Citizen's Forum: The First Successful eDemocracy Initiative in the Republic of Slovenia?

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Abstract: On-line forums in Slovenian web sphere have just recently justified theoretical assumptions that democratic potentials of the Internet based communication can strengthen citizen's deliberation on public issues. Earlier unsuccessful attempts resulted in overall scepticism towards participatory possibilities of on-line forums. Opposite to them, the e-democratic experience of the Citizen's forum affricates the democratic value of moderated on-line debates when engaging Slovene citizens in the European Parliament's decision-making process. The cases of web debates concerning the European social model and the European energy policy point out political circumstances, technical conditions and communication patterns essential for effective implementation of an e-democracy on-line forum.

Key words: European parliament, eDemocracy, citizens, Citizen's forum, case study, eParticipation, Slovenia

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reflect on key political, technological and communication factors required for effective on-line engagement of Slovene citizens in deliberation processes with members of the European parliament. Based on empirical evidence from practical example of the Citizen's web forumⁱ, recommendations for successful implementation of an e-democracy on-line forum regarding European policy issues will be proposed. Both factors and recommendations will be firstly endorsed by presenting the general context of the e-democracy developments in Slovenia from the viewpoint of its hegemonic conceptual orientation and comparison with other nations. Secondly, the unpromising experience with hitherto on-line deliberation in Slovenia and successful cases of the e-consultations in some EU states will be highlighted. Thirdly, an analysis of the e-democracy effects of the Citizen's forum deriving from e-consultation evaluation framework defined by Macintosh and Whyte (2004) will be presented. Finally, concluding remarks on key factors for effective on-line deliberation and recommendations for further initiatives in the field will be proposed.

2. Electronic democratization as a hegemonic conceptual orientation

2.1. E-democracy deficit in Slovenia

Slovenia ranked among less developed countries of the European Union according to the United Nations e-participation index in 2005. It was placed 46th among 191 nations of the world and 15th among EU-27, behind the majority of new member states (Estonia, Malta, Hungary, Poland

and former candidates Romania and Bulgaria) [1]. Slovenia did not considerably improve its EU position from the previous years (14th place in 2004 and 18th place in 2003). The UN e-participation index assessed the government websites for providing on-line information and participatory tools and services to the citizensⁱⁱ. As such, it indicates the capacity of the state in encouraging the citizens in promoting deliberative, participatory decision-making in public policy. Slovenian ranking is not surprising, because present governmental web sites are limited to e-access to public information, simple web polls and e-mail based public discussions on draft legislation [2]. Interactive e-democracy features such as deliberative on-line forums and moderated consultations are rarely available, although the Slovenian government followed European Union's political directions in the context of the eParticipation initiative [3]by setting an ambitious goal of becoming one of the ten most developed countries in the e-democracy area in the world by 2010 [4].

2.2. Conceptual shortcomings

Slovenian e-participation index results can be explained within the concept of the electronic democratization. Electronic democratization means using democratic potentials of the information-communication technologies (ICT) for strengthening democratic legitimacy of the representative democracy. For this purpose ICT is mainly used for improving political participation of citizens and civil societies by enabling (1) improved e-access to public information and (2) political discussions for political participation [5]. The Slovenian government followed the electronic democratization orientation by adopting legal foundations in the Act on the Access to Information of Public Character in 2003 and the Electronic Communications Act in 2004. Both acts established a formal framework for government institutions to provide public information access on-line and to use e-mail as an official way of on-line communication with citizens. In the beginning of November 2006, eight government ministries out of fifteen offered the Slovenian citizens e-mail addresses either of their main offices or responsible officials available for sending comments, suggestions and amendments on draft legislation (acts, laws, regulations, rules etc.) [6]. E-mail enabled services supporting public remarks on the draft legislation are also available within the E-government portal of the Republic of Slovenia, where draft legislation from different ministries is published in one place and available for public deliberation within a specified time frame (E-democracy section)iii. Although on-line information provision and e-mail commenting represent an important leverage for strengthening citizens participation in democratic decision-making, they represent according to Hagen (1996) only the first dimension of political participation (e.g. information-seeking and keeping abreast with the issues). Other dimensions of political participation such as active political discussion, voting and political activity, considered crucial elements of active political citizenship, are only partially strengthened by electronic democratization orientation. In order to fully exploit the democratic potential of the ICT, the e-democracy concepts like Teledemocracy [8] and Cyberdemocracy [9] should be reconsidered. The first has a clear preference for forms of plebiscitary democracy and is mainly concerned with the voting and political activity dimensions of political participation and the second also advocates more direct forms of government, but stresses different aspects of participatory democracy [9]. Both models had practical implementation in e-democracy tools that enhance the direct involvement and participation of citizens (e-petitions, e-consultations^{iv} and e-voting) and improved quality of opinion formation by opening new spaces of deliberation (e-forum^v)[11].

