



Digital Democracy Day 2019

Harnessing the Potential of Technology in Elections

7 March 2019

BIP, Rue Royale 2-4, 1000 Brussels

-REPORT-

On 7 March 2019, ECAS held its fifth annual Digital Democracy Day - *Harnessing the Potential of Technology in Elections* - focused on the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to engage citizens in political elections, with a particular focus on the 2019 European Parliament elections.

The event was organised in the framework of the YOU VOTE EU project, under the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Commission. As part of this project, ECAS and its partners developed "Your Vote Matters", an [online participative platform](#) that engages European citizens in the 2019 European Parliament elections by informing and connecting them with their current representatives or new candidates.

More than 70 participants from 20 different countries took part in the conference, which was also livestreamed and reached over 2000 people online.

Keynote speech and opening remarks

Mady Delvaux, Member of the European Parliament, S&D Group, opened the conference with a keynote speech on the opportunities offered by the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in political elections. She highlighted how technology offers a great platform for debate that 'upgrades' the traditional practices and provides the possibility to foster citizens' engagement in policy making.



MEP Mady Delvaux shared view on how together, technology and democracy are an opportunity to involve disengaged people in politics.

However, this technology also comes hand-in-hand with new challenges that we must be cautious of. For example, citizens are now confronted with the spread of online disinformation at a very large scale. For this reason, it is necessary to provide citizens with the best framework in order to minimise the emerging risks. In this respect, the adoption of the European Commission Action Plan against online disinformation has been a first step to address this challenge, but the right balance regarding regulatory actions remains difficult to find. It is, in fact, important to ensure that the informed and free opinion of each citizen is built on verified information, but to also avoid negative effects of regulatory measures that could lead to forms of censorship. This can best be accomplished only when all stakeholders collaborate together on adopting the necessary measures, as they have the duty to act ethically and respect standards. MEP Delvaux also remarked that it is important to increase the transparency and the accountability of the online platforms, particularly in regard to the use of algorithms. She concluded her speech by restating the importance of ensuring that citizens have all the possibilities to enjoy the positive effects of the use of ICT in electoral contexts.

"It is important to ensure that the informed and free opinion of each citizen is built on verified information, but to also avoid negative effects of regulatory measures that could lead to forms of censorship".

-MEP Mady Delvaux

Alexander Kleinig, Head of the Concept & Design, European Parliament, presented the “This time I am voting” campaign. He explained that the European Parliament campaign aims at increasing citizens’ participation all around Europe in the 2019 European Parliament elections, as voter turnout has been significantly decreasing in the past decades. He highlighted that the scope of the campaign goes beyond this aspect, with a wider objective of engaging people in European democracy. According to recent research, 42% of European citizens affirm that even if they are happy with democracy, in certain circumstances it is preferable to have an authoritarian regime. This statistic is unfortunately increasing and therefore, it is pivotal to demonstrate to citizens the value of democracy.



Mr Kleinig underlined that the campaign particularly targets citizens that wanted to vote in recent elections, but for whatever reason did not. The focus has been to learn what those reasons are and, along with other important topics, bring them into the conversation on how to improve the political participation of citizens. As it is a pan-European campaign, there have been several events organised in the Member States to achieve this aim.

Ending on a brighter note, Mr Kleinig reassured that a lot of efforts are currently undertaken by volunteers and the results are encouraging. Illustrating some of the initiatives, he presented the app ‘What Europe Does for Me’ that has been developed to identify everything the European Union has done on different matters and for different categories of citizens.

Panel 1 - *Connect, share and vote!* How digital technology can be used in elections

During the first panel, moderated by **Elisa Lironi**, European Democracy Senior Manager at the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS), speakers discussed how digital technology can be used in elections for many different purposes. The interactive approach of the panel allowed the audience to engage with the speakers after each presentation by asking questions and expressing their thoughts on the relevant topics.



Elisa Lironi, ECAS European Democracy Senior Manager, introduced the first panel.

Federico Anghel , Campaigner/Institutional Relations, Riparte Il Futuro, presented an overview of his organisation's activities in Italy and the importance of using digital tools to reach a wider audience, particularly young people. The organisation aims at tackling the increasing problem of corruption in the country and it has now become the biggest digital online community against corruption ever created in Italy. He highlighted how the online platform of Riparte il Futuro is a public space where 1 million people are advocating for the common good. The community is mostly engaged through online petitions and social media channels and has been able to push thousands of candidates to increase their transparency in the electoral processes. Many other results have since been achieved, such as the adoption of the Freedom of Information Act, and the whistleblowers protection legislation by the Italian Parliament.



