

FROM E-PARTICIPATION TO CO-LEGISLATING WITH CITIZENS  
**DIGITAL DEMOCRACY IN THE EU**

27 January 2015 - Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique - Boulevard de l'Empereur, 4 - Brussels



EVENT REGISTRATION:  
<https://eudigitaldemocracy.eventbrite.co.uk>



## Conference Report

ECAS' conference on Digital Democracy in the EU explored the possibilities for deepening online debate and the crowdsourcing of legislation at EU level. More than 10 examples of the use of e-democracy platforms for citizen participation and co-decision from different member states were presented to 120 participants in Brussels and 180 who watched it on-line.

The follow up discussions and the results of the online voting revealed that digital tools could indeed be useful for outreach to "new" audiences but that they should be used as complementary methods to traditional means of participation. EU decision-makers are not yet ready to engage in co-decision with citizens on-line and citizens also need to develop the necessary skills to do so. We are still at the very beginning of a "long journey" and it is of key importance to create a network that could enable the exchange of promising examples and lead to the creation of a digital ecosystem for citizens' engagement. There are encouraging national examples of crowdsourcing initiatives which have resulted in legislation. The necessary platforms and technology are already in place. The challenge is to create a meaningful interface that would encourage the participation of both citizens and policy-makers at European level on European policies. ECAS and partners will consider the launch of a Digital Democracy Day (DDD) as an annual forum for the sharing of good practices, the development of skills for on-line participation and for the assessment of progress.

The conference was organised in the framework of the JoiEU project, funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme.

The conference was opened by Mrs Assya Kavrakova, ECAS Director.

## Ms Assya Kavrakova, ECAS Director – Welcoming Note

*“Is it time for Europe to think of a Citizens 2.0 Strategy?”  
“Technology does not create miracles; People do”*

Ms Kavrakova welcomed all participants:

- Holocaust Memorial Day provides a good opportunity to remind ourselves of the value of the European project.
- President Juncker’s recent claims that the new European Commission would listen more to citizens and work to restore trust are promising. But how will this be achieved? Is the appropriate infrastructure in place?
- The rapid technological development in the last 5 years provides an opportunity to outreach more effectively to citizens and engage them. ECAS has been taking advantage of this itself with its ECAS 2.0 strategy.
- Technology must be used wisely. The majority of young people are in fact eager to participate in the European project, and have high expectations of it. However, they don’t want to use traditional tools to do so.

The audience then benefitted from the valuable contribution of Prof. Marju Lauristin, MEP, vice-chair of the S&D Group, and a member of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, who is responsible for a report on data protection. Prof. Lauristin has worked and taught previously on political communication and culture.

## Prof. Marju Lauristin, MEP – Keynote Speech

*“In order to have real digital democracy we must first develop the resources offline...we have to create the platforms and the knowledge...we must create the institutional structures which will enable action between the digital and real legislative processes”*

- The European Commission will be driving Europe towards digitalisation in the coming years with its emphasis on the [Digital Single Market](#).
- No society/democracy is born from computers; it is born from people. But if there are people who are interested we must give them access and the ability to communicate.



- In Estonia, e-voting has become a part of everyday political life, with 30 % using it in the last parliamentary elections. Despite doubts in the beginning, people are now comfortable with it. However, most people who used the e-voting system said they would have voted anyway.

- Political parties are trying to reach out to young voters with e-campaigns. They use computer games and quizzes to try to make politics interesting. But can you really change things through games? No. Analytical work is needed.
- The Estonian experience of crowdsourcing started as a result of negative attitudes towards current political system. It began with online articles and a manifesto. Then these ideas were drawn together and voted up and down. Finally, at a large event, a representative sample was able to vote for the final proposal.
- But the problem still remains: where do these results go? How can we go from such crowdsourcing examples to actual decision-making?



## 1<sup>st</sup> Panel – Shaping Policies through E-participation -



The first panel of the conference discussed various experiences of civic participation in on-line debates based on the lessons learnt from the JoiEU events, which combined online international participation and offline, on the spot attendance.

### Ms Elisabeta Dinu – National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, Romania

- The event looked at the issue of “solidarity in times of crisis”, concluding that the crisis actually increased social solidarity
- The technical challenges encountered generated difficulties in maintaining two-way communication between online and offline participants

### Ms Maarja Toots – Open Estonia Foundation, Estonia

- The event addressed “Political participation and the European Elections”, considering primarily how young people could be engaged.
- Can counter stereotypes about “lazy” MEPs through such methods as ensuring that MEPs are present online, that they use simple language their work at the EP, and discuss the creation of pan-European media as a tool for bringing Europe home to its citizens.
- Digital democracy “not all about the digital”. We can have great online tools, but we still need users.

