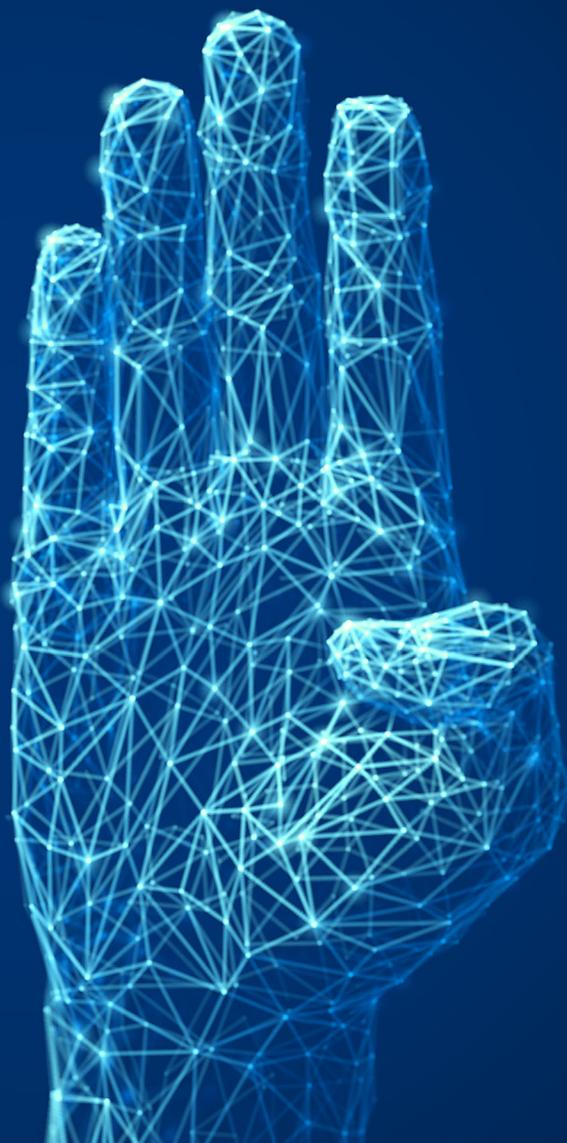


FLAVIO GRAZIAN • HENDRIK NAHR

# NEXT LEVEL PARTICIPATION

CITIZEN-DRIVEN  
E-DEMOCRACY TOOLS



EDITED BY  
IVAYLO TSONEV



**Next Level Participation:**

Citizen-Driven e-Democracy Tools

Flavio Grazian  
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Edited by Ivaylo Tsonev

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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

Information and communication technology (ICT) constitutes an essential element of people's daily lives in 2020 and the world could not be imagined without the use of digital technologies. People do their shopping online, consume media on their electronic devices, rent cars with apps, and meet friends virtually - and this is just a snapshot of the current use of technology. Today, a great part of people's day-to-day activities rely on digital applications and services. Imagining a world without the internet becomes increasingly difficult - and the number of people online is constantly rising<sup>1</sup>.

However, it appears that this is less valid for democratic, political, and public life. Despite more and more online activities and campaigns possibly impacting political decisions, a great deal of political activity is still happening offline, following traditional and established modes of democratic participation. It was only due to the developments related to COVID-19, that a number of Parliaments explored new ways to digitalise their activities<sup>2</sup>. There is not only unexploited potential for more online activities when it comes to elections (amongst EU Member States, online voting is only possible in Estonia<sup>3</sup>) but also for public administration services<sup>4</sup>.

Nonetheless, the great *potential* of digitalisation does not only apply to businesses or social connections but, in fact, also to democracy and citizen engagement with politics<sup>5</sup>. In this regard, it does not come as a surprise that there has been a rich discussion on the topic in the academic world in recent years. Even before the widespread

1 International Telecommunications Union, *Individuals using the internet 2005 – 2019*  
<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

2 Rozenberg, O., (2020), *Post-Pandemic Legislatures: Is real democracy possible with virtual parliaments?*, European Liberal Forum publ. [online], p. 6. Available at: <https://www.liberalforum.eu/publications/post-pandemic-legislatures-is-real-democracy-possible-with-virtual-parliaments/>

3 Russell, M., Zamfir, I., (2018), *Digital technology in elections Efficiency versus credibility?*, European Parliament Research Service, Brussels, p. 8. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS\\_BRI\(2018\)625178](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2018)625178)

4 European Commission, *eGovernment Benchmark 2018: the digital efforts of European countries are visibly paying off*  
<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/egovernment-benchmark-2018-digital-efforts-european-countries-are-visibly-paying>

5 European Parliament, (2017), *Report on e-democracy in the European Union: potential and challenges*, 2016/2008 (INI), Brussels, 1. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2017-0041\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2017-0041_EN.html)

emergence of the Web 2.0<sup>6</sup>, academics researched pioneer e-democracy pilots<sup>7</sup>, the potential of online fora<sup>8</sup> and the opportunities presented by electronic democracy more generally<sup>9</sup> - amongst others. With growing progress in technical and societal innovation, the research in this field has also become more specific. More recent studies have, for example, included a clear focus on e-participation in Europe<sup>10</sup>, e-participation and social capital<sup>11</sup>, digital democracy at the EU level<sup>12</sup> and EU public consultations<sup>13</sup>.

Based on these studies that have sought to understand how the use of digital tools can be applied to enhance citizen participation in democracy, it is, firstly, possible to assume that digital technologies could have growing potential in relation with democratic processes<sup>14</sup> (Observation 1).

Secondly, the *potential* of using technological tools for democratic innovation comes hand in hand with a number of trends and changes that can be observed across the EU and beyond in recent years. One of the most relevant developments is an appearing decline of trust in traditional political actors, such as political parties and elected representatives. The number of citizens who have trust in (national and European) institutions in the EU has consistently remained below 50%<sup>15</sup> (Observation 2). Furthermore, electoral turnout in Europe overall is constantly decreasing<sup>16</sup> - a tendency that

- 
- 6 Oxford Dictionaries, *Web 2.0* <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/web-2-0?q=web+2.0>
- 7 Macintosh, A., (2004), *Characterizing e-participation in policy-making*, in: Proceedings of 37th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, IEEE, pp. 1-10. Available at: <https://www.computer.org/csdl/pds/api/csdl/proceedings/download-article/12OmNwoPttU/pdf>
- 8 Klein, H.K., (2006), *Tocqueville in Cyberspace: Using the Internet for Citizen Associations*, in 'The Information Society', Vol. 15, Is. 4, pp. 213-220. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/019722499128376>
- 9 Bolognini, M., (2001), *Democrazia elettronica*, Carocci Editore, Rome.
- 10 Hennen, L., et. al. (Eds), (2020) *European E-Democracy in Practice*, Springer International Publishing, Cham. Available at: <https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783030271831>
- 11 Naranjo-Zolotov, M., et al., (2019) *Examining social capital and individual motivators to explain the adoption of online citizen participation*, in 'Future Generation Computer Systems', Vol. 92, pp. 302-311. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167739X18313396>
- 12 Bruno, E., (2015), *Co-deciding with Citizens: Towards Digital Democracy at EU Level*, ECAS publ. [online]. Available at: <https://www.ecas.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ECAS-Publication-online-version.pdf>
- 13 Lironi, E., Peta, D., (2017), *EU public consultations in the digital age: Enhancing the role of the EESC and civil society organisations*, European Economic and Social Committee, Brussels. Available at: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/eu-public-consultations-digital-age-enhancing-role-ee-sc-and-civil-society-organisations>
- 14 Lironi, E., (2018), *Harnessing Digital Tools to Revitalize European Democracy*, Carnegie Europe publ. [online]. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/11/28/harnessing-digital-tools-to-revitalize-european-democracy-pub-77806>
- 15 European Commission, (2019), *Standard Eurobarometer 92: Public opinion in the European Union*, Autumn 2019, p. 58. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2255>
- 16 Solijonov, A., (2016), *Voter Turnout Trends around the World*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm, p. 25. Available at: <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf>

can be equally observed amongst young people<sup>17</sup>, even if the turnout of the 2019 European elections was – for the first time – higher than in the previous election<sup>18</sup>. It must also be mentioned that youth engagement in different modes of political participation varies significantly across countries in the EU<sup>19</sup>.

Thirdly, despite the trend of low level of engagement with ‘traditional participation modes’, it appears that citizens remain interested in public decision making and politics (Observation 3): the European Commission’s Standard Eurobarometer 92 found that 76% of EU citizens are interested in their national politics (by indicating that they frequently or occasionally discuss them with friends or relatives), and 73% in local politics<sup>20</sup>. Another observation that indicates an ongoing interest in politics amongst citizens is that young people are particularly likely to remain involved in political organisations - but not necessarily in political parties: in a policy paper published during the run-up to the 2019 European elections, the European Youth Forum stated that “*young people care about life in society and politics and have a lot to say. [...] We volunteer for youth organisations, for example, to fight social inequality and environmental injustice*”<sup>21</sup>. This is also mirrored by the rise of global, social movements - to a wide extent driven by young people (e.g., Fridays for Future).

OBSERVATIONS		
1	2	3
Digital technologies could have growing potential in relation with democratic processes.	Decline of trust in traditional ‘political actors’ such as political parties and elected representatives.	Citizens remain interested in public decision making and politics.

While some of these three observations might not seem particularly encouraging in terms of their individual potential for social progress, they could harness interesting and promising synergies if combined creatively. In fact, citizen-driven e-democracy tools come

<sup>17</sup> Deželan, T., (2015), *Young People and Democratic Life in Europe*, European Youth Forum, Brussels, p. 25. Available at: <https://www.youthforum.org/young-people-and-democratic-life-europe>

<sup>18</sup> See: European Parliament, Election Results 2019 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/turnout/>

<sup>19</sup> Kitanova, M., (2019), *Youth political participation in the EU: evidence from a cross-national analysis*, in ‘Journal of Youth Studies’, Vol. 23, Is. 7, p. 827. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676261.2019.1636951>

<sup>20</sup> European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 92: Public opinion in the European Union*, p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> European Youth Forum, (2018), *10 Ideas to #YouthUp the 2019 European Elections*, EYF General Assembly, Novi Sad, p.5. Available at: <https://www.youthforum.org/10-ideas-youthup-2019-european-elections>

with the benefits of digitalisation, providing non-traditional ways of political participation and enabling citizens to address the topics that they consider relevant to them. E-tools are “*increasingly being used to reinvigorate and improve citizen participation in democratic decision making*”<sup>22</sup>. These existing examples provide a great source of expertise and can help develop this field further in order to foster citizen participation in democratic processes.

**Therefore, this paper aims at exploring the potential of projects creating citizen-driven e-democracy tools.** The analysis of different case studies has the objective of understanding how those tools currently work practically, what the challenges of those initiatives are and what steps can be taken to improve them and their use by citizens. Clearly, these tools serve a wide variety of purposes and can be used for many different kinds of applications.

**The main ambition of this study is to identify success factors of existing citizen-driven e-democracy tools and to provide recommendations for civil society organisations (CSOs) and other actors that aim to implement similar projects.**

To this end, a conceptual ground of online participation is established in the first place (*Chapter 2*), before the methodology of this study is laid out (*Chapter 3*) and some best practices that showcase the use of online tools to activate citizen participation are explored in detail (*Chapter 4*). The case studies focus on tools that establish more *transparency* for citizens (*Chapter 4.1*), that create spaces for citizen *deliberation* (*Chapter 4.2*) and on tools that provide more possibilities for inclusive and active *participation* (*Chapter 4.3*). Subsequently, the main lessons and the success factors identified are discussed by providing recommendations for CSOs that aim to implement similar projects themselves (*Chapter 5*). To summarise and to provide a way forward for further research and the implementation of similar projects, *Chapter 6* establishes the most relevant conclusions of the study.

The study will show that, based on the cases at hand, a few main factors for the success of citizen-driven e-democracy tools can be identified. At the same time, while some challenges faced by the projects remain very individual, a number of hurdles highlighted are shared amongst most of the projects. In this context common experiences can be singled out, particularly when it comes to the financial sustainability and the organisational development of the tools at hand.

<sup>22</sup> Lironi, E., *Harnessing Digital Tools to Revitalize European Democracy*, p.2.

# Concepts

When discussing the challenges, implications, and success factors of e-democracy tools in light of the potential of citizen-driven participation, it is important to lay out the groundwork of these concepts. To that end, the relevant terms applied by this study are first defined before the conceptual framework of this article is established.

