



# EaP eDemocracy Conference

**Politics in the Digital Age**

**Summary of the  
Eastern Partnership eDemocracy Conference  
Danube University Krems  
23 October 2018**

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**EaP** | Eastern  
Partnership 

## **Eastern Partnership eDemocracy Conference 23 October 2018**

The Danube University Krems, Department for E-Governance and Public Administration, and the Tallinn University of Technology, Ragnar Nurkse Department of Innovation and Governance, hosted the Eastern Partnership eDemocracy Conference on 'Politics in the Digital Age' under the auspices of the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

The conference provided experts from academia, think-tanks, governments, international and civil society organisations from the EU member states and the EU's Eastern Partnership countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine – the opportunity to discuss the current topics and challenges of eDemocracy.

The conference focused on three dimensions of good governance: participation through political communication in the digital sphere, transparency and stakeholder inclusion. How can eDemocracy enhance participation, inclusion, transparency and accountability? Although political communication, access to information, transparency and inclusion are not new concepts, they need to be re-appraised in the digital context. This report summarises the exploration of these dimensions by the keynotes and the conference participants' experiences.

Videos of the keynotes, photos, short interviews are available here:

<https://digitalgovernment.wordpress.com/category/knowledge/>

## **Acknowledgments**

The conference organisers would like to thank all the speakers and participants for their contributions.

**The Eastern Partnership eDemocracy Conference was Organised by**

Dr. Noella Edelmann, Danube University Krems, Austria

Prof. Peter Parycek, Danube University Krems, Austria

Prof. Robert Krimmer, Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia

Dr. Thomas Buchsbaum, Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, Austria

**The Eastern Partnership eDemocracy Conference was Supported by**

European Commission, Eastern Partnership (EaP)

Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership (ECEAP)

Fabasoft, Austria

OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

CEU Democratisation, Budapest

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## Executive Summary

The use of digital tools and the digitalization of democracy can help governments change their relationships with citizens and businesses, support citizens' involvement in government-led activities, and by making government more open and transparent, may be able to increase citizens' trust in government. However, eDemocracy is not a panacea, it can neither be an end in itself nor should it replace traditional democracy. Western countries and the Eastern Partnership countries face similar issues and challenges when using digital tools to enhance democracy, in order to combine online and offline communication effectively, trying to increase citizen participation by citizens, using Artificial Intelligence, or dealing with the problems created by trolling and "fake news". All countries are at some transit stage towards achieving a digital world and in terms of their eDemocracy development, with the need to address several challenges on issues such as political communication in the digital sphere, transparency and accountability of government activities as well as stakeholder involvement.

Social media and direct, digital communication change the ways in which public administration and politicians can communicate with citizens. Benefits can be that information spreads rapidly and is able to reach marginalised groups that previously could not access the information and may therefore engage less in relevant for political decision-making processes. Governments and public administration may not necessarily know what citizens needs are, so stakeholder participation and co-production are opportunities for listening and communicating with citizens and other stakeholders. But there are negative consequences of online communication such as echo chambers, bubbles, and digital ghettos that inhibit political processes central to democracy, and algorithms of social media aim to maximize our online presence in order to increase advertising revenues, not to support meaningful conversations. Further, "fake news" that increases the divide between official representatives and citizens and the "Trumpification" of political communication impact democracies in the Eastern and Western world. Academic experts sometimes find it hard to distinguish between what is "fake news" and what not, making evident the need for more media and digital literacy training.

eDemocracy is based on the provision of information and Open Data and should support citizens build democratic tools and their democratic space. Transparency is a cornerstone of good governance, it enables a greater scrutiny of politics and public administration by different stakeholders, in other words, it makes governments more accountable. At the same time, transparency means access to massive amounts of data, limiting citizen participation and thus the benefits of transparency.

The digital age has transformed societies, and Eastern Partnership countries are confronted with state- and nation-building, democratization and digitalisation at the same time, making it essential to learn from the Western and Eastern countries' experiences and experiments. This

report is a summary of personal views and comments made by the keynotes speakers, panellists and conference participants during the conference. It does not represent an official statement or assessment of the readiness or status of eDemocracy in the any of the countries. There are two parts to this report. First, it summarises the keynotes speakers' presentations and their discussions with the conference participants: Rasto Kuzel on "Communication in the Digital Sphere", Alexander Trechsel on "Transparency and Accountability" and Elke Löffler on "Stakeholder Involvement". Secondly, it briefly summarises some experiences from the Eastern Partnership countries in relation to the three conference topics.

