

Direct Decision-Making Mechanisms and E-Democracy Tools: Cases of Austria, Croatia, Greece, Italy, and Slovenia

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the importance of e-democracy and the introduction of information and communication technologies in democratic processes. Digitalisation significantly impacts citizens' involvement in e-participation and direct decision-making in developed societies. We want to show the current local and national levels based on comparisons of direct decision-making solutions and e-participatory tools in Austria, Croatia, Greece, Italy, and Slovenia. It should be emphasised that with the development of e-participation tools, Croatia, Greece, and Italy are ahead, while Austria and Slovenia are lagging behind the current trends in the citizen's direct decision making and the emergence of e-participation. This is mainly due to a lack of confidence in online security and a decline in interest in e-democracy, mostly in Slovenia.

Keywords: e-democracy, e-participation, direct decision making, governance, European Union

Riassunto. *Meccanismi decisionali diretti e strumenti di democrazia elettronica: casi di Austria, Croazia, Grecia, Italia e Slovenia*

Il documento si concentra sull'importanza della democrazia elettronica e sull'introduzione delle tecnologie dell'informazione e della comunicazione nei processi democratici, che nell'era della digitalizzazione ha un impatto significativo sullo sviluppo del coinvolgimento dei cittadini nella partecipazione e nel processo decisionale diretto nelle società sviluppate. Sulla base di confronti tra soluzioni decisionali dirette e strumenti di partecipazione elettronica in Austria, Croazia, Grecia, Italia e Slovenia, vogliamo mostrare la situazione attuale sia a livello locale che nazionale. Va sottolineato che con lo sviluppo di strumenti di partecipazione elettronica, Croazia, Grecia e Italia sono avanti, mentre Austria e Slovenia sono in ritardo rispetto alle tendenze attuali nel processo decisionale diretto e all'emergere della partecipazione elettronica. Le ragioni di ciò sono principalmente dovute alla mancanza di fiducia nella sicurezza online e al calo dell'interesse per la democrazia elettronica, soprattutto in Slovenia.

Parole chiave: democrazia elettronica, partecipazione elettronica, processo decisionale diretto, governance, Unione europea

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1. Introduction

The concept of democracy has been described in the scientific literature as confusing. The reason for this labelling lies in a variety of conflicting interpretations of the meaning of democracy. However, the majority of the democracy definitions came from Western society, where democracy is understood as a norm established based on Western cultural hegemony

(Grugel and Bishop, 2014). Thus, we find definitions of democracy as undeniably good, like human rights, and as something that will shape a more innovative society.

The role of information and communication technologies (I.C.T.s) is to strengthen democracy, provided it has a known social fabric. It is to be considered that the use of I.C.T.s changes the concept of public and community. In this context, the essential importance of research can also be understood to contribute to e-democracy as a political tool that enables social innovation to bring about social change. E-democracy aims to enable citizens' participation in political decision-making through e-participation techniques (for consultation purposes) and e-voting (Paulin, 2019). The design of such a communication and, at the same time, the participatory tool is always normative. It is a social technology within which human communication and decisions are made for specific purposes and orientations (social, economic, political, developmental, programmatic). It is important to note that we reproduce and formulate new norms by designing software for that purpose (Hansson, 2015). Despite their differences in content, both the deliberative and the participatory models have shown that information and communication technology considerably influence future democratic development. It is worth noting that individual authors have emphasised that increasing the amount of information can cause congestion, frustration, and apathy among citizens (Davis, 2010).

In the 21st century, the digitalisation processes enable the emergence of social innovation e-participation (e.g., open government, participatory budgeting, citizen participation in political decision-making and e-voting). The participation (of-line and online solutions enable a more liberal and participatory approach that allows direct democracy solutions in technologically advanced urban communities (e.g., Smart Region, Smart City, Smart Village). It is about a democratic process of self-organisation in the context of (cyber) community and government interactions (Krommyda, Somarakis and Stratigea, 2019). E-democracy has become an essential factor for citizens' decision making. The leading countries using e-democracy solutions are Denmark, Finland, the Republic of Korea, the Netherlands, and Australia (United Nations, 2018).

The importance of socio-political and socio-technological development led us to the research question: what direct democratic approaches and e-participation solutions have been introduced in Austria, Croatia, Greece, Italy and Slovenia? The article's main objective is to analyse e-participation and direct democratic approaches in the studied countries by reviewing different online participation systems and literature.

The article consists of a theoretical part on e-democracy concepts in the European Union, followed by direct decision-making mechanisms and e-participation solutions in the studied countries. The last chapter contains a conclusion that focuses on the paper's main findings, limitations, and recommendations for further research.

2. Theoretical overview of e-democracy concepts in European Union

In the early 1980s, it was first pointed out that information and communication technology broke down barriers of time and space and enabled a new approach to direct democracy (Toffler, 1984). However, the development of e-democracy did not take place until the late 1990s. For example, e-democracy was first mentioned in European documents in 1998 (e-government was first mentioned in the E.U. in 1994 Bangemann Report) in a report at the Information Society Forum conference of the European Commission (Baskoy, 2009). In 2000 the first steps were taken to develop e-participation and e-business. The E.U. Presidency in Lisbon recommended providing everything necessary to develop a digital and knowledge economy. It was based on developing new goods and services to enable growth, competitiveness and new jobs (European Parliament, 2000).

Van Dijk (2012) estimates that the contribution to the development of e-democracy in the 1990s was limited, especially in facilitating access to and exchanging political information. Van Dijk says that implementing e-democracy projects related to public debate, consultation, and community building has not succeeded. He also points out the ineffectiveness of projects related to the implementation of direct democracy. Van Dijk also argues that e-participation is mainly limited to the initial and final stages of the political

cycle and rarely provides access to the key stages of decision-making and policy implementation. However, the development of new online tools and cyberspace, as well as the reforms of modern democracy and the political discourse on increasing the influence of citizens in policy-making, especially at the local level, increasingly demonstrate the need to develop new e-democracy models that not only facilitate communication and consultation between citizens and with their political representatives but go beyond the concept of representative democracy and allow for the introduction of a direct e-model of democracy and the transformation of indirect decision-making into direct decision-making by citizens (Kneuer, 2016).

