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An Attempt to Build an eParticipation Program from Scratch: the Case of a District Municipality

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Abstract. The use of electronic tools to support the democratic process through inclusive participation has almost a two decades history - but not in all countries. There are regions where eParticipation projects are still in their infancy. Albeit there are mature "best practices", they mostly address issues faced by developed countries with strong tradition of democracy in general, where transition to online, technology based solution is on a normal trajectory. On the other hand, there is a growing collection of case studies from all over the world with very differing views on the option - and diverging needs how to proceed and how to make ePart projects successful. This paper reports on research that addressed technology related challenges a district authority in the capital of Hungary faced when decided to embark on a program of extended democratic decision making - with the possibility to utilize digital technologies.

Keywords: eParticipation, deliberative democracy, municipal government, local democracy, participation platform.

1 Introduction

The ideal of inclusive deliberative democracy aims at greater public participation in political and administrative decision making, but it also requires appropriate channels, methods and tools for it to become a successful practice [2]. With the emergence of electronic government (eGov) on the back of the Internet, digital technology has become an option for citizen participation: eParticipation (ePart) now has a history of a bit over fifteen years [14]. Scientific interest in these areas have also increased. On the one hand, various theoretical frameworks have been proposed to analyze ePart projects (including evaluation models covering a set of criteria), on the other hand numerous case studies had been published offering critical success factors (CSF) and best practices how to run such projects [13, 18, 20, 23, 26].

Already in 2004 Macintosh warned [14], that at the start of an ePart project there is a need to "*clearly characterize the stage in the policy-making process, the level of participation, the technology used, and various issues and constraints, including the potential benefits online participation offers*" (p. 2). Participation, however, is not a self-serving goal: eParticipations initiatives usually aim at creating a climate of

transparency, trust and creative interaction in the government-citizen relationship using technology [18] which could bring benefits for both parties over the long run.

Although, there is a slowly growing set of practical evidence how to start such projects locally when there is no visible civic engagement and involvement of civil society in political matters is not welcomed by national politics (e.g. [10, 11, 28]), there appears to be no comprehensive summary of best ePart practice specifically addressed to newcomers who operate in a controversial political context. Such need has arisen when one of the campaign promises of the (opposition) coalition who won the local elections in one of the Districts of Budapest in October 2019 was to extend participation and open up the municipal decision making process. To translate their task into a research challenge the following (pragmatic) research objective was formulated: What practical advice may be concluded from ePart literature that could be used by a local municipality to strengthen participation in a climate of political division and general public apathy; and what strategy to follow regarding the utilization of technology.

This paper, reporting on the research that has ensued is organized as follows. First the case and its context is presented briefly to set the stage. The third section presents basic concepts and definitions of participatory democracy and electronic participation followed by a short review of tools applied and a brief overview of best practices and evaluation frameworks. This leads to our research questions and the methodology applied. The analysis of the case study focuses on questions faced and tools investigated followed by a detailed discussion of the findings and main messages. The paper is closed by a discussion of results and planned future work.

2 Introduction to the case (as research motivation)

During the October 2019 local elections in one of the Districts of Budapest a coalition – formed mostly by opposition parties and civil organizations – won: they got the major position and majority in the municipal assembly. One of the campaign promises was to improve transparency and allow local residents more say in district matters. The goal of the new leadership was to extend participation, improve fairness, and open up the municipal decision making process including better access to information. They were determined to improve both width and depth of reach, funnel ideas from local civilians, and co-create selected policy (by allowing for involvement, discussion, and feedback). They intended to do participatory planning and design in revitalization of public places.

However, they had to face a deep political division, high level of nepotism by the outgoing office, and a general level of (political) apathy. There were only a few active individuals and NGOs backing their agenda. There were several ongoing planning projects drawing civil attention - albeit reactions had been mostly fueled by anger and motivated by frustration as important decisions were made without consultations. Civil engagement thus were mostly protest-based against the way city-level projects were planned and executed.

To improve participation the major's office planned to investigate options of ICT-based solutions. Our group was invited as eGov experts to help define the tasks ahead and offer best practices. As personal connections do matter, they needed to balance

authority and legitimacy, while broadening public participation through gradually allowing more room for citizen control.