## Keynotes

Alexander Trechsel University of Lucerne (Switzerland)

Elke Loeffler Governance International, UK & Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham (UK)

Rasto Kuzel MEMO98 (Slovakia)

## Panel Speakers

Aleksand Dudchenko, Kyiv City Council (Ukraine)

Alexey Kozliu, Human Constanta (Belarus)

Andrei Rusu, Information Society Development Institute (Moldova)

Anna Melenchuk, Institute of Innovative Governance (Ukraine)

Harutyun Azgaldyan, Ministry of Education and Science (Armenia)

Lejla Turcilo, University of Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Levan Avalishvili, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (Georgia)

Lucia Aprodu, Institute for Strategic Initiatives Communications and Digital Transformation (Moldova)

Maarja Toots, Tallinn University of Technology (Estonia)

Meri Davtyan, Mission Armenia NGO (Armenia)

Mikheil Mirziashvili, Centre for Democracy Development (Georgia)

Øystein Sæbø, University of Agder (Norway)

Rashad Shirinov, OSCE/ODIHR expert (Azerbaijan) and Radboud University Nijmegen (The Netherlands)



## Opening of the EaP eDemocracy Conference 2018

**Speaker: Thomas Buchsbaum (Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, Austria)**

Thomas M. Buchsbaum, Special Envoy on Eastern Partnership, Austrian Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, welcomed all participants. He expressed the deep gratitude of the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the EU to the Krems Danube University and to professors Peter Parycek and Robert Krimmer for their co-operation and steering of the conference, and to the European Commission and other partners for their financial contributions.

After presenting the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Austrian priorities therein, he identified good governance as one of the top priorities of the EU in the EaP region – and democracy as its underpinning. “Transparent public governance” and “Strengthening good governance” were two of the “20 Deliverables for 2020”, the current work programme of the EaP. Issues of digitalization were mentioned nine times and integrated in two of the 20 “deliverables”. eDemocracy had been strongly highlighted at the EaP Senior Officials Meeting on 12 March. Only a few days ago, at the EaP Foreign Ministers meeting of 15 October, digitalization had been mentioned by nearly all speakers as a constant priority of the EaP.

The speaker drew the attention to the sub-title of the conference: *‘How can eDemocracy enhance participation, inclusion, transparency and accountability?’* Contrary to, e.g., eGovernment, eAdministration, and public eServices, eDemocracy dealt with essential properties of democracy. While eDemocracy – like democracy – was in life never fully accomplished or perfect - in no country -, it came with constant efforts towards perfection. If and how eDemocracy could help to achieve this goal remained to be discussed here. eDemocracy – like democracy – was not a prerogative of the so-called West – or something the so-called West could teach others. The Eastern partner countries of the EU could pride themselves of notable e-democracy showcases, be it tools of eAccess-to-public-information, eJustice, eLegalEvidence, eWealthDeclaration, eIntegrity, eSelection-of-judges, eProcurement and eTender, be it national concepts and plans on eDemocracy and eGovernment, or be it a number of Open Government Partnership initiatives.

Few international rules or guidelines existed in the field of eDemocracy, with the notable exception of the Recommendation of the Council of Europe on e-democracy of (already) 2009<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on electronic democracy (e-democracy)*, adopted on 18 February 2009

[https://www.coe.int/t/dgap/democracy/Activities/GGIS/CAHDE/2009/RecCM2009\\_1\\_and\\_Accomp\\_Docs/Recommendation%20CM\\_Rec\\_2009\\_1E\\_FINAL\\_PDF.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dgap/democracy/Activities/GGIS/CAHDE/2009/RecCM2009_1_and_Accomp_Docs/Recommendation%20CM_Rec_2009_1E_FINAL_PDF.pdf)

## Topic 1: Communication in the Digital Sphere

### Keynote: Rasto Kuzel (MEMO98, Slovakia)

*How is digital public communication overturning the traditional hierarchical model in favour of popular and participatory communication? Is it suitable for horizontal, unmediated exchanges between politicians and citizens, and does it promote and offer a flattened communication structure in contrast to the top-down structure of the traditional legacy media – the kind of interactive communication often praised in populist rhetoric? What are the profound changes?*