## 2.1 DEFINITIONS

Given that this study aims at researching the impact of and success factors for ‘citizen-driven e-democracy tools’, this term must be defined and discussed. Provided that the active role of citizens in a society is an important condition to the topic of this study, the term ‘citizen’ must reflect much more than just “*a person who has the legal right to belong to a particular country*”<sup>23</sup>. In fact, building on this, this study applies the notion of a ‘citizen’ in line with Bellamy and Castiglione’s three-dimensional scope of citizenship. Besides *belonging* to a community and *rights* granted to an individual (as already established above), the *participation* of individuals in society plays an important role. It is described “*as the way in which citizens, as equal and full members of a political community [...], actively engage with each other in order to create and re-create the conditions in which they can address the ‘circumstances of politics’*”<sup>24</sup>.

In this context, a ‘citizen’ can also be a group of citizens. Since ‘driven’ describes the fact that something is “*influenced or caused by a particular thing*”<sup>25</sup>, ‘citizen-driven’ refers to the opposite of being driven by more institutionalised actors (e.g., states, administrations, or political parties).

Following up on this, it is now crucial to establish what the term ‘e-democracy’ re-

<sup>23</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, *Citizen* <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/citizen?q=citizen>

<sup>24</sup> Bellamy, R., Castiglione, D., (2008), *Beyond community and rights: European citizenship and the virtues of participation*, in: Mouritsen, P., Jørgensen, K.E. (Eds.), ‘Constituting Communities’, Palgrave Macmillan, London, p. 175. Available at: [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057%2F9780230582088\\_8](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057%2F9780230582088_8)

<sup>25</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, *Driven* [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/driven\\_1?q=driven](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/driven_1?q=driven)

### Minimalist and substantive approach to e-democracy

### Citizen-driven e-democracy tools are digital tools, developed and run exclusively by citizens, civic groups and organisations, with the goal to support formal democratic decision making or to establish an alternative democratic process

fers to. Here, the work of Tuzzi, Padovani and Nesti is of great support. While they rightfully establish that “*there is no all-encompassing definition of the term e-democracy*”<sup>26</sup>, they further outline a dichotomy that can be found in the various definitions of e-democracy which is of great help to this study. The authors distinguish between a “*minimalist definition of e-democracy [...] and a more substantive conception*”<sup>27</sup>.

On the one hand, the *minimalist approach* describes that “*citizens would enjoy electronic access to governmental information and be offered the opportunity to interact with government officials and conduct online transactions with governments*”<sup>28</sup>. In such cases, no interaction between citizens themselves is established. This refers to a clear top-down application of e-democracy that can be considered an example of ‘e-government’. Given the citizen-driven approach of this paper, this dimension of e-democracy will not be considered in the analysis carried out in the following chapters.

On the other hand, Tuzzi, Padovani and Nesti build on the work of Norris by explaining that the substantive approach implies “*a more active citizen involvement [...] and the ability to act both directly and through their chosen representatives to govern themselves and their communities*”<sup>29</sup>. In those cases, digitalisation provides the power for citizens to establish new democratic tools that may enable them to actively participate in public policy making processes. Therefore, this will be considered ‘e-participation’. In this context, it is important to highlight that bottom-up processes can be initiated by both administrations (institutional) and citizen-driven projects (non-institutional) with the goal to complement existing tools or to create new ones. Another important element is how the set-up of a tool itself must be considered an act of active citizen participation. The study focuses on the *non-institutional* dimension of e-participation. Having established that, in this study ‘citizen-driven e-democracy tools’ are consequently defined as **digital tools, developed and run exclusively by citizens, civic groups and organisations, with the goal to support formal democratic decision making or to establish an alternative democratic process.**

Citizen-driven e-democracy tools have the ultimate goal to enhance ‘digital citizenship’. Therefore, it is important to have a shared understanding of what this term

26 Tuzzi A., Padovani C., Nesti G., (2007), *Communication and (e)democracy: assessing European edemocracy discourses*, in: Cammaerts, B., Carpentier N., (Eds), ‘Reclaiming the media. Communication rights and democratic media roles’, Intellect, Bristol, Chicago, p. 33. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242098486\\_Communication\\_and\\_edemocracy\\_Assessing\\_European\\_e-democracy\\_discourses](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242098486_Communication_and_edemocracy_Assessing_European_e-democracy_discourses)

27 Ibidem

28 Ibidem

29 Norris, P., (2003), *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 3. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/de/academic/subjects/politics-international-relations/comparative-politics/democratic-phoenix-reinventing-political-activism?format=PB>

means and, to this end, the work of Jones and Mitchel is taken into account. According to them, ‘digital citizenship’ is “a combination of respectful, tolerant online behaviour and online civic engagement activities”<sup>30</sup>. Although the primary focus of the authors lies on digital citizenship education of youth, their definition is indeed applicable to digital citizenship in general. It allows for the transposition of certain democratic values and civic competences (well established in traditional and ‘offline’ research and practice of democratic political culture) into the analysis of civic engagement in the digital environment. In short, what distinguishes a digital citizen from other actors in the digital sphere is not only their civic engagement but also the values that set the citizen apart from an online bully or ‘troll’<sup>31</sup>.

## 2.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Besides the definitions of key terms discussed in this study, it is important to establish a conceptual framework that allows the analysis of the case studies (see 3. *Methodology*). The framework laid out in this article is based on previous research carried out by experts in the field. The “Levels of Participation”<sup>32</sup> developed by Macintosh serves as a starting point to build the conceptual framework.

**Table 1: Levels of Participation by Macintosh**

LEVEL	GOAL
E-enabling	Supporting those who would not typically access the internet and take advantage of the large amount of information available.
E-engaging	Consulting a wider audience to enable deeper contributions and support deliberative debate on policy issues
E-empowering	Supporting active participation and facilitating bottom-up ideas

These levels of participation are important as they will help to understand the different types of citizen-driven e-democracy tools discussed in the next chapters. It is also critical to delve further into the notion of e-participation, which this study will take into consideration. As previously explained, this study will use the definition of e-participa-

<sup>30</sup> Jones, L. M., Mitchell, K. J., (2016), *Defining and measuring youth digital citizenship*, in ‘New Media & Society’, Vol. 18, Is. 9, p. 2074. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1461444815577797>

<sup>31</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, *Troll* [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/troll\\_1?q=troll](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/troll_1?q=troll)

<sup>32</sup> Macintosh, A., *Characterizing e-participation in policy-making*, p. 3.

The “Levels of Participation” by Macintosh serves as the base for the conceptual framework of this study

### Passive and active role of citizens in e-democracy tools

### Dependence and independence from public authorities

tion that refers to the process of enhancing and deepening the political participation of citizens by means of ICT.

The conceptual framework of this research also builds upon the different functions of e-participation outlined by Ralf Lindner and Georg Aichholzer<sup>33</sup>: monitoring, agenda setting, and decision making. Moreover, the three models of democracy (liberal, deliberative, participatory) by Habermas<sup>34</sup> are equally feeding into this framework. Tuzzi, Padovani and Nesti<sup>35</sup> also provide crucial theoretical groundwork for this study since they established the distinction between the different levels of engagement (active participation, consultation, information). These categorisations are brought together for the study in a comprehensive conceptual framework outlined in the following paragraphs.

Before moving forward, two more dimensions need to be considered. Firstly, it must be understood whether citizens are ‘passively’ benefiting from online tools or whether they have the possibility to ‘actively’ get involved. It is important to clarify whether the ‘active-passive distinction’ only applies to the citizens that use such tools. Setting them up requires active citizenship in the first place, of course (e-participation). However, some tools (once they are set up) invite fellow citizens to either have more of a monitoring role (passive) or to take part themselves in discussions, deliberations, or votes (active). This is what the active-passive dimension aims to cover.

Secondly, the dimension of ‘dependence and independence from public authorities’ must be established. Some citizen-driven e-democracy tools can indeed be fully functioning and implemented without any active involvement or commitment of public authorities. In such a case, they would be considered ‘independent’. This also covers tools that might be based on public data but whose impact does not rely on guarantees by officials. Others, however, might rely on a certain level of engagement or support by authorities. Those initiatives must be considered ‘dependent’ (from public organisations). It is important to highlight that even dependent citizen-driven e-democracy tools remain in the hands of citizens. Yet the involvement *of*, and the commitment to the outcome *by*, public authorities may be necessary in some cases.

Consequently, the framework of this study is also developed along those two dimensions (active-passive; independent-dependent). The above-mentioned concepts are implemented into these dimensions.

33 Lindner, R., Aichholzer, G., (2020), *E-Democracy: Conceptual Foundations and Recent Trends*, in: Hennen, L., et. al. (Eds), ‘European E-Democracy in Practice’, Springer International Publishing, Cham, p. 23. Available at: <https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783030271831>

34 Habermas, J., (1994), *Three Normative Models of Democracy*, in ‘Constellations’, Vol. 1, Is. 1, pp. 1-10. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8675.1994.tb00001.x>

35 Tuzzi A., Padovani C., Nesti G., *Communication and (e)democracy: assessing European edemocracy discourses*, p. 34.

### Passive- independent: Transparency

The tools that provide possibilities for *passive* engagement by citizens and that are *independent* from public authorities correspond to liberal models of democracy<sup>36</sup>. Such tools provide citizens with improved transparency, so that their involvement is limited to consuming information about administrations' actions<sup>37</sup>. People are enabled to monitor the work of political representatives and authorities (and ultimately understand decision making) better<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, it results in e-enabling<sup>39</sup>.

### Active- independent: Deliberation

The tools that provide possibilities for *active* engagement by citizens and that are *independent* from public authorities correspond to deliberative and contestatory types of democracy. However, contestatory democracy will not be taken into consideration since this study will focus on constructive approaches. Therefore, deliberation is the primary type of democracy considered here<sup>40</sup>. Accordingly, when using deliberative democracy tools of democracy, citizens take part in discussions and the potential for deliberation is raised. In line with Macintosh, the level of participation of such tools can be considered e-engaging<sup>41</sup>: citizens engage (with each other) online to discuss, understand and exchange ideas. The ultimate objective of citizen engagement would be to set the agenda of administrations and policy makers<sup>42</sup>. Even administrations can make use of those tools by following conversations online, which may contribute to a better understanding of citizens' opinions<sup>43</sup>.

### Active- dependent: Participation

The tools that provide possibilities for *active* engagement by citizens and that are *dependent* on public authorities correspond to participatory types of democracy<sup>44</sup>. When using the corresponding tools, citizens may act as legislators and take decisions themselves<sup>45</sup>. Due to the active participation by citizens<sup>46</sup>, the power is shifted from (elect-

<sup>36</sup> Bruno, E., *Co-deciding with Citizens: Towards Digital Democracy at EU Level*, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Tuzzi A., Padovani C., Nesti G., *Communication and (e)democracy: assessing European edemocracy discourses*, p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> Lindner, R., Aichholzer, G., *E-Democracy: Conceptual Foundations and Recent Trends*, p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> Macintosh, A., *Characterizing e-participation in policy-making*, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Bruno, E., *Co-deciding with Citizens: Towards Digital Democracy at EU Level*, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> Macintosh, A., *Characterizing e-participation in policy-making*, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Lindner, R., Aichholzer, G., *E-Democracy: Conceptual Foundations and Recent Trends*, p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> Tuzzi A., Padovani C., Nesti G., *Communication and (e)democracy: assessing European edemocracy discourses*, p. 34.

<sup>44</sup> Bruno, E., *Co-deciding with Citizens: Towards Digital Democracy at EU Level*, p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> Lindner, R., Aichholzer, G., *E-Democracy: Conceptual Foundations and Recent Trends*, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Tuzzi A., Padovani C., Nesti G., *Communication and (e)democracy: assessing European edemocracy discourses*, p. 34.

