E-democracy
in action

2016

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Introduction

> " Democracy cannot survive and society cannot be sustained without civil and civic engagement. The importance of civil society goes beyond underpinning political action, formalised institutions and processes of decision-making. (..) That is why active citizenship is central to the progressive vision of a good society. It embodies core values such as empowering men and women to be able to make decisions for themselves. It is vital that individuals are able to contribute, even in small measure, to their own well-being as well as their inclusion in broader society, both at neighbourhood and at civic level. Active citizenship embodies the reciprocity and responsibility which any civilised society requires for its survival[1].
>
> — DAVID BLUNKETT and MATTHEW TAYLOR

In the light of the sentiment expressed in the paragraph above that active participation is a valuable asset of any functioning democracy in the modern day, this publication will seek to explore cases of good practice, describing most prominent tools of e-democracy in Estonia, Finland and Latvia. For the purposes of the study, e-democracy will be understood as the body of all those initiatives which accommodate civic activism and allow people to be more involved in decision making process, thus contributing to the overall improvement of a healthy democracy.

Up until now, we have seen many different forms of democratic participation springing up all across the world - from citizens' juries to citizens' assemblies to participatory budgeting mechanisms to deliberative polling. Impressively, many of these initiatives have had quite a lot of success locally. However, much as is the case with different online tools of participation, these are mostly operating on ad hoc basis and have not been mainstreamed into state institutional or constitutional arrangements. What this publication strives to do then, is to contribute to the body of evidence that explains how some of these initiatives come to be, how they are constructed and how they function so that mainstreaming them can become tangible in the future.

It will do so by looking at 9 stories from Latvia, Estonia and Finland, using desk research and interviews with experts working with the initiatives. References to online publications are used where appropriate, the rest of the information gathered is summarized from the opinions expressed in the interviews.

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[1] Crick and Taylor (2010) Active Citizenship – What Could it Achieve and how?, Edinburgh University Press.

Democracy of crisis or crisis of democracy?

Academics, researchers and laymen alike repeatedly claim that democracy as we know it, is in crisis. For many, though being 'the lesser evil', democracy is still the most valuable framework for 'doing politics' that we know and it is thus worrisome, that some of the core driving principles of democracy are seemingly fading away.

The evidence for these claims stems from many observations that we are constantly reminded of by the headlines - party dealignment; low voting turnout on any elections; lack of trust in politicians; harsh disparities between different social groups, and rising economic inequalities. When it comes to the reasons behind this, opinions will vary – you will hear people say that the very nature of democracy is flawed and that a certain change is in order. Some will blame the liberal-capitalistic state arrangement where too much attention is paid to the individual and wealth accumulation (with which, arguably, comes the power and thus more influence among the general public, which is something you don't really want in a democracy). Interestingly, more often than not, proponents of this view don't seem to be able to come up with an alternative solution themselves but that is a matter of a different conversation altogether.

Amongst other causes for these very obvious failings of democracy, liberal individualism, capitalistic wealth accumulation, and globalisation, as well as the triumph of law over politics[2], and increasingly complex social and economic structures in contemporary liberal-democratic states are identified as having led to the fragmentation of political interests and identities[3] and to general disengagement of the public.

But no matter what the true reasons behind this disengagement and passivity, we are left with a general public which seems to be more apathetic than active and more dismissive than critically engaged. While investigating the cause of this state of affairs is by all means a worthwhile endeavour as it might direct us to possible cures to the ills of democracy, at this stage it is however just as important to treat the symptoms to relief the excess tension that has steadily been building up for more than two decades now.

Now, when talking about crisis of democracy, many will say it is in retreat or decline while others will be more optimistic and suggest we are only witnessing a democratic transformation

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[2] Bellamy, R. (2009). The Republic of Reasons: Public Reasoning, Depoliticization and Non-Domination. Legal republicanism: national and international perspectives, 102-120.

[3] Cain, Bruce E., Dalton, Russel J., & Carrow, Susan E. (eds). 2006. Democracy Transformed? Expanding Political Opportunities in Advanced Industrial Democracies. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

and moving towards a completely new type of democracy. If we adopt this more optimistic and hopeful stance, then we might wish to look for evidence that this might be true and we have some, even if faint, ray of light to hold on to.

One bundle of such evidence lies in the grassroots activism that can be observed across the globe. From protests in the streets and to acts of civil disobedience (occupy!), from guerrilla gardening to participatory budgeting and many more, we can clearly see that people are not, in fact, disinterested and passive by their nature, it is quite possibly simply the case that the channels of participation currently offered to them by their states are quite frankly simply not enough.

If one thinks about it in historical context for a second, then it becomes quite apparent that, at least in what we call the Western world, we live in a society that has developed immensely in only the last 50 years or so, and yet somehow we govern ourselves by the institutions and arrangements that are at least two centuries old, minimum. It is perhaps then not so surprising that there is a certain mismatch between the principles democracy embodies and the ability of its institutions and arrangements to deliver.

All of the above considered, where does this leave us? If we recap, what we see is that democracy, by and large, is failing to deliver and has left us with a bitter taste in our mouths, figuratively speaking. Meanwhile, grassroots initiatives are springing up across the globe, suggesting that the general public is craving more (high quality) channels of participation than the current state arrangements are able to offer.

If one is to follow the Jeffersonian dictum which assumes that problems of democracy are to be cured with more democracy, then we must search for new, innovative (yet still democratic!) tools that will help us fix and then enhance the democracy as we know it.

New deliberative and online democratic mechanisms are at the forefront and the very top of the toolbox that we ought to use, if we are to take this stance. First of all, the technical opportunities of the World Wide Web are unprecedented and allow us to exchange information at a speed like never before, be it entertainment, medical advice or information about our politicians and the laws they are about to pass. This, among other others, is one of the decisive factors contributing to the mismatch between the current modern day society and the aged and perhaps, one would to dare to say, slightly backward institutional state arrangements of 17th and 18th century. People get to acquire information faster, they grow more impatient, they exchange views on politicians not only with their immediate family, neighbours and perhaps some friends from the same town they have always lived in, they also get to discuss the new tax policies with like-minded people from across the country!