3 Participatory democracy and electronic participation

3.1 Key ideas behind eParticipation with focus on the local level

Participatory democracy is the broad participation of constituents in the direction-setting and operation of political systems [2]. There appears to be a need to open up representative democracy to achieve a higher involvement of civil society so people may bring their divergent views and interests to solve public issues [14]. Such participatory initiatives may be the results of top-down engagements, or may come from ground-up efforts where citizens seek empowerment in support of various causes [1]. However, inclusion of citizens and organizations requires new forums, methods and procedures [7] as all interested parties should have access to relevant data and be able to contribute. The expected outcome is not only a wider, yet well-informed debate (avoiding reliance on emotional arguments only), but also transparent decisions that may be better accepted [24]. From this point of view eParticipation – as part of eDemocracy along eVoting – is the use of information technology to support democratic decision-making [6]. ePart implies the use of info-communication technologies (ICT) to form innovative practices that enable various stakeholders to take part in policy making processes [4]. Main objectives of ePart include [17] broader participation and support of more efficient participation (by offering a selection of tools addressing citizen groups of differing technical and communication skills), and creating a well-informed deliberative debate in support of deeper contributions. This is expected to increase legitimacy and quality of the decision, whether concluded during the process or based on the input originated from the participatory initiative. Regarding participants the agreement in the literature is that the widest possible involvement of stakeholders would be ideal (spanning demographic groups and reaching out to civil organizations).

One arena where citizen participation in democratic decision-making processes can be realized with immediate visible results is local governments and municipalities (of different levels) [22]. The key is to allow citizens/residents to engage with the local political establishment in their decision-making processes affecting societal groups or involving issues of public interest in the given locality. ePart at the local level provides municipalities with ICT-based opportunities for consultation and dialogue while minimizing logistical and communication constraints associated with traditional engagement methods [21]. Booher [3] summarizes five reasons for the participation of citizens in municipal decision making: 1) information gathering: decision-makers can find out what the public's preferences are and consider them in their decisions; 2) local expertise: decisions can be improved by incorporating citizens' local knowledge; 3) democratic values: public participation can advance fairness and justice; 4) democratic process: public participation helps getting legitimacy for public decisions; 5) regulatory conformance: participation is offered by public officials because the law requires it (p. 422). However, there are reports and arguments that ePart initiatives did not always achieve a more participatory process [16] – or at least not automatically. Hepburn [8]

warns of political challenges and the influence of vested economic interests local governments have to deal with. Consequently, if local governments intend to use electronic tools in order to strengthen local democracy they have to develop strategies to tackle such issues. They also have to prepare their organization through reformed internal processes and structure augmented with education that is prepared to enable and support local citizenship (including youth, social workers and NGOs) enacting their interests online [27]. They also need to choose fitting tools.

3.2 Tools of eParticipation

ICT-based participatory tools may take many forms from online petition, public opinion polls, surveys, or complaint portals to electronic discussion forums, online policy consultation projects or even talking to officials directly online [18]. General Internet solutions such as social media, Web portals, alert services, groupware tools, webcasts, wikis, podcasts or blogs may also be utilized [26]; while on the other end of the spectrum there are dedicated complex platforms of deliberative participation developed (i.e. ourspace, yrpri.org, consul, b-involved, decidim). In judging the usefulness of any ePart tool one key characteristic is if it allows one way or two way communication or something in between (restricted two-way).

Regarding usability, some tools may fit certain purposes but could fail to support others. For example social media now has a wide reach and is good for information dispatch or mobilization (especially against something [21] and may even offer platform for discussion, but not fit for participation because people do not use it to express political opinion, arguments may become simplified and emotional, and it is questionable whether such positions would reach the administration. Opinions seem to converge that effective ePart programs that have a long term impact in mind should consider the use of a deliberative platform dedicated to give space to diverging opinions and help contradicting standpoints to reach a conclusion.

