

CONTRIBUTION TO DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE EU COUNCIL PRESIDENCY: NGO'S E-PARTICIPATION PORTAL PREDSEDOVANJE.SI

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The main e-democracy effects of the Predsedovanje.si non-governmental organisations portal during the Slovene EU Council presidency were presidency information provision, rising EU policy awareness, strengthening transparency and enhancing public visibility. Despite the official agreement between the Slovene government and NGOs, the portal interactive e-participation tolls faced limited feedback from government bodies and a low numbers of users. In order to fully benefit from democratic potentials of internet technology for democratization of the member state's EU Council presidencies, both NGO's and governments have to find solutions for overcoming imaginary and selective involvement strategies, civic participation apathy, limited capacities, lack of expertise and alienation from technocratic complexity of the EU policy making.

1. Introduction

Strengthening citizens and civil society participation within the European Union decision-making processes by means of the Internet technology is attracting wide attention of scholars, practitioners and government institutions [15], [14], [11], [10], etc. E-democracy and e-participation relevance for the European governance were identified by Schmitter (2005: 193), arguing that the process of the European integration has expanded from strictly economical into political area thus consequently increasing the influence of decisions taken by the EU institutions on everyday life and welfare of citizens. On the other hand, European institution's decision-making processes are characterised by the "democratic deficit" indicating a lack of authorisation, accountability and representation (Beetham & Lord, 1998: 26). This paper discusses e-democracy effects of the Slovene non-governmental organisations on-line portal www.predsedovanje.si and its on-line forum discussions initiated in order to strengthen involvement of the civil society organisations into the Slovenian EU Council presidency before and during the first half of the year 2008. The Predsedovanje.si case is relevant for both civil society and academia reflection since the EU Council is being described as not politically accountable at the European level (Van Gerven, 2005: 360) and because of a "very low level of democratic processes" in relation to the civil dialogue on public issues in the Republic of Slovenia [9].

2. Conceptual and methodological framework

For the purpose of this paper, electronic democracy is referring to any democratic political system in which computers and computer networks are used to carry out crucial functions of the democratic process - such as information and communication, interest articulation and aggregation, and decision-making (both deliberation and voting) [6]. As a part of e-democracy concept, term electronic participation is focusing to public participation in

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legislative and policymaking processes by means of different e-democracy techniques. In his report Trechsel (2002: 45-51) defines techniques for increasing transparency (e-access to official documents and to political information), techniques for increasing participation (e-consultation, e-petition, e-polling and e-voting) and techniques promoting deliberation (e-forum). E-democracy effects analysis of the www.predsedovanje.si portal will derive from e-consultation evaluation framework defined by A. Macintosh and A. Whyte (2002). The framework includes political criteria, technological criteria and social criteria. Political criteria are used to identify consultation objectives, stakeholders, accessibility, resources, involvement in decision-making, feedback and extent of citizens' influence. Technical criteria are used to identify user friendliness and appropriately designed application to fit the tasks and circumstances of consultations. The social criterion includes depth of discussion and extent of deliberation (ibid, 2006: 5-10). By using both qualitative (empirical involvement in managing the Predsedovanje.si portal and moderating discussions) and quantitative methods of analysis (poll results and moderators reports), the case study will focus on e-democratic effects of different e-participation tools provided by the portal.

3. Historical and legal context

The e-participation portal Predsedovanje.si was established in 2007 by the Slovene non-governmental organizations in order to strengthen involvement of the Slovene and European NGOs into decision-making processes before and during the Slovene EU Council presidency in the first half of 2008. The Presidency of the Council of the European Union is held by each Member State in turn for a period of six months. During this time, the Presidency is the "face and voice" of the European Union, speaking on behalf of all Member States. Republic of Slovenia held the Presidency for the first time, as the first of the twelve "new" member states that joined the EU in the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. In 2006, the Slovene non-governmental organizations identified the Presidency as an opportunity to establish much needed civil dialogue with the Government on the EU policy issues by preparing a proposal for the Ministry of Public Administration suggesting specific ways of their involvement during the EU presidency. As a result, the Agreement between the Slovene Government communication office (GCO) and portal Predsedovanje.si³ was signed, determining the communication before and in during the presidency was adopted in 2007. The agreement defines two ways of involvement of the NGOs during the presidency, namely the information and consultation. The agreement obligates GCO to encourage respective government bodies to use the portal for regular information sharing with NGOs on activities and events, to engage in the e-dialogue with them about priorities, viewpoints and preparations of the informal meetings and to provide sufficient time for the consultations, availability of the documents and replies to the received comments. The Agreement had also foreseen the link between the official web page of the Slovenian presidency (www.eu2008.si) and Predsedovanje.si portal. This document was the first of this kind signed by the government for the purpose of the civil dialogue institutionalization, recognizing NGOs (e-)participation playing an important factor for successful outcome of the presidency.