Federico Anghel  presented Italy's biggest digital online community against corruption.

As one of the project partners, Mr Anghel  also presented the latest developments around the “[Your Vote Matters](#)” platform. The accomplished results confirm the effectiveness of the platform as an important tool for fostering citizens' engagement in the next European elections.

“The accomplished results of the YourVoteMatters platform confirm that it is an important tool for fostering citizens' engagement in the next European elections”.

-Federico Anghel 

Elena Gozun from Europuls presented the work of the Brussels-based organisation on fighting disinformation in the electoral environment ahead of the European elections in May. She remarked how disinformation campaigns can be extremely dangerous in electoral contexts, using the case of Moldova as an example. There, the last two elections have been heavily influenced by online disinformation.

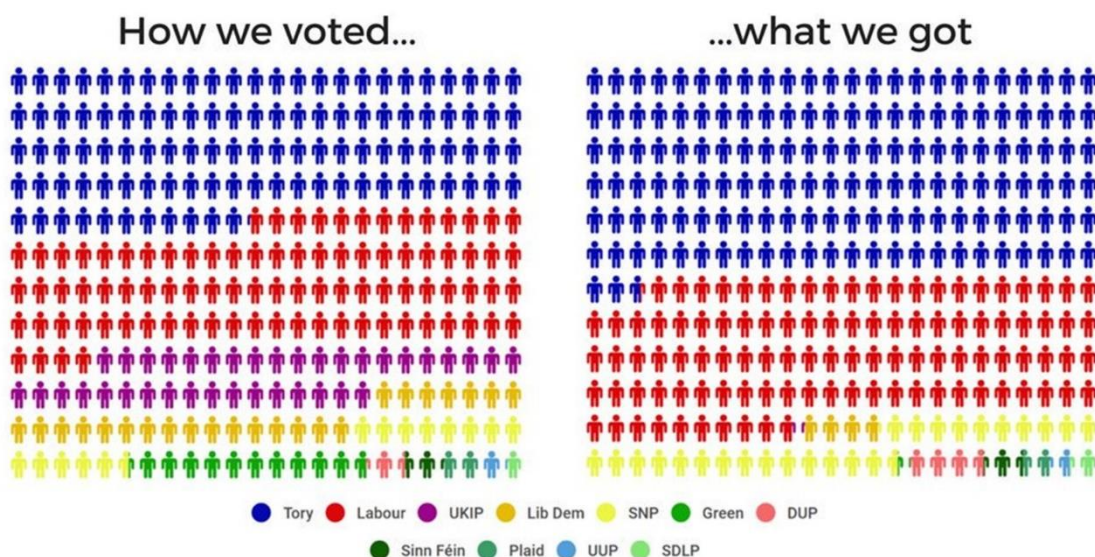
To address this challenge, the organisation developed the innovative app ‘Stopfalse’, which has been officially launched at the beginning of January. The app was developed in both Romanian and Russian, in order to cover the two official languages in Moldova, and has since been used to debunk fake news and double check sources.



Elena Gozun gave case examples of disinformation that led up to the creation of the 'Stopfalse' application.

The e-tool has been designed to be user-friendly and interactive, with an alert system that sends notifications to the users every time a false news item is identified. The app is also strengthened through collaboration with a network of journalists that have been previously trained as part of the project. Additionally, users have the opportunity to send a notification to the media team of the app when they spot fake content, thus forming a 'watchdog' that includes and engages journalists and citizens alike. Finally, she noted that the initial results of the app have been very encouraging and this kind of e-tools can help safeguard key electoral moments and foster citizens' engagement in political elections.

Tom de Grunwald, Co-Founder of SwapMyVote, presented the e-participation tool created to overcome the democratic deficit emerging from the first-past-the-post voting system in the United Kingdom. He explained that due to the way the voting system is designed, a lot of votes in some constituencies are wasted, as they are dominated by one party. Voting in one of these constituencies has become irrelevant for some citizens, because their candidates may have only a slim chance of being elected.



Slide from Tom de Grunwald's presentation.

SwapMyVote allows for people who feel their vote might go to waste to swap with someone in another constituency that is already dominated by a certain party. He introduced the system by first stating that it is completely legal. The application helps citizens to connect with someone else who wants to swap their vote, along with providing information about the most recent poll outcomes in the selected constituency. He shared that in the last UK general elections, more than six million people voted tactically, and the tool received support from all the political parties. By aiming to assure that no vote is wasted, SwapMyVote is an e-participation tool that improves citizens' democratic representation and adds more value to a vote.

Although designed for the UK's political landscape, it is intended to be used in other countries all over the world, particularly where the first-past-the-post voting system is in place.