3.3 Theoretical and evaluation frameworks of eParticipation

Based on the main goals of eParticipation a number of descriptive models as well as analytical and evaluation frameworks have been proposed [25]. The layered model of Macintosh and Whyte [15] addresses three perspectives: democratic, project, and socio-technical – composed of 20 single evaluation criteria. The 7Ps of sustainable eParticipation implementation by Islam [9] covers policy and capacity building, planning and goal setting, programs and contents development, process and tools, promotion, participation, and post-implementation analysis (in this order as they form a process, where the participation stage has its own internal steps). The participatory action research (PAR) model [1] simplifies the above into 5 stages for developing countries and accommodates both top-down and bottom-up initiation. However, Dahler-Larsen [5] points out that a too much program and process centered mindset can lead to neglect of the often complex interaction of these with their context. Evaluation frameworks offer a set of dimensions (such as fairness, competence, acceptance, quality of process etc.) covering a wide range of criteria (for reviews see [13, 18, or 20]).

As for unsupportive contexts, Kabanov and Chugunov [10] starts with the assumption that autocracies in general have ineffective institutional performance regarding civic relationships, then show that e-projects can still survive in case of local political patronage and may achieve some – albeit limited – institutional changes. Kneuer and Harnisch, [11] argue that while autocratic regimes may actually establish efficient web-based bureaucratic processes, they do so "*without institutionalized distributions of democratic powers to those affected*" (p. 550). Wakabi and Grönlund [28] show that low belief of citizens that they may influence change and fear of backlash limits their interest in e-Participation, and keeps them away from political matters.

4 Practical research questions and methodology

Despite all these frameworks it is not straightforward how eParticipation projects should be initiated and how to take into consideration specific characteristics of local democracy and civic engagement, or lack thereof. This was the challenge local authorities in Hungary faced late 2019 (after civil organizations working with opposition parties have won local elections in several cities). To support the efforts of one capital district government the following research questions have been put forward: 1) What strategy may a local authority utilize to mobilize a wider constituency when they have to combat historical apathy? 2) What requirements follow against technological (ICT) support of the above goal? 3) What tool(s) would meet the expectations best and in what order tools/features/services/functions should be introduced?

This is essentially an exploratory qualitative case study using a mixture of data collection methods. Desk work included literature review on frameworks and cases in order to collect CSFs, and this was augmented with online search of potential ePart tools. Field work consisted of interviews with 4 municipal leaders and 4 participatory democracy experts, and observation of 4 participatory (face-to-face) forums to collect requirements. Interviews lasted approximately one hour each and formed of open ended questions, while at the forums detailed minutes were taken and citizen opinion was collected using a simple questionnaire. The conclusion was a report to the ePart officer regarding CSFs and an evaluation of potential solutions. Analysis was conducted based on this data and was contrasted with findings of the literature review.

5 Useful literature: Critical Success Factors to consider

The first step was to review preconditions of effective ePart projects and critical success factors in achieving a legitim process along with potential barriers. The structural model of participation initiatives by Kubicek and Aichholzer [12] offers CSFs to judge if there were strong links from the given project to formal political decision making. Panopoulou et al. [18] distil seven CSFs that makes a difference: commitment by the government; usability of tools; combining online with offline channels; a thorough communication and promotion plan; ensuring security and privacy; addressing organizational issues; and handling complexity of the topic and quality of participation. Smith et al. [26] claim that external factors (including the choice of technology, institutional setting,

and elements of political and societal context) need to be carefully investigated as they may act either as drivers or barriers. Their main message is that eParticipation is essentially a relationship-building process. Consequently, the goals of participatory initiatives evolve from providing (building tools and offering methods) to using (utilizing the tools and methods available) to practicing (making it to be the norm to consider and integrate these solutions). Furthermore, "*it is necessary to identify the external factors in the environment within which a project exists and the wider processes with which it must co-exist*" (p. 310). Primus et al., [23] is a comprehensive example of best practice recommendations as it defines 36 CSFs along 6 dimensions. Based on a cross-cultural perspective Parycek et al. [20] offered the following lessons and CSFs: select topics carefully; integrate affected decision makers into the discussion, but also provide moderation (both on- and off-line with the intent that neither politicians nor expert should overdominate the discourse); manage community (especially for the long-run); use a mix of channels (augment the discussion tool with social media channels or even blogs carrying background information); offer social media features so participants can connect beyond the topic at hand (or could create links to such known services like user profiles or groups). Panopoulou et al. [19] proposed success factors specifically tailored for designing eParticipation initiatives, where each factor had a set of activities associated with them. Many of these factors, practices and barriers are reinforced by case studies (a good example is [27]).