3. Implementation problems with an on-line deliberation

Neither the Slovenian government institutions nor the Slovenian parliament (the National Assembly) or local communities have had much success in engaging both citizens and civil society organizations within participatory and deliberative e-democracy tools. On several occasions, those initiatives did not fulfil expectations, because the citizens did not actively respond to this type of communications channels. Such were cases of on-line forum for involving non-governmental orga^{vi}nizations in the process of preparation of the National programme of environmental protection, which was initiated by the Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning[12], an on-line based consultation on the Future of Europe during the pre-accessesion period initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairsvii and the public web debate on Slovenia's Development Strategy coordinated by the governmental Institute of Macroeconomic Analysis and Development (IMAD). The final report of IMAD on public debate states that "The on-line debate was not realized, because the target participants were more likely to submit paper comments directly on the IMAD postal address." [13]. Similar was the case of the web forum of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, which was established in order to debate on the European classification framework in the context of the Cologne reform. The moderated web debate did not take off, and forum slowly became a target of spammers, which resulted in removal from the Internet. In June 2006 a similar spam attack hit the web forum of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food. The very latest governmental attempt in using deliberated on-line tools is the web forum Slovenia jutri (Slovenia Tomorrow) related to public debate and discussion on Slovenia's Development Strategy. The web forum, combined with a web blog, represents a part of the government communication strategy in order to secure public support for implementation of Slovenia's Development Strategy. Although the moderated on-line forum received some public attention from anonymous participants, it remains unclear whether the opinion and messages posted by the citizens will be reconsidered by the government. At this stage is safe to say that the Slovenia Tomorrow forum was more about a governmental public-relations action than about actual citizens' participation [6].

In 2005, the Slovenian parliament introduced a new web site with very limited interactive features. The Dialogue section of the web site offers modest opportunities for an on-line public presentation of opinions^{viii} as a part of parliamentary committee's public hearings. The feature failed to either captivate public attention or become a deliberative space on issues within the parliamentary agenda.

Similarly unpromising is the situation with on-line forums in Slovenian local municipalities, where cases of closed or banned forums by the local mayors were reported in the mass media and a lot of hate-speech and flaming is present on others. Local community on-line forums are not yet involved in the decision-making procedures and participation by local politicians is rare. As result, on-line forums in Slovenia do not enjoy a public image as democratic communication tools and as leverage for strengthening local citizen's participation [14]. Not surprisingly, according to the 2005 Digital Governance in Municipalities Worldwide comparative study, Ljubljana ranked 74th among 78 cities in the Citizens participation category. This indicates the use of the Internet to foster civic engagement and public policy deliberation in local government [7].

4. Analysis of the e-democracy effects of the Citizen's Forum

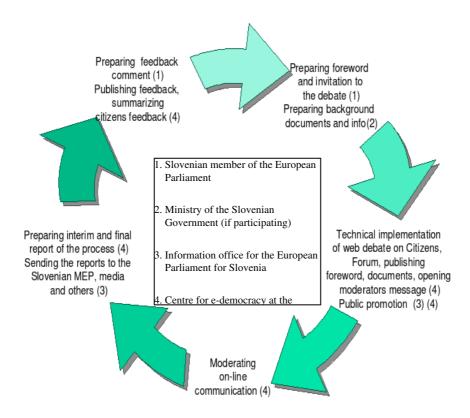
4.1. Citizen's forum background

In June 2006 the European Parliament Information Office for Slovenia (IPEP)ix in collaboration