Nguyen and Alexander (1996) proposed a plebiscitary model as a political system in which citizens actively participate in public decision making through electronic voting to develop a shared ideal democracy. Barber (2003), contrary to Nguyen and Alexander, proposed a so-called deliberative e-democracy model. Accordingly, Barber believes that the deliberative e-democracy model should focus on citizen participation in debates on public issues rather than electronic voting. Kim (2008) believes that the deliberative e-democracy model sees cyberspace as a medium for implementing the public sphere processes described by Habermas (1989) as a place where private entities can unite as a public entity and engage in rational thought.

The theory of deliberative democracy focuses on the consultative quality of the decision-making process in politics. According to the theory, the legitimacy of democratic decisions can be enhanced if such decisions are preceded by deliberation that is as free as possible from bias and unequal power relations among deliberators (Held, 1992). Deliberative Democrats are divided into those focusing on reflection within political elites and those with a more populist orientation and engage in debates among lay citizens (Ponet and Leib, 2011). In Europe, there are historical cases where populist-oriented elite become effective (direct or indirect) promoters of populist tendencies in society (especially the model of direct democracy is very useful for such tendencies). So, it is not surprising thus technopopulism has been innovated in Europe. The key elements of tech populism include internal egalitarianism, people organised in a social community, direct democracy, techno-

libertarianism and hyper-representation (technical knowledge, ownership, anti-elite technocracy). Techno-populism builds on political elites' corruption, and the government is corrupt, politics is not adequate, meritocracy as ideology, and the rule of law (De Blasio and Sorice, 2018). Bickerton and Accetti (2015) question themselves whether there is a possibility that the struggle between the opposition between the left and the right can replace the "split" between populism and technocracy. Müller (2017) points out that technocracy believes in only one correct political solution and populism believes only one credible will. This statement implies that both somehow reject democratic debate and can be interpreted as a result of the depoliticisation process. It is another aspect of the post-political period, the results of which are visible in the effect of depoliticisation and the emergence of a new form of repoliticisation through technology.

In the 21st century, I.C.T. enables the transition of public policy-making and decision-making to the citizen. It is expected that further technological development and social change will prevent us from needing more political bodies in "smart cities" in a few years. Therefore, the local council and the aim must be to ensure that politics and bureaucracy lose their influence on the management of local communities. The e-democracy solutions are the 21st-century focus primarily on people's online participation in opinion-forming and political decision-making. E-democracy thus enables citizens who are entitled to vote to participate equally in the stimulation, development and formulation of government decisions. It is a process that includes social, economic and cultural conditions that enable the free and equal exercise of political self-determination (Ceccarini, 2021).

It is also important to emphasise the crucial difference in developing e-democracy concepts between the E.U. and the U.S. because the E.U. has focused on more democratic strategies, while U.S. strategies focus more on technological development. It should be noted here that European policy aims to develop European projects, most of which should be focused on the empowerment of the European citizens, as has been the case since the 1976 Tindeman Report, which stated that a European project should be more than just an integrated market (Thorn, 1976). From this, we can conclude that the European model of e-democracy must be equally down-to-earth and citizen-oriented.

The informatisation of governmental processes increasingly influences moving communication between citizens and public and political administration from the physical to the cyber-physical environment. For this reason, the European Union wants to enable its sovereignty in cyberspace by balancing many of its elements and defining its boundaries and ensuring its security. Thus, in December 2020, the European Commission presented a New E.U. Cybersecurity Strategy and new rules to make physical and digital critical entities more resilient (European Commission, 2020).

The development of cyberspace has led to many challenges in regulating the internet and establishing minimum standards for its interoperability. These rules are inherently controversial, given the specific way the network operates and the need to balance all fundamental human rights relating to the exercise of freedom of expression and association, which are often in conflict with other rights and public interests. The North American and European networks are different, showing how complex and delicate they are (Vieira, 2018). According to the European Parliament report on the development of e-democracy in the E.U., European citizenship is likely to become more critical in this case. Since nationalities do not limit the European political space and its identity, the possibility of sharing common values and characteristics of users in cyberspace will mean greater integration in European cyberspace, which is crucial for the level of the digital single market and e-democracy (European Parliament, 2018).

In theory and practice, the universal set of models for e-democracy were formed based on different criteria. The main models that have developed over the last 25 years are presented in figure 1. The concept of e-democracy itself is also somewhat vague. It is understood as part of e-government, including cyber-politics, e-participation and open government (Hansson, 2015; Webster and Leleux, 2018). This breadth of the concept is probably one of the possible reasons not many citizen-oriented models have been developed so far. International organisations such as the United Nations and the O.E.C.D. define a three-level approach. For example, the United Nations distinguishes between e-information, e-consultation and e-decision making. Although the O.E.C.D. also uses a three-level approach, e-government is subsumed under e-cooperation and includes e-information, e-consultation

and e-participation. Besides, the O.E.C.D. defines e-cooperation as a two-way mechanism (top-down and bottom-up) instead of the United Nations as a two-way mechanism (Kneuer, 2016).