And somehow, with this abundance of information, the will to participate and the trust in the whole political apparatus seems to have gone astray. It is not, unfortunately, within the scope of this brief paper to investigate the step-by-step route of how exactly we arrived here, though it is by all means among the most meaningful and fascinating questions that can be asked.

Be as it may, the technological developments of our century have not just taken us further and added convenience and speed to the way we live our lives, it has also given us loads of exciting opportunities (and not just Amazon an Ebay). It has affected every aspect of our lives, including active participation – petitioning, crowdsourcing, decision-making, opinion-polls and so many more. All of these are all examples of democratic revival on a digital terrain. And sure, most of these initiatives are still operating on *ad hoc* basis, but they nevertheless represent the wider urge to participate somehow and prove that the general public is by no means incapable, disillusioned or passive. Quite the contrary – they cannot wait for you to give them another megaphone to raise their voice on.

This introduction may sound like a bit of a mouthful, but it really is just meant to get you a little bit more excited about all the different tools of participation we actually have at our disposal to use right… now. Finland and more so Estonia and Latvia are all relatively small republics, all of which have not had the easiest of historical narratives to determine their faith and yet, despite one too many obstacles, all three of these countries have managed to make innovative, brave and also difficult steps to enhance democracy in their countries. This publication will strive to illustrate how exactly.

CASE STUDIES

E-democracy in action

RAHVAKOGU
Crowdsourcing platform | ESTONIA

> " An efficient representative democracy works when the people's discontent and proposals are taken into account in-between elections and when the citizen truly sees members of parliament as their representatives, not as members of a political party who belong either to the governing coalition or the opposition[4].

— TOOMAS HENDRIK ILVES

What is it?

An online crowdsourcing platform for policy proposals, combined with a deliberative component of The Citizen Assembly Day

When was it created?

January 2013

How does it work?

- Online platform *https://www.rahvakogu.ee/*
- eID required to register for the online tool
- Comments and analysis provided by experts in the field
- Participants of the Citizen Assembly Day chosen via random sampling

Organising/ Management

Volunteers from NGOs (Estonian Cooperation Assembly, the Praxis Centre for Policy Studies, Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations, the Open Estonia Foundation, e-Governance Academy, the Open Estonia Foundation), political parties, IT and communications professionals

Publicity used for promotion

Social media, national broadcasting

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[4] As qoted in Citizens Foundationwebpage: *http://www.citizens.is/portfolio/estonian-laws-changed/*, Last assessed: 26/01/2015

Results

3 out of 15 proposals turned into laws so far, activated citizenry, has triggered development of other platforms of participation

Contacts

E-mail: *info@rahvakogu.ee*

Rahvakogu (People's Assembly) is an Estonian initiative that was created with a purpose to crowdsource policy proposals with an overall aim to improve the state of democracy in Estonia. Rahvakogu was a one-time method of deliberative democracy and the website continues to function as an archive, but does nevertheless serve as a showcase example of bottom-up civic engagement. The process can be repeated by anyone on any issue.

Getting the initiative going was triggered by a corruption scandal in 2012 which then brought many people out to the streets to protest. This increase of political activity was of course noted by opinion leaders, most notably by the president of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who then reacted by assembling representatives of political parties, social interest groups and non-profit sector, political scientists and other opinion leaders to discuss how to address the issues and open the government to the people more.

The discussion cycle, which was initiated by president Ilves and which later became to be known as the 'Ice Cellar Initiative' could have easily been dismissed due to its exclusive nature, so in order to overcome the issue and provide certain amount of transparency,. But most importantly, it led to two intertwined initiatives, where crowdsourcing policy proposals from citizens was merged with a deliberative activity (aka deliberation day) to then discuss the gathered ideas[5].

The initiative was launched January, 2013 and focused on five specific issues that were selected beforehand, namely the electoral system, the functioning of political parties, the financing of political parties, public participation in political decision-making, and the politicization of public offices. Should a proposal submitted not fall into one of these, it would then be included in the 'varia' category.

The online platform also provided an opportunity to comment, support or criticize the submitted proposals. This part of the overall process was available to everyone – both general public as well as politicians, the only requirement being a log in with an electronic ID.

After the Rahvakogu was launched it took only three weeks for it to reach 60,000 visitors, 2000 registered users and 6,000 original proposal and comments[6]. The body of proposals

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[5] *http://www.kogu.ee/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Peoples-assembly_summary-by-Praxis_2014.pdf*, Last assessed: 26/01/2015
[6] *http://www.praxis.ee/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Nations-in-transit-Estonia.pdf*, Last assessed: 26/01/2015

accumulated was then summarized, systematized and subcategorised by group of policy analysts from the Praxis Centre for Policy Studies and handed over to a group of experts in various fields, who then assessed the impact proposals would bring about and how the implementation of them would take place. This part of the initiative was carried out so as to contribute to the overall quality of the process as well as to assist participants of the next stage of the process.

Following the analysis stage, 5 thematic seminars took place in March, 2013. Political representatives, experts, and citizens who had contributed to the original proposals all participated in these and deliberated upon the proposals. Finally, 18 most crucial ideas were selected for the final stage of the process, namely, The Citizen Assembly Day. This took place on 6th of April, 2013. For this event, a diverse selection of the general public was picked to create a random sample, representing all strands of society. As a result, 314 people responded and, assisted by moderators, discussed the submitted proposals in groups of approximately 10 people. It is important to note that the participants also received briefing materials, containing expert opinions on each of the proposals.

Out of the 18 proposals, 15 were finally selected to be furthered to the Estonian parliament for consideration and by the summer of the following year, 3 of the proposals had turned into actual laws and 4 more had been either partially implemented or redefined in one way or another into the government coalition programme.