### Mr Mariano Votta - Cittadinanza Attiva, Italy

- It is important to get the right mix of online and offline elements during conferences due to the different characteristics of speakers, topics and outputs.

- The online component enabled a high level of EU speakers and a wide range of good practices to be brought together, however, there were some linguistic and technical problems.
- The offline component allowed for a much more interactive atmosphere and a civic mobilization at the national level in 30 Italian cities. However the topics were more relevant for the national level rather than the EU level.

#### Ms Marisa Gomez Crespo - Plataforma de ONG de Accion Social, Spain

- It was difficult to integrate questions from online participants during the conference.
- It is important to know better the different campaigns and integrate them. More work needed to be done on social media to promote online participation in such events.

#### Ms Blerina Guga - Partners Albania, Albania

- Albanian CSOs are engaged in and actively follow and feed online debates, and other forms of e-participation. They have virtual presences that secure them greater visibility beyond their national boundaries. *"I Facebook/I instagram / I Tweet ergo sum"* seems to be the philosophy of the future development of democracy and civic engagement.
- E-democracy needs e – education and e – accessibility for all citizens to be considered successful.

#### Mr Petko Georgiev - ProInfo Foundation

- 660 physical participants and over 500 organisations involved in the JoiEU debates.
- Politics is currently going through the same dramatic/traumatic process that journalism has gone through in attempting to adapt to the digital realities. New media tools were used to host the JoiEU debates. The debates attracted viewers from 98 different countries.
- The next priority is to move from joint debate to joint action.

### Conclusions

- Digital tools can be a viable method to enable broader participation as demonstrated by the high number of participants across countries in the JoiEU events. However, training on the use of these tools is necessary to foster truly pan-European discussion and overcome technical challenges
- On-line tools are also not enough on their own. A comprehensive framework should be created for combining them with offline activities and devoting sufficient resources to ensure their effective functioning and impact.
- Future steps should include the creation of a sustainable system for pan-European citizen participation.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Panel: Co-legislating with Citizens

The second panel explored national examples of crowdsourcing and the use of e-democracy platforms for co-decision between decision-makers and citizens.

The European Commission's framework for e-participation was presented by Mr. Novaretti, who is the Programme Manager for the Public Services Unit within DG CONNECT, which focuses on the development and deployment of EU Digital Public Services.

### Mr Serge Novaretti - European Commission, Programme Manager, EU Policies, DG CONNECT

*"Public administration across Europe should become digital by default"*



- One of the four pillars of the Commission's E-Government Action Plan has the aim to empower citizens and businesses. DG CONNECT published a vision for public services putting forward a possible approach: the open and collaborative government model.
- The Commission's goal is that public administration across Europe be "digital by default" and "cross border by default". This is the best way to modernize public administration and match citizen's high expectations.



- The Commission is looking at ways in which citizens can be involved in policy making and engaged into co-creation of services.
- There were five e-participation projects. The lessons learnt from these projects are among others that policy makers were not yet ready to be engaged, they have not been prepared for high level direct citizen engagement and that citizens are more interested by local topics and those that directly affect them. eParticipation needs a cultural change.
- It is one thing to attract the user on these e-participation platforms, but the key is to find ways to make the user stay on these platforms.

### Mr Giovanni Allegretti - Senior Researcher, Centre for Social Studies, Faculty of Economics, University of Coimbra – Online Contribution

- Participation in crowdsourcing initiatives had been gaining momentum in recent years.
- In consultative processes, as opposed to actual crowdsourcing, governments appear to have more control. However, governments also have pressure on them to appear to be responsive. Often in consultation processes you get the issue of redundancy, with repeat responses being submitted.
- There is a problem concerning knowing who will participate in these crowdsourcing initiatives. How can governments control who participates and how they participate?

### Co-legislating with Citizens: National Examples

#### Mr Gunnar Grimsson - Citizen Foundation, Iceland

- Modern loss of faith in democracy has been brought on in part by increased levels of inequality.
- What is important with e-participation is to focus on *quantity* first, reaching out to people and encouraging their participation, before worrying about the *quality* of this participation.
- Citizen Foundation has developed an online platform. On this platform, citizens add ideas for legislation, and then others vote them up or down. To prevent unconstructive arguments, as opposed to debates, all comments are divided into two columns depending on whether they are for or against the point in question.