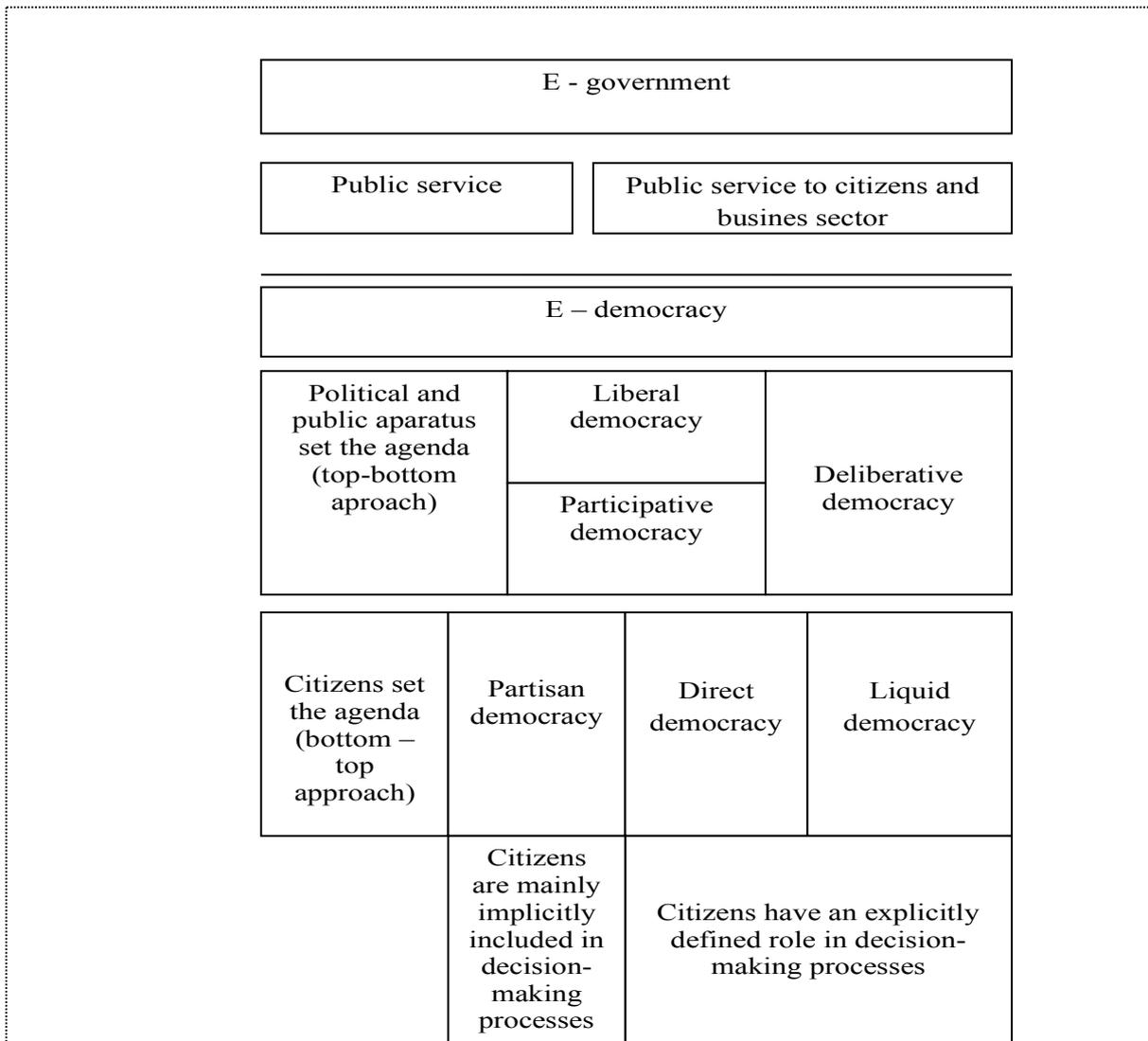


Fig. 1. E-government concept and e-democracy (Roblek et al., 2020)

An example of e-participatory democracy at the regional level is the "io Partecipo +" website in Emilia-Romagna, Italy (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2019).

In Finland, they have an open-source platform for citizens' initiatives organised at the national level. A citizens' initiative can contain a draft law or suggest that the Finnish

parliament start to draft a law. An initiative may also concern the amendment or repeal of a valid law (Digital and Population Data Services Agency, 2021).

Estonia is an example of a country that has set up platforms at the municipal level to prepare and adopt participatory budgeting (Tartu, 2019).

Biased e-democracy involves the participation of citizens in political debates that do not take place through the usual channels and their representatives. The agenda is set by visible public expression, not restricted by the government. However, partisan democracy does not lead to decision-making, and consensus on a particular issue is rare (Carlson, 2016; Päivärinta and Sæbø, 2006).

Liberal e-democracy allows citizens to participate in government decision-making, but their role is indirect. It is, in fact, a representative democracy in which citizens empower their representatives to represent them. In addition, however, liberal e-democracy enables citizens to communicate their views and proposals to their representatives via I.C.T. and communicate directly with them (Fuchs, 2006; Lindner, Hennen and Aichholzer, 2016).

Consultative or advisory democracy provides citizens with clear links to decision-making processes but does not necessarily allow citizens to control the agenda. In this model, politicians and citizens come together for debate and discourse, leading to the formation of public opinion. In the background, all the threads of decision-making are in the hands of the electorate representatives in parliament because they are still a representative form of democracy which, although it requires cooperation between politicians and citizens, gives them explicit decision-making power through participation and involvement of citizens. Consultative referenda are an example of deliberative democracy. The purpose of implementing e-democracy in deliberative referendums is to strengthen cooperation between politicians and citizens in each legislative period (Lindner, Hennen and Aichholzer, 2016). Two examples of e-tools implemented by the Finnish government should be good examples of e-evolutionary democracy. Both can be used for consultation when drafting legislation. The platform Otakantaa.fi (<https://www.otakantaa.fi/fi/>, 22/05/2021) can design questionnaires and discussions during the drafting process. Lausuntopalvelu.fi (<https://www.lausuntopalvelu.fi/FI>, 21/05/2021) collects formal requests for online

statements, which should always be done before the government sends the bill to parliament. An example of a consultative platform is the Estonian platform initiative rahvaalgatus.ee, which allows initiatives collecting more than 1000 digital signatures to participate in the parliamentary debate and have the opportunity to monitor the draft legislation (Peck and Danilova, 2016).

