

# ADVANCING CITIZEN-DRIVEN PARTICIPATION THROUGH DIGITAL TOOLS



FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
FOUNDATION For Freedom.  
Bulgaria and North Macedonia



projekt:polska®

## REPORT

25 FEBURARY 2020  
ONLINE CONFERENCE



**How can the impact of citizen-driven e-democracy tools be strengthened throughout Europe? This was the main question that the conference 'Advancing Citizen-driven Participation through Digital Tools' aimed to answer. On 25 February 2021, civil society representatives, policy makers, researchers and civic-tech practitioners convened to provide a multi-angle view on this topic. Organised by the European Liberal Forum (ELF) and supported by the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS), the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) and Project Polska, the conference was the final point the corresponding research project 'e-democracy: Driving citizen advocacy through digital means'.**

## Opening Statements

**Pieter Van De Stadt**, Board Member, European Liberal Forum and **Martin Kothé**, Regional Director for East and Southeast Europe, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, opened the conference with some introductory remarks. Both speakers highlighted the timeliness and the importance of the topic discussed. Mr Van de Stadt emphasised that e-democracy tools have a great potential to bring more inclusiveness in policymaking, but they can also be used by anti-democratic actors. Mr Kothé underlined the potential of technology for citizen participation and public engagement and the need to harness this potential to improve our democratic societies.



Pieter Van De Stadt

## Keynote Speech

The opening of the conference was followed by a keynote speech by the European **Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica**. She explained that to ensure the sustainability of our European democracy, it is necessary to look for new ways to involve citizens and consistently review our democratic mechanisms.

In that light, the Vice-President also remarked the potential of the Conference on the Future of Europe as a process that can increase citizens' trust in our democratic institutions. Ms Šuica explained that the Conference will include a combination of online and hybrid events, and that everyone will have the opportunity to participate. The Vice-President announced that citizens will be invited to share topics that are close to their hearts via an online platform - the first of this kind in terms of scale - that will enable all citizens to participate in their own language in this EU-wide exercise.



Dubravka Šuica

Vice-President Šuica concluded her remarks emphasising how deliberative democracy can complement representative democracy, but it does not replace it. She also added that in order to successfully apply e-democracy tools, it is necessary to create effective

mobilisation and engagement strategies and that the European Commission will enable more support for open-source digital tools.

**"The most important factors for successful e-participation are close and clear links between e-participation processes and concrete formal participation processes. These should not be limited to one event but be embedded in a culture of participation. Deliberative democracy strengthens representative democracy, it does not replace it."**

**Dubravka Šuica**, Vice-President, European Commission

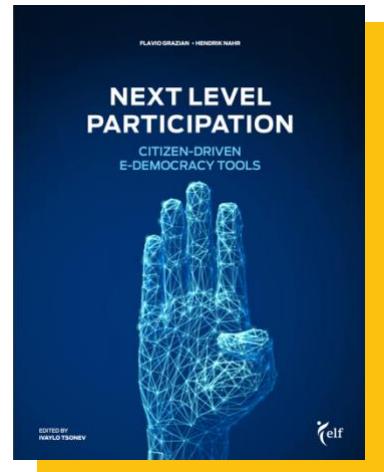
## Research Presentation

**Flavio Grazian, ECAS Participatory Democracy Manager** and **Hendrik Nahr, ECAS Citizen Deliberation Coordinator**, authors of the study "Next Level Participation", presented the main findings from their research. The speakers provided an overview on their work by outlining the conceptual framework and the data collection processes. The study is based on 3 underlying observations:

- Potential of digitalisation for democratic processes;
- Decline of trust in traditional 'political actors';
- Citizens' interest in public decision making.

The authors assumed that these three observations are likely to funnel into the development of citizen-driven e-democracy tools. The study analysed fifteen case studies around Europe and aimed to identify success factors of existing projects in order to provide recommendations for future ventures. The study distinguishes between three types of tools: those that enhance participation, those that create deliberative space, and those that enable further transparency.

The presented findings included the main success factors (e.g., user friendliness, public trust and media dissemination), challenges for creating e-democracy tools (e.g., successful cooperation with public authorities, funding and user engagement) as well as recommendations for future developers. In the authors' views, these tools may ultimately help create a more inclusive society where citizens can actively participate in decision making processes.



The study is available [here](#)

## Panel Discussion

## How can the impact of citizen-driven e-democracy tools be strengthened throughout Europe?

The panel discussion, moderated by **Stephen Boucher**, Founder of Dreamocracy, featured four experts in the field and aimed to debate how the impact of citizen-driven e-democracy tools could be strengthened throughout Europe. Following an opening statement, each panellist answered two sets of questions related to their area of expertise.

Based on a recent research carried out by the Joint Research Centre, **David Mair**, Head of Unit of Knowledge for Policy: Concepts and Methods at the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, explained that social media platforms tend to make political discourses more polarised. However, online platforms offer also the opportunity to counteract these negative tendencies and create a space where citizens have the opportunity to engage in more open discussions and have their ideas heard.

Mr Mair's team is working on a multilingual participatory platform for the Conference on the Future of Europe. He hopes that based on the good experience with this platform, governments will start calling for national, regional and local equivalents. Mr Mair also emphasised that in order to rebuild trust in our democracies, we need to create more trust in the political processes. In his view, citizens increasingly see such methods to be valid because people are able to capture the whole plurality of views that we have in a society.