### Bastien Jaillot - Democratie Ouverte, France

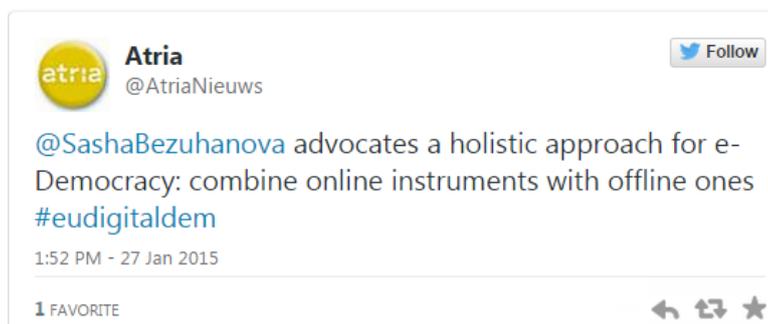
- The “Parlement & Citoyens” project is an experiment in increasing involvement between parliamentarians and citizens.
- It allows structured participation whereby for a given issue/solution participants can vote for or against it, and add arguments for or against it.
- The project has experienced success, involving over 4000 citizens, receiving 12000 contributions and resulting in 2 laws being promoted.
- Online platforms need to be simple but not simplistic.

### Joonas Pekkanen - Open Ministry, Finland

- A citizens’ initiative has been introduced in Finland. If an initiative gains 50 000 votes, it is now pushed onto the legislative agenda, successfully breaking the politicians’ monopoly on determining the agenda.
- Nine initiatives have reached this 50 000 vote threshold. One initiative has even been successfully voted through Parliament.
- Open Ministry helps those who want to design and crowdsource a campaign. They helped crowdsource a campaign on changing copyright law which had 140 contributors and was eventually written up by ten legal experts.
- Parliament currently processes these crowdsourced bills differently to normal government bills and the process is not very open.

### Mrs Sasha Bezuhanova - MoveBG, Bulgaria

- MoveBG is a platform where experts and progressive citizens come together to participate in the search and discovery of adequate, balanced, long-term solutions for the state and society. MoveBG combines expertise and civic energy to build a better, modern, democratic Bulgaria.
- A recent success story involved the European Citizens’ Initiative for Media Pluralism and a nationwide programme on media freedom and pluralism. Bulgaria was the only EU MS which managed to collect all the signatures required for this ECI.



- MoveBG contributed to this achievement through a series of initiatives: forming an ad-hoc coalition of stakeholders, hosting online streamed events, organizing both online and offline public campaigns in Bulgaria, and crowdsourcing and formulating solutions and legislative proposals.
- The lessons learnt were that a holistic and cross-disciplinary approach was required with alternative solutions clearly presented as well as a combination of both online and offline instruments used to crowdsource public and expert opinion.

## Mr Fraser Henderson - The Consultation Institute (TCI)

- TCI has been working on an EU knowledge exchange project with the Chinese government regarding the feedback of public comments on draft legislation.
- The public is capable of understanding complex issues. The voice of the non-expert is valuable and decision makers are themselves not necessarily expert on the subjects they legislate on.
- The Chinese government has been conducting public consultations on legislation since 2009. So far they have consulted on over 100 laws as well as 400 departmental rules. Over 100 000 comments have been made.
- We need more pre-consultation and dialogic methods of engaging the public on the merits of a draft law, not just the technicalities of it.
- The ability to comment directly on draft European legislation, online, should be the default position.

## Conclusions

- The necessary technology is in place. There are successful examples of e-democracy platforms which are user friendly with simple and effective designs.
- At national and local level, crowdsourcing initiatives seem to have gathered some momentum.
- We need to look at ways to move forward from the Commission consultations towards true co-decision.
- The key challenge is to motivate policy-makers to engage in an open and transparent dialogue with citizens online, using the knowledge and technology that is already available at national level.
- There is a need to create a space for networking and synergy building between the different national, local and European projects on e-democracy.

## Online Voting & Audience Participation

- The audience were able to use the online voting system as well as pose questions and opinions.
- You can see the results of the live voting [here](#)