In the era of e-democracy, the concept of direct or fundamental democracy has established itself as a radical contradiction to the traditional form of representative democracy. Political decisions, or at least essential decisions, are made by the public. In contrast to participatory democracy, which limits the scope of public participation and leads to decisions that are not legally binding on either the government or parliament, direct democracy is understood as a form in which citizens control the design of code processes and the decision-making process. All decisions are taken in this way, become legally binding. A prerequisite for establishing such a model is that the internet becomes a key factor in establishing democracy, replacing traditional forms of communication (Asatryan *et al.*, 2017). The concept of liquid democracy is linked to direct democracy. Liquid democracy is considered a collective decision-making model that aims to improve democratic decision-making systems in communities. It is classified as direct and representative democracy, and unlike representative democracy as an example of a static solution, liquid democracy is considered a dynamic solution. The liquid democracy enables a person to decide whether a person wants to participate in a particular issue or leave his electoral vote to someone who perhaps has more knowledge about the problem (Escoffier, Gilbert and Lanneau-Pass, 2019).

The following section concentrates on demonstrating legal options for direct decision-making and the use of e-democracy tools, focusing on e-participation in Austria, Greece, Croatia, Italy, and Slovenia.

3. Direct decision-making mechanisms and e-democracy tools in the sample countries

3.1 Austria

3.1.1 Direct decision-making mechanisms

The role of civic participation in Austria is defined by the Austrian Federal Constitution of 1920 and is also determined by parliamentary rules and procedures (Muller, 1999). The Austrian Federal Constitution defines the following forms of direct democracy: referendum, popular initiative, consultation, parliamentary citizens' initiative and parliamentary petition. The first implementation of the popular initiative at the national level occurred relatively late in 1964. The first referendum was held in 1978 (referendum on the utilisation nuclear energy act) and the second on the E.U.'s access in 1994 (Pelinka and Greiderer, 1996). At the regional level, the provincial constitutions of all nine countries also provide direct democracy, albeit for different purposes. They also allow for citizens' judgement and the right to petition. In Vorarlberg, direct democracy and other forms of participation were included in the provincial Constitution in 2013. For example, sacred wisdom was introduced within which a small group of randomly selected citizens, members of each municipality, deliberate on municipal issues for one or two days and develop ideas and recommendations for political decision-makers (Büro für Zukunftsfragen, 2014).

The Austrian federal constitutional law (Republic of Austria, 1920) defines a popular initiative in article 41 and the Act on popular initiatives (Bundesministerium für Digitalisierung und Wirtschaftsstandort, 2021a). From 30th January 2018, citizens can sign a popular initiative in any municipality (regardless of their place of residence) or online with a “qualified electronic signature” (“Handy-Signatur”) (Bundesministerium Inneres, 2018). The relevant parliamentary committee will examine the initiative that receives sufficient support, which will report on the plenary session over four months and continue to consider the issue. The popular initiative is non-binding, and the popular initiative national council

members can decide whether and in what form its content will be implemented (Bundesministerium für Digitalisierung und Wirtschaftsstandort, 2021a).

The instrument of citizen consultation is regulated by article 49b of the federal constitutional Act (1920) and the corresponding Act of 1989 (Bundesministerium für Digitalisierung und Wirtschaftsstandort, 2021b). It is a non-binding instrument that the government or the national council can initiate. The purpose of the consultation is to obtain the opinion of citizens on fundamental issues or questions of national importance. The instrument was only used in 2013 to obtain an opinion on introducing a professional army and a voluntary social year or maintaining compulsory military and community service. At the regional level, the consultation instrument has greater use. For example, it was first used in Vorarlberg in 1972, where consultation was held on shop closing times and in 1989 on the ban on night-time driving of lorries. Other consultations at the regional level include the consultation of March 1986, when the population of Lower Austria had to decide on the capital of Lower Austria (Schaller, Schmidt and Breinschmid, 2018).

In Austria, direct democratic instruments are a common way of expressing the opinion of citizens at the local level. For example, by October 2014, about 150 referendums, 554 public initiatives and 172 population surveys (preliminary data) had been conducted at the local level (Bork, Egg, Giese, Hütter and Poier, 2015, p. 35).

The parliamentary citizens' initiative and the parliamentary petition can be supported online in Austria (Republik Österreich Parlament, 2018a). A citizens' initiative in the responsibility of a legislative or executive body must be supported by 500 Austrian citizens (aged 16 and over). The initiative must deal with matters that fall within the legislative or executive branch (Republik Österreich Parlament, 2018b). The national council or federal council members must be informed in a plenary session. Citizens may express their support for a parliamentary petition on the website of the Austrian parliament, which is for information only.

In both cases, via petitions and citizens' initiatives, the parliamentary committee can take into account and obtain the opinion of the competent ministries and institutions only or forward it to the Austrian ombudsman committee or other parliamentary committees. The

committee's reports are published on the website of the Austrian parliament (Republik Österreich Parlament, 2018c).

3.1.2 E-democracy in Austria

In Austria, e-government focuses primarily on providing e-services for legal entities and natural persons. The most important portal for communication between citizens and administration in Austria was, until 2019, the website [Help.gv.at.](http://Help.gv.at), which was networked Austrian public authorities and has offered a one-stop-shop for online services since 2001. In 2019, it was replaced by the new central e-government platform [oesterreich.gv.at.](http://oesterreich.gv.at) (Die Presse, 2019). Within the EU, Austria is one of the leading countries in providing and using e-government tools. However, it lags far behind in providing e-participation and decision-making tools. The reason for the underdevelopment of e-democracy in Austria lies in citizens' mistrust of Internet security (data protection) and the mere functioning of I.C.T. As a result, citizens cannot participate and decide directly in public affairs via digital media, and it is not yet possible to vote online in Austria (Pohoryles, 2017).

