strive for the following policy priorities, to be achieved by 2015.

» Citizens and businesses are empowered by eGovernment services designed around users' needs and developed in collaboration with third parties, as well as by increased access to public information, strengthened transparency and effective means for involvement of stakeholders in the policy process ...

...

Involve stakeholders in public policy processes. We will actively develop and promote effective, useful and better ways for businesses and citizens to participate in the policy processes. Increased public engagement through more effective methods at all levels enhances government's efficiency and effectiveness and improves the quality of its decisions and services." (Ministerial Declaration on eGovernment, Malmö, Sweden, 18 November 2009, pages 2 and 3)

We see therefore that there is a strong political commitment to rebuild the governments' relationship with citizens and businesses by opening up public institutions, and by empowering citizens and businesses to take a more active role.

The European Commission is developing a new eGovernment Action Plan based on the Ministerial Declaration on all four challenges.

At the same time, the European Commission has presented its new overall strategy "A Digital Agenda for Europe". The Digital Agenda for Europe is one of the seven flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, set out to define the key enabling role that the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) will have to play if Europe wants to succeed in its ambitions for 2020. The digital agenda for Europe opens up an important new field of initiatives which are basic enablers for eParticipation actions.

Finally, the Lisbon Treaty states three fundamental principles on the democratic governance of the EU. The first one is Democratic Equality: the European institutions must pay equal attention to all citizens. Today no institution can give proper and equal attention to all citizens without the use of ICTs. Therefore re-thinking the definition of public goods and services, e.g. broadband access for all, becomes a prerequisite for democratic equality. The second principle of democratic governance in the EU is that of Representative Democracy: a greater role for the European Parliament and

greater involvement for national parliaments. This coincides with the European Parliament's decision to become an eParliament from 2010. Many national parliaments have already made a move in this direction. The development of eParliaments in the EU creates enormous new opportunities for even greater transparency, improving legislation processes, strengthening representative democracy and engaging citizens on a mass scale. The third principle of democratic governance in the Lisbon Treaty is that of Participatory Democracy: new forms of interaction between citizens and the European institutions. One of these is the citizens' initiative, whereby one million citizens, from a number of member countries, will be able to ask the Commission to present a proposal in any of the EU's areas of responsibility.

5. Conclusions

In a relatively short time eParticipation has established itself as a widely used practice. It is being deployed in a wide range of institutions and decision-making processes. It will however require a more coherent approach across institutions if the diverse approaches are going to converge into a visible mass engagement of citizens in all levels of EU decision making.

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