

## eParticipation initiatives: How is Europe progressing?

This paper aims to determine the progress and current trends of eParticipation activities across Europe. For this purpose, a European survey took place aiming to identify, record and analyse fully operational (i.e. not pilot or research) initiatives originating from or targeting at the geographical area of Europe, including both EU and non EU member states. As a result, we identified 255 eParticipation initiatives originating from 18 different countries and being offered in more than 30 different languages. Apart from country of origin and language, we also recorded a number of additional characteristics for each initiative. These include the participation area (e.g. consultation, discourse, deliberation, etc.) in which the activity focuses; the scope of the initiative in terms of participation level (European, national, local, etc.); the type of funding utilised; and the operation status.

The results suggest that the majority of the initiatives have been identified at the local and national level of participation and focus to participation areas such as information provision, deliberation, consultation and discourse. Moreover, results indicate a connection between participation areas and participation level of the identified initiatives, drawing the conclusion that as the target audience of eParticipation initiatives narrows, the more specific these initiatives become, allowing more active participation and greater capacity to reach tangible decisions. In terms of operation, most of the identified initiatives are currently still in operation, while in terms of funding, eParticipation initiatives seem to utilise mainly EU funds.



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“ The EU may need to reconsider the actual potential of eParticipation and to revise priorities and expectations from the field, while at the same time try to learn from small-scale experience. ”

## 1 Introduction

According to the European Commission (2008a), many people today are losing interest and confidence in the way their countries are being governed. Issues of trust, openness and transparency are being frequently and intensely discussed (Millard et al, 2008) as the public manifests lack of confidence in public servants and governmental institutions. At the same time, public apathy and dissatisfaction is also evident through decreasing turnout rates at elections, which further lead to representatives elected by a minority of the electorate and to a feeling of loss of ownership of the democratic process. In this context, citizens increasingly demand greater transparency and accountability from the government, and favour public participation in the shaping of policies that affect them (OECD, 2001).

Public participation is about citizen power. It provides the means for deliberately including all citizens in policy and decision making by incorporating their concerns, needs and values into these processes (Arnstein, 1969 and Creighton, 2005). This is achieved by setting in place the appropriate procedures for informing, consulting and involving citizens affected by a decision to have an input into that decision (Smith and Nell, 1997). Current Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have made it possible to enhance traditional participation procedures by electronic means, introducing in this way the concept of electronic Participation (eParticipation). eParticipation "*refers to efforts to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another, with civil servants, and with elected representatives using ICTs*" (O'Donnell et al, 2007). Contrary to traditional participatory procedures, contemporary technologies provide the opportunity to reach wider audiences in a more accessible (at anytime and from anyplace) and understandable format (Macintosh, 2004), as well as in a way that is possibly faster and more efficient. So, eParticipation emerges today as the medium for tackling the contemporary political challenges of democratic societies and for reconnecting ordinary people with politics and policy-making (European Commission, 2008a).

Intending to exploit this promising field, the European Union has funded more than 35 eParticipation research projects with a total budget of over 120M€ during the last decade mainly through the FP5 and the Preparatory Action programmes (Tambouris et al, 2008). But although eParticipation research projects and their results have been previously documented and discussed (DEMO-net, 2008), there is still insufficient acknowledgement, documentation and analysis of practitioner projects in the field of eParticipation. Admittedly, there have been efforts to do so at the national level, for example in Germany (Albrecht et al, 2008), but no structured efforts to understand the current state of the art of fully operational eParticipation initiatives across Europe exist. According to the European Commission (2008b), over the last five years numerous eParticipation trials and programmes have been run at national and local levels across Europe and many systems are now routinely in place, gaining thus much experience in the field. So, the challenge to be addressed at this point is to identify and document this experience from across Europe, and to recognise good practice with the intention of eventually learning from past experience and successfully transferring good practice into other contexts.

This paper aims at examining eParticipation activities across Europe with the objective of understanding the current state of the art, trends and progress in the field. For this purpose, a survey has been conducted aiming to identify, record and analyse fully operational (i.e. not pilot or research) initiatives originating from or targeting the geographical area of Europe. Thus, the scope of this survey is mainly on European eParticipation initiatives either implemented in an EU Member State or in a country geographically belonging to the European continent. In addition, a limited number of international initiatives by international organisations and civil society organisations have been included as they are also targeting Europe.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the methodology followed to conduct the survey, while section 3 presents the results. Finally, section 4 discusses these results and presents the limitations of the survey, while section 5 concludes the paper and describes future work.