In 2012, however, the Austrian government had made public data (data.gv.at) available for government data by creating a public information catalogue, thus enabling the so-called open government (<https://www.data.gv.at>, 10/11/2019).

The development of e-democracy in the country is in the hands of civil society organisations. The leading developer of the project is the Netzwerk Zivilgesellschaft (Network Civil Society), affiliated with the Akademie der Zivilgesellschaft (Academy of Civil Society). The network brings together various initiatives to exchange experiences and "acceptable practices". In addition, the Academy offers several e-democracy and e-participation and promotes voluntary activities in this field (Akademie der Zivilgesellschaft, 2021).

In Austria, this has led to informal forms of e-democracy, mostly organised through websites such as Avaaz. In Austria, for example, a website has been developed dedicated to

social activism in the form of online petitions. This informal online petition connects interest groups with target groups such as public authorities, private companies and other organisations. However, there are no specific procedures for implementing these petitions, whether and how the addressees of the petition have to react to them (Dalpra and Rosenberge, 2020). An example of such a petition is the request of the people of Graz to participate in the preparation of municipal urban planning and inform about future projects at an early stage. The citizens also expressed the view that the central concern of the city should be to strengthen the participation of citizens in the preparation and decision-making process of city policy (Nachhaltig in Graz, 2019).

At the level of the development of e-participation in the Vienna City Administration, the participation portal (Partizipationsplattform der Stadt Wien: Ideen entwickeln. Diskutieren. Umsetzen) is the most noteworthy. As the website's name suggests, it is intended to consult citizens who can make concrete suggestions to the administration. For example, in addition to the portal, the portal also discusses the development of design proposals and the implementation of the participatory budget for 2017 and 2019 in the districts of Margareten and Simmering, direct discussions in the districts and video conferences, discussions about the year Urban Digital Agenda 2020 and digital health, etc. (Partizipationsplattform der Stadt Wien, 2019).

3.2 Croatia

3.2.1 Direct decision-making mechanisms

The forms of direct democracy in Croatia include a plebiscite, a citizens' initiative and a referendum. According to article 87 of the Croatian Constitution act (Republic of Croatia, 1990), the plebiscite provides that the Croatian state parliament may call a so-called state referendum on proposals to amend the Constitution, law, or other matters may fall within its competence. The president of the republic may, on the proposal of government and with the

co-signature of the prime minister, hold a referendum on the amendment of the Constitution or on any other issue he considers relevant to the independence, integrity and existence of the Republic of Croatia. The Croatian parliament shall hold referendums on the issues referred to in paragraphs (1) and (2) of the Constitution following the Act, required by 10% of the total electoral body of the Republic of Croatia. A majority of the electorate shall decide such referendums. The decisions of the referendum shall be binding. An act shall be adopted in each such referendum. Such a law may also determine the conditions for holding a consultative referendum.

Croatian parliament shall, in case of a citizens initiative following the law, convene a referendum on the matters referred to in Article 87(1) and (2) of the Constitution (the Republic of Croatia, 1990) if 10 per cent of the total electoral body of the Republic of Croatia so requests. A majority of the electorate shall decide such referendums. The decisions of the referendum shall be binding. A law shall be adopted in each such referendum. Such a law may also determine the conditions for holding a consultative referendum.

Two constitutional referenda have been held in Croatia. The first was the referendum on independence in 1991 and the second in 2013 on the institution of marriage (Rytko-Marczewska, 2018).

The state-binding referendum as stipulated in Article 142 of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (1990). It is nearly related to integrating the Republic of Croatia into alliances with other countries. The decision on the assessment can be initiated by at least one-third of the members of the Croatian Parliament, the President of the Republic and the Government of the Republic of Croatia. Any procedure for the accession of the Republic of Croatia to alliances with other countries is prohibited if such an association leads or may lead to the reconstruction of the State South Slavic Community or any form of consolidated Balkan state. Any association of the Republic of Croatia shall be decided Croatian Parliament by a two-thirds majority of all members. Most voters who vote will take any decision to join the Republic of Croatia in a referendum. The provisions of this Article on

association shall also be annexed to the conditions and procedures for separating the Republic of Croatia.

Croatia also has a consultative referendum, which may be convened by the Republic of Croatia for the territory of one or more local or regional self-governing units to obtain the opinion of the inhabitants of that regional territory structure of local or regional self-governing units. The right to participate in a consultative referendum shall be granted to Croatian citizens aged 18 and over who reside in one or more local government units and in one or more regional government units for which a referendum is being held. The consultative referendum shall be decided by a majority of the votes cast (Rytko-Marczewska, 2018).

3.2.2 E-democracy in Croatia

Croatia has several instruments that help ensure that citizens can participate in decision-making through electronic communication channels and contribute to a higher level of participation and quality of decision-making at the national and local levels. At the state level (top-level), two web portals which fulfil the functions of e-participation are worth mentioning: Imamopravoznati.org and e-advice.

In Imamopravoznati.org (<https://imamopravoznati.org>, 12/11/2019), this is a Croatian website to which enquiries are addressed to public authorities in Croatia Act on the Right of Access to Information OG 85/15 (Republic of Croatia, 2015). The portal allows all citizens to seek information from a national authority in Croatia. The searcher will receive a reply if the information is valid following the law (<https://imamopravoznati.org>, 12/11/2019).