6 Analysis: Conflicting goals and challenges faced

Several of the issues raised by literature was indeed present in the district case. It was clear to municipal leaders that they need to make changes to internal rules along with reorganizing the structure and processes of the administration. But the success of these ongoing changes do depend on a deeper cultural change requiring education of staff. Such a sweeping change is not an ideal setting for initiating ePart projects - but more opportunities for participation and a wider access to municipal decision making was a major campaign promise that the major and elected officials were keen on keeping. The stake is also high, because in case of failure the desire to participate in future projects may meet resistance.

Based on the findings of the previous section the following CSFs were recommended: committed champion; prepared staff; mix of channels (in communication and participation alike); intuitive tool(s); careful selection of individual projects; detailed promotion and communications strategy of those projects; balance the level of privacy and the degree of anonymity allowed; managing the process; participant preparation; apply moderation for online discussions.

They have appointed a "participatory advisor" and our first task was to review current projects and existing communication channels as well as to collect requirements against ICT and compare them to potential ePart tool options. Most of the ongoing projects of civic engagement were planning activities, revitalization initiatives or policy related to traffic, parking, or regulating shop facades. They have also considered participatory budgeting but it was decided to delay it until later in the year (influencing

budget of next year). For dissemination and engagement these ongoing projects utilized public displays at the local Old Market; email lists; Facebook posts; as well as community forums at the local cultural center. Also needed to rely on a few existing, active civil groups.

The solution had to support different phases of the participatory process (i.e.: 1) collect project ideas; 2) project selection; 3) promotion and dissemination of background information; 4) ideas, comments on solutions; 5) discussion, deliberation; 6) voting,; 7) implementation control; 8) feedback about results) and other activities (such as communication channels, authenticated registration, community building, links to social media, moderation, or special access for more senior officers). The divergent types of projects (above) posed a wide range of challenges as each had different target audience and had different civil organizations who supported or initiated them, thus they required different design and evaluation frameworks and as a result had different e-Tool needs.

After discussions with municipal leaders the following was concluded. There was strong will to reach a large constituency face-to-face (as that was the factor that brought them the election results). They need tools that have a high chance to be successfully applied in increasing activity of residents. But there is a risk associated with complex tools: (their use, management, time to implement and test), versus existing tools with limited scope and functionality but readily usable and known to the public. On the other hand it would be hard to later transfer to an integrated platform. Technology should help in limiting the influence of negative contextual factors (such as anger, trolls, and deep political divide) - without being politically or administratively too restrictive. Staff had a limited ePart IT knowledge and the offices had limited financial resources. Even running existing systems and updating the website strained IT operations personnel. Overall, they need to use a mix of technology and other methods, as building connections was more important than using technology.

7 Options: Evaluation of tools considered

As a starting point the municipality had a (registration-based) email distribution list, a website, and a Facebook page. The questions were how to utilize these in the future and whether the district should operate its own participatory platform. Due to financial, technical and personnel restrictions it was not an option to design and develop a new ePart platform. However, they could install and run a freeware solution, while there was also discussion about the opportunity to collaborate with other districts to share one. Ultimately, they could wait for the technology platform contemplated by the city level municipality (and utilize that once available). The municipal website was under redesign, with first offering static capabilities (but being more informative, and regularly updated with fresh news) and later potentially being augmented with 2.0 features.