Now, it's worthwhile to note that in itself, the initiative is quite ambitious in that, if successful, it can lead to serious improvements on multiple levels all at once - it aims to improve the electoral system; to promote healthy competition between political parties and the way they govern themselves; to seek a more effective party financing model; to empower and strengthen civic society and to find a way to stop politicization of public offices. But what is even more striking, is the very important educational element present at all stages of the initiative process. It allows the general public to learn about issues they otherwise might not engage in and do so by obtaining information and opinions from the leading experts in the field. That combined with the actual decisions being made and the dialogue created between the political representatives and the general public, makes for a powerful tool which, provided it is actively used in the future, can foster healthy participation in the decision making procedure of all those actually affected by these decisions.

CITIZENOS.COM
Crowdsourcing platform | Estonia

> " We believe the time has come,where technology can give the ability to participate in decision making back to each and every person[7].

— CITIZENOS TEAM

What is it?

A crowdsourcing portal for collaborative decision-making

When was it created?

September 2015

How does it work?

- Collaborative online decision making platform *www.citizenos.com*
- Discussion and voting functionality, signing decisions and sending them to relevant instances

Organising/ Management

- Let's Do It! World
- Estonian Debating Society
- Open Estonia Foundation

Publicity used for promotion

Social media, meetings with stakeholders (companies, municipal leaders, state institutions)

Results

Expected results include energising general public to get involved in the decision making processes on state and community level, also to encourage argumented discussions

Contacts

Margo Loor: *margo@letsdoitworld.org*

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[7]   As quoted in CitizenOS webiste: https://citizenos.com/about, Last assessed: 26/01/2015

CitizenOS platform is a communal online decision making platform which allows its users to discuss pressing issues via online communication. Its aim is to serve as a channel of direct democracy, where people can jointly discuss those issues that are truly important to them and then forward their opinions to the decision makers.

On the platform everyone and anyone can add their own proposal and can do so privately or publicly, as long as they log in via one of three available options. IN order to use the platform, one has to register, still, the voting is anonymous due to the data protection law requirements. Once a proposal is submitted, users can then comment on the proposals, make amendments and list pros and cons of the suggestion in question. All of the comments and notes are preserved in a single location, so that it is easier to follow a discussion and the development of the proposal.

The users can then vote on the drafted suggestion, whether it has to do with the wording of the proposal or the content of it. Veto vote can also be used. Originally, the text of the proposal may be relatively unstructured or vague, but since every user of the platform can comment on and amend the text, it eventually becomes much more precise and solid.

The interesting thing about the platform, or tool, rather, is that it is something that nearly any decision making body can use, should they wish to adopt and use e-tools of participation more actively. The design and set-up of the tool allows users to use it quite effortlessly and really come to agreements on issues that affect everyone in the community and can thus be used very effectively on the municipal level, for example. The managerial team running the platform also offers consultations, assistance to anyone in of need support so as to promote active use of participation tools in Estonia and elsewhere in the world.

RAHVAALGATUS.EE

Citizen initiative platform | Estonia

> " Rahvaalgatus.ee will be created by the 98th anniversary of the Estonian Republic on 24th February 2016[8]!
>
> — RAHVAALGATUS.EE TEAM

What is it?

Rahvaalgatus.ee (Citizen Initiative) is an online discussion and petitioning tool to gather proposals to be submitted to the parliament, with an added element of joint discussions and co-creation of petitions online

When was it created?

To be launched February 2016

How does it work?

- Petitioning platform *www.rahvaalgatus.ee*
- E-signature required
- Discussion and amendment functionality
- Automatic follow-up of initiatives submitted to the parliament

Organising / Management

- Estonian Cooperation Assembly
- Let's do it! Foundation
- Chancellery of the Riigikogu

Publicity used for promotion

Social media, national broadcasting, public presentations

Results

No visible results yet, since the platform is yet to be launched, but the hope is that people will actively submit proposals and engage in debate, leading to active interaction between the government and the general public

Contacts

Teele Pehk: *teele@kogu.ee*

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[8]   As quoted in *http://www.rahvaalgatus.ee/*, Last assessed: 26/01/2015

Rahvaalgatus.ee will function as a collective petitioning site and is to be launched in February, 2016. It is being developed by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly followed by initiative and support of Let's do it! Foundation. The idea is to have a well-functioning petitioning platform, where proposals can be gathered, discussed and, provided they meet the necessary requirements, be then forwarded to the Parliament for consideration.

In a way, Rahvaalgatus can be seen as a descendent of Rahvakogu, since it grew from one of the proposals that emerged via this initiative. Before the People's Assembly no such right to submit proposals to the Parliament existed in Estonia. However, the functionality of Rahvaalgatus is entirely different.

First of all, Rahvakogu platform operated as a one-off occurrence, it had a certain purpose and a culmination, after which, whilst achieving many of the goals that had been set for it, ceased to exist. Rahvalgaatus, on the other hand, sets out to be a permanent platform of citizen initiatives, which will be used actively and regularly by general public of Estonia, in Estonian, English and Russian language. Second of all, it is a different type of a platform altogether - while Rahvakogu had an online proposal gathering element to it, it was only a part of it and had an important role dedicated to the real life deliberation. For Rahvaalgatus, the main function is to gather high quality discussions and proposals, enable to gather digital signatures and submit them to the Parliament for consideration.

Results of the voting are presented with a statistical overview and a visual sum-up. If the proposal becomes so successful that it reaches support of 1000 (in digital signatures), it can then be sent to the Estonian Parliament committees for discussions. The platform also provides feedback for the users - its users can request information about the progress of the proposal and the status of its implementation.

For a petition to be successful and submitted to the Parliament, it needs to reach at least 1000 signatures in Estonia. This is a relatively low threshold, especially when it is compared to 10 000 signatures that need to be gathered in Latvia and 50 000 signatures in Finland.

Even though the right for general public to submit proposals to the parliament has been present in Estonia since 2014, the parliament has processed only 11 proposals so far. This was due to the fact that there was no decent channel (enabling digital signing) for the general public to use, so the hope is that this will now change with the birth of Rahvaalgatus platform.

It needs to be pointed out that Rahvaalgatus is unique in the sense that it will allow for the users to co-create proposals and comment on the existing ones, even if they had not been involved in submitting it originally. Also, it will be possible to follow online what the parliament commissions answer to proposals and whether the proposals will be turned into draft acts.