Stephen Boucher



David Mair

**"On the internet, you can go down a rabbit hole and you end up thinking that your political views are perhaps more widely shared than they really are."**

**David Mair**, Head of Unit of Knowledge for Policy:  
Concepts and Methods at the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission

**Elisa Lironi**, Senior Manager European Democracy at ECAS highlighted the great variety of e-democracy tools that we could use and how they can be applied in different stages of the policy cycle. During the agenda setting phase, they can contribute to make a topic more popular. Ms Lironi also shared the example of how such tools were used by parliamentarians during the policy formulation stage, where citizens could work together with their representatives on drafting official policy proposals. Furthermore, applying such tools in the implementation phase of public policies should allow citizens to monitor decision-making processes. Finally, during the evaluation stage, it is important to receive feedback on the e-participation process and e-democracy tools can help to better assess the effectiveness of certain policies.

Ms Lironi also highlighted the key factors to consider when implementing e-democracy exercises from a top-down perspective: accessibility, representativeness, feedback and impact. According to her, the feedback element is often underestimated, while impact highly depends on political willingness and is crucial in participatory processes in order for citizens to see a concrete result of their efforts.

Ms Lironi observed that the outbreak of COVID-19 has shown that many governmental systems are not yet ready to implement e-democracy initiatives in a serious manner, as there is still the lack of technological infrastructures, organisational agility and solid regulatory frameworks for e-participation. Ms Lironi announced that ECAS is launching a brand-new project ([CODE Europe](#)) over the next 3 years across 9 countries in Europe to crowdsource citizens' ideas on how to improve air quality. The project will also produce an assessment framework for e-participation that would allow reliable comparative analyses of e-democracy case studies. Ms Lironi concluded by saying that it is crucial to create a true democratic culture in which e-democracy initiatives are normalised and complementary to representative democracy.



Elisa Lironi

**Paulina Fröhlich**, Head of Programme 'Future of Democracy' at Progressives Zentrum, affirmed that she noticed a transformation in the relationship between political parties and civil society organisations (CSOs). In the past, these groups used to work together intensively and constructively, and this approach helped both to better understand citizens' claims and interests. Ms Fröhlich noted that today, parties are turning towards individual citizens, while NGOs tend to address state institutions instead of political parties. She raised the question of whether this trend could be balanced by the use e-democracy tools.



Paulina Fröhlich

Ms Fröhlich also provided participants with some (online and offline) examples of citizen-driven democracy projects in Germany that aimed to bring people together – countering division and polarisation. She also explained how digital tools can support CSO-led initiatives. According to her, cooperation amongst civil society initiatives is an important factor in this regard. Finally, Ms Fröhlich underlined the importance to also involve the artistic and cultural sectors to promote these democratic tools.

**Milosz Hodun**, Board Member of Project Polska, provided a brief overview of his project '[Hejt Stop](#)'. He explained that the current national context in Poland is very specific. According to Mr Hodun, bottom-up e-democracy tools cannot only improve democracy, but actually save liberal societies. Referring to the project he implemented, he remarked that the cooperation between online and offline activities was one of the main success factors of the project. He explained that the 'Hejt Stop' aimed at removing hate signs from public spaces in Poland, as part of a larger anti-hate speech online project. He affirmed that it emerged that citizens are motivated to use e-democracy tools if



Milosz Hodun

they can observe a real change in their community as a consequence on their active engagement.

Mr Hodun also mentioned that for new projects that aim to upscale their action, the support of public authorities is very important. He noted that many projects in Poland lost public funding after the PiS-led government took office in 2015 and for this reason the availability of European funds is a vital source of support.

After the Q&A session with the public, **Stephen Boucher** closed the panel discussion. He highlighted three challenges for democratic institutions (such as parties, administrations and civil society) when aiming to outweigh "demagogues": (1) demonstrating their impact, (2) demonstrating fair, legitimate and transparent processes, and (3) being in tune with people's emotions.

The event was facilitated by **Ivaylo Tsonev**, Project Coordinator, Friedrich Naumann Foundation. In his final remarks, Mr Tsonev emphasised the importance of digital participation and the need for citizen empowerment in our societies.

The full livestream of the event can be viewed [here](#).



Ivaylo Tsonev

## Advancing Citizen-driven Participation through Digital Tools

### Agenda

25 February 2021 10h CET

10:00 – 10:10 *Opening by organisers*

- **Pieter Van De Stadt**, Board Member, European Liberal Forum
- **Martin Kothé**, Regional Director for East and Southeast Europe, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom

10:10 – 10:20 *Keynote speech*

**Dubravka Šuica**, European Commission Vice-President, Democracy and Demography

10:20 – 10:30 *"Next Level Participation - Citizen-driven e-democracy tools" - main research findings*

- **Flavio Grazian**, Participatory Democracy Manager, European Citizen Action Service
- **Hendrik Nahr**, Citizen Deliberation Coordinator, European Citizen Action Service

10:30 – 11:30 *Panel discussion: How can the impact of citizen-driven e-democracy tools be strengthened throughout Europe?*

Moderator: **Stephen Boucher**, Founder & Partner, Dreamocracy

- **David Mair**, Head of Unit, Knowledge for Policy: Concepts and Methods, Joint Research Centre, European Commission
- **Elisa Lironi**, Senior Manager European Democracy, European Citizen Action Service
- **Milosz Hodun**, Board Member, Project Polska
- **Paulina Fröhlich**, Head of Programme 'Future of Democracy', Progressives Zentrum

11:30 – 12:00 *Q&A*

12:00 – 12:10 *Closing remarks*

**Ivaylo Tsonev**, Project Coordinator, Friedrich Naumann Foundation