## 2 Methodology

The methodology followed in our research consists of three steps:

- Preparation of a template for reporting survey findings
- Identification of eParticipation initiatives utilising three different types of sources
- Populating the reporting instrument and analysis of results.

## 2.1 Reporting template

As a first step, a specific template has been developed for reporting the gathered eParticipation initiatives. At this point, the intention has been to develop a template that would provide a summary of what each initiative is about and highlight specific characteristics of interest to our research such as scope, origin, language, etc. So, it was deliberately not our intention to record detailed information on each eParticipation initiative, since this level of analysis would surely require collaboration with the owners of the initiatives in order to reach safe conclusions. Hence, the template has been kept short but fairly descriptive, including only what was considered absolutely necessary for describing each eParticipation initiative. Overall, it includes the following eleven elements for describing each eParticipation initiative:

- Title
- Short description
- Web address
- Participation area(s)
- Participation level
- Country
- Language(s)
- Funding type(s)
- Start date
- End date
- Contact details

*Title*, *short description* and *Web address* of each initiative are obviously the first elements to report under this survey. Furthermore, the *participation area(s)* element refers to the specific participation activities implemented in each eParticipation initiative. According to the literature, all participation activities fall within specific areas of citizen engagement and involvement in the democratic process (DEMO-net, 2006; Tambouris et al 2007; Kalampokis et al 2008, Smith et al, 2008). For this survey the authors decided to adopt the categorisation of participation areas as defined by DEMO-net (2006):

- Information Provision. ICT to structure, represent and manage information in participation contexts.
- Community Building /Collaborative Environments. ICT to support individuals coming together to form communities, to progress shared agendas and to shape and empower such communities.
- Consultation. ICT in official initiatives by public or private agencies to allow stakeholders to contribute their opinion, either privately or publicly, on specific issues.
- Campaigning. ICT in protest, lobbying, petitioning and other forms of collective action (except of election campaigns covered under electioneering area).
- Electioneering. ICT to support politicians, political parties and lobbyists in the context of election campaigns.
- Deliberation. ICT to support virtual, small and large-group discussions, allowing reflection and consideration of issues. In our survey deliberation also includes discussion and consideration of issues in an unstructured and non-moderated manner.
- Discourse. ICT to support analysis and representation of discourse. In our survey discourse differentiates from deliberation in that it covers conversation and dialogue between citizens and elected representatives.
- Mediation. ICT to resolve disputes or conflicts in an online context.
- Spatial planning. ICT in urban planning and environmental assessment.
- Polling. ICT to measure public opinion and sentiment.
- Voting. ICT in the context of public voting in elections, referenda or local plebiscites.

The *participation level* element refers to the scope of each eParticipation initiative in terms of governmental level. In our survey we distinguish initiatives under the following categories: international, transnational, European, national, regional or local. International are initiatives originating mainly from important civil society organisations and other international organisations of universal interests and actions, whilst transnational are initiatives targeting a certain group of countries or regions; for example two neighbouring regions in different countries may start together an eParticipation initiative in order to propose solutions on a specific topic.

Additionally, under *country* the origin of each eParticipation initiative at the national, regional and local level is reported. The *language* element refers to the operational language(s) of each eParticipation initiative, namely the actual language(s) in which participation takes place; not languages in which information is provided or general dissemination of the initiative is made. Obviously, the *start date* and *end date* of each initiative are also important to include in this survey, as well as the type of funding utilised. Finally, the availability of *contact details* for each initiative is also reported for facilitating future communication with the owners of the initiatives.

## 2.2 Initiatives identification

Three sources for identifying eParticipation initiatives have been utilised:

1. Through award schemes or online databases relevant to eParticipation or eGovernment domains,
2. Through desktop research in the literature and the web,
3. Through communication with experts and project owners in the eParticipation domain.

Award schemes and online databases in the fields of eParticipation and in eGovernment have proven to be a significant source for identifying initiatives relevant to our research. Such sources include:

- eEurope Awards for eGovernment<sup>1</sup>
- UK e-Government National Awards<sup>2</sup>
- Stockholm Challenge Awards<sup>3</sup>
- epractice.eu database<sup>4</sup>
- eParticipation preparatory action<sup>5</sup>
- e-participation.net database<sup>6</sup>
- peopleandparticipation.net database<sup>7</sup>

A large number of cases have been identified through desktop research, namely through literature references and through Web surfing. To this end, keywords such as “eParticipation”, “consultation”, “petitioning”, “citizen forum”, etc., have been used in search engines on the Web. Especially for European level cases the authors exploited the results of an extensive desktop research within numerous EU institutions (Dalakiouridou et al, 2008), the College of Commissioners, EU policy documents as well as political parties and civil society organizations; the latter being also sources of international level eParticipation initiatives.