There were issues with social media integration. There was a clear need to foster community and there indeed was a municipal Facebook (FB) page with small but active group of participants. But the future role of Facebook as a readily available communication channel was not straightforward. Although FB definitely falls short of a deliberative platform the options were: a) do not use; b) use only for dissemination; c) use for

basic group discussions or d) rely more on it through forums, votes, and community building. While FB is global and widely used, the question remains whether it would be beneficial (or even possible) to build a new, local social media solution. They could perhaps utilize Twitter for offering fast access to interesting bits of up-to-date information and collecting issues. Furthermore, the applicability of social media tools in deliberation is questionable (in general). On the other hand, social interaction has benefits for participatory engagement in general - and is encouraged by municipal leaders. Besides, local authorities wanted to take advantage of the existing civil group on FB. However, if FB is used for such goal then data would be controlled by a third party and integration with a (potential future) local deliberative platform might become difficult (beyond linking from the platform to Facebook and other SM sites). **Table 1** presents an overview of evaluating the technology options considered by the municipality.

Table 1. Overview of tool options

Tool	Main Functionality(s)	Reach	Complexity	Costs
deliberative platform	form assemblies, run projects, deliberation	younger, active residents	running: medium managing: high	high
shared platform	form assemblies, run projects, deliberation	younger, active residents	running: medium	shared (medium)
discussion forum (2.0) on website	idea generation; moderated discussion and sharing opinion;	need to be advertised	low	medium-low
web site	disseminating information; sharing project ideas;	those already online	medium	medium
email list	disseminating information	older generation	low	low
general social media	disseminating information; raising opinions; non-moderated discussion;	those already online - age dependent	low	low

If they delay the decision on a platform, but release the new website, there are pressing questions to face: a) what features the website should have and b) how a later deployment of a platform would be influenced by the website (if successful) or a strengthened Facebook presence. IT-based tools and techniques thus could be a useful addition to the repertoire, but with the current goals of reaching out and perceived extra work to be done, district authorities did not make it a priority. Furthermore, given the complexity of running their own platform (as an alternative to the popular social media riddled with disadvantages or augmenting the existing web sites with 2.0 capabilities), districts decided to wait if there is a platform offered at the capital level they could utilize.

8 Discussion: Status of Critical Success Factors

This Section reviews the CSFs (and related barriers) as summarized in Section 5. One of the key political factors is "Commitment by the government". Indeed, the new district major had acted fast. The first step towards participatory involvement – just a few weeks after the election – was the appointment of a "participation" consultant with the job to set the direction and who had a (small) budget to assemble a part-time team.

Following our recommendation, the municipal "Participation" team first considered potential issues and identified the following main barriers. Most importantly, there was no substantial history of civil participation in the works of the municipality – not only online, but in general: apart from a few active individuals and a handful of civil organizations resident engagement had to be built up from scratch. This has made it even more difficult to engage in an ePart program. Also – and consequently – there were no accepted norms and ways how to get civil players involved and how to collaborate with them successfully. There was no routine at either side, and it was not in the thinking of citizens. In addition, even after the first meetings there was clear resistance on the side of administration. Not only new policies and internal rules were required but there appeared to be a clear need for a culture change and related education.

The previous Section has reviewed the external factors related to technology and thus covered the corresponding CSF as concluded from the literature (i.e. Usability of tools). It was recognized that the key to success is building relationships quickly, relying on existing connections and basic communication channels. They organized town-hall meetings advertised through old-fashioned ways of using public displays as well as through FB and by sending out emails to existing receiver lists. Although it was more out of necessity, it still fits the requirement of combining online with offline channels for communication. Again, the desire to act fast – and thus take advantage of the political momentum of winning the election from the position of being in opposition – had resulted in a situation when there was no "[t]horough communication and promotion plan" ready yet.

Regarding security and privacy it was a tough choice between anonymous posting that allows privacy and using names for credibility. It was decided, that – irrespective the actual technological solution to be selected – participation in certain discussions should definitely require proof of local residence (and this capability was enlisted as an important requirement).

To address organizational issues the major initiated the revision of all internal policies dealing with resident services. Although this is not directly related to participation, this was decided to the first step in changing the culture – and to see individual reactions. No training of sensitivity have been initiated yet. Interestingly, why there was a participation project initiated and a participation officer role established whose task was to set the strategy and organize training, there was no participation policy created.