The mass media allows political contestants to communicate their messages, provide a platform for debates among candidates, to report on campaign developments and helps users access to essential information about politics. The media are vital for the integrity of the electoral process, and whilst various types of media are under different obligations, in general, international norms and standards foresee that media give equitable access to election contestants, provide the electorate with information on how to exercise their rights and make informed choices, help to monitor the electoral process and report the results to the public. The media landscape has changed significantly in the last few years, particularly given the expanding internet media and the rapidly growing role of social media. Both traditional and new media can play a vital role, as a campaign platform, a forum for public debate and as a public educator, thus ultimately strengthening democracy. Nonetheless, there are concerns that the changes in the media landscape and the expansion of internet media may have an impact on the democratic decision-making processes and the integrity of election process. Malicious online communication, the rise of “fake news” and computational propaganda, the increasing “Trumpification” of language in the digital sphere are seen as endangering not only the fair conduct of the electoral process but also democracy itself.

State-sponsored disinformation aims to impact election processes and undermines the essentials of democracy. From the beginning, "fake news" has tended to be sensationalist and extreme, designed to inflame emotion and prejudices. "Fake news" is not a new phenomenon, but social media has made it easier to spread hoaxes quickly that result in angry actions and reactions from the users. According to a report by "Freedom House" published in 2017<sup>2</sup>, disinformation tactics played an important role in the elections of at least 17 other countries aside from the US elections in 2016. In addition, during the last few years, the practice of using “fake news” is not only significantly more widespread, but also technically more sophisticated through the use of bots and by exploiting social media and search algorithms for high visibility. The effect of these tools and techniques on democracy and civil activism contribute to a decline

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<sup>2</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN\\_2017\\_Final.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN_2017_Final.pdf)

in confidence in international alliances and organizations, public institutions and mainstream media.

Computational propaganda is one phenomenon associated with the digital disinformation and manipulation efforts, it can be seen as a powerful tool to be used against democracy. It is associated with the use of algorithms and social media bots to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks in order to manipulate public opinion. Social media bots are automated programs developed to perform simple, repetitive, robotic tasks; they can help to get work done online and for routine tasks such as collecting information, delivering news and information. Bots can quickly deploy messages and interact with users and content, and, as they often pass as human users, can therefore be used for malicious activities such as spamming, harassment and spreading propaganda, thus artificially shaping public life and political campaigns<sup>3</sup>.

Another challenge is the increasing use of inflammatory and hostile language. Hyper-partisan views are presented, views that ignite fear, anger and prejudices, in order to influence citizen voting intention and behaviour. Strong emotions such as anger travel further online than inspirational messages, and the way to get noticed on the internet is to be loud and provocative. Social media has recently been described as “Trumpified”: political groups and candidates imitate President Trump’s raw and combative language style and use of polarizing issues, such as illegal immigration, issues that receive more attention than narrower local issues.<sup>4</sup> Instead of discussing the real issues, politicians attract public attention by being provocative and aggressive.

Traditional media and good quality journalism may be a valuable tool able to respond to fake news and disinformation. Traditional media is bound to regulations, so should an ethical code be developed for non-traditional media to help deal and control the problems in the digital sphere? In Europe, there is a drive to develop a legal framework and regulators (e.g. Ofcom in the UK) have been requested to be more active regarding such issues. The main fear is that legal provisions or the regulation of the internet may quickly be understood and implemented as censorship.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/computational-propaganda-the-book/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/19/us/politics/corrupt-chris-and-two-faced-tammy-candidates-try-their-best-trump-impressions.html>

## Topic 2: Transparency and Accountability

**Keynote: Alexander Trechsel (University of Lucerne, Switzerland)**

*The emergence and proliferation of digital tools and the digital transformation of organizations has led to several initiatives, reforms and new principles, such as Open Data and Open Governance (e.g. the Open Government Partnership). How does digital technology, digital culture and the possibilities they offer transform societies and their governments, and lead to better services, increased transparency and accountability? What are the benefits, the dangers and the lessons learned so far?*