with the Centre of Electronic Democracy at the Institute of Ecology and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana initiated an on-line Citizen's forum project. The primary goal of the project was to involve Slovenian citizens, civil society and members of the European Parliament into deliberative and moderated on-line dialogue concerning the future of Europe. The political framework was provided by the European Parliament resolution on the next steps for the period of reflection and analysis on the Future of Europe (P6_TA(2006)0263), adopted on 14th of June 2006[15]. Following the resolution, the web site of the European Parliament Information Office for Slovenia was firstly supplemented by the "EU Citizens participation" section, which includes links to participatory and deliberative e-democracy tools^x (e.g. e-petition system of the European parliament) and on-line Citizen's forum. The forum was technically implemented within the E-participation web portal (E-participacija)^{xi} by using a Simple Machines Forum software package for setting up advanced on-line community.

4.2. The communication concept

The Citizen's forum communication concept derives from the concept of deliberative democracy [16] which emphasises the importance of public opinion formation as a result of debates enabling expression of different viewpoints and arguments. Before any political decision is taken, an interactive debate with qualitative information and different actors involved should take place. The result of the consultations is not only the exchange of different view points but also agreements (compromises), deriving from the assumption that a group of people, who faced their ideas and view points have come to a consensus built upon common knowledge (Fishkin, 1995: 178-181). The basic premises of deliberative democracy have been included in the Citizen's forum communication process:



The Citizen's forum communication concept.

4.3. Analysis

The Citizens' Forum case study will derive from the e-consultation evaluation framework defined by Macintosh and Whyte [18], which includes political criteria, technological criteria and social criteria. The political criteria consist of consultation objectives and extent of citizens' influence, owners, actors and target participants, access and accessibility, stage in decision-making, time range, resources, methods and feedback. The technical criteria consist of easy-to-use and appropriately designed application to fit the tasks and circumstances of e-consultation. The social criteria include depth of discussion and extent of deliberation (ibid, 2006: 5-10).

By using qualitative (in person project involvement) and quantitative methods of analysis (statistical data from the Citizens' forum and moderators reports), the case study will focus in two examples of Citizens' forum public issues debate: The future of the European social model and The future of the EU Energy Policy, which were both initiated by the Slovenian representatives in the European parliament.

An issue-based forum on the future European social model took place in Ljubljana between 17th and 19th of October 2006 at the Students Arena exhibition. The aim of the debate was to gather ideas, opinions and suggestion on the future European social model from university students. A Slovenian Member of the European Parliament, Mr. Mihael Brejc, who initiated the web debate, prepared eight questions related to different social model aspects backed by relevant documents and information (economic and social reforms in Slovenia, university fees, kindergartens fees, retirement reform etc.). The web debate was technically implemented and moderated by the Centre for Electronic Democracy at the Institute of Ecology within the Citizens forum application which was accessible through laptop computers at the exhibition.

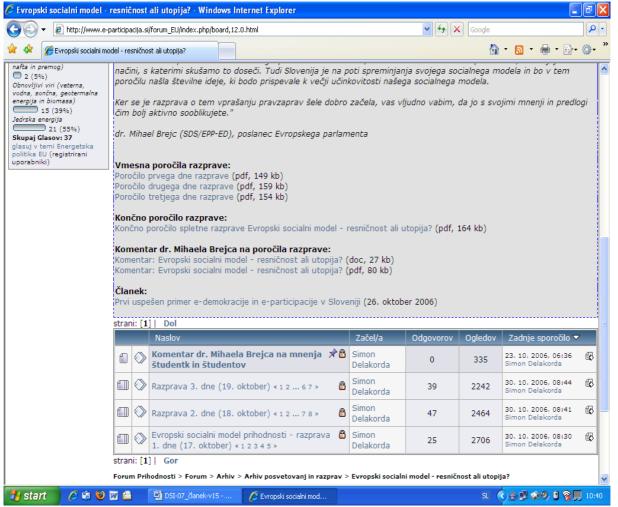
The participation was enabled upon forum registration by entering the name and surname of the participant and valid a e-mail address. The web debate was open 24 hours a day (for the course of three consecutive days) and constantly moderated (moderators monitored the rules and standards of the communication procedure). The moderators were also present at the Students exhibition in order to help participants if they needed assistance. The Information office of the European Parliament for Slovenia initiated a public and media promotion and promotion materials with on-line debate questions and web links to the debate were distributed through faculties. During the exhibition, a public lecture on e-democracy and European parliament was organized with the exhibition.