MAZINAM SLOGU

Individual civic participation tool | Latvia

> 66 **We are confident that lessening administrative burden, having more simple regulation, customer-oriented attitude and smart bureaucracy is exactly the type of public administration that we need**[9].

— TEAM OF MAZINAM SLOGU

What is it?

Mazinām slogu (Let's share the burden) is an internet platform for direct civic participation, rating and improvement of state services, delivery of information to citizens, reduction of bureaucracy.

The users can rate and comment on their experience at a state institution and suggest changes to laws and processes. Suggestions are reviewed weekly by employees of the State Chancellery, replies are issued and changes are made if feasible.

When was it created?

Late 2013

How does it work?

- Platform *http://www.mazaksslogs.gov.lv*
- Anonymous complaints submitted
- The submissions and the Chancellery's replies posted on the website and sorted by tags
- Additional free app allows the user to post comments on ratings on their experiences at state institutions they have visited

Organising/Management

- Latvian State Chancellery
- Publicity used for promotion
- Websites and social media run by state agencies, online news sites

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[9] As quoted in the Mazinam Slogu website: http://www.mazaksslogs.gov.lv/slogs/par–iniciativu/, Last assessed: 26/01/2015

Results

Citizens have had many state bureaucracy-related questions answered. Any complaints posted by users are regularly investigated and problems are often solved. Several changes have been made to legislation as a result of citizens input.

Contacts

Ketija Strazda: *Ketija.Strazda@mk.gov.lv*

Mazāks slogs or Mazinām slogu is a state-run project for receiving feedback from citizens, using it to improve legislation, to improve the availability and quality of public services and the customer service culture in them. The main idea is to reduce the bureaucratic burden and hassle of receiving public services and fulfilling the registration actions mandated by the state. The campaign was launched in November 2013 by initiative of the State Chancellery and it was created as a continuation to a pilot project called 'Let's share the burden' (started in 2012).

The increasing importance of client-oriented public services is marked by the 'Good service movement in public administration' campaign launched by the State Chancellery in 2015. The good cases and popular workers were praised and rewarded.

The website operates by letting any internet user submit a suggestion or complaint pertaining to public services and legislation using just their e-mail address as an identifier. Importantly, the user must also add a suggested solution to the problem. All the questions, complaints and suggestions are reviewed by heads of departments of the State Chancellery, experts and employees of other state agencies on a weekly basis. Every serious submission receives a reply and is notified via email. The exchange and actions taken are posted on the website (unless the submitter doesn't want it posted) and all the submissions are sorted thematically by tags. A reader can observe the older posts and see that improvements to state services which are noticeable in everyday life might have just originated from the website they are viewing. When reacting to posts, the Chancellery fulfils several functions. One is informing and explaining to citizens a legal process which they might not understand or be aware of. Another is receiving comments and complaints, issuing them to the public service institutions responsible and assigning said institutions to fix the problem. The third and most interesting function is to use the authority of the State Chancellery to order the ministry to whom the problem pertains to work on changes to legislation or other solutions via a resolution issued by the Chancellery or the prime minister.

The feedback received from the website's section and app called *Futbols* (Football) is discussed and used in a similar manner. The *Futbols* app's name is a grim reminder of the Soviet public service culture where the client was footballed by public service workers from one office to

another constantly while the client is trying to sort a problem or receive a document. Breaking away from these bad traditions is realized by using the app for rating the received service and reporting if the user was footballed by the employees. The user can also praise the particular civil servant that did a good job helping them to highlight positive experiences.

The very simple and user-friendly app features most if not all public services country-wide. Each public service has a small business card with contact information and precise location listed which can be used together with Google maps to get directions to the institution. The mean rating of an institution is not public.

Since the website launched, it has had 28 326 unique visitors and received more than 494 suggestions and complaints. The app has been downloaded more than 3000 times and has received 1592 ratings on the app and website[10].

Several small and larger improvements have been achieved since launching the website and app. It is a tool for both voicing problems and showing that the State does indeed make improvements based on the needs of the public. First of all, since 2014 the Chancellery takes into account ratings and comments posted on the website and in the *Futbols* app as well as statistics and formal complaints when evaluating public service work effectivization and de-bureaucratization according to set goals.

Other achievements include the following: changes in real estate tax legislation; changes in legislation about bookkeeping in micro-sized companies; reduced administrative burden for organizing the home-schooling of children unable to attend school; Investigations in institutions not replying to formal complaints and investigations of building safety and legality.

This initiative features a direct democracy approach where every citizen has an opportunity to participate – to evaluate, to report and to suggest changes. It seems very effective. However, one cannot help but notice that the control is in the hands of the State. Users can not know what reports have been rejected as invalid. Often times the poster would have wanted immediate action to be taken, but instead, they receive explanation and it is obvious that the desired change cannot currently be made.

This tool is also not extremely popular and its popularity isn't being purposefully increased, thus many people don't know about this easy way to complain and make suggestions about public services.

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[10] Data from October and December 2015 *http://www.es.gov.lv/news/luksemburga-prezentes-valsts-kancelejas-iniciativas-administrativa-sloga-mazinasana; http://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/infografika-iedzivotajus-visvairak-uztrauc-pensijas-un-veselibas-aprupe.d?id=46869289,* Last assessed: 26/01/2015

MANABALSS.LV

Online petitioning platform | Latvia

> " ManaBalss now puts Latvia at the forefront of European efforts to shift some forms of political participation to the Internet[11].

— THE NEW YORK TIMES

What is it?

ManaBalss.lv (MyVoice) is an e-democracy tool that enables the user (any person age 16 and older) to post both broadly grasped initiatives and concrete law amendments to be voted on by other such users.

When was it created?

2011

How does it work?

- Online platform *https://manabalss.lv/*
- Initiatives are posted and updated
- Bank ID signatures required
- When reaching 10 000 signatures, initiative is submitted in the Parliament (Saeima) and must be reviewed as a collection submission according to the Rules of Procedure of the Saeima.