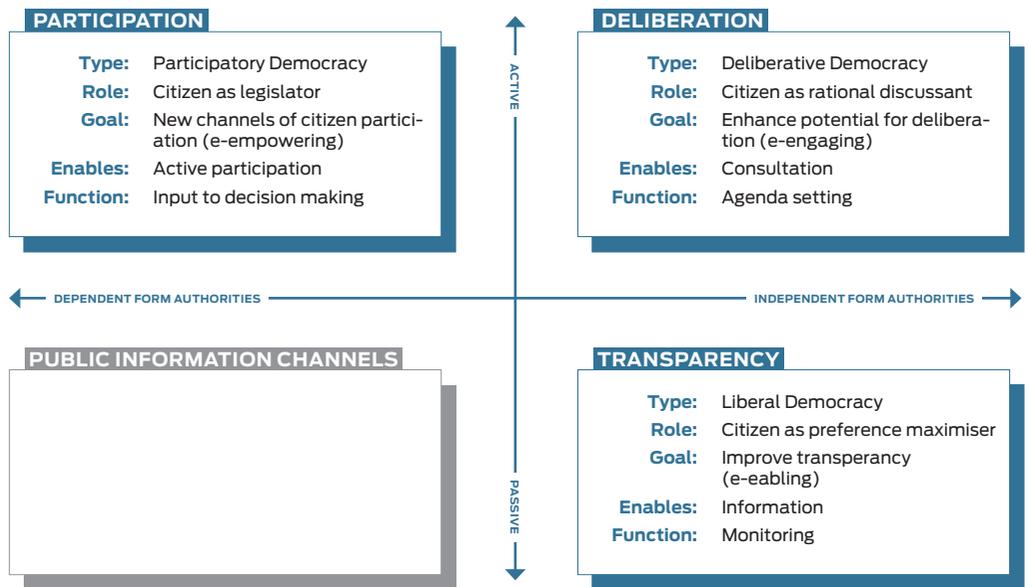
ed) officials to citizens. Therefore, this can be considered e-empowering<sup>47</sup>. This naturally requires a high-level of commitment from public authorities. Consequently, those tools are considered dependent.

### Passive- dependent: Public information channels

The tools that provide possibilities for *passive* engagement by citizens and that are *dependent* on public authorities do not correspond to any of the above-mentioned concepts. Those tools provide information published by public authorities (e.g., a website that informs citizens - without any interactive element). They cannot, however, entail any citizen-driven e-democracy element (since they are entirely controlled by public authorities). Therefore, this dimension will not be considered in this study.

The figure below summarises the conceptual framework used in this article that is indeed in line with the types of participation that can be achieved through e-democracy identified by the Council of Europe: “*the provision of information; communication, consultation, deliberation, transaction, empowered participation, co-decision and decision making*”<sup>48</sup>.

**Figure 1: Types of e-democracy: threefold conceptual framework**



<sup>47</sup> Macintosh, A., *Characterizing e-participation in policy-making*, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Council of Europe, (2009), *Electronic democracy (“e-democracy”)*, Recommendation and explanatory memorandum, CM/Rec(2009)1, Strasbourg, p. 5. Available at: [https://www.coe.int/t/dgap/goodgovernance/Activities/Key-Texts/Recommendations/Recommendation\\_CM\\_Rec2009\\_1\\_en\\_PDF.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dgap/goodgovernance/Activities/Key-Texts/Recommendations/Recommendation_CM_Rec2009_1_en_PDF.pdf)

There is no doubt that the three concepts outlined above are ideal types. In reality, it can be difficult to clearly assess whether a project establishes citizen *participation*, *deliberation* or *transparency*. Of course, there are a great number of projects that might entail participatory *and* deliberation elements. Others could have the main goal to establish *transparency* but also offer a discussion section - so that deliberation can take place.

However, those concepts will help to better understand what type of democratic idea they can contribute to and hence create a more citizen-driven democratic environment online. They will also foster a better grasp of the goal of the case studies presented in [Chapter 4 \(Case Studies\)](#), which analyses tools enhancing *participation*, *deliberation* and *transparency*.

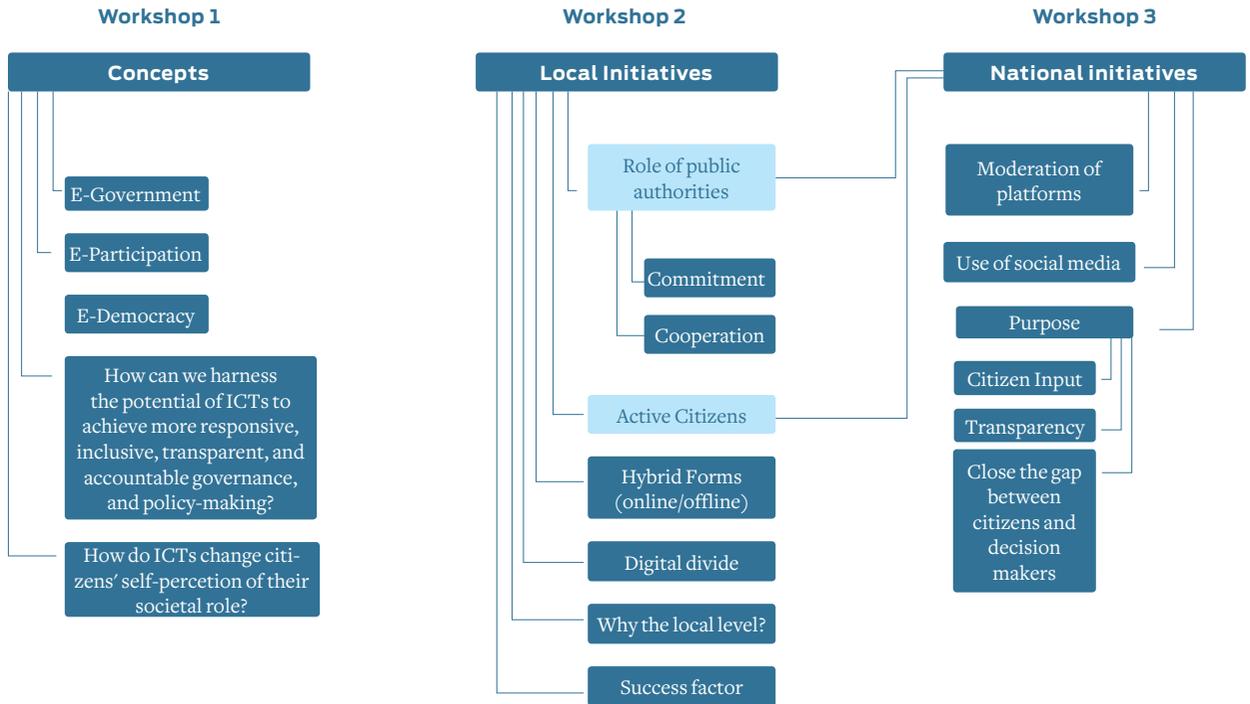
# Methodology

This chapter presents an outline of the methodology applied in this study, which is particularly relevant for the analysis of the case studies presented in the following section. Given that the main result of this study is to **identify success factors and provide recommendations for civil society organisations and other actors that aim to implement similar projects**, a qualitative research design will be applied. Although a quantitative study would have been particularly useful to analyse a greater number of projects, focusing on the quality of contributions is more effective when defining precise success factors and recommendations. In this context, the number and overall representativeness of cases matter less than providing profound, detailed insight into a limited number of cases. Therefore, a qualitative research design is considered the best way to carry out the study at hand.

This study is written within the scope of a project on e-democracy that also entailed a series of three workshops. Those workshops aimed at discussing and evaluating good practices for informal citizen e-participation with experts on e-democracy. In relation to the main topic of the study, the workshops focused on (1) concepts and theories of the role of the digital citizen in the XXI century, (2) informal citizen participation projects on the local level and, (3) projects on the national level. After presentations on relevant cases, an in-depth discussion amongst participants sought to identify and analyse factors for the success of citizen-driven e-participation tools. While the methodology of this study is clearly separated from the workshops, the discussions and exchanges that emerged during those events provided a platform to engage with the topic of citizen-driven e-democracy. The main outcomes of the discussions held at the workshops are summarised in the figure below (*Figure 2*). The workshops were also a valuable source of information to identify relevant case studies presented during the sessions.

The cases of this study were selected by keeping a balance between the three categories of citizen-driven e-participation tools outlined in the previous chapter (*transparency, deliberation, participation*). In order to identify the respective cases, desk research

Figure 2: Summary of discussions during the workshops



was carried out by the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) and the Friedrich-Nau-  
mann-Foundation (FNF). The desk research aimed at identifying relevant cases at the  
European level, balancing their geographical distribution as well as their representa-  
tiveness in the categories previously mentioned.

In the end, fifteen relevant cases were identified. Six projects aim to create more  
*transparency*, four fall into the category of *deliberation* and five provide new tools for  
citizens to actively *participate* in democratic processes.

To carry out the analysis of the projects, a questionnaire (*Annex I*) was created to  
collect in-depth and first-hand information on the selected case studies. The ques-  
tionnaire was sent to the main initiators and organisers of the projects and - together  
with further desk research - constitutes the main component of the data-collection  
methodology of this research. The chosen methodology allowed the authors to apply a  
uniform and harmonised approach in collecting information on the selected cases. The

Questionnaire  
as a way of data-  
collection

questionnaire had the goal of highlighting the most significant aspects of respondents' projects as well the relevant differences between them. This approach enabled an effective and productive comparison that could ultimately lead to the recommendations formulated in *Chapter 5.4*. The survey contained seven open questions covering the main aspects of citizen-driven e-democracy tools. The questions aimed at collecting and presenting information in a uniform way concerning the organisation, motivation, implementation, impact and challenges of the selected citizen-driven initiatives. The list of respondents representing the projects surveyed is available in *Annex II*.

The answers of those questionnaires were evaluated in an analytical way in order to identify common patterns or outstanding highlights. The goal was to identify relevant synergies and differences between the projects or joint challenges that they were faced with. The case studies are presented in the following *Chapter (4. Case Studies)* and the analysis is carried out in *Chapter 5*.

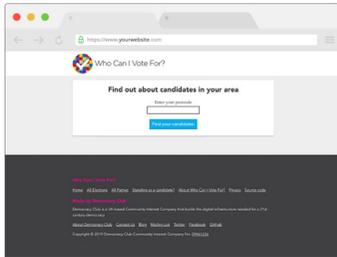
# Case studies

Diverse and selective case studies of citizen-driven e-democracy tools

Citizen-driven e-participation tools come in various shapes and forms. Although compiling a comprehensive list of all such projects (even just in Europe) would be impossible, this chapter will present a selection of projects from across Europe that have had a proven impact. Clearly, these tools serve a variety of different purposes and are used for different kinds of applications in different countries and settings. In this chapter, the various features and characteristics of citizen-driven initiatives are explained. The project descriptions contain a general overview of the history and the nature of the respective digital tool, including an explanation of the impact that it has had so far, the main factors that contributed to its success, the challenges faced during the development and implementation of the project, and details regarding the finances of the project. The tools that provide more *transparency* for citizens are displayed first, the projects enabling *deliberation* between citizens second, before the *participation* platforms which are presented last. As outlined in [Chapter 3](#), the case studies included are based on the answers provided by the developers and / or project managers of the identified tools.

## 4.1 TRANSPARENCY

This section presents six citizen-driven e-democracy tools that have the goal to create more *transparency* in relation to a variety of processes, from elections to access to information on democratic processes. As discussed above, they either contribute to novel and innovative ways to display official data or they create their own way to provide such information to citizens. In both cases, they are considered to be independent from authorities since there is no commitment required from governments or political institutions for those tools to have an impact.



## WHO CAN I VOTE FOR

*Election transparency tool, United Kingdom*

[www.whocanivotefor.co.uk](http://www.whocanivotefor.co.uk)

*WhoCanIVoteFor* provides lists, contact information and election statements of candidates for upcoming elections in the United Kingdom, including local elections. The tool was set up as such information is not always easily accessible for citizens. On top of the information provided by the platform, candidates are also encouraged to edit their own profiles. The tool was set up to provide voters with an easy, unique and novel way to learn about candidates - just by entering their post code. *WhoCanIVoteFor* was set up by the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Democracy Club and relies on the work of volunteers for its background research.

864 000 visits during the 2019 election campaign

**Impact:** The tool has not only helped citizens to vote, it has also been picked up by regional and local governments and the data provided is used by the Electoral Commission. During the 2019 general election campaign (6 November - 12 December), *WhoCanIVoteFor* counted 864 000 visits. The feedback provided by users confirmed that the tool is an important assistance tool for voters. External organisations can use the application programming interface feed, which enables them to build new versions of the same tool.