Finally, authors have utilised their connections to key experts and project owners in the field for communicating this research and the intention to gather eParticipation initiatives across Europe. Specifically, this research has been communicated in the “eParticipation and eDemocracy Network” community<sup>8</sup> in ePractice.eu portal, in the “Democracies Online”<sup>9</sup> forum, in workshops by the European eParticipation study<sup>10</sup> and in the different conferences attended by the authors.

At this point, it would be appropriate to mention that desktop research has been limited due to the language barrier faced during this survey. Self-evidently, authors were able to mainly work in the English language, and especially in the case of web search and search engine utilisation, all used keywords originated from the English vocabulary. This automatically implies that an eParticipation case had to be offered or at least documented in the English language in order to be identified through desktop research.

## 2.3 Results reporting

The last step of the methodology is the reporting of all identified eParticipation initiatives across Europe in the template developed for this purpose. The results of this survey are provided in the following section.

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- 1 [www.e-europeawards.org/](http://www.e-europeawards.org/)
  - 2 [www.e-governmentawards.co.uk/](http://www.e-governmentawards.co.uk/)
  - 3 [www.stockholmchallenge.se](http://www.stockholmchallenge.se)
  - 4 [www.epractice.eu/](http://www.epractice.eu/)
  - 5 [http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/activities/egovernment/implementation/prep\\_action/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/egovernment/implementation/prep_action/index_en.htm)
  - 6 [www.e-participation.net/](http://www.e-participation.net/)
  - 7 [www.peopleandparticipation.net](http://www.peopleandparticipation.net)
  - 8 [www.epractice.eu/community/eParticipation](http://www.epractice.eu/community/eParticipation)
  - 9 [dowire.org](http://dowire.org)
  - 10 [www.european-e-participation.eu/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=28&Itemid=94](http://www.european-e-participation.eu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=28&Itemid=94)

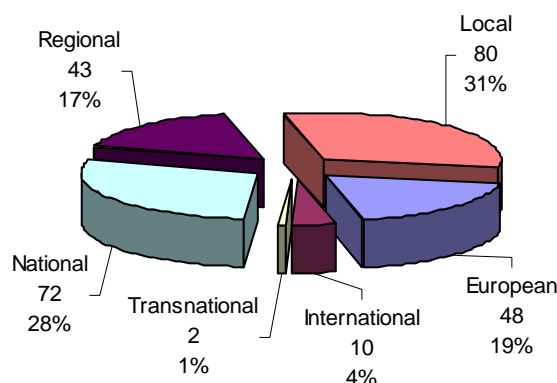
The language barrier mentioned previously has also influenced this methodology step. So, although each website of the identified initiatives has been visited by the authors, it has been extremely difficult to understand the functionality of the website if it was offered in an unknown language. Hence, authors have been able to fully understand and report initiatives offered either in the English language or in other commonly spoken languages, such as German, French and Spanish. Information on websites offered in other languages has been borrowed from initiatives' descriptions found in different sources, such as site descriptions and summaries, publications and awards.

Moreover, all initiatives have been reported as they have been perceived from a guest user's view. This means that authors did not register on any of these websites for checking their full functionality for registered users. Such a decision, and combined with the aforementioned language limitation, would lead to unfair consideration of cases, as for only some of them it would be possible to understand the additional opportunities for registered users.

Overall, authors have tried to provide as complete information as possible for each of the reported websites and by employing different sources in this process (the website per se, references to it, award candidate descriptions). Moreover, authors have tried to identify as many as possible eParticipation initiatives and do not in any way claim that they have managed to identify the full set of initiatives taking place currently in this field across Europe.

### 3 eParticipation initiatives in Europe

The overall findings of our survey amount to 255 eParticipation initiatives. Most of them refer to the local and national level (31% and 28% respectively) followed by initiatives at the European level (19%) and at the regional level (17%). Only 2 transnational initiatives could be identified throughout Europe, while we also include 10 initiatives with an international scope (Figure 1).



**Figure 1 – Participation level**

The 48 initiatives with a European scope include initiatives by European Institutions (mostly the European Parliament and the European Commission), by Agencies of the European Union, by political parties, and initiatives relevant to EU presidencies and to Plan-D<sup>11</sup> activities (European Commission, 2005). Furthermore, the 10 international initiatives originate from important civil society organisations and other international organisations, such as Amnesty international, Greenpeace and the Aarhus Clearinghouse.