E-Counseling is a website designed to consult the interested public about many draft laws and regulations adopted in Croatia every year. Public consultations usually prepare draft laws proposed by ministries and various regulations proposed by public authorities and state agencies. The purpose of the e-advisory platform is to allow the interested public to familiarise themselves with the content of the regulations in preparation before entering into

force and having the opportunity to read about them and formulate their provisions in advance. The interested public comprises all citizens as natural persons and legal persons establishing various public authorities' relations. For example, civil society organisations (citizens' initiatives, associations, foundations, private institutions, trade unions, employers' organisations), representatives of the academic community, chambers, public bodies, and other legal persons with a public service mission may be affected by regulation. Any consultation also entails an obligation for the authority that imposed the regulation to inform the public that it has been consulted. Besides, all comments received and all statements made by public authorities are published on the electronic consultation page, which ensures the accountability of the information bodies and the responsibility of citizens and organisations commenting on the regulation to make their comments in a civilised, constructive and consistent manner (<https://esavjetovanja.gov.hr/ECon/Dashboard>, 23/03/2020).

Only Rijeka, Zagreb, Pula and Osijek have marked access to public information of the Croatian cities. Access to G.I.S. the websites of Croatian municipalities is widespread, but municipal websites vary according to data access possibilities. The city of Zagreb is considered dominant in the quality of (geographical G.I.S. information system) services. On the other hand, Rijeka offers the best offer of publicly accessible data for natural and legal persons (Apsolon, 2019).

In the area of citizen participation in decision-making processes, only a few cities in Croatia have developed an interactive digital implementation of public consultation, including the possibility for citizens to decide online on the preparation of a city budget. In e-participation and openness of budgeting, the leading Croatian cities are Pula and Rijeka, and the Croatian public expects the cities to develop standards that other Croatian cities will adopt. Both sides have developed an online format for e-advising citizens. In Croatia, they consider it necessary to develop e-advisory systems in all cities and introduce systems at the national level, which allow for interactive participation of the interested public in legal procedures, laws, and other regulations and actions. The development of simpler digital forms of websites to collect opinions and views of citizens is also being considered. The

purpose would be, for example, to »preserve citizens' views in the early stages of policy making, collect and adapt citizens' initiatives, monitor their design and adoption, create smaller non-binding referenda, polling stations, etc. Open budgeting includes Rijeka, Zagreb (both in the category of large cities) and Sisak (smaller cities), which have developed an interactive interface for budget planning and control.

In contrast, all other cities have a spreadsheet of budgets with visualisations. Split, Rijeka, Pula, and Karlovac are the most prosperous cities in terms of household documents. The cities of Rijeka and Pula also provide their citizens with e-participation budgets (Apsolon, 2019).

3.3 Greece

3.3.1 Direct decision-making mechanisms

The Constitution of Greece (Republic of Greece, 2001) defines a national plebiscite on critical national issues (ATP) - a referendum on important national issues. Article 44 of Law no. 4023/2011 (Republic of Greece, 2011) provides that the republic's president shall declare a referendum on important national issues by a resolution, following a resolution adopted by an absolute majority of all cabinet members of nominations. A referendum on laws passed by parliament that regulate critical social issues, except for tax issues, shall be declared by the president of the republic when three-fifths of all deputies decide on a proposal by two-fifths of all deputies, as well as on the rules of procedure and the law applying this paragraph. No more than two motions for a referendum on a bill may be submitted in the same parliamentary term. In exceptional cases, the president of the republic may, with the consent of the parliament prime minister, address a message to the citizens, including his opinion on the question of the referendum. The parliament prime minister must sign such a message and publish in the Government Official Gazette.

Article 16 of Greek law no. 4023/2011 on the extension of direct and participatory democracy by referendum (Republic of Greece, 2011) states that the majority of voters who agree with the majority of responses to valid ballot papers shall prevail. Shall be recognised as valid. A referendum on a critical national issue is binding if at least 40% of the citizens registered as voters have cast their votes.

An example of a constitutional referendum is the Greek plebiscite on the decision to accept the rescue conditions in the first debt crisis, jointly proposed by the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank on 25th June 2015 and implemented on 5th July 2015.

The Constitution of Greece (Republic of Greece, 2001) also defines a national plebiscite on social affairs (Greece, National Plebiscite [ATP] – a referendum on important social issues). This requirement for a plebiscite is also subject to the conditions laid down in Article 44 and Article 16 of Greek Law 4023 / 2011. Unlike a national plebiscite on critical national issues, which comes into force if 40% of the electorate vote in favour, the national plebiscite on social affairs comes into force if 50% of the electorate vote in favour (Article 16, paragraphs 3 and 4 of Greek law 4023/2011) (Republic of Greece, 2011).

3.3.2 E-democracy in Greece

In Greece, they ensure the transparency of the functioning of the public administration by publishing all decisions taken by their authorities on the Diavgeia portal (European Commission, 2018). In addition, the Opengov.gr portal was also created to meet the information needs of citizens. The portal provides information on all governmental and administrative decisions and builds best practices. It is designed to serve the principles of transparency, consultation, cooperation and accountability and comprises three initiatives (European Commission, 2018):

- (1) public appeals for the recruitment of civil servants;

- (2) an electronic debate that allows citizens and organisations to express their views and criticisms on draft legislation and policy initiatives;
- (3) In the OpenGov Laboratory case, an open innovation initiative combines the ideas and suggestions of citizens, the public, and the private sector. Labs.OpenGov.gr seeks to connect and harness decentralised knowledge and explore new ways to solve public administration problems.

Geodata.gov.gr offers open geodata and services. A national open data catalogue enables the INSPIRE Spatial Data Infrastructure provision of value-added services based on open data. Citizens can publish, access, reuse and visualise all published information free of charge (European Commission, 2018).