Organising/ Management

Foundation for Public Participation NGO

Publicity used for promotion

- Social media
- News websites
- Newspapers, radio, TV
- Some public events

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[11] As quoted in the New York Times: *http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/world/europe/a-web-site-where-latvians-ideas-can-become-law.html?_r=1*, Last assessed: 26/01/2025

Results

Made it possible for petitions signed online by 10000 people to be added to the parliament's agenda in 2011.

In 2015: 4 initiatives submitted to the Parliament, 2 initiatives submitted to local governments. Overall: 8 important initiatives realized as law or amendments to the law; several popular initiatives rejected by the parliament.

Contacts

Imants Breidaks, 00371 22077684, *sveiki@manabalss.lv*

Work on the petition website ManaBalss.lv was started in 2010 by two young businessmen with minimal experience in political participation with help from civic society organizations. The first two initiatives, posted by the ManaBalss.lv creators themselves in June 2011, in the first days received a couple of thousand votes. The first initiative was named 'Let's open the offshores!' and asked for changes in legislation for better ways to investigate the true benefactors of companies whose owners (or more than 25% of owners) are registered outside the country. Lying about the true benefactors was to be made a criminal offence. The second initiative 'Let's open the Parliament!' posted on the website made it possible for an initiative signed by 10 000 citizens online to be added to the Parliament's agenda. 5000 signatures are required to forward the initiative to a local government. Two days after the petitions were posted, the president of Latvia at that time, Valdis Zatlers, urged the society to vote on the petitions, which gave the website a good kick-start. The timing was very good for such an initiative because it was caught in the momentum of the very recent suggestion to dismiss the Parliament, also directed by the president. This was the first time in Latvian history when the president used his authority to suggest dismissal of the Parliament and organize a referendum. 95% of voters voted in favour of the dismissal and a new election was announced. The voting on ManaBalss.lv initiatives and the dismissal of Parliament was happening in parallel in a rare wave of civic activity. The catalyst for the president's suggestion was outrage caused by the fact that the Parliament voted against removing an MP's immunity and allowing to raid his place of residence when there was well-grounded suspicion of his corruption and criminal activity. Both the offshore initiative and public participation initiative was made law, putting ManaBalss.lv on the road to success.

The working principle of the website is simple. The creator of the initiative (a regular citizen or an NGO or company member) logs in using their online banking ID which identifies their name and personal ID code, then writes a proposal for changes in legislation and practice. The name of the initiative's creator is visible to anyone who visits the website. The initiative stays on the website indefinitely if it is approved as legitimate and is in accordance to the

Constitution and other legislation. Authors of initiatives can involve experts to get help with correctly writing the text. Any website user age 16 and over can sign the initiative, casting their vote in favour and helping to reach the 10 000 signatures needed for the initiative to be reviewed and voted on by the Parliament. The votes are public – the first and last names of those who vote are listed under the text of the initiative. The creator promotes their initiative via social media and other means. When the initiative arrives in the Parliament, it is marked with 'reviewed by the Parliament' on the website and later, if changes are made – 'the law has been passed'. News on the review process can be posted by the creator of the initiative or ManaBalss.lv employee.

In the approximately 5 years of ManaBalss.lv existence, more than 436 000 signatures have been received, 910 initiatives have been submitted, and the website has been viewed by more than 912 000 unique web users. Over 123 000 citizens have given their signature to at least one initiative. The most popular initiative so far has been 'Accountability for breaking the deputy oath' with over 17 000 signatures[12].

The petition website has been an active place since its beginnings and still often comes into sight of the media with important, popular and also controversial initiatives for change. A very recent topical petition is for the protection of the dunes and other natural treasures in the seaside city of Jūrmala from overbuilding. It has received more than 930 signatures in a week. The idea about an open vote in the presidential elections has just reached 10 000 signatures. The demand to add road tax to gas prices and create a fund to be used for road repairs is currently being reviewed in the Parliament. A petition for making free hepatitis C medicine available was approved by the government at the end of 2015. An initiative to decriminalize marijuana received the needed number of votes in three years but was rejected. There are many other ManaBalss.lv petitions that came to public attention, were made law in an unchanged or slightly changed state or rejected by the Parliament or ManaBalss.lv itself to the disappointment of the public. In 2012, when Andris Bērziņš was the president of Latvia, many citizens found him unfit to be president, so a petition to suspend him was posted to ManaBalss.lv and received a hundred signatures in two days. The petition was then suspended by ManaBalss.lv so as not to set a precedent of using the portal for getting rid of particular politicians. Popular initiatives such as online elections and keeping the lat as the Latvian currency were also rejected by the Parliament.

Nevertheless, the portal is very popular and has surprisingly many achievements that are recognized worldwide. What is the key to the success of ManaBalss.lv? Firstly, it is availability. Most people in Latvia have internet access and internet banking. The website is also very simple and there is no unneeded bureaucracy involved. Help can be received from volunteer

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[12] Progress report of ManaBalss, Available at: *https://manabalss.lv/page/progress*, Last assessed: 26/01/2015

experts to make the initiatives better. Secondly, cooperation is established with the Parliament. Thirdly, it's timing. Just like with Estonian Rahvakogu, the tool came to existence in a time of heightened political activity. Fourthly, it is the promotion. The initiatives can be easily shared via social media, and the website creators' affiliation with the marketing profession is clearly visible.

DEPUTĀTI UZ DELNAS

Watchdog platform | Latvia

> 66 **Political responsibility relies not only on the elected officials, but also on the general public, it should follow what politicians do and call them accountable when necessary. Deputāti uz Delnas will provide a channel for this and encourages following work of the Parliament**[13]

— DEPUTĀTI UZ DELNAS TEAM

What is it?

An information board about the reputation of Latvian politicians and political candidates for 'refreshing the memory' of the Latvian voter, promoting accountability of both the voter and the candidates.

When was it created?

- 2010
- Updated irregularly, before every election at a minimum

How does it work?

- Information about political candidates gathered by Delna (Transparency International in Latvia)
- Established methodology from news sources and public state registration (income declaration, company financial reports etc.) databases used
- Information can be promoted via social media
- Polls' and quizzes' functionality

Organising/ Management

Project of Delna – Transparency International in Latvia, a non-benefit NGO.