In terms of offered activities, eParticipation initiatives may be categorised in 10 different areas (Figure 2), noting that each initiative usually offers activities in more than one participation areas. Most of the initiatives provide information to the public, while a great number of initiatives offer the possibility to participate in deliberation and consultation activities. Other areas frequently encountered are discourse, spatial planning, campaigning, community building and polling.

<sup>11</sup> The European Commission has proposed Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate in order to stimulate a wider debate between the European Union's democratic institutions and citizens. It is seen as complementary to the already existing or proposed initiatives and programmes such as those in the field of education, youth, culture and promoting active European citizenship (European Commission, 2005).

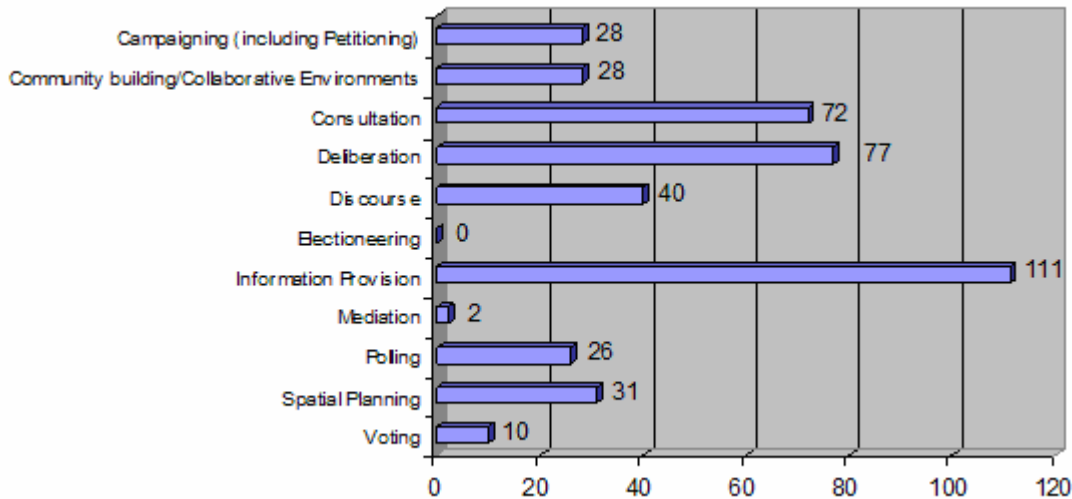


Figure 2 – Participation areas

Looking closer at participation areas, it is interesting to notice that their degree of utilisation may differ according to participation level. For facilitating clearer comparison we provide in Figure 3 the participation areas normalised by the overall number of initiatives per participation level. Results indicate that some areas have approximately the same degree of utilisation (i.e. community building, polling, mediation), while great differences may be observed for other areas. Specifically, information provision activities are much more frequent at the European level than at the national or local levels. On the other hand, consultation activities display a clear trend of being more common as the participation level narrows. The same trend is much more evident for spatial planning activities; according to our survey spatial planning activities are limited at the national level (2 activities identified), and become more frequent at the regional and local levels (6 and 23 identified activities respectively). In fact, at the local level spatial planning activities are nearly as frequent as the deliberation, consultation, and information provision activities.