As part of e-participation design at the municipal level, it is necessary to point out Trikala, which was the first Greek city to introduce technology in 2006, enabling citizens to participate in both the first and second level of local decision-making and urban policy-making. In Thessaloniki, from 2016 to 2018, a website was set up to consult citizens, as well as a page with publicly accessible information on the functioning of the city administration and other data of interest to citizens and other stakeholders (mobility data, data on the functioning of research institutions and universities, etc.) (Open Government Partnership, 2018). However, Georgilis (2017) notes that progress in e-participation in Greek municipalities is slow, despite citizens' expressed interest in local government issues. Therefore, the study's authors recommend that Greek municipalities focus on designing well-designed e-participation tools and services, considering citizens' needs to integrate them into public affairs.

In participatory budgeting, open access to budget data has been established in the Western Greek region and the possibility for citizens to express their opinions on spending on tourism, culture, and social structures. The regional government determined the fund's amount. The process took place in the period 2016-2018. Citizens were informed about the process through the YouTube channel and video-on-demand, and citizens could submit proposals through the Diavgia portal and vote on them. Selected proposals were discussed at

a special regional meeting of representatives of regional authorities with citizens' representatives (Open Government Partnership, 2018).

3.4 Italy

3.4.1 Direct decision-making mechanisms

Under Italian legislation, a referendum presents a request for the entire electorate to express its position on a particular issue. In Italy, the referendum is the main instrument of direct democracy (Della Porta *et al.*, 2017). According to the Italian Constitution, there are four types of legally binding referendums in Italy (Palermo and Wilson, 2014).

At the national level, the Italian Constitution allows the holding of a legally binding referendum proposed by the citizens (Referendum popolare per deliberare l'abrogazione, totale o parziale, di una legge). In the case of a general referendum, a law or a measure having the force of law may be repealed in whole or in part if so, requested by five hundred thousand voters or five regional councils. A referendum may not be held when deciding on tax laws, the budget, amnesty or pardon, or a law ratifying an international treaty. Any citizen with the right to elect the representatives in the chamber of deputies can also vote in a referendum. A referendum is considered to have been held when most of those entitled to vote have cast a vote (50% of voters must participate), and most valid votes have been obtained (Republic of Italy, 1947, Art. 75).

Another form of the binding referendum is the Constitutional Referendum, which may be required in some cases when the parliament approves a new constitutional law (Republic of Italy, 1947, Art. 138). Citizens may also request a referendum to confirm the adoption of the Statute of Regular Regions (Republic of Italy, 1947, Art. 123). Furthermore, an advisory referendum is required to approve the change of regions, provinces or municipalities (Republic of Italy, 1947, Art. 123 and 133). Finally, a popular referendum on regional laws and regulations may be regulated by regional statutes (Republic of Italy, 1947, Art. 123).

An example of a successful popular referendum is the 2011 referendum on four issues related to the repeal of the recent laws on the privatisation of water services (two issues) and the return of nuclear power, which expired after the 1987 referendum. Furthermore, the criminal procedure, particularly the provisions on the exemption of the Prime Minister and ministers from appearing in court (Qvortrup, 2017).

Two other ad hoc referenda are worth mentioning. A referendum on the institutional form of the state was held in 1946. The citizens decided to abolish the monarchy and found a republic. A consultative referendum on Italy's accession to the E.U. was held in 1989.

3.4.2 E-democracy in Italy

The emergence of e-democracy in Italy began in 2004 when the Ministry of State for Innovation and Technology co-funded projects to develop digital citizenship and civic participation in territorial administration. This experience has led to the development of institutional websites with monitoring for access to public information and the creation of forums to facilitate public debate. In the Open Data project framework, Italy has developed a website at the national level at www.dati.gov.it. (2019) will provide access to some 150 publicly accessible databases. Access to spatial data has also been developed nationwide (<https://geodati.gov.it/geoportale/>, 19/05/2020).

In addition to institutional initiatives in Italy, private (often amateur) projects have started to create programmatic websites to develop direct and participatory democracy. In 2013, for example, individual members of the Democratic Party, civil suffrage and left ecology and freedom joined the liquid feedback-based e-democracy platform (De Rosa, 2014). From 2015 the platform will no longer be active. In 2013, a consultative referendum with a unique digital ballot paper was held in Salento for the first time in Italy (Mancarella, 2014).

It should be mentioned two Italian regional e-participation projects. First is the «io Partecipo+» platform (<https://partecipazione.regione.emilia-romagna.it/iopartecipo>, 23/5/2021) in region Emilia-Romagna. Citizens can express cross the "virtual space" their

opinion about regional policies in the preparation phase. Each "virtual space" is designed as a collaborative process and is configured as a public space where people can exchange information, discuss ideas and propose solutions (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2021). Second, Tuscany was the first in Italy to set up a «PartecipaToscana» web page that allows public participation and consultation within the regional political system (e.g. thematic forums, dialogues or other forms of debate between citizens). The web page can be from 2016 found in the «Open Toscana» platform. The new platform joins together the possibilities of participation and enables citizens to access public information (<https://partecipa.toscana.it>, 23/05/2021). An essential public debate on the portal happened in 2016 when citizens were discussing developing the port of Livorno. The Tuscany project has also encouraged Emilia-Romagna, Sardinia and Umbria to set up their e - participation projects (Fletcher, 2019).

Italy is also developing the use of a distribution budget. For example, a two-year test project on participatory budgeting was launched in Milan in 2015, conducted in four phases: The first phase was an open consultation of citizens, with particular attention given to social groups such as young people and immigrants. The second phase of joint planning involved 30 citizens per district: the third phase involved online or personal voting on selected dates. Under 14 to 18-year-olds could only vote in person with a ballot paper. In the fourth phase, selected projects were implemented. The main participants are municipal officials, technicians and experts, following their progress on the committee's website. The implementation of the projects lasted three years and ended in 2018 (it fell in 2019). The implementation of the participatory budget was also carried out in 4 phases in Bologna in 2018 (Comune di Bologna, 2019).