Figure 2:

Photography of the Citizens' forum at the Students Arena exhibition (17th October 2006).

When concluded, the debate was reported by printed and electronic media. The three interim reports (one per day) and a final report of the debate were prepared by the moderators' team and sent to the member of the European Parliament and Parliamentary Committee for the EU affairs at the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia. From the communication view of point the debate followed a high level of web interaction. The debate was visited by more than 500 internet users and 111 participants (mainly students) posted exactly 100 messages. The messages were in line with the debate topic and were related to the initial questions. Most of the messages expressed personal opinions, preferences, experiences and suggestions without argumentation or additional information. Although the opinions were often opposite, the participants did not try to convince others in their right. All messages are publicly available in the Archive section of the Citizens forum sii.



Main site of the on-line debate on European Social model (5th of March 2007) http://www.e-participacija.si/forum_EU/index.php/board,12.0.html

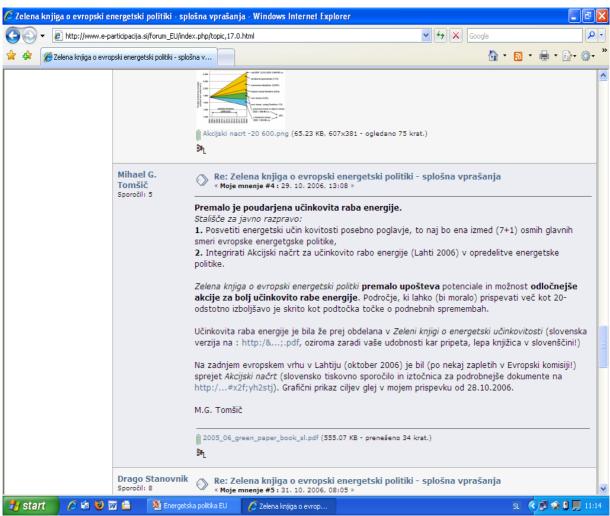
From the political view point the debate was taken in the frame of the Future European Social model debate on the agenda of the European parliament (identification of the policy suggestions). MEP Mihael Brejc, who was a parliamentary reporter for the European social model issue, in his foreword to the debate expressed the importance of an active participation in the European debate and announced that final report of debate would be included in his report to the European Parliament. The MEP was not able to attend the three day on-line debate, although he provided a public response on the specific student proposals and opinions with which he agreed or disagreed^{xiii}. Regarding the fact, that the entire communication procedure was transparent and involving (all messages, the initial document, moderators' reports and a reply form the MEP are publicly available on Citizen's Forum), the debate represents a democratic mechanism for bringing political decision in compliance with citizens expectations. The forum participants could also amend and comment on the draft moderators reports and public response from the MEP.

The policy-based forum on the Future Energy policy went on from 28th of August 2006 to 1st of the April 2007^{xiv}. The aim of the consultation was to gather views, suggestions and comments from citizens and NGO's o the draft document Green Paper on Energy: European Strategy for Sustainable, Competitive and Secure Energy^{xv} which was prepared by the European Commission. The Slovenian member of the European Parliament Mrs. Romana Jordan-Cizelj

initiated a web consultation in order to get feedback on the paper and present it before the European parliament Committee of Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE).

The on-line consultation highlighted three main issues of the green paper: the general issues of the green paper, the sustainable and competitive energy supply with an emphasis on energy mixing and the external energy policy. The consultation was visited by more than 1000 forum visitors, 18 posts were submitted and 39 registered forum users participated in the on-line poll. Most of the messages were in line with the consultation issues. Some also contained expert argumentation and provided additional information. The consultation was also supplemented by a simple e-poll on the most suitable future energy source of the EU.