4. Predsedovanje.si case description

The on-line portal was developed by the Institute for Electronic Participation within the project group of the Centre for Information service, Cooperation and Development of Non-governmental Organisations (CNVOS) involving 10 NGOs already well organized and

³ The Agreement is available on-line <http://www.predsedovanje.si/en/Predsedovanje/Dogovor-z-UKOM.html>.

involved at the EU level⁴. The consortium actively participated in portal implementation and co-operated with other NGOs presidency initiatives in the field of development cooperation and environment. The portal target groups were non-governmental organizations, other civil society organisations and individual citizens⁵.

The "all in one place" portal enabled NGOs to manage policy priorities sections according to their agenda and to formulate, promote and inform general public, media and government on their policy standpoints, assessments, initiatives, news, documents and e-participation actions during and after the Presidency. The portal also enabled networking with other NGOs in Slovenia and the EU. The e-participation part of the portal enabled NGOs to launch moderated and informed e-debates and e-consultations (Predsedovanje.si forum⁶), e-opinion polls, e-petitions and e-actions covering specific topics of the EU Presidency agenda (Gender Equality, Intergenerational Cooperation, Intercultural Dialogue, Youth for EU – EU for youth, Climate and Energetics, Future EU Priorities, Future of the European Union, Development Cooperation and EU Neighbourhood). On-line forum was managed by a group of NGOs moderators and editors responsible for both specific policy priorities during the Slovenian EU Council presidency and for overall topic of NGOs participation. The topic of the debate included brief introduction of the issue, starting questions, relevant documents and time frame. Reports⁷ from e-debates and e-opinion polls including NGO's comments and initiatives were sent to mass media, general public and relevant government bodies. Discussions on Predsedovanje.si forum were often related to live events during the presidency such as the consultations (debriefings) of the government ministers and the EU Commission with the civil society⁸ and to other round tables, conversations and events taking place during the presidency.

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⁵ In 2005, there were approximately 21.000 NGOs in Slovenia including establishments, associations, societies, private institutions and religious organizations.

⁶ Available at <http://www.predsedovanje.si/en/forum/index.html>.

⁷ Moderators reports are available on-line <http://www.predsedovanje.si/en/E-participacija/e-razprave.html>.

⁸ Information on presidency debriefings for NGOs are available on-line <http://www.predsedovanje.si/en/NVO/izmenjave-stalisc.html>.



Figure 1: Portal Predsedovanje.si main page <http://www.predsedovanje.si/en/> (visited on 22th of June 2009)

Because of its usefulness and functionality for e-participation implementation, the Open Source Content Management System Joomla! was used as a portal platform. Joomla CMS was enhanced by custom template and additional components and modules (e.g. Fireboard for forum discussions, PollXT for online polls, tabs scripts for better content organization, video integration support, integration of Google calendar, RSS availability and multi-language support for English and Slovene languages). The portal also offered enhanced interoperable experience, which actively connected NGOs publishing their content. Every NGO had its own account and user options (adding news, content management, forum discussions moderation). A set of standards was also incorporated within the portal: RSS, XHTML, basic and advanced SEO, W3C CSS Valid. In addition, Predsedovanje.si content provision was upgraded by short thematic videos covering EU presidency issues provided by an independent NGO multimedia project Studio 12.

During the six month presidency from the 1st of January until 30th of June 2008, the portal was visited 22.979 times by 16.039 unique internet users (2.673 per month), more than 500 news covering the Presidency issues, events and activities were published, 12 moderated on-line debates and 8 on-line polls took place covering topics as intercultural dialogue, climate/energy, intergenerational cooperation and the future of the EU. 170 messages from both NGOs and individual citizens were published during the operation and 163 votes were cast in e-polls. The government ministries provided two official feedbacks out of eight

discussion reports provided by the NGOs. The discussion reports combined a set of conclusions and proposals elaborated both off-line and on-line by the NGOs on specific EU Council presidency political priorities.