Access to information is central in a digital world, and citizens have both the right and means to access information, even to their own data according to General Data Protection Regulation. The Council of Europe sees “Good Governance” as “the responsible conduct of public affairs and management of public resources (....) encapsulated in the Council of Europe 12 Principles of Good Governance”<sup>5</sup>. Principle 4 addresses openness and transparency, and states that decisions must be taken and enforced in accordance to the given rules and regulations, that there public access to all information that is not classified is possible, and that information on decisions, implementation of policies and results is made available to the public so that they can both follow and contribute to the work of the local authority. Whilst there are successful examples of access and use of data, such as the Rahvakogu process in Estonia or Iceland’s crowdsourced constitution, access to data is also an issue of power and politics. By considering the dimensions and opportunities offered by digital technology to access information and data allows a deeper understanding of transparency and accountability in the context of eDemocracy.

Political actors, political parties, stakeholders from within public administrations and governments have encouraged digitalisation as this brings advantages such as enhancing efficiency, improving workflows and being available to the public beyond office hours. Digitalisation has further benefits, such as more transparent administrative processes both within the administration and to the public, or the provision of public data to citizens. Digital transparency may thus lead to better and more participation by citizens, increased knowledge about politics, and a more developed sense of political efficacy. Data made accessible to citizens allows them to work with the data, enrich, enhance and also control them. If digital transparency is guaranteed and enabled from the top, this can help citizens participate in democratic processes and lead to successful bottom-up initiatives, important citizen activities particularly from a democratic point of view.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/good-governance/12-principles-and-elope>

At the same time, digitalisation and ensuring transparency is expensive, challenges the administrative culture and bears risks. It is also associated with the issue of legitimacy: whilst access to general information is not seen as a problem, the storage, the processing and the accessing of personal data by the state and citizens, has raised questions regarding the ownership of data and privacy. Recent scandals about data leaks in administration and technology companies, the processing of personal data stored in social networks, push legislators to set up regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation, that clearly state who has access to data and how it can be used. Furthermore, digitalisation and making data available online does not make participation by citizens automatic or automatically easier. Whilst on the one hand there is a need to ensure public interest in the data, to make the public more aware of the availability of data and to provide tools that will help them use it, on the other hand, this raises the question as to what can citizens do with the data? Transparency and allowing citizens access to large amounts of data or information may not always be the best solution. Citizens cannot read all the information available in order to understand how this relates to one's own political views and information overload is known to have detrimental effects. In some cases, ensuring access to data and transparency may be problematic for government, parliament or even in the interest of the wider public. The format and the timing of the accessibility to the information may represent transparency in some cases, but may be useless, obscure and even dangerous in other cases. In other words, transparency is not just about accessing (more) information, but also about the quality of information, the need for informational shortcuts and tools such as information aggregators. In the digital era, access to data means accountability can be more efficient but also more vulnerable. Citizens, media, civil society have access to a massive amount of data with which to hold their representatives accountable, but news, as well as "fake news" and fake data, can spread quickly and lead to uncontrollable and undesirable effects. There is therefore not only the risk that citizens will drown in a sea of data and information, but that they drown in a sea of information that does not even relate to the truth.

In future, new forms of intelligence will have an even greater impact on transparency and accountability, making "algorithmic accountability" a necessity. Artificial intelligence plays an important role here, and although is already used extensively, it is usually seen as a negative development. In future it will be used even more to optimise political decision-making: to detect electoral fraud patterns, making decision-making procedures and structures more efficient; but would be an efficiency at odds with legitimacy, as it removes the need for the traditional chain of accountability. As artificial intelligence has the potential to completely dominate the information eco-sphere, it is important to understand how artificial intelligence functions, how it is used to reach conclusions, and users must learn to evaluate what is suggested by artificial intelligence. The question that needs to be raised here is whether artificial intelligence should be developed to be more inclusive, more transparent and more

democratic? If the answer is yes, then algorithmic accountability must be insured, that is, algorithms must lead to the same accountability relationships that exist at the moment.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> At the moment, the big technology companies do not show their algorithm unless they fear damage to the reputation of their organisation, as seen with the Cambridge Analytica scandal during the 2016 elections. There seems to be an in-built mechanism that only a scandal or problem or disaster will make the wider public aware of the risks and dangers and thus the need for accountability and algorithmic accountability.