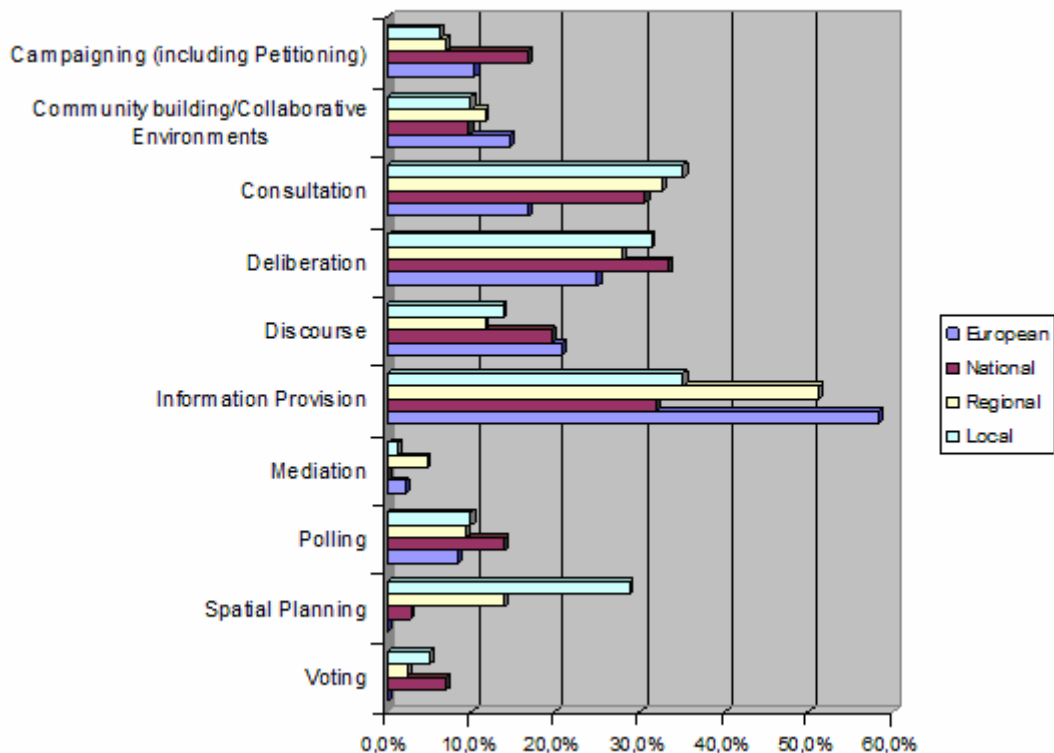
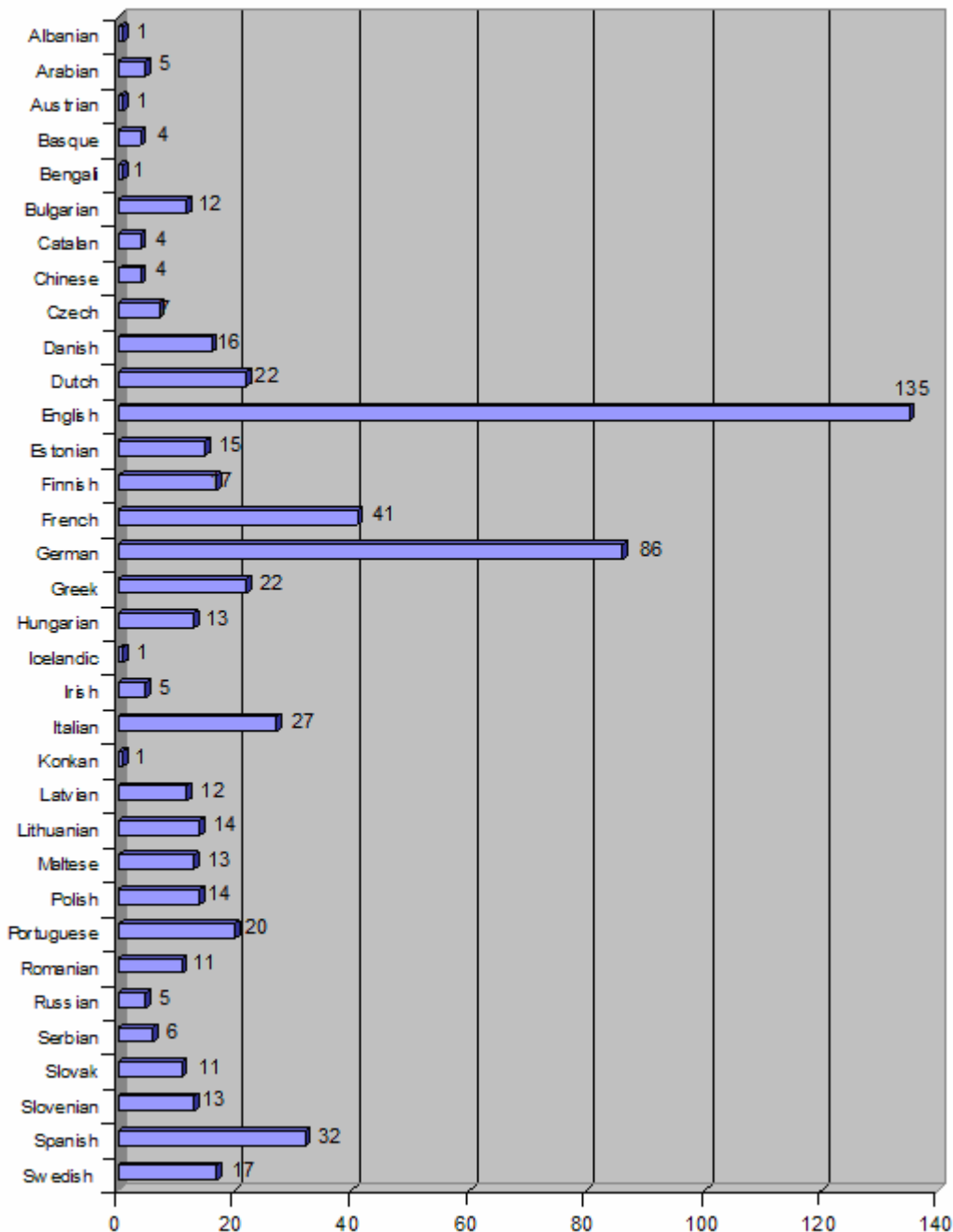
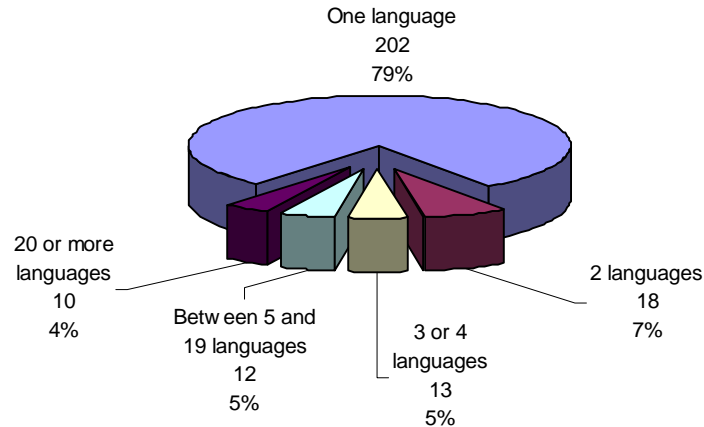