Volunteers, open access, cooperation with other organisations, (social) media use

**Success Factors:** *WhoCanIVoteFor* would not be possible without the work of (1) its team of volunteers. Besides, another success factor is that (2) anyone can download and use the datasets, which provides an incentive for volunteers to contribute. Moreover, (3) the project managers have worked with a range of other organisations to deliver their services and data to voters, including via social media and traditional media channels.

**Challenges:** The biggest logistical challenge to the usability of the tool is the decentralised nature of UK elections (organised by about 370 separate local councils). Furthermore, finding good personal and contact information about candidates is often very difficult, and this can result in patchy coverage, where some candidates have good profiles, and others nothing more than a name and party label.

**Finances:** The tool is mostly financed by philanthropic grants. Over time, the project managers have received funding for their data services from local and devolved governments and the UK Electoral Commission. However, long-term funding remains a major challenge to the project managers.



## STOP FALS

*Disinformation Detection App, Moldova*

<https://stopfals.md/ro/about-us>

*StopFals* is an app that aims to identify disinformation (fake news) and anti-Western propaganda in Moldova by debunking anti-Western propaganda. To ensure accessibility from different linguistic groups, the app is available in two languages (Romanian and Russian). It provides a fast-response mechanism that uses graphics and explanatory fact-checking articles to debunk fake news. The app sends alerts to users for every piece of fake news debunked. *StopFals* was developed by Europuls (Centre for European Expertise) and API (the Association for Independent Press in Moldova). It was launched in 2019 in the scope of a broader project against disinformation. Moldova is particularly vulnerable to disinformation, given its split between pro-Western and pro-Russian media.

50 000 views of  
debunks by 2020

**Impact:** 50 fake stories were debunked in a period of 6 months. By 2020, over 50 000 debunks had been viewed on the app and it had been downloaded by 20 000 users. The debunks were also spread by media outlets. *StopFals* has ensured that citizens have lower exposure to and increased protection against disinformation and online manipulation.

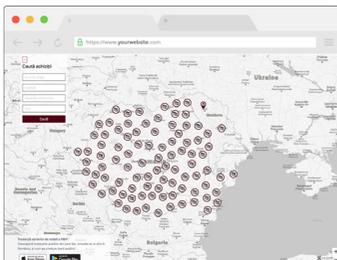
Innovation,  
bilingual,  
preparation,  
social media  
strategy

**Success Factors:** Three factors have brought along the success of *StopFals*: firstly, (1) the app is innovative and novel in the Moldovan public sphere. The combination of humour, visuals and fact-checking has raised the interest of various age groups. The bilingual approach has ensured accessibility for different linguistic and ethnic groups. Furthermore, (2) exhaustive preparation was essential to create a good tool. Finally,

(3) the team implemented an effective social media (Facebook & Twitter) strategy to raise awareness of the project.

**Challenges:** One of the main challenges for the project is its financial sustainability. The app has a strict no-ads policy. At the same time, the direct costs are growing - mostly due to the enlargement of the fact-checking team and the aim to have increased coverage of local news (at the moment, it mostly focuses on national news). Additional funds are needed to invest into updating the user interface and to introduce better functionalities.

**Finances:** The project was funded by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, a German Marshall Fund project. The budget allocated to the project ensured its development and covered all related costs for two years. Later, funds from other international donors ensured the existence of the project beyond the initial timeline. However, more funds are needed to guarantee the sustainability of the tool in the long term.



## HARTA BANILOR PUBLICI

*Public Procurement Mapping, Romania*

<https://www.hartabanilorpublici.ro>

*Harta Banilor Publici* (Public Procurement Map) helps to increase transparency, integrity, and responsibility of public institutions by raising awareness amongst citizens about how public funds are spent. It is an interactive open-source application that provides citizens with data on public procurements by all institutions in Romania since 2007. The tool shows the various points of expenditure on a map and allows citizens to gain insight into procurement contracts. The institutional data is made publicly available by the authorities and the tool displays this information in an easy-to-access way. The project has been developed as a response to the reported and perceived corruption in the public sector in Romania.

Hundreds of thousands of users

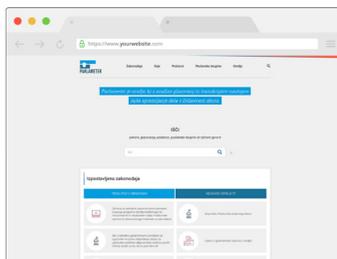
Public interest, interactive design, volunteers

**Impact:** Its versions for web, Android, and iOS have been used by hundreds of thousands of users across the country. It helps journalists, analysts, and regular citizens to track public decision making. The tool has received international awards for its impact.

**Success Factors:** *Harta Banilor Publici* is based on three success factors: firstly, (1) as corruption is a very sensitive and salient issue in Romania, the project has enjoyed broad public interest from the very beginning. Secondly, (2) the design of the map is interactive and follows best practices for user experience, which has been to the benefit of both citizens and professionals. Lastly, (3) the project was developed and run entirely in-house by a team of passionate volunteers.

**Challenges:** Due to the voluntary nature of the developers, the process is highly dependent on their availability. Besides, the raw data provided by the state institutions cannot be directly used. This data often contains errors and formatting issues, which requires a lengthy correction and verification process before being included in the app.

**Finances:** The initial demo has been developed with internal resources and small donations. In 2017, as part of a contest, *Harta Banilor Publici* received a prize of 2 000 Euro from the European Resource Bank. A national tour for the promotion of the project was financially supported by the Fund for Democracy – Fondul pentru Democratie.



## PARLAMETER

*Parliament Transparency Tool, Slovenia*

[www.parlameter.si](http://www.parlameter.si)

*Parlameter* is an interactive and user-friendly platform that enables journalists and CSOs to monitor the parliamentary process in Slovenia. Furthermore, it tracks the voting behaviour of Members of Parliament (MPs) and parliamentary groups. The platform also creates individual ‘information cards’ with complete records and automatic statistical data processing of MPs’ speeches. The information is collected, processed,

Institutions requested to use the tools themselves.

Public interest, investment, international growth

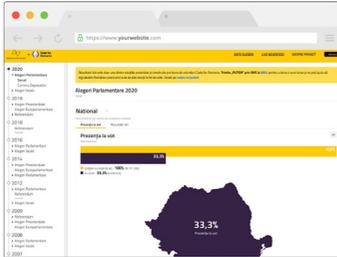
and analysed through algorithms and visualised on the web platform. The project managers aim to promote transparency and accountability of MPs and give watchdog organisations and journalists tools to facilitate data-driven analysis and initiatives.

**Impact:** Since the launch of *Parlamenteer*, citizens' expectations on what data should be easily accessible have changed and demands for increasing the transparency of public institutions have become more popular. As a result, different institutions have requested that the platform be enhanced and also set up for them (e.g., the second chamber of the Slovenian Parliament and several municipalities). MPs themselves refer to the platform in their speeches, which is a sign that they have become used to the new standard of public oversight and transparency introduced.

**Success Factors:** From its early stage, *Parlamenteer* (1) attracted the interest of the general public. This inspired the team of voluntary developers to grow and develop the project without secure funding. Moreover, (2) a timely Google grant enabled the team to professionalise and to transform the platform. Finally, (3) the general interest attracted by the project and funding opportunities from abroad has allowed *Parlamenteer* to expand internationally.

**Challenges:** The project is limited by the type, availability, and quality of information provided on the parliamentary website. Publishing some data with delay makes it difficult for the platform to be up to date. Moreover, websites often change their architecture and documents fail to follow a consistent logic, which can lead to problems concerning automated data scraping. Hence, the main challenge for the platform remains the collection of official working data.

**Financing:** *Parlamenteer* started as a volunteer project of ten open data and civic-tech enthusiasts. In the second year of its development, it received Google funding that enabled the team to work full-time and launch the platform in 2016. The project has received funding from the US Embassy in Slovenia and the National Endowment for Democracy to expand to Croatia and to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Recently, the project earned the Active Citizens Fund to set up the platform for municipalities in Slovenia.



## REZULTATE VOT

*Election Result Display, Romania*

[www.rezultatevot.ro/elections/112/turnout](http://www.rezultatevot.ro/elections/112/turnout)

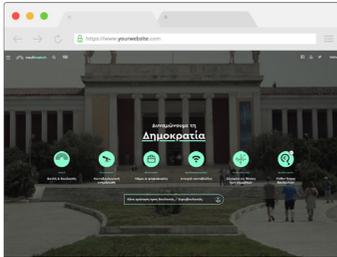
Rezultate Vot displays the results of elections in Romania, including European Parliament elections, Romanian legislative elections, Romanian presidential elections and local elections, as well as national referenda, from 1990 onwards. During elections, citizens can also follow live streamed election analysis from experts. Rezultate Vot was set up by Code for Romania (a civic tech organisation) that was founded in 2016 and currently relies on the work of over 1 800 volunteers. The organisation focuses on building tech solutions to solve Romania's major societal problems and aims at responding to several gaps in Romanian civil society with the use of an innovative, digital approach.

**Impact:** By 2020, Rezultate Vot was visited by 528 579 unique users with 2,84 million total page view. The highest page views per election were recorded for the 2020 Romanian parliamentary elections (268 712).

**Success Factors:** One of the main success factors for Rezultate Vot is (1) the structural design of Code for Romania which remains very much community-driven, inclusive, transparent and agile, but at the same time offers a very functional mechanism to create impactful civic tech solutions. Furthermore, (2) the trust that was built due to the quality of Rezultate Vot helped to further raise public awareness of the tool.

**Challenges:** The main challenges facing the tool are the lack of capacity of Romanian civil society and governmental bodies in terms of digital preparedness. Another major challenge is the limited number of funds available.

**Finances:** For the first 3 years, Code for Romania relied exclusively on the work of volunteers. Currently, its main sources of funding are grants and sponsorship from foundations or companies, in addition to some revenue generated from time-to-time commercial work and private donations from citizens.



## VOULI WATCH

*Parliament Transparency Tool, Greece*

[www.vouliwatch.gr](http://www.vouliwatch.gr)

*VouliWatch* is a website that uses innovative technology applications to facilitate the monitoring of Greek parliamentary activities. The main objective of the project is to provide citizens with information, data, and tools to hold their MPs accountable and increase citizen participation in political processes. The monitoring of the website includes finances, the transparency of communication between MPs and their constituents, as well as recordings of legislative activity. Users can take advantage of the tool by tracking the results of votes, asking questions to MPs or by comparing the positions of main political parties on specific issues with the possibility to comment and suggest different solutions. Finally, users can access information with regards to the number of bills voted upon in Parliament, the most active MPs, political groups, and the topics of the questions/petitions tabled. The project also aims at introducing politicians to a new concept of political accountability and transparency.

More than 70%  
of MPs use the  
platform

**Impact:** The impact cannot be easily measured. However, the project has been very popular: over 70% of MPs are using the platform to communicate with citizens. The platform's content reaches over 25 000 citizens on a daily basis. Moreover, some citizens' questions or proposals submitted through the platform have been brought into Parliament by MPs.

Using political  
momentum,  
a non-parti-  
san approach,  
transparency  
regarding fund-  
ing, user-friend-  
liness

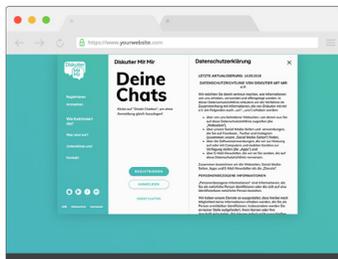
**Success Factors:** Firstly, (1) by carrying out timely awareness-raising campaigns, *VouliWatch* made the most of the political consequences of the economic crisis and the delegitimisation of democratic institutions in Greece. Secondly, (2) project managers were able to keep a balanced and non-partisan position during times of increased polarisation in society and the political system. Thirdly, (3) the project ensures full transparency regarding its funding and financial support. Finally, (4) the project developed User-friendly technological tools addressing users' needs.

**Challenges:** The main challenge of the project is its financial sustainability. Sources of funding remain scarce and the lack of financial stability hampers the further development of the project and hinders it from reaching its full potential.

**Finances:** The project is financed by individual donations and grants from international funds as well as local foundations.