Bogdan Ivănel presented Vote Monitor, a tool developed by Code for Romania that monitors elections in real time and allows for citizens to report any voting irregularities.

Bogdan Ivănel, CEO, Code for Romania, presented another e-tool – Vote Monitor (Monitorizare Vot) – which monitors the electoral processes in Romania. He explained that election monitoring in Romania has always been a pen-and-paper affair carried out without any real-time observation, thus making any findings irrelevant. Vote Monitor is an app developed for both Android and IOS systems and is meant for use by election observers, as well as citizens. He explained that it is the first app of its kind to be developed and used in Romania and one of the few used in Europe and worldwide. Its innovation aspect enables real time

secured communication between election observers and their respective organisations, but also allows citizens to report voting irregularities, thus fostering their engagement in electoral processes. The app has been used in the 2016 Romanian Parliamentary elections and again in the 2018 Romanian Constitutional referendum, and it is on its way to soon be used in Poland. Mr Ivănel expressed that the use of these kinds of e-tools can bring innovation and enhance transparency in electoral processes, as well as foster citizens' civic engagement.

Laura Bretea, Policy Officer, Democratic Governance, DG DEVCO, European Commission, explained that while DG DEVCO strongly supports the use of digital technology in elections, as it brings a lot of opportunities, it is also important to be aware of the negative sides. She underlined that it is essential



Laura Bretea reviewed some of the efforts by the European Commission in both supporting digital technology and combating its challenges.

to understand how we can use new technologies efficiently and how to best support Civil Society Organisations in the process. She presented CivicTech 4 Democracy, a competition for civic tech projects all around the world, supported by DG DEVO in 2018. She explained that the EIDHR Global call 2018 is another example of the European Commissions' efforts in this aspect, with 5,5 million euros allocated for projects. The call received 330 concept notes and many of them were related to the use of technology in elections.

Furthermore, she remarked on the importance of providing electoral assistance in developing countries because many threats, such as disinformation campaigns, can hinder the correct execution of electoral processes. DG DEVCO is currently exploring and assessing the potential of digital technologies in activities, such as electoral monitoring, or ways to foster citizens' engagement during elections.

Ms Bretea's presentation contributed to the overall message that technology is extremely helpful and has the potential to play an important role in not just one, but many aspects of political elections.

"It is important to understand how we can use new technologies efficiently and how to best support Civil Society Organisations in the process".

-Laura Bretea

Panel 2 – *Engaging the disengaged!* Reviving citizen engagement in European Elections through e-democracy

During the second panel, moderated by **Christopher Glück**, President of the Young European Federalists, speakers took the discussion one step farther by analysing the potential of digital tools in reviving citizens' engagement in the next European elections.



Christopher Glück opened the second panel.



Doru Frantescu highlighted the societal transformations that have taken place throughout the last years.

Doru Frantescu, Director and Co-Founder, Vote Watch Europe, presented an overview of the organisations' activities in the recent years. He remarked that citizens are still very much interested in politics, but the societal transformations that have occurred have also transformed the ways they get involved. Technology provides citizens with an increasing access to information, but the main challenge is the way that citizens select, interpret and understand the available information. In this context, transparency is extremely important. Moving towards the next European

elections, he remarked how 'traditional' political parties have an interest in making citizens to go vote, but an increase of the voter turnout will not necessary translate into more votes for the pro-European parties. In fact, there is still the possibility that a bigger turnout could results in more seats for the populist parties in the next European Parliament.

"Citizens are still very much interested in politics, but the recent societal transformations have transformed the ways we get involved".

-Doru Frantescu

Sam Van der Staak, Head of the Europe Programme, International IDEA, noted that due to the opportunities it creates for engaging citizens in elections, technology is also widely used by political parties. He underlined that while the political party system is dominant everywhere in the world and that political parties are commonly considered as representative of the citizens, they are highly distrusted. However, this is not to say that citizens are disengaged from politics. He noted that political parties are increasingly realising that citizens' engagement has shifted away from the traditional forms or places.



Sam Van der Staak presented the other side – how political parties use digital technology to reach voters.

Currently, political parties have been using digital technologies in order to increase citizens' mobilisation and direct engagement. Over the past years, digital micro-funding and online political crowdfunding are among the most used successful practices used by political parties. He underlined that microtargeting increased with the availability of big data, as there is detailed information available on voters. However, users are increasingly cautious with the use of social media and there is a general dissatisfaction and scepticism around the use of personal data for political purposes. The real question is how to deal with the use of ICT in democracy and how to channel its use in a positive way. He affirmed that it is very important to start a debate on how to regulate this, while taking in consideration that it is necessary to begin with a softer approach that empowers citizens to use digital tools through education. Finally, he suggested that in this context, it is important to take a multi-stakeholder approach and to combine regulation with guidance.