Publicity used for promotion

- Social media

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[13] As quoted in Deputāti uz Delnas website: *http://deputatiuzdelnas.lv/lv/par-datubazi/datu-bazes-merki.html*, Last assessed: 26/01/2015

- National broadcasting
- News portals

Results

Voters have regular accessible summaries of the politicians' activities since the previous election for making an informed choice. Information campaigns are held.

Contacts

General Info: *kandidatiuzdelnas@delna.lv*

Voters can be said to have famously short memory when it comes to re-electing political candidates with repeated offences. The resource Deputātiuzdelnas.lv ('Candidates on your palm' or 'Candidates in the open') aims to tackle this problem by presenting information about candidates and parties standing in local government, parliamentary and European Parliament elections which should be worrisome to any voter. Major corruption scandals are often forgotten as well as conflicts of interest, hate speech and just general discourteous behaviour. The resource was initially created as a pre-election project but continues to live on. The main objectives stated by Delna are to refresh the memory of the electorate and to promote accountability of both the voters and the political parties. Deputatiuzdelnas.lv watches out for criminal offences such as bribery, abuse of authority, seizure of public resources, as well as conflicts of interest, poor governance, party-switching and unethical conduct. Candidates are accessed on a scale which ranges from 'dangerous to the State' to 'low risk' and 'worth considering'. Delna states itself to be a non-partisan NGO that collects information impartially. The website user can collaborate by sending information to the organization's e-mail.

The website provides a wide range of information gathered by Delna employees, also journalists and volunteers, in various forms. The tone of the website is quite blunt, identifying corruption by established definitions (which they state on the site) and legislation, not giving politicians the benefit of the doubt. The information posted is mostly based on mass media releases and information from politicians' income declarations, databases of donation to political parties and other public tax and company registration databases. The information is provided in a simple language and features many infographics.

The functions of the website have changed slightly during its existence while keeping the core principles the same, but the current setup is as follows. The Chronicle section sorts scandalous events involving government officials by themes such as 'small tricks', 'misuse of EU funding', 'offences during elections', and 'protests in the society'. There is an anti-top where the website user votes their opinion on an anonymized event of corruption or suspicious actions. The user

reads, for example: 'Some politicians have not been given access to classified information due to doubts about their reputation and ability to keep state secrets' and then votes on a scale of five whether they are OK with or decry such a fact. To vote, one has to log in using social media, so the voting is not completely anonymous. When the user has voted, they can see the average vote on a statement and an anti-top forms where the statements most condemned are at the top. Once the user has voted, they find out who the statement is about.

General information about political parties is available together with events in the parties' history that are seen as controversial. The party information features 'promises', 'finances', 'statistics' with demographic information on the party members and a list of candidates and current members of Parliament whose dossiers are available. In the dossiers of the 100 members of Parliament, which are possibly the best tool for refreshing the memories of voters, a reader can find information on the MPs' and candidates' reputation, scandalous events related to corruption and bad governance, previous activities, donations to political parties and accumulation of money and debts. Up to 2014 the website had an archive on how the members of Parliament voted on issues related to open governance, direct democracy possibilities, MP legal immunity, stance on the Ukraine conflict and others. Previously information on parliamentarians' session participation was also available.

The site features news and blogs on governance and Delna's and its partners' activities, as well as simple explanations of how the Parliament works. There are also simple descriptions of civic participation and ways someone can protest and report corruption. You could call Deputātiuzdelnas.lv the 'democrat's cookbook' – it provides a set of tools and information that helps citizens use the power given to them by democracy wisely. Delna employees organize information campaigns and discussions and appear in the news reminding about the controversial information available to voters. However, Deputatiuzdelnas.lv is still not widely popular, though it is seen as a credible source and used in academic studies. The website isn't constantly maintained so dead links and bots are a problem.

OPEN MINISTRY

Crowdsourcing platform | Finland

> 66 An unusual collaboration between the Finnish Parliament and a group of tech entrepreneurs is getting citizens' proposals straight to a parliamentary vote[14].
>
> — THE TECHPRESIDENT

What is it?

A civil society organization that helps people crowdsource law proposals into parliament.

When was it created?

March 1st 2012

How does it work?

- Online platform *http://www.avoinministerio.fi*
- Initiatives submitted evaluated by experts
- 50 000 threshold to be reached before passing the initiative to the Parliament for a vote

Organising/ Management

Open Ministry was set up by hacktivists in the series of open hack sessions with the pro bono help and input from IT companies. A non profit association was set up and is now in charge of running it.

Publicity

Media releases, blog articles, social media

Results

Lately the platform had experienced a decrease in activism, but up until the end of 2014 out of all initiatives passed over to the parliament, none had been voted in favour for.

Contacts

Joonas Pekkanen: *joonas.pekkanen@avoinministerio.fi*

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14   As quoted in the Techpresident: *http://techpresident.com/news/22927/finland-open-ministry-brings-legislation-crowd*

The Citizens' Initiative Act started as a political process, backed by Ministry of Justice and The Green Party and initially it was without any citizen involvement. While the act itself and all the constitutional amendments were being passed, there was no public discussion or public debate and almost no media coverage. It all changed after first initiatives were launched and the project started to get attention from the public and politicians as well. The biggest initiative that showcased how the project could possibly become a game changer was the Same sex marriage initiative which was signed by more than 100,000 people and the launch in 2013 of said campaign was very well timed with the ongoing debate in the Parliament. For the last one and a half year Open Ministry has seen decline in activity mostly because of insufficient funding. However, there are some proposals to keep Open Ministry as active as possible and turning the project into a political party is one of them. The idea is to inspire people to consider new ways of thinking and set an example how crowdsourced projects could evolve over time. A key component to more active contributions from citizens is publicity. While the idea of citizens being able to propose new laws is good, the initiatives are sometimes rejected in the Parliament because they are not correctly formulated and prepared and that is where Open Ministry comes to help.

Initiatives submitted to the platform are evaluated by experts and are then to acquire popular support to be considered further. Then, the selected proposals are considered by Ministry's volunteer experts and different professionals (such as researchers, professors etc) and lawyers to evaluate potential impact of the initiative.