Figure 4



On-line debate on future of the EU Energy Policy (5th of March 2007) http://www.e-participacija.si/forum EU/index.php/topic,17.0.html

From a political point of view, the consultation was part of the public debate on the future of the European Energy policy, which represented a part of European parliament agenda. The MEP Mrs. Romana Jordan Cizelj had in a foreword to the consolation committed herself to present opinions and view points of the participating citizens and NGO's on corresponding sessions in the European parliament. She did not directly participate in the debate, although she provided a quick and detailed response on the report. The response was supplemented by an invitation to continue the on-line dialogue by sending messages directly to her e-mail address^{xvi}. Also in this

case, the stakeholders had the opportunity to comment the response of the MEP. The evaluation of the e-democracy effect of the Citizens' forum is available in table 1.

Table 1:

Criteria	Indicator	European social	European energy
		model	policy
1. Political	1. a) Stakeholders were satisfied with the process.	Yes (assessment)	N/A.
	1. b) Adequate resources were in place to conduct the	Yes	Yes
	consultation.		Yes
	1.c) Process followed best practice guidelines.	Yes	
	2. a) Stakeholders understood what is being asked.	Yes	Yes
	2. b) Participants' contributions were appropriate.	Yes	Partially
	3. a) The promotion of the e-consultation was adequate.	Yes	Yes
	3. b) Who were participants and where they were, in terms	Yes (assessment)	No
	of demographic and geographic characteristics. 7. a) Questions were answered by MIP's during the	No	No
	consultation. 7.b) The MEP's feedback relates to the contributions.	Yes	Yes
	8. a) A change of policy was possible given the stage in the decision-making the consultation occurred.	Yes	Yes
	8. b) Contributions were reflected in the revised or newly formulated policy.	Yes (assessment based on MEP's feedback)	Yes (assessment based on MEP's feedback)
2. Technological	4. a) The participants could access the information.	Yes	No
	4. b) The participants' contributions were informed.	No	No
	5.a) User friendliness	Yes	Partially.
	5.b) Providing shortcuts	No	No
	5.c) Simple error handling	Yes	Yes
	5.d) Application stability	Yes	Yes
3. Social	6. a) The contributions addressed the consultation issue.	Yes	Partially.
	6. b) The participants could access contributions from others.	Yes	Yes
	6. c) Contributions were classified according to provided	Yes (in moderators	Yes
	information, questions, and suggestions.	report).	T
	6. d) To what depth contributions respond to other	T	Low.
	contributions.	Low.	

Evaluation of the e-democracy effects of the Citizens' forum

4.4. Similar cases in other EU countries

Although examples of on-line parliamentary consultations in other EU countries with a high UN eParticipation index (Finland, Sweden, Germany etc.) are growing in number, in-depth evaluations of concrete cases are still very scarce. One of the most prominent examples is the case study of the on-line parliamentary consultations conducted on behalf of the UK Parliament between 1998 and 2002. Although the UK case was conducted on a much broader time frame and upon greater financial and human resources, the conclusions drawn by Steven Coleman [19] are very much similar. In both cases, on-line consultations provided a space for inclusive, informed and quality public online interaction between representatives and represented. On the other hand, the on-line consultations did not necessarily lead to a greater trust between them, especially when participants were dissatisfied with the contributions from MPs and were unconvinced at the end of the consultation that MPs had been interested in what they had to say.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The e-democracy effect evaluation of Citizens' forum indicates that the on-line debate on the future European social model and on-line consultation on the future of EU energy policy

fulfilled most of the objectives defined by the Macintosh / Whyte methodology. The technical objectives were implemented, although the forum user friendliness was not state of the art in terms of short cuts and minimal number of operations needed for posting messages. As far as the communication objectives are concerned, the process took place within a relatively intense level of web communication and a constructive exchange of opinions. From the view point of the depth of the discussion, the deliberation potentials of the web forum were not fully exploited since messages provided by the citizens generally expressed opinions, personal view points or convictions, and were rarely supported by informed arguments or oriented towards reaching any consensus. The political objectives were also fulfilled for the major part. Both MEPs provided feedback on citizens' posts and the involvement in the decision-making process was transparent. The extent to which citizens' contributions were reflected in the MEP's reports to the European Parliament is hard to acknowledge, and the estimation is based solely on the publicly expressed agreement or disagreement with the opinions and suggestions provided in the MEP's feedback (ideological acceptance).