"The real question is how to deal with the use of ICT in democracy and how to channel its use in a positive way".

-Sam Van der Staak

Aleksandra Kluczka, Campaign Officer, European Elections, European Youth Forum, affirmed that digital tools can play a positive role in reviving citizens' engagement in politics, particularly for young people. She presented the online platform that the European Youth Forum is currently developing in view of the 2019 European Elections. The tool will allow users to compare the positions and policy stances of European political parties and leading candidates on different topics. These topics have been grouped in seven different themes previously identified as particularly relevant for young people. She added that the tool will also be provided in the form of a widget that partner organisations and political institutions can easily integrate into their own websites. She remarked that many other activities and campaigns will involve digital means, as young people are extremely interested in this kind of participation and engagement. Finally, she suggested that e-democracy could be extremely important in reviving citizens' political participation, but it has to be accompanied with more direct forms of civic engagement.



Aleksandra Kluczka specifically focused on young people and how to better engage them in elections.

Errikos Pitsos, Founder and CEO, Kialo, presented the online debating platform launched in 2017. Kialo is a free platform with around 60 000 contributions per months. It was started with the idea that a thoughtful debate is an excellent way of informing citizens and fighting political apathy. It was born out of the need for such a platform, as the traditional commenting system used in all the other online platforms is designed for commentary, not for having a debate.



Errikos Pitsos explained his platform that allows for important public debates on often controversial topics.

in which we engage with each other. Digital tools, such as Kialo, can provoke thoughtful debates on controversial and – potentially divisive – topics.

Specifically, the traditional commenting systems are designed to maximise engagement, while Kialo allows users to have complex debates with opposing arguments clearly visualised in the form of an interactive tree. At the top is the thesis, which is supported or weakened by pro and con arguments. He explained that the platform has been working well in debating very controversial topics and it is best described as ‘collaborative reasoning platform’. He explained that the platform uses a peer-to-peer moderation system that has proved to be effective. Given that we live in a society that is formed by a variety of opinions, it is extremely important the way

Assya Kavrakova, Executive Director, European Citizen Action Service, brought the conference to a close with a reflection on the importance of citizens’ engagement in the next European elections. However, she also reiterated that getting more people to vote does not guarantee an increasing number of seats for pro-European parties in the next European Parliament. It is therefore necessary to foster a deeper understanding of the important societal transformations that occurred in recent years and increase the efforts to counter the



ECAS Executive Director Assya Kavrakova brought the conference to a close.

emerging threats. In support to this remark, Ms Kavrakova presented the main findings of the recent study commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee and carried out by ECAS *“Societies outside Metropolises: the role of civil society organisations in facing populism”*. The study suggests that all around Europe citizens are calling for new forms of collaborative models of policy-making, where innovation will be the game changer.

“All around Europe citizens are calling for new forms of collaborative models of policy-making, where innovation will be the game changer”.

-Assya Kavrakova

The full livestream of Digital Democracy Day 2019: Harnessing the Potential of Technology in Elections can be viewed [here](#) (first panel) and [here](#) (second panel).



Agenda

9.00 – 9.30	Registration
9.30 – 9.45	Keynote Speech <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Mady Delvaux, Member of the European Parliament, S&D Group▪ Alexander Kleinig, Head of the Concept & Design, European Parliament
9.45 – 11.15	<p>Panel 1: <i>Connect, share and vote!</i> How digital technology can be used in elections</p> <p>Moderator: Elisa Lironi, Senior Manager European Democracy, ECAS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Federico Anghel�, Campaigner/Institutional Relations, Riparte Il Futuro▪ Elena Gozun, Europuls▪ Tom de Grunwald, Co-Founder, SwapMyVote▪ Bogdan Iv�nel, CEO, Code for Romania▪ Laura Bretea, Policy Officer, Democratic Governance, DG DEVCO, European Commission
11.15 – 11.30	Coffee break
11.30 – 13.00	<p>Panel 2: <i>Engaging the disengaged!</i> Reviving citizen engagement in European Elections through e-democracy</p> <p>Moderator: Christopher Gl�ck, President, Young European Federalists</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Doru Frantescu, Director and Co-Founder, Vote Watch Europe▪ Sam Van der Staak, Head of the Europe Programme, International IDEA▪ Aleksandra Kluczka, Campaign Officer, European Elections, European Youth Forum▪ Errikos Pitsos, Founder and CEO, Kialo
13.00 – 14.00	Lunch