Prior to the Presidency, a special NGOs workshop was implemented for moderators and editors of Predsedovanje.si portal in order to follow deliberative democracy principles and discursive ethics standards in moderating portal discussions.

The public promotion of the portal, results dissemination and good practice sharing were implemented by both on-line activities (accessible from major Slovenian web search engines and the official government presidency web site, weekly updates from the portal through the central NGOs e-mailing list and web link exchanges with other NGOs sites and the ePractice.eu) and off-line activities (public and expert presentation at the presidency events, debriefings and conferences during and after the Slovenian presidency with government officials, academia, labour unions, associations and public newspapers, radio and NGOs newsletters coverage both in Slovenia and the EU).

The Predsedovanje.si information and e-participation activities continued also during the French EU presidency, which ended on 31th of December 2008.

5. Results of the on-line questionnaire

In the period from 27th July and 16th of October 2008, 40 answers were provided to the anonymous on-line questionnaire⁹ on the NGO's involvement during the Slovene EU Council presidency. The questionnaire included four questions covering NGOs influence on the issues and decisions adopted during the presidency, attitude towards Agreement with the Government communication office, evaluation of the NGOs e-participation portal Predsedovanje.si during the presidency and overall benefits for the NGOs provided by the presidency period. For the purpose of this paper, results of the questions related to the Predsedovanje.si portal and the Agreement document will be displayed in details.

5.1 How would you evaluate the role of the web portal Predsedovanje.si in involving NGOs during the Slovene EU Council Presidency? (multiple answer possible) N=40

The content available on the portal increased NGOs information regarding issues, course and events during the Presidency.	17	21.25%
The content related impact of the portal on policies, events and decisions taken during the Presidency was insignificant.	15	18.75%
The role of the portal is disputable as the portal was not recognized among the NGOs and lacked stronger connection with live events during the presidency and on-line debates and polls involved a small number of participants.	13	16.25%
The portal performed as a common information and communication space for the NGOs during the Presidency and contributed to NGOs cooperation, networking and media recognisability.	11	13.75%
The portal was not utilized on proper scale because of limited financial and staffing capacities of the NGOs, limited knowledge on EU policies, decision-making processes and lack of the	8	10%

⁹ The questionnaire is available on-line

http://www.predsedovanje.si/component?option=com_pollxt/Itemid,38/id,17/task,results/

interest for participation.		
Do not know.	5	6.25%
English translation of the portal improved the recognisability and networking of the Slovene NGOs sector with foreign organizations and contributed to better information and involvement of the foreign NGOs during the Presidency.	4	5%
On-line debates and polls contributed to public identification, creation and visibility of the NGOs positions related to the Presidency political priorities and enabled transparent feedback from government institutions.	4	5%
Other (please provide your opinion): "Portal is like bulletin board, serving to information procurators", "This is a false portal!".	3	3.75%

Source:

http://www.predsedovanje.si/component/option,com_pollxt/Itemid,38/id,17/task_results/.

5.2 How would you estimate the officially signed Agreement between the Government communication office and the web portal Predsedovanje.si on the communication before and during the Slovene EU Council presidency? (one possible answer) N=40

I am not familiar with the content of the Agreement / I was not aware of its existence.	10	25%
The Agreement was only provisional political document without formal guarantees and will be soon forgotten.	6	15%
The Agreement formalized fictional involvement of NGOs and enabled government to foresee actions of the part of NGOs during the Presidency at the expense of limited co-financing.	6	15%
The Agreement strengthened communication role and increased the importance, credibility and efficiency of the web portal Predsedovanje.si.	6	15%
Do not know.	4	10%
The Agreement did not substantially improved participation of NGOs during the Presidency.	3	7.5%
The Agreement has provided more efficient, inclusive and transparent information between government institutions and NGOs and is representing a new standard of mutual interaction.	3	7.5%
Other (please provide your opinion): "Trivial smoke and fog for a few beneficiaries of further financing of the Government's NGOs".	2	5%

Source:

http://www.predsedovanje.si/component/option,com_pollxt/Itemid,38/id,17/task_results/.