The main lessons from the Citizen's forum experiment are the following:

- solely institutional top-down approach when designing e-democracy on-line forums brings limited democratic implications (political elitism),
- complex situations when implementing eDemocracy within multilevel European governance require detailed knowledge of the decision-making process (proper evaluation framework),
- politicians are keen to exploit the on-line democratic process for their own advantage (trust issue),
- an important argument in favour of e-democracy forums derives from securing transparency and concrete evidence of citizens contributions inclusion in final documents (policy involvement),
- setting an on-line deliberation in real-time environment improves access to the participation process (digital divide issue),
- A larger (national) scale e-democracy deliberation requires more human moderators and advanced technological platforms (e.g. content management system) in order to facilitate massive participation and to summarise large amounts of different kinds of information provided by participants (technological issue).

Main recommendations for a successful implementation of the on-line forum in democratic decision-making process, based on Citizens' forum experience, are following:

- create intensive, long term media promotion and public advertisement of successful online forums that are trusted by both politicians and citizens in order to secure wider citizens' participation and confidence,
- enable complementary implementation of an on-line and real-time debates, which
 overcomes digital divide and technical determinism and allows participation of an
 internet less experienced citizens,
- provide expert and professional implementation of the on-line deliberation by intermediary civil society institutions which will promote, moderate and evaluate the process, involve and motivate citizens and monitor the transparency and inclusion in the decision-making process,
- secure expert evaluation of the democratic effects of on-line forums based on methods
 of extended interviews or questionnaires with participants involved (both decisionmakers and citizens) and policy analysis or content analysis (consistency) of the final
 versions of the political documents with citizens messages,

- combine on-line forums with different eDemocracy tools, especially Web 2.0
 applications in order to create different communication channels and to facilitate grassroots participation,
- Secure a proper time frame (length) and legal or political guaranties from decision-makers involvement in the process.

Although not completely fulfilling several e-democracy criteria, the Citizen's forum strengthened communication between the Slovenian citizens and members of the European Parliament, resulting in an increased MEP's interest to initiate public debates by themselves and to seek public reflection, opinion exchange and co-creation on their policy proposals. Consequently, a new consultation with Mr. Alojz Peterle, MEP, has recently been launched on a debate on Cancer report. As such, the Citizens' forum represents a much needed deliberative supplementation to the electronic democratization orientation and representative understanding of democracy in Slovenia. This also brings a new perception of on-line forums and strengthens the affirmation of their e-democracy potentials by providing a reflection of how, in very particular cases, the Citizen's forum shifted the balance of power within the democratic process.

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- ⁱ Citizen's forum is available on-line http://www.e-participacija.si/forum EU/.
- ⁱⁱ E-participation, as defined by the UN report, aims to achieve these objectives through the means of: (1) Increasing e-information to citizens for decision making; (2) Enhancing e-consultation for deliberative and participatory processes; and (3) Supporting e-decision making by increasing the input of citizens in decision making (UN Global E-government Readiness Report 2005, p. 19).
- iii Available on-line http://e-uprava.gov.si/e-uprava/edemokracija.euprava.
- ^{iv} E-consultation refers to the use of the internet to disseminate to the wider public, experts and interest groups developments in a policy field and invite them to respond. The e-democratic hope behind the promotion of e-consultation techniques is to encourage the general public, interest groups and experts to participate in the decision-making process (Trechsel, et. all, 2003: 47).
- ^v E-forum provides citizens with an online tool that allows them to exchange and share respective political opinions among themselves The aspiration of e-democracy advocates is that e-forums will enhance the process of citizen's opinion formation through their deliberative engagement (Trechsel et all, 2003:51).
- vii Available on-line http://www2.gov.si/mzz/eu-debata.nsf/.
- viii Available on-line http://www.dz-rs.si/index.php?id=158.
- ix The European Parliament Information Office for Slovenia web site is available on-line http://www.europarl.si/.
- ^x Available on-line http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ljubljana/101/lju5681eu6179.htm.
- xi Available on-line http://www.e-participacija.si/index.php?lang=en.
- ^{xii} Available on-line http://www.e-participacija.si/forum EU/index.php/board,13.0.html.
- Available on-line http://www.e-participacija.si/files/evropski socialni modelforum.pdf.
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- ^{xvi} Report is available on-line in the Slovene language http://www.e-participacija.si/files/forum_prihodnosti-komentar_na_razpravo_r-j-cizelj.pdf.