## 4.2 DELIBERATION

The following section showcases four projects that aim to create deliberate spaces for citizens. In this context, it is (again) important to highlight the blurred lines that exist between the three categories of citizen-driven e-democracy tools (*transparency, deliberation, participation*). Some projects listed below could also be grouped in another category, namely the section on tools that enhance citizen participation. Those tools are the ones that establish ways for citizens to submit initiatives or petitions. At the same time, they provide the possibility for citizens to discuss the proposed texts and can therefore also be considered deliberative platforms. Ultimately, they are integrated in this section (*4.2 Deliberation*) as there is no certainty whether or not a text will pass the respective threshold of support required to be put forward to Parliament or the relevant assembly. The *deliberation* amongst citizens, however, is ensured independent from any threshold.



### DISKUTIER MIT MIR

*Discussion tool, Germany*

[www.diskutiermitmir.de](http://www.diskutiermitmir.de)

*Diskutier Mit Mir* (Discuss with me) is a digital dialogue platform that aims at creating safe spaces for public debates within a polarised public sphere. It was set-up in the run-up to the 2017 German federal elections, aiming to address one of the main problems of debating in the digital space: the increasing polarisation of people's opinions.

Conversations between voters of the German Green party and far-right AfD party

Innovation, co-operation with other CSOs

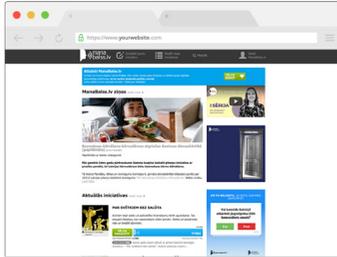
In fact, digitalisation accelerates the establishment of opinion bubbles by keeping users in their echo chambers and, as a consequence, polarises discourse further. Therefore, *Diskutier Mit Mir* aims to burst opinion bubbles by pairing people with opposing views to discuss political issues in anonymous 1:1 chats. The tool has been developed in parallel with election cycles. Together with European partners, *Diskutier Mit Mir* also launched a European-wide tool (Talking Europe) ahead of the 2019 European Parliament elections (<https://www.talkingeurope.eu/>).

**Impact:** *Diskutier Mit Mir* managed to reach its target audience, mainly addressing young people in rural areas. Additionally, the managers have the aim to increase the understanding of opposing political views and voting preferences. During the 2017 federal election campaign, *Diskutier Mit Mir* mostly paired voters of the German ‘Green party’ with voters from the far-right ‘AfD’. Considering the lack of exchange between those groups outside of this tool, the discussions the platform facilitated are considered a positive outcome, which has also been supported by the feedback provided by users.

**Success Factors:** The main success factor of the project is (1) its innovative digital approach. The creation of an app that users can relate to and use in their everyday lives outside of the context of civic education is a great achievement. Another success factor is (2) the cooperation with other CSOs and institutions. *Diskutier Mit Mir* was used beyond its initial purpose in this regard. Once the discussion platform was established, it provided a digital space for discussion for various initiatives in many different contexts.

**Challenges:** The main challenges to the project are of a technical nature (proper functioning of the app and response rates in terms of bug fixing). Beside these technical challenges, maintaining a stable user base is another challenge that *Diskutier Mit Mir* is facing. Keeping users involved beyond the election cycle also proved to be particularly difficult.

**Finances:** The project’s finances are based on 70% state funding (by the German Ministry of Family Affairs and the Federal Agency for Civic Education), 20% private foundations and 10% donations and small grants from other NGOs.



## MANABALSS

*Deliberation & participation platform, Latvia*

[www.manabalss.lv](http://www.manabalss.lv)

*ManaBalss* (MyVoice) is a public participation platform. It enables citizens to submit and support legislative initiatives (at national and local levels). After reaching a certain threshold of public support, initiatives are submitted to the Latvian Parliament for a hearing. The platform was founded in 2011 with the aim of creating a positive environment for citizens to share ideas and actively participate in improving their country. The platform aims to develop a society in which citizens' ideas are heard and the best of them are turned into laws. *ManaBalss* keeps looking for new and innovative opportunities to involve citizens in decision making processes.

More than  
330 000 Latvians contributed  
from a nation  
with a population of 1.92  
million

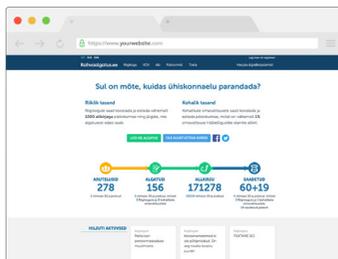
Trust from citizens, finances,  
public display of success, civic  
entrepreneurship principles

**Impact:** Since 2011, 61 initiatives have reached the threshold of supporting statements and 36 of these have triggered legislative change. Currently, 22 initiatives are under review in the Latvian Parliament. Since the start of the project, *ManaBalss* has involved more than 330 000 Latvians in civic activities. Given that *ManaBalss* keeps exploring new tools of civic engagement, several thousand citizens have also been involved through other participation platforms of the *ManaBalss* brand.

**Success Factors:** *ManaBalss* is based on five success factors: firstly, on (1) trust from citizens, government and media. Trust was gained by having successful initiatives from the beginning, incorporating good quality control and having high-quality sound authentication systems. Furthermore, (2) the development of a self-sustainable financial system has been very important for the continued existence of the project. (3) The successes of the platform are made public by sharing daily publications and by building a brand that is publicly known. Also, (4) the IT-system behind the platform is user-friendly. Finally, (5) *ManaBalss* is a non-governmental and politically independent organisation, working on civic entrepreneurship principles, which helps create a truly participatory online platform.

**Challenges:** Engaging with unengaged citizens is the main challenge for *ManaBalss*. To address this issue, project managers always seek to think from a user’s perspective. Another ongoing challenge is the credibility *of* and awareness *about* the tool. The team addresses this issue by strengthening its public image and ensuring a permanent dialogue within the team. Finally, project finances are a challenge for *ManaBalss*.

**Finances:** Operational costs of *ManaBalss* are covered by micro-donations, normally ranging from 0.5 Euro to 5 Euro. The project receives the annual support of around 25 000 individual donors. This system enables the team to promote the engagement of citizens and produce high-quality publications. For larger growth and development, however, the team is looking for support from grant programmes at the local and international levels.



## RAHVAALGATUS

*Deliberation & participation platform, Estonia*

[www.rahvaalgatus.ee](http://www.rahvaalgatus.ee)

*Rahvaalgatus* (Citizens’ Initiative) is a citizen initiative portal that allows drafting, discussing and submitting proposals to the Estonian Parliament and local governments after reaching a specific threshold of signatures. The platform also enables citizens to follow the proceeding of the proposal as it makes its way through Parliament and local governments. *Rahvaalgatus*’ setup was based on the collective petitioning right that emerged from the Estonian People’s Assembly process in 2014. The ability to draft and send collective proposals to local authorities was introduced in August 2020.

**Impact:** Between 2016 and 2020, more than 50 state-wide proposals were sent to Parliament via *Rahvaalgatus*, based upon which several laws, directives, and policies have been adopted or introduced. The first proposals of local initiatives were drafted and sent to local government units before November 2020. Furthermore, the platform provides a public space for discussion – including on proposals that have not reached the threshold. More than 150 000 digital signatures have been submitted via *Rahvaalgatus* so far, indicating that the platform has succeeded in attaining a critical mass of users.

User experience, urge for people to be involved in political decisions



**Success Factors:** The main success factor of the portal is (1) the constant improvement of user-experience, which has allowed citizens to more effectively use their collective petitioning right, coupled with (2) the stronger urge it has created for people to get involved in everyday political decisions.

**Challenges:** The platform faced two main challenges after its launch: reaching a critical user base in terms of initiatives drafted and signatures collected and overcoming the initial scepticism and concern from the authorities.

**Finances:** The Estonian Cooperation Assembly (running *Rahvaalgatus*) is financed through the Office of the President of the Republic of Estonia. Furthermore, collecting donations is necessary to maintain the platform, covering the expenses of digital signing while ensuring and advancing the quality of user experience.



## PARLEMENT & CITOYENS

*Deliberation & participation platform, France*

[www.parlement-et-citoyens.fr](http://www.parlement-et-citoyens.fr)

*Parlement & Citoyens* enables French citizens to contribute to the law-drafting process together with MPs online. The non-partisan platform has the goal to make the decision making process more transparent and therefore strengthen the effectiveness of public policies, the legitimacy of laws, and citizens' trust in elected officials. It provides MPs with a means of drafting laws together with citizens. Online activities are combined with offline events. *Parlement & Citoyens* was set up in 2013 due to the growing mistrust of citizens towards political institutions.

**Impact:** For the past seven years, thirty online consultations have been carried out on *Parlement & Citoyens*. More than 80 000 citizens, 40 MPs and 70 volunteers throughout France are currently part of the platform (numbers are growing). In 2014, one proposal put forward via the platform became law. As a pioneer of public participation, *Parlement & Citoyens* has also contributed to raising awareness of participatory policy making amongst French institutions.

**Success Factors:** The success of *Parlement & Citoyens* is based on two factors: firstly, (1) the large community of people who are convinced that it is necessary to improve the way that laws are made. Secondly, (2) the 6-step methodology applied by the platform (presentation, crowdsourcing, mapping of opinions, responses from the decision-maker, a deliberative-day and the presentation of the decision) that allows for transparency in the policy making process.

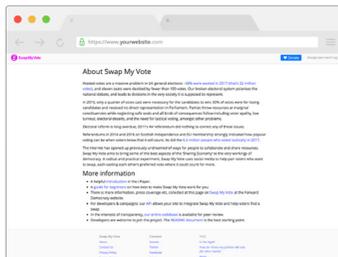
**Challenges:** A major challenge faced by the project is making itself better known. In fact, increasing the public awareness of the project would increase the chance of more citizens taking part. Another challenge is to ensure that bills discussed on the platform are actually introduced in Parliament. This depends on several factors that are difficult to control (e.g., the legislative calendar). *Parlement & Citoyens* tries to tackle this challenge by not only cooperating with individual MPs, but also with parliamentary groups.

**Finances:** The association is mainly financed by membership (citizens and MPs). *Parlement & Citoyens* also receives donations on a regular basis. In 2019, it received a grant from the European Commission to organise a consultation on environmental issues at the European level.

### 4.3 PARTICIPATION

This section presents five different illustrative cases related to *participation*. Before proceeding with the introduction of the case studies on tools that provide new ways for citizens to actively participate in their political constituency, two caveats need to be highlighted: (1) the displayed tools do not necessarily constitute new ways to create a truly participatory democracy in which citizens can actively take (binding) decisions. The applied range of initiatives is much broader and includes tools that trigger citizen action more generally - even in a truly representative polity. Here, a challenge to the applied research design must be considered: purely citizen-driven participatory e-democracy tools are faced with the challenge of relying on administrations to implement their outcomes. Therefore, (2) this study also included two projects (*Local Digital Democracy in the Netherlands* and *The Scottish Government's National Covid Conversation*) directly initiated by authorities or governments. Clearly, this might fall out of the scope of the 'citizen-driven' focus that was initially outlined in the study. However, it is important to consider that these initiatives used citizen-driven projects and civil so-

ciety know-how as a basis for their initiatives and their implementation. Furthermore, the experiences gained from those projects remain valuable and show that civil society action triggered by authorities (and not only the other way round) can also make an important difference.



## SWAP MY VOTE

*Voting Efficiency Tool, United Kingdom*

[www.swapmyvote.uk](http://www.swapmyvote.uk)

*Swap My Vote* is an online platform that pairs voters in the UK across constituencies to allow them to ‘swap’ their vote in national Parliament elections. Due to the UK voting system in general elections (Single Member Plurality, also known as First Past the Post), ‘swapping a vote’ could increase the chance for a single vote to have an impact on the election of a political representative in any given constituency. To ‘swap a vote’ in this context means that two voters are matched by the tool. The matching is done based on (1) their preferred party and (2) the party they are willing to vote for, being the tactical choice in their constituency where the party has a better chance of winning than their preferred party. Both voters cast their vote for their partner’s preferred party: each voter has a vote cast on their behalf by their matched partner for their own preferred party. Swapping a vote does not violate electoral law and helps to minimise the quantity of wasted votes (70% are regularly wasted). The developers see it as a form of protest against an iniquitous system.