The process is transparent and available on the website thus allowing everyone to participate in debating. Furthermore, once the proposal has been furthered to the Parliament for consideration, citizens can also obtain a detailed information of how their representatives have commented and voted on the proposal[15].

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[15] Joonas Pekkanen (2012) Crowd-sourcing Legislation: The Open Ministry Launches in Finland, available at: *http://www.avoinministerio.fi/artikkelit/in-english-crowd-sourcing-legislation-the-open-ministry-launches-in-finland*, Last assessed: 26/01/2015

D-CENT

E-democracy toolkit | Finland

> 66 One of the most interesting projects about the (necessary) innovation of democracy is the European D-Cent. In D-cent, the relation between citizens and the government is critically reviewed. Technical tools are developed to reshape participation, the dialogue and the ways the money is divided[16].

— THE HUFFINGTON POST

What is it?

D-CENT (Decentralised Citizens ENgagement Technologies) is a Europe-wide project bringing together citizen-led organisations that have transformed democracy in the past years, and helping them in developing the next generation of open source, distributed, and privacy-aware tools for direct democracy and economic empowerment.

When was it created?

2013

How does it work?

- Online platform *http://tools.dcentproject.eu/* and *https://decisions.dcentproject.eu/*
- Keyword-based search engine
- Subscription to notifications
- Email updates
- Collaboration par for co-working

Organising/ Management

Open Knowledge, Nesta, W3C

Publicity used for promotion

Public events, social media

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[16] As quoted in the Huffington Post: *http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/marleen-stikker/what-we-know-about-2016_b_8922918.html*, Last assessed: 26/01.2015

Results

Participation tools used in Madrid, Reykjavik, Helsinki and Barcelona

Contacts

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D-CENT is a Europe-wide project creating privacy-aware civic engagement tools and applications for direct democracy and economic empowerment. While piloted in Finland via enabling active citizens to follow decision making process in Helsinki, it now functions elsewhere in Europe and strives to become popular on a global scale, too. The idea here is to bring citizens together with decision makers and developers, thus creating a new form of a decentralised social media platform which allows large-scale collaboration and promotes active participation in decision making.

The platform allows the user to choose exactly those topics/issues that are of interest to him or her and to then sign up for a notification system, which will give the user a 'heads-up' when the city municipality/committee will be handling these issues of interest.

What D-CENT is trying to do in this case, is to explore new ways of changing interaction in decision making processes. It does so by trying to turn the decision made into almost a type of social object, fit for active online interaction. The key element of achieving this, is focusing heavily on an effective, plain and intuitive functionality of the platform. In addition, it allows to share the information on social media and helps people who may not interact in real life but share a joint interest, to create a co-working environment when they need to. This enables active and like-minded citizens to share their ideas in more efficient and active manner as well as to held the officials accountable by following their actions closely.

It has to be mentioned that D-CENT is a unique project also for the reason that it serves for more than a single purpose – it is not simple a political and a technical tool, it also has an innovative scientific approach to it. D-CENT as a project has released quite a few documents related to how certain aspects of it could potentially support theories and ideas in other fields.

DATADEMO
E-democracy promotion | Finland

> ❝ Instead of looking for polished but perhaps random apps to heap fame and prize money on, Datademo is trying to get developers to aim their creative energies toward general goals city leaders think are important[17].

— CITYLAB

What is it?

Funding for open data projects to promote democracy

When was it created?

2014

How does it work?

- Website *datademo.fi*
- Ability to submit an idea that uses open data to promote democracy and receive microfunding of 2000 euros
- Participatory budgeting aspect

Organising/ Management

Run by Open Knowledge Finland

Publicity used for promotion

Social media, partner websites and newsletters

Results

15 proposals that rely on the use of open data

Contacts

Joonas Pekkanen: *joonas@pekkanen.org*

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[17] CityLab – How Helsinki became the Most Succesful Open-data City in the World, available at: *http://www.citylab.com/tech/2014/04/how-helsinki-mashed-open-data-regionalism/8994/*

The main idea behind Datademo was to seek out ideas that make use of open data, promote democracy and participation and then to help these ideas to become a reality which providing the developer of the idea with a micro funding of 2000 euros. The platform, set up and maintained by Open Knowledge Finland, welcomed developers who were interested in creating new and innovative forms of participation and were happy to see many respond.

The submitted proposals were required to be either specifically from Helsinki or otherwise elsewhere in Finland and needed to be enabling for the citizens to obtain certain types of information or to participate in the local decision-making in a meaningful way. In total, 48,000 euros were assigned for the initiative and 57,000 were spent eventually, which were and were distributed in three rounds, where a total of 15 projects were selected and developed.

Datademo can be described best as a participatory process (participatory budgeting). This is due to the fact that the applicants were taking part in evaluation process and could contribute to the decision of who is awarded with the funding, alongside experts of the field. The successful ones were then given three months in total to develop their project. A noteworthy fact to be mentioned here is that the funding was provided in advance thus removing the financial pressure and leaving the rest for the effects of the peer pressure.

Datademo is an excellent example of how promotion of innovative participation tools can be managed to both create them more speedily as well as more effectively, since a certain element of competition is present as well. However, it will of course depend entirely on the available funding for such an endeavour, but once it is there, it is a fantastic tool to consider.

Conclusions

Having considered 9 different cases of e-democracy from Estonia, Finland and Latvia, it can be concluded that, even though there are more similarities than differences between them, these differences are in fact prominent enough and should be taken seriously by any practitioner who may wish to work with e-tools of civic participation in the future.

The following paragraphs will enlist most prominent factors to consider.

Political culture

The main characteristic here is the lack of an overarching explicit political will in Latvia and Estonia, which is more pronounced in Finland. The fact that the Finnish constitution has promotion of direct democracy mentioned in it, provides politicians with an extra incentive to support new tools of participation. This is not to say that the presence of a certain type of constitution or any other legal document will by default create a healthy political climate, but it does nevertheless serve as an initial impulse for the politicians to further into concrete action. Having this kind of a back-up, paired with active and interested politicians, may lead to healthy political culture, where innovation and development is highly valued and active participation is key.