### Topic 3: Stakeholder Involvement

**Keynote: Elke Löffler (University of Birmingham, UK and Governance International, UK)**

*Deliberative democracy aims to expand meaningful public participation in political decision-making. What are the practical implications for the design of legitimate and effective involvement? Who are the different stakeholders, what roles do they have in the processes and how can they be encouraged to participate? How can digital tools, processes and services increase the involvement of stakeholders? Is reaching a high number of participants the most important aim, or are there are other important goals that need to be reached too?*

Co-production as an intensive form of citizen engagement and stakeholder involvement puts the focus on both citizen voice and action, which offers new opportunities for effective stakeholder involvement in public issues. In particular, it has the potential to improve social inclusion by making better use of the strengths, capabilities and assets of service users and communities and also of professionals working in public services in order to improve outcomes and/or efficiency.

In most OECD countries, governments acknowledge the need to move away from being only a provider of services towards developing close partnerships with relevant stakeholders. In co-production, public service providers and commissioners co-commission, co-design, co-deliver and co-assess public services and outcomes with local people. In particular, the use of digital tools such as social media in public services can be key to helping service users and communities to help themselves. However, there are several barriers to effective user and community co-production, whether through digital or other means. In general, barriers can include the lack of skills of public managers and frontline staff to collaborate with citizens, a lack of strategic objectives in public stakeholder involvement initiatives, and the lack of adequate evidence of the benefits of co-production. A study by the University of Birmingham<sup>7</sup> on the needs of people with visual impairments compares what public managers think service users need with what service users themselves state what they want. The results highlight that citizens not only need public services but, more importantly, wish to be valued as part of society. In particular, the study reveals that citizens' actual needs are different from what public managers think they need.

The Governance International Public Value Model highlights that improved outcomes stem not only from public services (which may be provided by the public, non-profit or private sectors or in partnerships) but also from the co-production of citizens with public service organisations.

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<sup>7</sup> Willis, M. H.; Douglas, G.G.A.; Dunstan, E. and Pavey, S. (2003): Evaluation of Pocklington day services in the West Midlands: Final Research Report for Thomas Pocklington Trust, Birmingham: INLOGOV und VICTAR, University of Birmingham.

This means that commissioners should not only involve citizens in the commissioning process but also commission co-production initiatives with service users and/or local communities.

The keynote presentation provided international case studies of key co-production approaches through digital means: co-commissioning, which is about deciding together on priority outcomes, co-planning strategies or contributing resources (e.g. through crowdfunding); co-designing new solutions or new services together; co-delivery, where stakeholders work together; and co-assessing to which degree priority outcomes and key governance principles have been achieved. However, it also emphasised that increasing the level of co-production is not easy: What encourages service users and local communities to contribute to public services and outcomes? Academic research has shown that one important factor which increases public participation and co-production is self-efficacy: if citizens think they can make a difference, they are more likely to engage. At the same time, people who engage are likely to have a higher degree of self-efficacy, so this can be a virtuous circle. The rapid growth of social media (e.g. Twitter) suggests that many citizens believe that this technology does indeed increase their ability to make a difference by airing their views. Empirical research has also shown that the correlation between the level of education of citizens and the extent of co-production is very low – this means that, unlike participation, co-production is not limited to the ‘usual suspects’. In particular, we should not make assumptions as to who is more likely to co-produce. Indeed, digital technologies such as social media are often more often taken up by young people, even those with a low level of education or high social disadvantage.

Finally, co-production requires resources – both from citizens and from the public sector. The use of digital tools may help to connect people with each other to facilitate collective co-production. Most importantly, more digital technologies need to be co-designed with service users so that the technologies are tailored to the specific target groups of public policy. The Governance International Co-design Toolkit suggests the process should start from ‘user experience’ in order to frame the issue concerned from a user perspective. This needs to be followed by exploring, experimenting and evaluating new solutions. Not all tested solutions will be successful but those considered to be beneficial need to evolve (which contributes to, but is different from, being ‘sustainable’). This requires distributed leadership and political support to mobilize and harness citizen voice and action.

During the plenary discussion many conference participants agreed that the adoption of new technologies is not enough by itself. Citizens’ online participation should not end up in echo chambers, where people speak only to people with similar ideas, or in digital ‘talkshops’, where people develop exciting new ideas which then are not put into practice. More research is therefore required on how the public sector and citizens together can use digital technologies to facilitate and scale social innovations through effective mutual interaction.