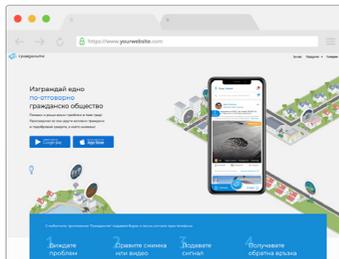
**Impact:** Until 2020, over 20 000 votes were registered to be swapped and 7 000 pairs of voters agreed to swap their vote. In 2017, the use of the application may have had an impact on the outcome of at least two or three constituencies, helping deliver a tight result a hung Parliament. In that year, some political campaigns promoted the use of the tool. Another key impact is that electoral reform is kept on the public agenda, on the one hand, and that it fosters collaboration between voters of different political parties across the country for the greater good on the other hand.

Linking profiles to social media, a non-partisan approach, social media coverage, user friendliness

**Success Factors:** *Swap My Vote* is built on four success factors: firstly, (1) linking *Swap My Vote* profiles with social media accounts and / or phone numbers ensures swapping votes with a real person. Secondly, (2) the tool is non-partisan. Thirdly, (3) media and social media coverage, and a crowdfunding campaign, has helped to make the tool better known. Once a swap is agreed, users have the option to tell their friends and followers online. Lastly, (4) the tool is user-friendly – the developers tried to keep it as simple as possible.

**Challenges:** Beyond the mere challenge of simply raising awareness about the tool, one key challenge confronting *Swap My Vote* is the need to educate users about democratic processes themselves. Therefore, the tool also provides information about the electoral procedure. Another challenge is the mistrust that citizens might have of society generally and of other citizens. That is why *Swap My Vote* links its users to their social media accounts and phone numbers.

**Finances:** The tool entirely depends on donations. After four years of running *Swap My Vote* on a volunteering basis, the project managers started a crowdfunding campaign in 2019.



## GRAJDANTIE

*Citizen reporting system, Bulgaria*

[www.grajdanite.bg](http://www.grajdanite.bg)

*Grajdantie* (The Citizens) enables Bulgarian nationals to improve their cities. The initiative is twofold: firstly, it is an app that enables people to easily report issues in urban spaces to local administrations. Once the problem is detected, it must be captioned by photos, reported and the progress of the report is tracked until the problem is solved. Secondly, the software enables public administration to handle the reports in a digital manner (as an alternative to paper-based processes). This software is sold to public administrations as an effective solution to manage the increased number of reports

More than 150 000 citizens have filed reports since 2015

First of its kind, user friendliness, media attention, solution for citizens and administrations, independence

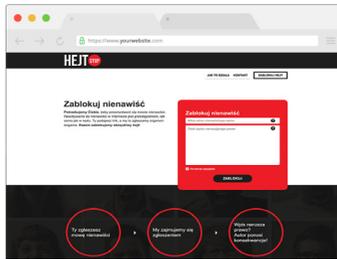
submitted electronically. The project emerged from another smaller scale initiative developed for reporting bad drivers' behaviour.

**Impact:** Over 150 000 citizens across Bulgaria have submitted reports since 2015. A significant amount of entries have been addressed by authorities. More than 300 municipal employees in 50 municipal organisations use the administration software solution. The tool fosters a joint community feeling and responsible citizenship, allowing everyone to become a local neighbourhood 'hero'.

**Success Factors:** The tool is based on two main success factors: firstly, (1) it was the first app of its kind. Secondly, (2) reporting is effortless, user-friendly, and engaging. Those two factors facilitated an organic spread to the platform. Other success factors include (3) the broad media attention that increased its popularity and (4) the fact that the project provides a solution for both citizens and administrations. Finally, (5) the team ensured independence from other parties by developing the software in-house and creating it with its own resources.

**Challenges:** Given the great popularity of the tool, the administration has been too modest to respond to the large amounts of reports filed by citizens. This required meetings with officials to reassure them that the project aims for true partnerships and does not mean to generate a negative public image through exposing local problems. Because many municipalities across the country do not have sufficient funding for software solutions, the software has been provided to them for free use.

**Finances:** For the first two years, the team behind the tool ran the project with their own financial means and voluntary input. Once the software service products were developed, the business model was adapted and the first contracts with municipalities signed. Two investment rounds totalling 230 000 Euro have been raised so far and the project has become a profitable business.



## HEJT STOP

*Citizen Reporting System, Poland*

[www.hejtstop.pl](http://www.hejtstop.pl)

*HejtStop* is a campaign for removing hate signs from public spaces in Poland, as part of a larger anti-hate speech online project. It has been created as a counter-reaction against the increasing wave of hate rhetoric spreading in the country. The project combines online engagement with offline activities. It uses an online reporting tool, through which citizens can take a picture of hateful graffiti with their mobile devices and submit it with its respective GPS coordinates to the online platform. The report is then processed by coordinators who use various channels for addressing the issue (incl. direct contact with the owner of the building or volunteers to remove the reported hate sign).

Raised awareness about hate speech within society

**Impact:** *HejtStop* creates a unique online community of people who are willing to initiate and execute real actions offline. Through its initiatives, it has raised awareness about the negative impact of hate speech within different groups of society. It is amongst the first projects in Poland that has showcased (to the wider public) the power of digital tools to deliver real changes for local communities.

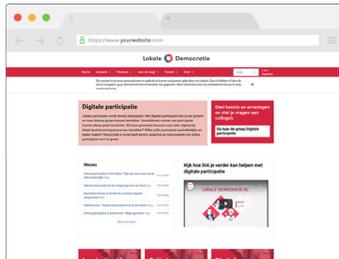
User friendliness, engaged users, cooperation with institutions and companies

**Success Factors:** *HejtStop* relies on (1) a user-friendly reporting tool, accessible through any smart mobile device. The signal submission is intuitive and fast. In addition, (2) the project managers themselves manage to engage users who are already organised online via the website, through the form of physical graphite cleaning campaigns. Finally, (3) cooperation with institutions and private companies has also helped promote the tool.

**Challenges:** The greatest challenge has been the need for constant mobilisation within the campaign's network of volunteers (financially and in terms of time). The coordinators also need to be well trained to keep the engagement level and motivation of the groups on the ground high. As the topic is politically relevant, the operation and popularity of the project is also dependent upon the government's view of the issue

(from 2015, the PiS-led government has made it very difficult for Polish CSOs to run human rights projects).

**Finances:** The project was originally volunteer-driven. With its growth, the campaign has been crowdfunded but there has also been the need for regular event campaigns to maintain public visibility. For a while, *HejtStop* was financed with grants from foundations and municipal subsidies.



## LOCAL DIGITAL DEMOCRACY IN THE NETHERLANDS

*Educating Public Administration, The Netherlands*

[www.lokale-democratie.nl/cms/view/57979766/lokale-burgerparticipatie](http://www.lokale-democratie.nl/cms/view/57979766/lokale-burgerparticipatie)

The Project started in 2016 and is a collaboration between the CSO Network Democratie and the Dutch Ministry of Interior to support Dutch municipalities in the use of open-source e-participation tools. In its first phase, it focused mainly on knowledge dissemination of open-source participatory tools through events and workshops that featured international experts. After this phase, the project piloted the best developed open-source tools with some municipalities and, subsequently, a growing number of cities implemented e-participation tools in their democratic processes, including tools such as participatory budgeting and spatial redevelopment projects.

**Impact:** The project was successful in achieving its main objective: providing Dutch municipalities with the knowledge and instruments to make use of open-source digital democracy tools for their citizens. The project upscaled its activities to the province level, where the Ministry of Interior supported a group of municipalities in the same province with the help of experts to implement e-participation tools for democratic purposes.

**Success Factors:** The main success factor was the (1) critical knowledge and lessons shared by international experts in implementing e-participation projects at local level.

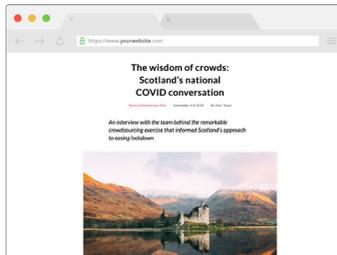
Providing  
knowledge and  
instruments to  
municipalities

Knowledge and lessons learned, financial and political support from the Ministry, frontrunner municipalities

Another important factor was (2) the continuing financial and political support provided by the Dutch Ministry of Interior and the Council of Dutch Municipalities. Lastly, (3) the capacity of the cities of Amsterdam and Groningen to act as frontrunners and support other municipalities was critical.

**Challenges:** The main challenges were related to the lack of experience of Dutch municipalities to work with open-source technology. This also encompassed a problem related to the ownership of open-source participation tools in light of financing and management of the development of a main open-source code.

**Finances:** The project was financed by the Dutch Ministry of Interior and the Council of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) in their shared program ‘Democratie in Actie’.



## THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S NATIONAL COVID CONVERSATION

*Participation project, Scotland, United Kingdom*

<https://blog.delib.net/the-wisdom-of-crowds-scotlands-national-covid-conversation>

In May 2020, the Scottish Government ran a digital crowdsourcing exercise in which public input was sought on the approaches and principles that would guide decision making related to transitioning out of COVID-19 lockdown arrangements. The exercise was hosted on Dialogue, a platform for hosting constructive online conversations, created by Delib. The Scottish Government Digital Engagement team set up the exercise following public briefings given by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon in which she pledged to involve the people of Scotland in decision making. In order to prepare for high volumes of traffic, Delib did some bespoke work preparing and bolstering the Scottish Government's Dialogue platform before the exercise went live.

**Impact:** During the week-long exercise, the platform received over 4 000 unique ideas and over 18 000 comments by users. The aim of the exercise was to have a conversation with citizens, and it was not intended as a formal public consultation. However,

4 000 ideas collected

Stability of platform, moderators and analysts to process the volume of contributions

the team analysed all comments and submissions received and ultimately sent the results to the government's officials.

**Success Factors:** The success was based on two factors: (1) the stability of the platform, which ensured that users did not experience problems while submitting their contributions. (2) The Scottish Government enrolled extra analysts and moderators to manage the volume of responses and a full report was made available promptly after the exercise concluded.

**Challenges:** The main challenge from Delib's perspective was the very tight timeline to ensure that the platform was ready and fully functional. Other challenges (that were addressed successfully) included the clarity of the questions and structural elements of a crowdsourcing exercise.

**Finances:** The project was fully financed by the Scottish Government.

Table 2: Case studies overview

Project	Who Can I Vote For	Stop Fals	Harta Banilor Publici	Rezultate Vot	Parlamer	VouliWatch	Diskutier Mit Mir	ManaBals	Rahvaalgatus	Parlement & Citoyens	Swap My Vote	Grajdantie	Hejt Stop	Local Digital Democracy (The Netherlands)	Covid Conversation (Scotland)	Total
<b>General information</b>																
Category	T	T	T	T	T	T	D	D	D	D	P	P	P	P	P	-
Year of setup	2015	2019	2018	2016	2016	2014	2017	2011	2014	2013	2015	2015	2013	2016	2020	-
Origin	UK	MD	RO	RO	SL	GR	DE	LV	EE	FR	UK	BG	PL	NL	UK	-
<b>Professionalisation</b>																
Voluntary nature in the beginning*			X	X	X	X		X			X	X	X			8
Professional nature today**	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	14
<b>Triggering event</b>																
Elections / parliamentary processes	X			X	X	X	X		X	X	X					8
<b>Interface versions***</b>																
Browser version	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	13
App version		X	X				X					X	X			5
<b>Administrative level of application</b>																
On local / regional level	X		X	X				X	X			X	X	X	X	9
On national level	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		13
On European level							X									1

T = Transparency, D = Deliberation, P = Participation. \*If explicitly mentioned by organisers. \*\*Does not exclude reliance on volunteers still today. \*\*\*Based on own research

# Findings

Analysis compares projects and groups criteria mentioned by respondents

This chapter presents an analysis of the case studies previously introduced and has the objective of comparing the different project experiences highlighted in the study in order to find common patterns across the different tools. However, it is important to note that the comparison of specific aspects of the projects is only possible by applying a certain degree of simplification, considering the diversity of the tools.

Those elements are grouped by corresponding criteria according to the answers provided by respondents to the questionnaire. One point is added on the respective scale when a reference to a criterion is mentioned by the respondents. It could not be excluded that, if answering a multiple-choice questionnaire rather than open questions, some developers may have included additional criteria. However, the fact that a certain criterion has not been mentioned explicitly is already an important indicator of its relevance for the respective project manager.