Despite considerable methodological limitations (small and not representative polling sample with multiple answers available), the Predsedovanje.si evaluation e-poll results indicates, that NGOs perceived Predsedovanje.si as a common information-communication space during the Slovenian presidency with positive impact on information accessibility and availability, policy issues awareness, developments and events visibility, media recognisability, reinforced networking and cooperation. The results also stressed the benefit of the English translation as a part of overall visibility, involvement and networking with the foreign NGOs. However, the potentials of the portal were not fully exploited because of small scale visibility among

Slovene NGOs, insufficient involvement into the official live events during the Presidency, low financial and limited staffing capacities of the NGOs, limited knowledge on EU policies and a lack of the interest for participation, resulting in a low number of participants from on-line debates and polls. In addition, the portal provided very limited impact on government's presidency political priorities and decisions as the government bodies provided only two official replies¹⁰ to eight NGOs on-line forum debate reports. Moderated debates were suffering from low level of intensity and the deliberation potentials of web forum were not fully exploited since published messages expressed general opinions, personal viewpoints or convictions and were rarely supported by informed arguments. Likewise was the case of both responses from the government (regarding the inclusion of the non-governmental organisations during the Presidency and the role of NGOs in inter-generational cooperation) which were equally general in nature, providing already known official government positions and summarizing government activities in the policy field during the Presidency without providing any concrete commitments or proposals.

The example of GCO response on discussion report is cited below:

"The Government Communication Office welcomes the implementation of the first in series of web discussions, which are and will continue taking place on the web forum www.predsodvanje.si. As you have already mentioned, there are a lot of comments that the non-governmental organisations have expressed within the discussion with the title "The role of the state holding the presidency of the European Union and the inclusion of the non-governmental organisations in presidency" and are already included in our mutual agreement, and some of them are already taking place. In addition, GCO supports the idea and the efforts of the non-governmental organisations for even more qualitative mutual cooperation and integration.

Regarding the identification of the priority areas of the non-governmental organisations in the period of Slovenian presidency of the Council of the EU, GCO estimates that the stated areas are in most cases identical to the priority areas of the Slovenian presidency. Hereby we would like to warn that the activities of the non-governmental organisations from the field of environment, sustainable development and economy should be closely connected to the energetic-environmental package, which will definitely remain one of the priority areas also in the future.

Kind regards, the Government Communication Office".

This kind of government discourse in relation to non-governmental organizations can be explained by both: the nature of the Council of the European Union and the present state of the civil dialogue in the Republic of Slovenia. According to Michieli & Blazinšek (2007: 14) the EU Council is recognized as the least open EU institution for NGOs in general public. As a result, NGOs are focusing their interactions with the Council on improving its transparency and documents access rather than quality and form of dialogue. When interacting with the Council, personal contacts and political culture play an important role since the scope and quality of the dialogue is higher in Member states in which public administration is already having strong in more open culture of dialogue (e.g. countries of the Northern Europe). According by the Mirror to the Government report this is not the case in the Republic of Slovenia where "In the area of public participation Slovenia has a very low level of democratic processes. They need to be considerably improved in order to enhance the effectiveness of legislation and the well being of society" [9]. Because of the institutional framework of the EU stipulating joint eighteen-month presidencies by three member states, the so-called Troikas, the joint presidency programme of Slovenia, Germany and Portugal was already confirmed in December 2006 thus heavily pre-determining the main policy agenda of the Slovenian EU presidency before the start of the presidency. As results, during

¹⁰ Government's responses on civil society's viewpoints and initiatives are available on-line <http://www.predsodvanje.si/en/Vlada/odzivi.html>.

the Slovene presidency NGOs had limited opportunities to influence decisions already negotiated among the member states by the closed doors of the EU Council effectively.

On the other hand, the Predsedovanje.si NGO initiative was both politically and financially supported by the Slovene Government and Representation of the European Commission in Ljubljana. This sort of institutional support also resulted in a negative interpretations from both NGOs and the part of public, which suggested, that the Government secured a predictable operation of the NGOs during the presidency based on limited founding and without any explicit legal commitments. What is more, the portal was in some cases perceived as a "government" portal managed from the "government controlled" NGOs.

6. E-democracy effects assessment

Deriving from results from the on-line questionnaire, data available on the Predsedovanje.si portal, empirical involvement when managing the portal, moderating discussions and live events participation during the Slovene EU Council presidency, the following assessment of the e-democracy effects of Predsedovanje.si portal was elaborated using e-consultation evaluation framework defined by Macintosh and Whyte (2002).