## **EaP Country Experiences**

*This section represents a summary of personal views and comments made by the participants during the discussions. It does not represent an official statement or assessment of the readiness or status of eDemocracy in the EaP countries.*

### **Armenia**

The digital transformation of the Armenian public sphere has had profound impact on how ideas are spread, how debates are organized, opinions formed and the way citizenships is exercised. The Prime Minister and Armenian politicians use Facebook on a daily basis to directly communicate with citizens, report on government activities and as a way to improve and enhance public participation. The Armenian government has recently set up an online platform for all the legal acts adopted by the National Assembly or the government as a way to involve civil society, support citizens decision-making processes and allow them to provide feedback. The Armenian Ministry of Education and Science also uses a digital platform to unite all levels of education institutions online. These platforms are seen as contributing to increasing the transparency of processes such as the provision of scholarships as well as having full information about each pupil and student's academic career. Whilst this information is seen as relevant and helpful for future job searches or for future beneficiaries, it raises issues regarding who has access to this information and the suitability of alternative uses of this data.

Social media has been used effectively for mass public mobilization and public participation, as was seen during the Armenian Velvet Revolution, and citizens and "vulnerable" participants are increasingly seen as raising their voices and being increasingly involved in decision-making processes, for example in the areas of juvenile justice and child protection. However, there are still several problems regarding citizen engagement in Armenia. On the one hand, there is still a lack of involvement which may be due to citizens' lack of trust in government or feeling that they are not really being listened to. On the other hand, government and public administration claim that citizens' contributions are not relevant or off-topic. There is a clear need to discuss how to make digital tools more efficient, more useful but also to understand how online communication and discussion can help achieve eDemocracy.

### **Azerbaijan**

The Data Centre in Azerbaijan was opened in 2016 by the President of Azerbaijan, it provides the basic infrastructure for the e-ID cards that have been available since September 2018. Power may be an important element that determines the relationship and involvement between the various actors in the political processes in Azerbaijan. Post-Soviet or post-

communist countries face a dilemma that results from state emergence and democratization efforts at the same time. Whilst European countries have a long political history of nation-building and state building, followed by democracy and democratization, this is somewhat different in the post-communist world, where both processes are occurring at the same time. The emergence of digital democracy or eDemocracy is to be seen as an evolution that requires public space. In the post-Soviet space the Eastern Partnership countries such as Azerbaijan are moving directly from communism to eDemocracy, bypassing democracy itself. The problem is exacerbated that in Azerbaijan there are two digital public spaces, a Russian-speaking and an Azerbaijani-speaking one; these spaces never interact, certainly to the language barrier but also because these two spaces are completely different. The post-Soviet public space may no longer have an egalitarian communist society, but seems to have become divided into groups with different languages and interests.

### **Belarus**

Belarus is perceived in a two-fold manner: either as the last dictatorship in Europe or the Silicon Valley of post-Soviet countries. Like Estonia, Belarus aims to be a digital society, so the Belarusian government supports the development of the IT sector and is eager to be involved in all aspects regarding digital transformation. It is clear though that in order to achieve digital transformation, there is a need to strengthen the relationships between business, government, civil society and democratic institutions rather than just aim to achieve economic benefits.

### **Georgia**

Following the post-Soviet occupation, Georgians quickly adopted the principle of freedom of expression, but there is still a current need to learn how to use digital tools that support the further development of democracy in Georgia.

In 2009, most public services in Georgia did not have a website, so information available on websites was very limited, making the provision of open data a relatively new concept for the Georgian government. One of the first information databases was OpenData.ge, set up to track and report the extent to which the right to information was respected in Georgia. This made it a useful tool both for research and business purposes, but also as a way to control the government and push for further democratic reforms. Later, in 2018, Georgia joined the framework of the Open Government Partnership and launched an open legislative platform for its parliament, so that data related to parliamentary activities was made available. This platform is useful for fact-checking as well as ensuring the accountability of the parliament. The creation of a national data portal of Georgia, DATA.gov.ge, is part of the eGovernment strategy, but the data sets currently available are the same ones as those published in 2016. As public authorities are not legally obliged to publish data, the non-governmental portal DataLab.ge was

set up and contains about 1000 data sets that were requested and uploaded onto the website. Further projects are the development of ProZorro in Georgia, an Open Data Portal for the Tbilisi Municipality and to ensure that the National Procurement Information Lobby uses an Open Data format.