## 5.1 GENERAL TRENDS

When looking at the fifteen case studies discussed in *Chapter 4*, it becomes clear that interesting patterns can indeed be found and recognised across the whole spectrum of citizen-driven e-democracy tools. At the same time, it is important to point out that this analysis does not seek to claim that those fifteen cases are representative of citizen-driven e-democracy projects at large. The choice of cases is based on exhaustive research, but no universal representativeness can be claimed. Still, these examples can provide solid and valid ground to better understand a number of dynamics, potentials and challenges of citizen-driven e-democracy tools.

Focusing on the different characteristics of the tools, the first element of analysis is the **shift from voluntary work to professionalisation during the project development phase** (see *Table 2*). It is remarkable that almost all of the project managers of the tools explored in the study are now working on their projects as professionals. At the

Projects became increasingly professional over time

Elections and parliamentary processes were often the trigger for setting up a tool

Browser versions prevail by far over mobile apps

same time, most of the developers started the projects on a voluntary basis. A steady progress towards professionalisation can be observed here. This is also due to the fact that a great majority of tools were created with no initial support or funding from standing organisations. Most of the cases originated from an innovative idea from social entrepreneurs or civic activists with an IT background which, only in its second stage, developed into a more structured framework or organisation. This element can be observed in eight out of the fifteen cases.

The second factor to investigate is **the rationale for starting or launching those projects**. Almost all initiatives started because of a specific event, finding or political momentum. This observation is interesting but ultimately not very surprising, giving that the motivation to act is likely to occur based on a specific element, political development or societal need. However, the role of elections is remarkable in this context: a number of projects were launched in relation with events around electoral or parliamentary processes (*see Table 2*). This finding might come as a surprise, given that citizen-driven e-democracy tools also have the potential to establish completely new ways of democratic engagement. On the contrary, the tools listed above were created around the traditional mode of elections in order to complement and foster citizen participation in representative democracy.

A third point of general comparative analysis is the **use of different software solutions**. In this context, the distinction between browser applications and mobile phone applications is important. Despite the general shift to more mobile use<sup>49</sup>, the number of projects that have developed a mobile application is rather limited. On the contrary: thirteen tools are accessible via online browsers and ten of them exclusively so (*see Table 2*). This, however, does not exclude that developers have also created mobile-friendly adaptations of the browser version of their tools. It nevertheless appears that browser applications are frequently preferred. This could be explained by the kind of tools examined in this study: they aim at providing users with a number of different solutions that did not exist before. However, some tools indeed required more complex interfaces to achieve this objective and it can be assumed that this might make them more difficult to be translated into a mobile application.

As a fourth element, it is remarkable that across the main levels where the identified cases operate, most of them aim at **addressing issues at the national level** (*see Table 2*). In fact, it appears from this overview that national applications of civic tech tools

<sup>49</sup> Gibbs, S., (2016), *Mobile web browsing overtakes desktop for the first time*, The Guardian, publ. [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/02/mobile-web-browsing-desktop-smartphones-tablets>

Issues addressed at local level and / or at national scale. Easy transferability of tools to another constituency

seem to work best. Moreover, it can be observed that tools developed for a local level application are likely to be upscaled to the national level. This shows the great potential of e-democracy tools of any kind: once the software is operational and it benefits from a certain degree of success, it is very flexible for further development beyond its original scope of application. Indeed, in some cases, it was even possible to apply one solution to other countries (e.g., *Parlameter*). An important observation that can be drawn here is the high degree of transferability of the tools and shifting them to the national level. However, only one case was found where this shift was actually done to the European level (*Diskutier Mit Mir*).

A fifth and final level of general comparison between the case studies reflects the **years of creation**. Given that the launches of the projects are well spread over the last ten years, it is valid to assume that there has been a constant need for civic innovation (see Table 2). Again, this study does not claim any universal representativeness, but this element gives an important indication about the consistent need for new civic tech solutions when addressing a different range of problems that occur over time, as was assumed in *Chapter 1 (Introduction)*. However, it was found that the tools keep being created and used - even beyond their original project timelines.

## 5.2 CHALLENGES

In order to proceed with the analysis, it is important to look at the challenges highlighted by the respondents in relation to their projects. When considering the challenges faced by projects, it is interesting to notice that many common hurdles were encountered across the wide range of tools investigated.

The most common challenge observed relates to the establishment of a certain **level of cooperation with authorities**. The different problems encountered in cooperating with local or national authorities may be diverse and vary significantly. Depending on the tools and the authorities considered, the challenges range from a lack of willingness to provide data and the low degree of digitalisation of governments, to a general sceptical approach to new tools and digital solutions. However, despite the varying severity of the challenge, this clearly shows the relevance of the (direct or indirect) support of authorities. In fact, the responses show that even just a public endorsement can be helpful for enhancing the success of such tools. This element is also important as the authorities' cooperation can have an impact on the perception and awareness of the tool amongst the public. Therefore, even if a tool is citizen-driven, as most of the

Low level of willingness for cooperation by authorities

**Figure 3: Challenges to citizen-driven e-democracy tools**

Motivating citizens does not come naturally

”Democracy does not have a business model - as it should be!”

ones considered in this study are, the cooperation and the support of administrations are relevant factors to its effectiveness and, ultimately, its success.

A second challenge that can be found across different projects is the **difficulty to create a user base** for citizen-driven e-democracy tools and to raise awareness about them to further increase their usage. Motivating people to use the respective tools and engage with the options provided to them does not seem to come naturally. Possible strategies to drive citizens to such tools (and assist with their engagement) will be discussed in [Chapter 5.3 \(Success Factors\)](#).

Another relevant challenge highlighted by a substantive number of developers relates to the problem of **ensuring adequate funding for the projects**. This issue is of particular relevance for tools that shift from a volunteer-based organisation to a professional one and are not launched by already established entities. In fact, building and further developing new tools takes significant time and effort. Once the tools experience a certain degree of success, the demand for funding to upscale the activities grow in parallel. One respondent summarised this development by stating that “*Democracy does not have a business model - as it should be!*”<sup>50</sup>, implying that the economic factor remains important even in citizen-initiated projects. Although most of the projects

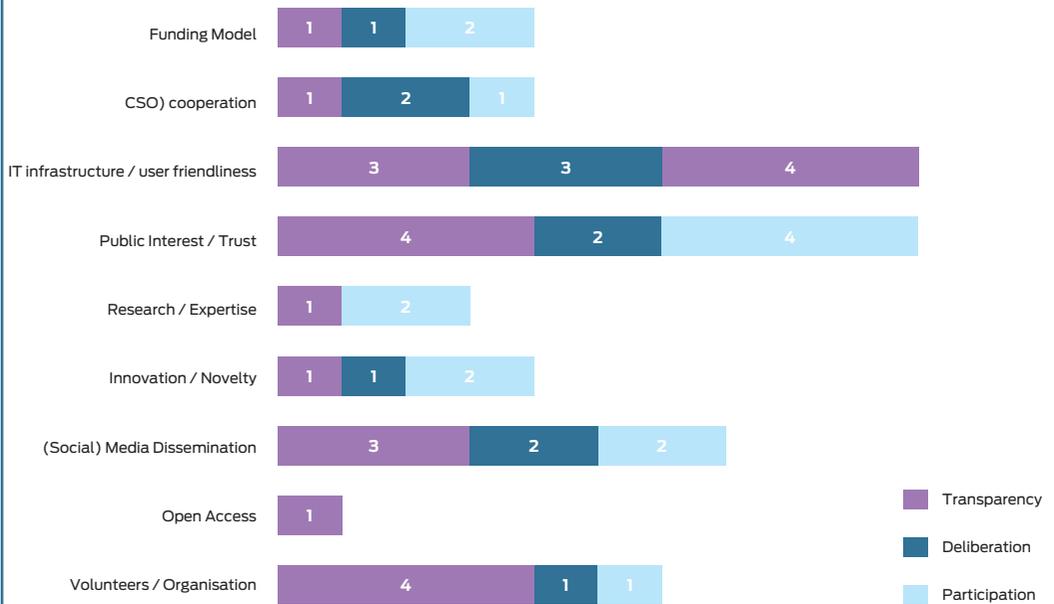
<sup>50</sup> Tom de Grunwald, Director and Co-founder, ‘Swap My Vote’

explored in the study eventually managed to establish a solid funding model, this remains a challenge to citizen-driven e-democracy tools.

Finally, it is interesting to notice how only two respondents indicated that the IT-infrastructure constituted a challenge to their projects. This rather low number makes it possible to assume that, from the start, project developers have sufficient expertise in software engineering at their disposal. It is not clear for all projects, however, whether this reflects their own expertise or whether they relied on additional IT experts. This finding might indicate the importance of the role of people with a profound knowledge of digital tool creation. It appears that they are crucial actors to the successful implementation of these projects. This, in turn, would come with a rising relevance of IT-knowledge in democracies but also in societies more generally.

When it comes to the different types of citizen-driven e-democracy tools, it is also possible to observe some patterns beyond the aforementioned findings identified for all projects. It is noticeable that tools aiming to create more *transparency* for citizens are mainly faced with the challenges of ensuring secure funding and establishing cooperation with authorities. A possible explanation for the latter point could be that *transparency* enabling tools have a strong need to retrieve data from public authorities. Also, for participatory tools, cooperation with authorities is the highest scoring challenge identified in the study. This finding nonetheless fails to come as a surprise and could be explained by the dependent character (in relation to public authorities) of those tools. It seems that without a commitment from public administrations, participatory tools cannot always develop their full potential.

Regarding *deliberation* projects, the main challenge observed is to engage citizens with the tool at hand. In fact, the engagement of a relevant number of active citizens who are willing to submit their contribution is indeed a substantial element for the success of deliberative exercises. Furthermore, citizens have to pass some hurdles after deciding to use deliberation tools in order to ultimately engage and submit their ideas or contributions (e.g., signing up to a platform). Obviously, the case is quite different for *transparency* tools. Although some *transparency* tools require a certain level of interactions from users, the majority of information is available to citizens without the need of a high level of engagement and commitment on those (*transparency*) platforms.

**Figure 4: Success factors for citizen-driven e-democracy tools**

User-friendliness is key

Without trust from the public, the tools would probably not be successful

A good organisational structure and effective internal processes is an important factor (incl. getting volunteers on board)

### 5.3 SUCCESS FACTORS

A comprehensive analysis would be incomplete without an in-depth look at the success factors of the e-participation tools examined in this study. As displayed in the graph below (Figure 4), the two most common success factors mentioned by the respondents are: good IT infrastructure / user-friendliness on the one hand and trust from the public on the other hand.

From this evaluation, it appears clear that a civic tech project can only be successful if users (hence, citizens) are provided with **software, a website or an app that is intuitive to use**. The obvious challenge in this regard is to keep the tools as simple as possible, without compromising on functionality. If a tool manages to strike this balance, its success will become more likely.

At the same time, **the element of trust is crucial** for a successful citizen-driven e-democracy tool. This is easier said than done, considering that most of the projects discussed were made from scratch. Consequently, the public sphere, political actors and citizens all have to get to know the tools and to understand that they are trustworthy. In short, establishing trust is indeed a critical factor for success. This can also be observed when considering the challenge of ‘cooperation with authorities’ men-

Tools must become known amongst the broader public. (Social) media can play a crucial role here

A number of respondents identified their funding model as a reason for their success

tioned by a great number of developers. As a result, a well-functioning citizen-driven e-democracy tool needs a good and easy-to-use interface, while also establishing the necessary credibility and trust amongst citizens and (potential) users it needs to succeed.

Besides, three other factors appear to be important to the successful implementation of a citizen-driven e-democracy project. Firstly, six respondents raised the point that their success was based on the **reliability of internal structures within their organisation and on the volunteers** that supported the project. Here, it is important to highlight that despite the high degree of professionalisation that has been pursued by the developers over the years (*see Chapter 5.1*), a great number of organisations rely on volunteers to support and complement the work of the core team. A good team spirit, functioning process-structures and passion about the issue at hand are all of critical importance for organisations, especially for volunteers.

Secondly, **(social) media strategies** appear to have been key for a number of projects in order to become successful. Indeed, the ultimate impact of citizen-driven e-democracy tools depends on the number of people that use the tool and engage with it. It is therefore necessary that citizens become aware of the existence of such tools. Similar to the factor related to credibility discussed above, increasing the user-base of such tools is particularly difficult for ideas that originate from scratch. An established organisation launching a new tool is more likely to successfully generate publicity, for example. Hence, a good and solid outreach strategy is key for citizens to learn about the tool.