As mentioned in Section 2 there were several ongoing projects which had already gathered (albeit limited) civil attention. The decision was made to built on these ongoing cases to expand reach. As suitable technology was not yet available, exhibitions and face-to-face meetings were organized where the municipality invited not only local residents but representatives of the city level and experts from the architect teams who

were involved in the revitalization projects. These meetings were quite successful and allowed the participatory team to collect online data. Meetings were video recorded and made available to further advertise the cause and to show they take their promise seriously. Strictly speaking however, these open, general meetings do not provide the best way of handling the complexity inherent in many of the topics addressed. Quality of participation is hard to judge as there were question-answer sections, but no small-group discussion or voting took place, neither there were any actual decisions made at any of the meetings. However, the participatory advisor had a novel idea of collecting ideas using an offline method of a display: at the local market a large poster was installed with the map of a street to be revitalized and passersby could use post its to add recommendations, ideas or suggestions to the map (see **Fig. 1**).

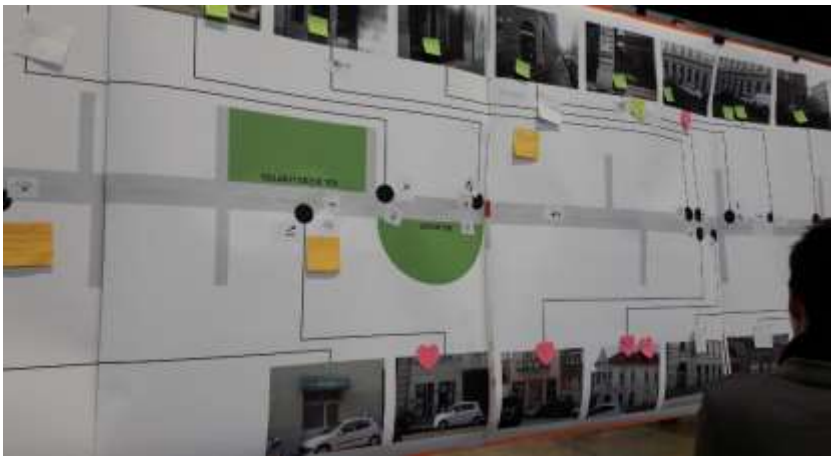

Fig. 1. Offline idea collection for the revitalization of a local street (photo by Author)

Regarding future projects a process management framework has been put together (based on literature case study recommendations) – but it has not been used yet. Based on best practice advice, beyond the current ongoing projects the rules for new initiatives recommend planning with generous timescales; establishing clear project boundaries and goals (as much as possible – but with flexibility), focused definition of tasks, preparation of participants (e.g. providing ample information through a diverse selection of channels). Also, for online discussions the use of a facilitator is considered – although at the current time there are no trained people available locally. Internal communication has to be improved. Projects that get a go ahead need to come with contingency plans.

9 Conclusions, limitations and future research

In the case presented contextual readiness seemed, as predicted by literature, just as important as technology itself. Indeed, while there are reasonable options to step on the "electronic" avenue of participation, the local authority had not only limited resources and expertise, their priority under the given political-social circumstances was to meet

people directly. The main, stated goal was to rebuild trust in local political leadership. The use of technology took a back seat, at least for now. Furthermore, considering the efforts required to install, run, and manage a full-blown participation platform, it should be done when critical mass is reachable, may be through sharing the work with other district municipalities. This path of introducing ICT was further reinforced by the expected cost relative to the limited budget available. Beyond the lack of trust another disadvantage of moving towards ePart is the expected complexity (and lack of expertise) of combining off- and online solutions. A gradual shift would also allow time for municipal leaders to experiment with incentives offered to citizens or motivators that could help shift culture from face-to-face to online, or at least mixed participation.

The research reported has only covered one municipality for a few months. More information collection is needed about the exact nature of local context especially in relation to the anecdotal "apathy" (no reliable scientific source investigating the issue have been located dealing with the attitude of residents in the capital or its districts). This research is planned to be continued for several more years and the intention is to monitor both the offline and online progress of the participatory initiative and a deeper understanding of the motivation of the various stakeholders is a priority along with an analysis of tool use. In addition, there are four more districts, who appear to be on the same track and face the same questions: contact has been made with them too, and successful collaboration could help shad even more light on what a new ePart initiative may encounter especially in a difficult political context.

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