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Predsedovanje.si portal</i>
1. Political	1.a) The stakeholders were satisfied with the process. 1.b) Adequate resources were in place to conduct the consultation. 1.c) The process followed best practice guidelines. 2.a) The stakeholders understood what is being asked. 2.b) The participants' contributions were appropriate. 3.a) The promotion of the e-consultation was adequate. 3.b) Who were the participants and where they were, in terms of demographic and geographic characteristics. 7.a) The questions were answered by the government during the consultation. 7.b) The government feedback relates to the contributions. 8.a) A change of policy was possible given the stage in the decision-making the consultation occurred. 8.b) Contributions were reflected in the revised or newly formulated policy.	Partially. No. Yes. Yes. Partially. Partially. Partially available. No. Yes. No. No.
2. Technological	4.a) The participants could access the information. 4.b) The participants' contributions were informed. 5.a) User friendliness. 5.b) Providing shortcuts. 5.c) Simple error handling.	Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

	5.d) Application stability.	Partially.
3. Social	6.a) The contributions addressed the consultation issue.	Yes.
	6.b) The participants could access contributions from others.	Yes.
	6.c) Contributions were classified according to provided information, questions, and suggestions.	Partially included in moderator's report.
	6.d) To what depth contributions respond to other contributions.	No.

Figure 2: Portal Predsedovanje.si E-democracy E-democracy effects assessment

7. Conclusions

The Predsedovanje.si NGO portal for the involvement of civil society during the Slovene EU Council presidency produced very limited e-democracy effects. The portal provided extensive information and documents e-access (increased public transparency of the presidency) but failed to benefit from participation (e-polling) and deliberation (e-forum) techniques. E-access had benefited NGOs in terms of policy issues awareness, media recognisability, reinforced networking and promoting their standpoints. Since this was the first of this kind civil society e-participation initiative ever implemented during the EU Council Presidency, the Slovenian NGOs and the government gained valuable experience in trying to create an on-line civil dialogue on the EU issues.

From technological viewpoint, the portal fulfilled most of the criteria and confirmed the open source CMS Joomla usability and usefulness when implementing NGOs e-participation projects. Open source standards enable possible replication by civil society in member states leading the next trio presidency (France, Czech Republic and Sweden).

In general, NGOs failed to provide informed and argumentation based policy proposals for the Presidency agenda, which was already predetermined prior to the Slovene Presidency. Inability of NGOs to use interactive e-participation tools on larger scale was deriving from limited professional and expert staff available to tackle with complex and intensive presidency period, lack of the interest for participation at the EU level, limited knowledge on EU policies and insufficient financial resources. Both can be described in terms of the active citizenship apathy (possible public alienation from the Presidency, which was also highlighted by the mass media) and democratic deficit of technocratic EU policy making. What is more, some of the NGOs had lacked experience regarding on-line engagement and participatory process management (e.g. technical and moderation skills).

On the other hand, the Slovene government also did not fulfil its e-consultation commitments deriving from the Agreement between the Slovene Government communication office (GCO) and portal Predsedovanje.si. The government institutions provided only two responses during the Presidency, lacking any concrete commitments on future policy developments. Reflecting on political criteria of e-democracy effects it is safe to conclude, that the government was using imaginary and small scale/selective involvement strategies during the Presidency. The later is in line to the Van Gerven's writings on political unaccountability of the EU Council stating that "no one judges the performance of the Council as a body or of its individual members from a global European Union or Community perspective" (ibid. 2005: 360).

Although the Predsedovanje.si e-participation portal reinforced both NGOs civil society and the Government of Slovenia awareness, public recognition and political formalization of the Internet as a relevant channel of democratic participation and civil dialogue both nationally and at the EU level, the challenges of providing e-democracy justification of such initiatives remain huge. Especially fulfilling social criteria related to the depth of on-line discussions and deliberation is demanding additional efforts in promoting Internet technology as a truly interactive and discursive technology within the decision-making processes. Similar challenges have been identified by the first successful Slovene e-democracy initiative the Citizens forum [5].

In order to provide a concrete evidence of the citizen's and NGO's e-participation impact on decisions, documents or policies within the European governance, further development in methodology and concepts are needed. Until then, the existing balance of power in favour of national political parties' elites within the European political community is going to determine the limited scope of the e-democratic effects of e-participation cases.

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