

Workshop 4

New technologies and transition:

What role for civil society in a future of e-democracy?

Organised by the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS)

The workshop aimed to explore both the potential of e-democracy to contribute to a more open and inclusive form of policy-making and the role that civil society can play in an even more digitalised future where Information and Communication Technology (ICT) allows the possibility for more direct participation between citizens and policy-makers.

Elisa Lironi, ECAS' Digital Democracy Manager, began the workshop by presenting the preliminary findings of the study 'EU Public Consultations in the Digital Age: Enhancing the Role of the EESC and Civil Society Organisations' that was commissioned to ECAS by the EESC and that will be published in July 2017. The study focuses on the analysis of EU online public consultations, which represent one of the participatory tools available at EU level that allow both stakeholders and citizens to express their opinions and be involved in EU decision-making processes. The aim of the study is to provide a general overview of the current state of EU public online consultations and try to investigate the potential role that CSOs, in general, and the EESC could play in improving the consultation process, especially thanks to the employment of new ICTs. The study proposes recommendations to tackle the three main challenges for EU consultations: accessibility, representativeness and feedback mechanisms.

Assya Kavrakova, ECAS' Executive Director, gave some additional remarks about the Opinion recently released by the REFIT Platform on EU online public consultations from which emerged the need to design the consultation process for stakeholders and citizens in a different way. In particular, citizens should have access to more user-friendly questionnaires while stakeholders should have the possibility to complete more technical questionnaires in order to better contribute to the consultation process with their specific expertise. Finally, on the basis of ECAS' position, it is necessary to develop additional e-participation tools at national and local level, in addition to EU online public consultations, in order to engage citizens from the first stage of the process (for instance, crowdsourcing procedures).

Lex Paulson, International Counsellor to D21, started his presentation by pointing out the main weaknesses of citizen consultations, including: issues of representativeness, poor and over simplified questionnaires, too many "one-way conversations" and the limited outreach of consultations.

D21 proposes a new approach to community engagement that has been used in 130 cases in eleven countries by developing a new voting system. While standard consultations oversimplify the problem by showing "winners and losers" only, D21's algorithm of plus and minus votes can help to collect

additional information about consensus, to measure relevance, anticipate controversy assess the impact of individual citizens' sentiments before and after the consultation process.

Finally, he mentioned the lessons learnt from the Macron political campaign in France and the '*En Marche!*' movement, which allowed the possibility of experimenting with new methods of participation. The campaign simultaneously used ICTs and the mobilisation of citizens on the ground to create a movement that brought people who are not usually politically involved into politics. Technology should always complement and amplify on-the-ground mobilisation. It is never a substitute for it and the priority should always be face-to-face contact.

Laurentiu Bunescu, CEO of ALL DIGITAL, Lifelong Learning Platform, focused his speech on the contribution that CSOs can make to enabling democracy by using digital tools and ensuring that citizens are able to use such tools. His organisation is one of the largest communities dedicated to digital skills and its mission is to enable citizens to take advantage of the benefit generated by the digital transformation. He emphasised that, by enhancing digital skills and critical thinking, more Europeans will be able to access and use online e-participation tools. Lifelong Learning Platform's position paper 'Education in a Digital world' speaks about how digital transformation is reshaping education, especially considering that almost half of the EU population lacks basic digital skills.

ALL DIGITAL (formerly known as Telecentre Europe) supports the position paper and works with its network of 25,000 digital competence centres across Europe to raise awareness of, and boost, e-participation.

Imants Breidaks, CEO of ManaBalss, talked about getting citizens' ideas on the political agenda and the successes ManaBalss has had in Latvia in that respect, such as engaging over 70% of Latvia's population and bringing 42 initiatives to national or local government. Going forward, they will be looking to implement practical democracy courses at universities, opening an 'Open2Vote' platform for citizens to vote on the most important parliamentary and municipal initiatives, and crowdfunding public lobbying campaigns to give civic activists the financial means to lobby government.

In terms of democracy, it needs effective communication tools and methods, and democratic legitimacy is derived from numbers and requires the involvement of those who are "tired and bored" of democracy as it is currently practised. For digital democracy, there needs to be valid authorisation tools and the widespread popularisation of such tools to create an environment in which additional tools will proliferate.

The role of civil society is to bridge the gap between politics and citizens, and between technology and concrete results. CSOs need to provide the infrastructure of e-democracy, making it easier for citizens to have a greater political impact. The focus of CSOs regarding technology must be to ensure "trustable information" and address corruption and the influence of finance on politics. Furthermore, digital democracy may lead to a "more nuanced and inclusive democracy" and break the monopoly of the state over democracy.

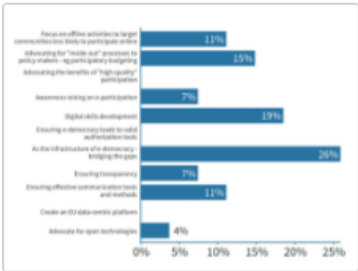
Prodromos Tsiavos of GFOSS – Open Technologies Alliance talked about GFOSS’ policy activities, legal actions, collaborations and open projects. In terms of policy, they are very active in ensuring transparency, encouraging the use of open technologies by public authorities and developing policies on open platforms and the “fair sharing economy”, whilst pursuing legal actions to include open source software in public procurement processes. They also have a civil society network for openness to share knowledge and coordinate action.

Their approach to open projects involves the “wikification of public services procedures”, the creation of “open tech registries” and encouraging the use of open tech in schools. This involves the use of open, standardised and widely-available tools, crowdsourcing procedure documentation and making government, academia, citizens, courts and businesses partners and users of the system.

Their aim is to create a critical mass for participation and an “EU data-centric platform” for CSOs to share knowledge and technology. They want to enable citizens to truly participate in the decision-making process and make Europe a world-leader for open technologies.

*The workshop finished with an **online poll** of the participants. The poll found that the largest number of people thought the role of CSOs in a future e-democracy was "as the infrastructure of e-democracy - bridging the gaps'. Also, many of the participants don't use official EU online tools, a majority prefer to voice their opinions directly, most agree that ICTs can strengthen communication between CSOs and citizens and that digital communication tools have led to the emergence of new forms of participation. Finally, digital tools have increased the civic participation of a majority of the participants in recent years, with 86% using the internet to express their opinions to policy-makers.*

What role for CSOs in a future of E-Democracy?



Response options	Count	Percentage
Focus on offline activities to target communities less likely to participate online	3	11%
Advocating for "inside-out" processes to policy-makers – eg participatory budgeting	4	15%
Advocating the benefits of "high-quality" participation	0	0%
Awareness raising on e-participation	2	7%
Digital skills development	5	19%
Ensuring e-democracy leads to valid authorization tools	0	0%
As the infrastructure of e-democracy - bridging the gaps	7	26%
Ensuring transparency	2	7%
Ensuring effective communication tools and methods	3	11%
Create an EU data-centric platform	0	0%
Advocate for open technologies	1	4%