Figure 3 – Participation areas per level of participation

In terms of the languages in which eParticipation activities take place, the identified initiatives are offered in more than 30 languages (Figure 4). This can be attributed mainly to the fact that some initiatives are offered in more than one language (Figure 5). Such multilingual initiatives are usually active at the European and International levels and usually focus at information provision. National eParticipation activities are at a percentage of 99% offered in only one language, whilst a few initiatives at the regional and local level are offered in more than one language in order to involve local populations like immigrants and other minorities.

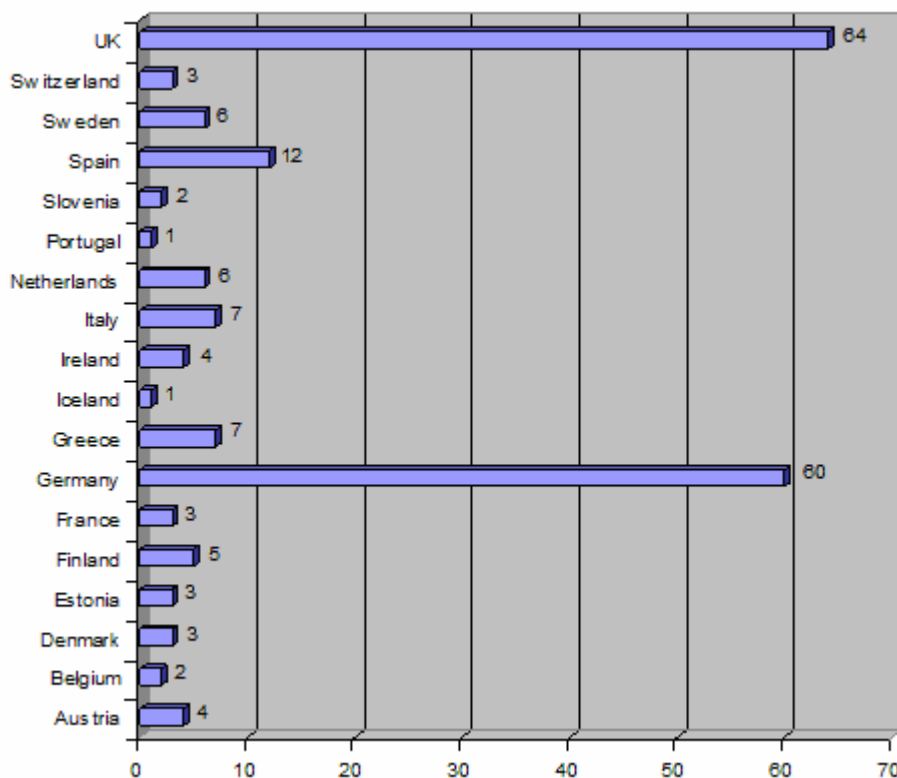


**Figure 4** – Languages in which eParticipation initiatives are offered



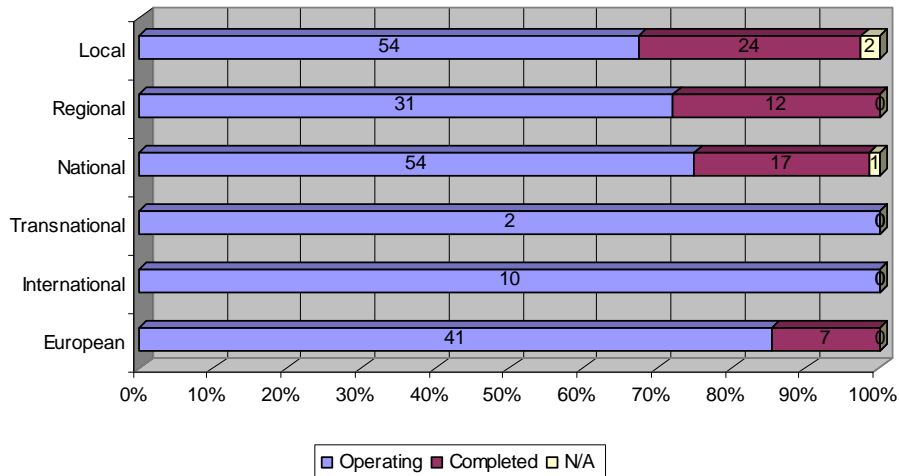
**Figure 5** – Number of languages in which eParticipation initiatives are offered

As explained in the beginning of this section, initiatives of European and international scope originate mostly from European Institutions and Agencies and civil society organisations. Hence, the origin of European initiatives is usually Brussels whilst the origin of international activities may be determined by the headquarters' location of each organisation. As such information is irrelevant to the objectives of this survey, it would be appropriate to examine only initiatives with national, regional and local scope with regards to their origin; these initiatives originate from 18 different European countries (Figure 6), 16 EU member states, Switzerland and Iceland.



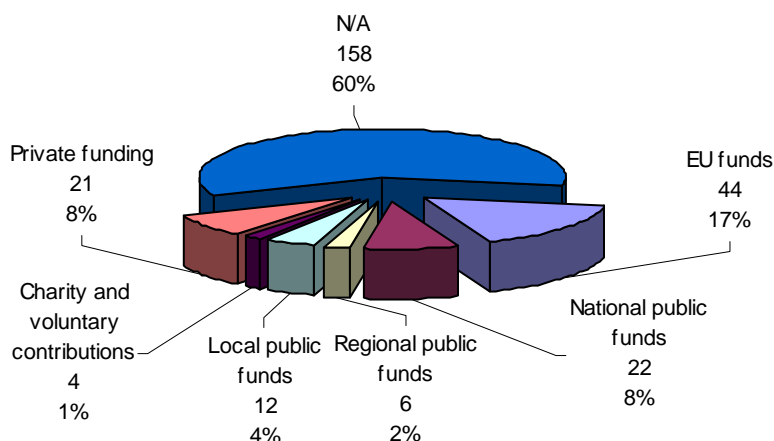
**Figure 6** – Origin of initiatives with a national, regional and local scope

Most of the initiatives in all different participation levels are still in operation (Figure 7); in total only 24% of these are found to be completed.



**Figure 7 – Current operation status**

It has not been possible to identify the type of funding for 60% of the initiatives. However, it seems that most of the remaining 40% are utilising EU funds, while national public funds and private funds are also frequently used (Figure 8).



**Figure 8 – Funding types utilised**

## 4 Discussion and limitations

With regard to eParticipation initiatives by the EU, findings indicate that more and more interesting activities are being established and most importantly that these activities are addressing the whole of Europe. To this contributes the fact that EU eParticipation activities are offered in many official EU languages enabling in this way a large number of EU citizens to get involved. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that at the transnational level only two eParticipation initiatives have been identified, whilst many different initiatives have been identified in each one of the rest participation levels. This is an indication that eParticipation has not yet evolved as a means of transnational or trans-regional cooperation and understanding within Europe.

With regard to participation areas, information provision, deliberation and consultation are overall the most frequently targeted areas. Nevertheless, the most interesting results of this survey are probably that the utilisation degree of participation areas may vary according to participation level. Specifically, results indicate that information provision activities are much more frequent at participation levels with a larger scale (such as the European and international level), while consultation and spatial planning activities display a clear trend of being more common as the participation level narrows. Considering that: (a) information provision is about one-way communication towards the public and therefore does not depend on the actual involvement of the public, and that (b) consultation and spatial planning activities are about two-way communication with the public and

therefore are dependent on actual involvement of the public in order to provide results and be considered a success, we may come up to the following empirical conclusion: *The greater the number of people targeted in an eParticipation initiative, the more general this initiative usually is, employing one-way communication. On the other hand, the fewer the people targeted in an eParticipation initiative, the more specific this initiative may be, allowing more active participation and more specific outcomes.* This finding makes us question the dynamics of the field and the potential impact that eParticipation initiatives may display under real circumstances. It suggests that eParticipation acts at the information level when it comes to large-scale initiatives and that it can become real influential only at a small scale. Hence, if eParticipation is visualised as a means for involving the millions of European citizens with the aim to jointly shape policies and influence decision-making, then current reality shows that Europe today is far away from this target. In fact, the EU may need to reconsider the actual potential of eParticipation and to revise priorities and expectations from the field, while at the same time try to learn from small-scale experience.