Thirdly, the mentioning of **'funding model'** by four developers when asked about their success factors is an interesting finding that needs to be discussed further. In fact, it appears as a success factor as well as a challenge raised by respondents. Moreover, those who mentioned their funding model as a success factor mainly relied on public funds. This shows that, indeed, it is valid to assume that public money plays an important role in civic innovation. Another example (*Graжданite*) shows that a creative and innovative business model can also be a way to go forward and ensure the financial sustainability of a project. It must be flagged, however, that while the targeted users of *Graжданite* are Bulgarians in general, the paying clients remain public administrations.

Finally, it is worth discussing the factor of **'innovation'**. As displayed in *Figure 4*, innovation was only mentioned by four respondents as a success factor. However, it is important to highlight that, by definition, all tools discussed brought an element

of novelty into their political and societal sphere (to a differing extent, of course). Interestingly, the developers' perception of whether that novelty is a decisive factor for the success of their respective citizen-driven e-democracy tool is not obvious and may, perhaps, be taken for granted.

Once again, the aforementioned elements should not be considered stand-alone factors for the success of e-participation projects. In fact, all developers underlined how an interplay of multiple elements is indispensable for the accomplishment of their project goals.

Looking at the success factors by types of tools, it appears that when considering *transparency* tools, one of the most relevant is ensuring trust from the broader public. This might be due to the fact that those tools rely on the quality of data provided to users as a structural element of their success. For projects in the category of *deliberation* and *participation*, this might be slightly different since citizens themselves provide input and have more control about the content on the platform. The other highest-scoring success factor is the need for a good organisational setup and / or the involvement of volunteers. A possible explanation could be the need for research or the reliance on data collection that those organisations are confronted with.

The main success factor for *deliberation* and *participation* tools is user-friendliness. Even though every type of online tool must, of course, be User-friendly, it is true that for tools where people actively join a platform it is even more important due to the greater level of engagement. This consideration is supported by the fact that 'user-friendliness' was also amongst the biggest success factors for *participation* tools. The second highest-scoring success factor for *participation* tools relates to the elements of public interest and trust. A possible explanation for this finding could be the need to have citizens on board in order to make participatory processes a success. Besides, their perception of participating in such processes will indeed have an impact. In fact, the two *deliberation* projects that also mentioned 'trust by the public' as a success factor are *ManaBalss* and *Parlement & Citoyen* – both of which also have a *participatory* element in addition to the possibility of *deliberation*.

## 5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis outlined above aimed at finding common patterns across the different projects examined. This, together with the information collected, allows to draw a few conclusions in terms of which elements need to be considered and which issues should be addressed as starting points for the development of citizen-driven

e-democracy tools. While these recommendations cannot serve as a blueprint for initiating e-democracy projects, they may offer some suggestions from which future organisers could benefit.

The first element that appears prominently is the **need to gain trust from the public** in relation to a specific project. This trust should encompass both administrations and citizens, as they are pivotal for the success of such tools. Secondly, although it could seem a difficult goal to achieve, this process might be easier if the **launch of a project is linked to a particular event** or tries to address a problem that is prominent in political discourse. Indeed, using a specific event seems to be a great asset to enlarge the user base of a tool. Furthermore, this may stress the necessity of the project and could highlight the aim that the tools are addressing. A third point that emerged as relevant is the need to build a tool that is visually appealing and has an **easy-to-use technical interface**. This may increase the chance of citizens' attention and assist them in engaging with the tool. It appears that the importance of the content, as well as the objective of a project, would be reduced by a digital tool that is not cutting edge in terms of technology.

Moreover, in the aforementioned analysis, the number of **projects initiated by volunteers** that eventually turned into well-established professional organisations is remarkable. Therefore, when starting a project, it seems advisable to already scout for different sources of funding that could help further develop the initial idea and professionalise team efforts.

*Based on the experiences collected from these fifteen successful initiatives, future organisers of citizen-driven e-democracy tools could benefit from considering the following points:*

- *Make sure to gain trust from the public (decision-makers, administration and citizens).*
- *Build a user-friendly tool! A great idea does not flourish if the technical interface is not up to date and does not catch people's attention.*
- *There is a high chance that you will start working as a volunteer on your tool. However, different sources of funding can help you professionalise further (e.g. public funding or donations).*
- *Be aware that - even if your idea will help to make politics better - there could be initial scepticism from authorities, politicians or administrations towards your tool.*
- *Link your launch to a problem, an event or something alike that shows the necessity of your tool.*

# Conclusions

Public administrations should be more open towards citizen-driven e-democracy tools and support them better (communication and funding)

Having analysed fifteen case studies, it is possible to state that **citizen-driven e-democracy tools indeed work** and that they help provide new ways for people to participate in a collective governance exercise and by doing so, improve democratic processes. Moreover, the success factors and the identified recommendations provide a positive outlook to the future and guidance for further projects. Despite all differences between the fifteen cases at hand, it was possible to identify a considerable number of common patterns that served as the basis for this analysis and the recommendations that stemmed from it.

It also became clear that citizen-driven e-democracy tools are faced with substantive challenges. Here, **more support from public administrations** could indeed make a great difference, which was also recognised by the European Parliament by encouraging “*public representatives to use new media and IT platforms with a view to stimulating discussion and exchanging opinions and proposals with citizens*”<sup>51</sup>. This could be in terms of public administration being more open towards citizen-driven e-democracy tools or providing more funding for social entrepreneurs in the digitalised political field, for example. The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic is already drastically changing our public sphere and the way in which citizens interact, both with other citizens and with the political system. While all of the consequences of the pandemic for how politics is conducted are not yet clear, it is certain – which this study confirms – that the future of politics will increasingly be more digital. Therefore, the increased openness of public authorities towards citizen-driven e-participation tools is not only recommended but also necessary if democracy is to be protected and deepened in the XXI century.

In fact, the study found that for e-democracy projects **financial sustainability is key on two levels**: firstly, most of the projects **were set up by engaged citizens without any organisational support** at first. Therefore, it comes naturally that a lot of projects started as voluntary endeavours and only later managed to secure funding

<sup>51</sup> European Parliament, *Report on e-democracy in the European Union: potential and challenges*, 38.

Willingness of citizens to start their projects on a voluntary basis is promising

High-quality and solid IT solutions require a great deal of technical expertise

for their tools that eventually helped them professionalise their projects. There is an ambiguous finding here: of course, it is great to see the commitment made by citizens to engage in the field of democracy and it is worth remarking how society is able to produce such solutions. At the same time, having to start as a volunteer also comes with the need for great dedication and the privilege of being able to invest unpaid time in the first place. Secondly, an **outstanding user experience** appears to be an important factor for attracting the attention of the broader public and boosting citizens' engagement. However, solid and high-end digital solutions demand a great knowledge of IT which, in turn, can be very costly if not provided by specialised volunteers.

At the same time, it was found that even if the interface turns out to be of high quality, **engaging citizens remains an important challenge**. Obviously, there are many other ways for people to spend their time online. Therefore, citizens do not only have to learn about the existence of tools but also understand why engaging actually makes a difference to their lives. In this context, public administrations are not the only ones who need to take more bold action when it comes to citizenship education and raising awareness of public decision making. Every citizen can make a difference with the means currently available to them (incl. spreading the word about e-democracy tools online). Suffice it to say that the issues of digital literacy and internet access also represent great obstacles in this respect.

It is also interesting to reflect on the common patterns and differences when considering the three categories of e-democracy projects analysed in the study. As it was observed, **deliberation projects experience engaging with citizens and increasing the users-base of the tools** as a main challenge. In this context, having a relevant number of citizens engaging with the tools is indeed a decisive element for the success of deliberative exercises. For both **participatory and transparency tools, cooperating with authorities represents the biggest challenge**. This could be explained by the nature of these tools that have a certain degree of dependency on public administrations. Such dependency is considerably higher for *participation* tools, however. When looking at success factors, it is possible to observe that **ensuring a high level of public trust remains a key element of success for transparency tools**. Again, this may be connected to the nature of the tools themselves: they entail a need for trust by citizens in order to be effective. **Regarding deliberation and participation tools, the main common finding relates to the importance of having a user-friendly technical interface**. Otherwise, acquiring people's attention and engagement online is very difficult.

Based on the analysis and the findings above, it is appropriate to now revisit the three observations identified at the very beginning of this study (digitalisation, decline in traditional use of political participation and high interest in politics generally). There is valid reason to believe that the cases at hand are great examples of how those developments can indeed result in setting up citizen-driven e-democracy tools. Moreover, by doing so, they ultimately enhance citizen action in the public (digital) space. This can either be done by making traditional modes of participation (especially voting) easier and more comprehensible or by providing alternatives (e.g., more participatory democracy tools) that are used by citizens to make their voices heard.

E-democracy is a very wide field and covers a great deal of elements that this study did not touch upon (especially the functions and opportunities of e-government). However, **the analysis showed how e-participation is far from being solely a theoretical concept.** On top of that, the cases presented are a great example of how e-participation does not necessarily depend on the initiative of public administrations (even though they were found to have an important role). E-democracy tools can indeed work to better connect citizens with the decisions that are traditionally taken on their behalf or to empower them to take decisions themselves. Also, the European Commission stated in its European Democracy Action Plan, published in December 2020, that “*Improving transparency and involving citizens in policy- and decision making enhances democratic legitimacy and trust*”<sup>52</sup>. These existing examples provide a great source of expertise and can help develop this field further in order to foster citizen participation in democratic processes.

Finally, while this study only provides a snapshot of developments in the field (more initiatives are taken in Europe - not to mention the great number of related developments worldwide), the insights in this study do **provide an important puzzle piece to gain a better and more detailed understanding of the bigger picture of such processes.** Communities can be supported by citizen-driven e-democracy tools to make better public policy decisions. Ultimately, this may lead to the creation of more inclusive societies where everyone is enabled to be an active part of the political system and, especially, of political decisions.

<sup>52</sup> European Commission, (2020), *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions on the European democracy action plan*, COM(2020) 790 final, Brussels, p. 9. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TX-T/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A790%3AFIN&qid=1607079662423>

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# Annexes

## I. Guiding Interview questions

The list below displays the questions that respondents answered to provide in-depth and first-hand information about the tools chosen as case-studies for this study. On occasion, some respondents might have provided more elaborate information beyond the scope of the initial questions.

- A.** Provide a brief description of your project. (max 2000 characters)
- B.** What motivated you to set up this project? (max 1500 characters)
- C.** How did you finance the project? (max 1000 characters)
- D.** What were the main objectives of the project and were they reached? (max 1500 characters)
- E.** What was the impact that your project had? (max 1000 characters)
- F.** What - in your view - have been the key success factors for your project? (max 1500 characters)
- G.** Which have been the main challenges/obstacles for implementing the project? (max 1000 characters)
- H.** Resources and links to the project:

## II. List of Respondents

The table below lists the respondents of the questionnaires, including their role, the name of the organisation they represent and where they are from.

Organisation	Project / Tool	Respondent	Position	Origin
Democracy Club	Who Can I Vote For	Peter Keeling	Voting information manager	UK
Europuls	StopFals	Elena Gozun	Affiliated Expert	MD
Inițiativa Romania	Harta Banilor Publici	Ainur Ablai-Sabiescu	Board Member	RO
Code For Romania	Rezultate Vot	Bogdan Ivernel	Co-founder and CEO	RO
Danes je nov dan	Parlameter	Maja Cimerman	General Manager	SL
VouliWatch	VouliWatch	Stefanos Loukopoulos	Director & Co-founder	GR
Diskutier Mit Mir	Diskutier Mit Mir	Sabine Mehnert	Project Lead	DE
ManaBalss	ManaBalss	Annija Emerson	Senior Project Manager	LV
The Estonian Cooperation Assembly	Rahvaalgatus	Kadri Org	Democracy Expert	EE
Parlement & Citoyens	Parlement & Citoyens	Cyril Lage	President	FR
Forward Democracy	Swap My Vote	Tom de Grunwald	Director and Co-founder	UK
Grajdanite	Grajdanite	Ivan Mitov	CEO	BG
Projekt: Polska	Hejt Stop	Milosz Hodun	Board Member	PL
Netwerk Democratie	Local Digital Democracy in the Netherlands	Anne de Zeeuw	Project Coordinator	NL
Delib	The Scottish Government's National Covid Conversation	Dani Topaz	Content Editor	UK



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