### **Moldova**

In Moldova, new digital tools and apps provide unprecedented access and opportunities for marginalized groups, to manage data, to support open science, to obtain grants for research projects, and to promote scientific publications. The 2016 presidential campaign was not only the first presidential election in 20 years, but also the first presidential election in Moldova's history where the online environment played a significant role. This electoral campaign displayed all the array of challenges associated with online campaigning, and political actors in Moldova were seen making extensive use of disinformation campaigns against opponents.

### **Ukraine**

Ukraine has implemented the Freedom of Information Act, the Ukrainian government is currently working on achieving more transparency and accountability by supporting the publication of open data sets. eDemocracy is seen as attracting hundreds of active users who work together with the Ukrainian public administrations on important issues that benefit both citizens and public administrations. Recently an Open Data challenge was launched, aiming to encourage developers, start-ups and researchers to use Open Data to create new services and products with social benefits, as well as to increase the efficiency and transparency of public authorities. One of the main problems faced by Open Data projects is a lack of back office systems to collect the data provided by open data mechanisms, a lack of trust between government and citizens, and as a result, the data sets are not used extensively. This suggests that transparency, understood in terms of publishing information, does not guarantee that the data is interesting to read or that people will use it.

## Conclusion

In the post-communist countries, civil society is steeped in a tradition that is different to the European or American civil society. The Eastern Partnership countries are in a state of transit from an offline past to an online and connected future. ICT based eGovernance or eDemocracy needs to go hand in hand with democracy and decision-making processes based in real life, and must not only involve experts, citizen representatives and citizens, but also ensure people are able to use digital tools effectively, to understand the decision-making process and be informed on the results gained. It is important to consider several dimensions in eDemocracy, including communication in the digital sphere, transparency and accountability, and citizen engagement.

The efficiency of digital tools for communication in the digital sphere needs to be assessed. Both digital dictatorships and digital democracies use the same technologies, the difference does not lie in the tools are used, but with the aims to be achieved. The focus is therefore on the use of information to undermine political communication, Russian interference in other countries' political processes and the use of social media to spread "fake news" in Western Europe and the Eastern Partnership countries alike. The EU has made great efforts to expose disinformation, operations and campaigns generated, coordinated or sponsored by certain state actors. Good journalism, fact-checking by organizations such as StopFake from Ukraine, and a Pan-European approach to dealing with "fake news" are helpful, but may not be enough to counter the problems. Moldova, for example, has had several "fake news" stories, such as the Benghazi story, the Pizzagate story or the story about an invasion by 30000 Syrian refugees that the MP Maia Sandu allegedly agreed to allow into the country.

Empowerment and engagement are important in the participation process. They are complicated processes though, that include several political aspects, interests and interests. Politicians play an important role here because in a representative democracy they represent the general interest – and they will have to learn to engage more with stakeholders, will need to change traditional decision-making processes, and know how transparency and access to information affects accountability. In the Eastern countries, for example Ukraine, citizen engagement has led to good solutions and shown that citizens have the ability to influence political decisions, but this engagement was achieved through financial and intellectual support from Western countries and organisations. The issues are often controversial, for example the discussion of gender-related issues in Poland, so citizens need to not only have the necessary digital skills, but also be very bold and brave if they decide to get involved.

Currently, there is a recognisable flaw in the design of the online platforms and social media applications, as the algorithms that drive them are created to maximize our online presence on sites that sell advertisements rather than support meaningful conversation or engaging with others with different ideas. In future, the efficiency and impact of the digital tools and social

media must increase, and it will, especially when the next generation will be the next decision-makers. It is clear that civic education needs to play a central role now and children in school need to learn the critical thinking skills necessary for online and offline worlds, but also that they have both the right to participate.

Governments are under increasing pressure and may set up counter measures in order to mitigate the process of empowerment, yet any kind of legislative censorship of information freedom on the internet would jeopardize the basic meanings of democracy. This is why in the context of these three topics of eDemocracy, experimentation is a must, there is a need to learn from experimentation and to share the results gained.

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