At the same time, exciting and effective tools of participation have developed in Latvia and Estonia despite not having this particular characteristic present. Therefore, it should not be seen as a decisive factor, but as one that may provide enough support to speed up development of new types of participatory tools.

The 'Momentum factor'

In the case of Estonia, for example, when the corruption scandal of 2012 took place, many people took it to the streets to protest against the status quo. This profound dissatisfaction triggered a chain of events, creating a momentum for development of new solutions. This event is noteworthy, since it is more of an exception rather than a norm in the Baltic States - the political culture in the region is not normally described by active participation, civic disobedience and engagement in protest marches. In other words, the dissatisfaction needs to be very high for general public to engage in such 'drastic' forms of participation.

In this case, it was high enough for it to trigger a search for new solutions and eventually led to creation of more than one new participatory tool. The question for these types of scenarios is the following then - how do we replicate such 'momentum-s' in the future? Is

it even possible to create a momentum out of thin air or are we instead expected to wait for one to come about? If so, then how is the civil society to operate in the meantime and more importantly, how do we keep our initiatives going once the moments gone? Answers to these question will, of course, depend on the context, but need to be at least considered before attempting to developing new initiatives.

The online/offline balance

What has come across from the comments of experts in the field is that having a 'real life' interaction and deliberation is crucial to a successful initiative. The argument here is that, should it function purely online, people might not be interested to be as active, since there is no direct participation and the immediate results are difficult to identify. At the same time, not every e-tool of participation will be have an offline element attached to it, purely due to its objective and functionality. In this case, promoters of the tool need to make sure they have identified their potential user/target audience properly and have made it easy for them to follow the progress of their input.

Aim of the initiative/dialogue with the general public

Many of the experts have mentioned this as a crucial factor for the success of the initiative -you have to be very clear from the very beginning what the end result is expected to be, where the opinions/suggestions of the people will go etc, so that people would have faith in the initiative and would not dismiss it and view it as a waste of their time.

Spectrum of participation

Some of the platforms of participation have been criticized for being too 'politicized' by which it is meant that there is too much of direct political influence present in the process. This can mean either promotion of the platform by a certain political figure or having the responsibility of maintaining the platform shifted to a certain institution. The argument behind this criticism is that the deliberative process by definition should take place within the civil society and should be aimed at consulting the government and holding it to account. Should there too many politicians and institutions involved, the process could then potentially be diluted and become pointless.

This in itself is a theoretical issue and could be defended or disproved, depending on the theoretical beliefs of the proponent. It is therefore difficult to promote a one true objective truth in this case. It is, nevertheless, crucial to consider that at certain points during the development of the new tools (especially during the early phase of development) a certain amount of 'political presence' will be absolutely necessary, if the initiative is to kick-off at all. If the deliberative practices are not a part of the status quo of doing politics in a specific country

or region, negotiations with politicians may be necessary, so that mutual trust is built between civil society and the government. Traditionally active participation is associated solely with the involvement of general public though, but perhaps this is a flawed approach and more compromised arrangements should be sought.

Publicity

In most cases, online participatory initiatives rely rather heavily on social media and online advertising by popularizing the initiatives through Facebook and Twitter or perhaps placing banners in the relevant webpages to reach a wider audience. However, it is worthwhile to consider the fact that despite the ever wider use of internet across the world, a rather considerable part of the society does not have access to internet or use it rarely, even in the Western world, which is traditionally considered to be relatively tech-savvy. In addition, active advertising of the e-tool in question should be endorsed repeatedly so that the interest of new users is triggered and sustained for the already existing ones.

User-friendliness, design and technical solutions

This has been mentioned as perhaps one of the most important factors of all by many practitioners. At the day and age where information is consumed very quickly, it is important to pay extra attention to design of the platform, so that it would accessible and easy to use, without requiring the user to take additional extra steps. The less clicks, the better, though this by no means suggests dropping log-in systems dropped altogether. If a platform will lack this characteristic, the users are likely to give up and not bother participating, even when he or she may feel quite strongly about the cause.

Portrait of a participant

Yet another factor to consider is that fact that more often than not, online tools will be used by younger people and those with higher levels of education. Yet, the very purpose of the participatory tools is to engage as many people as possible, so online having the so-called 'usual suspects' participating can be seen as quite problematic. Instead, it is often argued, we should strive to have a representative sample/ fraction of society involved at least.

The counterargument to this is to say that perhaps this isn't so troubling at all, as long as the participatory channels are open to everyone and efforts are made to help those less likely to participate. Since it will always be impossible to include absolutely everyone, we should aim for the next best thing and, which is a platform development focused around process design and effective advertising. So as long as the platform is user friendly and accessible to potential users, it will serve as an effective and worthwhile channel of active participation.

Quality of the proposals

When it comes to petition and crowdsourcing platforms, it is claimed that the quality of the proposals may be fluctuating at best, meaning that while some of the suggestions maybe well formed, feasible and of a high quality, other maybe be poorly drafter, populist or even racist. While this is a valid concern, the presence of such claims is virtually impossible to diminish, since the democratic state arrangement will be definition promote plurality of opinions and freedom of speech. A lot will also depend on the legislation of the state in question as well and in places where the hate-speech legislation is well drafted and effective, careful monitoring of the proposals will be needed.

Mainstreaming

Finally, there is the somewhat abstract question of the overall purpose of cases such as discussed in this document. Two main opinions stand out. First one will view e-participation as 'the future of doing all politics' and argue for mainstreaming deliberative mechanisms (including e-tools) across the spectrum for both governmental bodies and civil society alike. The second opinion will hold that these mechanisms need to be left to develop naturally within civil society and no extra efforts should be made to mainstream them, even if they are then to remain as ad hoc instances of activism.

While the first opinion is based on the belief that participatory tools carry intrinsic worth in them and are therefore to be promoted as actively as possible, the second view is more instrumental in its nature and claims that these tools will emerge when time is just right. This is a theoretical preference that practitioners working in the field will need to determine for themselves as a driving force behind their efforts, but either one can lead to good results in developing new tools of participation.

2016