With regard to operation status of the identified initiatives, our survey shows that only 24% of these are found to be completed. This percentage is relatively low when considering that many initiatives were established for finding a specific solution over a specific time period (for example spatial planning solutions). At the same time, this low percentage may also act as an indication that the field of eParticipation in Europe is flourishing. Nonetheless, this survey identified some cases where important funding problems have forced remarkable initiatives to stop operating. This finding shows that it is imperative to set up the appropriate mechanisms both at European and at national levels for identifying good practice initiatives and for helping them to be sustained over a long period of time.

Finally, we should also discuss the survey finding that the majority of the identified initiatives originate from UK and Germany and are offered in the English and German languages. This is definitely evidence that increased eParticipation activity is taking place in these countries, but the authors do not necessarily consider it as evidence that these countries perform better than the rest in the field of eParticipation. Similarly, the lack of identified initiatives from some European countries is just an indication and not sufficient evidence for concluding that eParticipation is non-existent in these countries. Our experience from this survey shows that some initiatives perform really well at disseminating their efforts and results and thus they may be easily identified through multiple sources. On the other hand, poor promotion and the language barrier make it difficult for some other initiatives to become known to the wider public and get appreciated. This is an indication of the importance of a centralised European database of eParticipation programmes and initiatives and the role it can play for enhancing and promoting work in the eParticipation field. The gathering of all eParticipation initiatives in one widely used database and the identification of good practices from all over Europe and at any participation level will contribute to the exchange of experience and the realisation of good practice transfer if and when this is found to be feasible. ePractice.eu acts already as such a repository of eParticipation initiatives from all over Europe, however it is still not adequately populated in this field.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper provides an understanding of progress and current trends of eParticipation through a survey of current and past fully operational eParticipation initiatives across Europe. The survey included eParticipation initiatives originating from or targeting the geographical area of Europe, including both EU and non EU member states. In total, 255 eParticipation initiatives have been identified, originating from 18 different countries and being offered in 34 different languages. Most of the identified initiatives refer to the local and national level (31% and 28% respectively) and 76% of them are currently operational. It has not been possible to identify the type of funding for the majority of the initiatives, however the limited evidence gathered suggest that eParticipation initiatives seem to utilise mainly EU funds. Finally, most of the identified eParticipation activities may be categorised under the participation areas of information provision, deliberation and consultation.

Empirical evidence from the survey suggests that there is a connection between the initiatives' participation areas and their participation level. In fact, it may be concluded that as the scope of eParticipation initiatives narrows the more specific these initiatives become, allowing more active participation and more specific outcomes. This empirical finding should be the basis for further consideration of the potential impact and limitations of eParticipation. It should be further examined whether eParticipation is indeed in a position to meaningfully involve the public at a large scale and in what way this could be achieved.

Future work includes gathering detailed information for a number of selected eParticipation initiatives. The instrument for this deeper survey is a questionnaire specifically designed for this purpose; it aims not only at capturing the essential information for each initiative but also at identifying specific details that could lead to the potential labeling of an initiative as good practice. For instance, the questionnaire includes reporting of the

results and impact of the initiative, the problems encountered, the lessons learnt, potential transferability, etc. The intention here is to draw conclusions not on which initiatives are considered as good practices, but most importantly on what constitutes good practice in the eParticipation field. Authors anticipate that this survey will provide a solid base of eParticipation practices and accumulated experience that may be further utilised by experts and practitioners in the field for drawing conclusions with regard to what works, what doesn't, and how can one minimise threats and at the same identify and exploit opportunities during design, implementation and operation of an eParticipation initiative.

Overall it may be concluded that there is increasing activity in the field of eParticipation in Europe, and there are some remarkable initiatives already implemented and fully operational. However, it seems that there are still many opportunities ahead and a lot could still be achieved with the cooperation and transfer of good practice between countries and regions, but also among the different levels of participation. Hopefully, the survey presented in this paper along with the planned future work by the authors will contribute to diffusion and transfer of eParticipation good practice.

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