3.5 Slovenia

3.5.1 Direct decision-making mechanisms

Zakon o referendumu in o ljudski iniciativi (Z.R.L.I., The Law on Referendum and People's Initiative) (the Republic of Slovenia, 1994) regulates a referendum on the amendment of the Constitution, a legislative referendum, a referendum on international relations and a consultative referendum on matters falling within the competence of National assembly and the people initiative for the amendment of the Constitution and adoption of the Act. Article 139 of the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia (1991) defines the referendum on establishing a municipality. This article states that a municipality is established by law after a referendum.

According to Z.R.L.I. Art. 3, the procedure for holding a referendum apply *mutatis mutandis* to a referendum in a self-governing municipality. Such a case happened when was prepared a referendum on 9th November 2009 for the independent municipality of Ankaran. The referendum ended with a positive result (56% for) for establishing a new municipality.

A legislative referendum will be convened at the request of forty thousand voters. According to the provisions of Article 16 of Z.R.L.I., any voter, political party, or other association may take the initiative to vote in favour of a referendum. Subsequently, the signatures of the voters are collected to support the request for calling a referendum, whereby the voter may support only one request by a single signature, including via the single state portal e-government with the secure electronic signature certified by a qualified certificate (Art. 16b Z.R.L.I.) (the Republic of Slovenia, 1994). However, a referendum may not be called on laws on emergency measures to ensure the defence of the State, security or the elimination of the consequences of natural disasters, laws on taxes, customs duties and other compulsory charges, as well as on the law on the execution of the state budget, the law on the ratification of international treaties and laws repealing the constitutionality of human rights and fundamental freedoms or other unconstitutional acts (Article 1 of the constitutional Act amending articles 90, 97 and 99 of the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia) (the Republic of Slovenia, 1991). An example of a legislative referendum presents

the Act on the construction, administration and operation of the second railway track of Divača - Koper, which took place on 13th May 2018. The law was supported by 53.46%.

The referendum on international relations: Articles 25a and 25b of the Z.R.L.I. provide that voters shall declare in advance, in a referendum following article 3a of the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia, the transfer of the exercise of part of sovereign rights to international organisations or accession to the international treaty. The decision of the voters bounds the national assembly in the referendum, which means that ratification of the international treaty referred to in the question of the referendum must take into account the determination of the voters; the binding force of the national assembly international treaty ceases to apply if the international treaty is not ratified (Article 25f Z.R.L.I.) (Republic of Slovenia, 1994).

The national party assembly convenes the consultative referendum on issues falling within its competence and which are of interest to the general public (Article 26 of the Z.R.L.I.), throughout the national territory or in a more narrowly defined area if the issue concerns only the inhabitants of that narrower area (Article 27 of the Z.R.L.I.), but is not bound by the result. (Article 29 of the Z.R.L.I.) A consultative referendum on Slovenia's accession to the European Union North Atlantic Alliance. With 60% participation, almost 90% of voters voted in favour of accession to the E.U. and 66% in favour of accession to NATO.

The people's initiative regulates chapter IV. Z.R.L.I. (Republic of Slovenia, 1994). The chapter stipulates that at least thirty thousand voters may submit a proposal to initiate the procedure to amend the Constitution (article 57 of the Z.R.L.I.), at least five thousand voters may submit a bill to the national assembly (article 58 of the Z.R.L.I.), the proposal to initiate the procedure to amend the Constitution or the bill may give each voter, political party or other association of citizens (Article 59 Z.R.L.I.) (Republic of Slovenia, 1994).

3.5.2 E-democracy in Slovenia

The most crucial web portal of the Slovenian public administration is eGovernment. (<https://e-uprava.gov.si>, 27/11/2019). This portal contains the e-democracy website. The site allows citizens: to participate in the form of comments on the drafting of regulations with their opinions, proposals, comments and initiatives to supporters and decision-makers; provides information on e-access and contacts of civil servants and individual ministries; provides essential information on democracy and its implementation, on fundamental human rights and freedoms and the regulation of power in Slovenia and the E.U.; contains a guide to the procedures of drafting regulations is to guide the basic process of drafting a regulation until it is submitted national assembly for discussion (eUprava R.S., 2019). The Slovenian Open Data Portal (O.P.S.I.) ensures open access to public information in Slovenia. O.P.S.I. represents a single national online point of publication of open data for the entire public sector (<https://podatki.gov.si>, 17/11/2019).

Civil society is also developing the latest approaches to e-democracy and e-transparency in Slovenia, following the latest open data and open governance trends. For example, the N.G.O. Today has today developed a new parameter. It is open-source software, which, in addition to the visual presentation of voting results, provides the possibility to see which members have participated in committee and parliament meetings. The site also makes it easy to share results on social media and embed them in online news (<https://parlameter.si>, 17/11/2019).

At the local level, e-participation is exceptionally underdeveloped in Slovenia, although all municipalities have websites. However, only very few municipal websites allow comments and questions to the local authorities. They are mainly used for information, access to public information, and electronic services (Haček & Kukovič, 2013). Ankara, Ajdovščina, Komen and Nova Gorica have a participatory budget. However, none of the municipalities allows the submission of proposals and the decision on proposals by electronic means. They only provide content information and submission forms on their

websites (Občina Ankaran, 2019; Občina Ajdovščina, 2019; Občina Komen, 2019; Občina Nova Gorica, 2019).

4. Conclusions

The emergence of digital technologies in the fourth industrial revolution enabled the penetration of these technologies into the field of political administration and public bureaucracy. Digitalisation and digital transformation have become a key factors in the 21st century for driving communication between public administration and citizens. Digital platforms enable the further development of e-government and e-democracy at all levels of decision-making (from the city district, city, region to country).

The further development of e-democracy will make it easier for governments to facilitate citizens' demands for greater participation in political decision-making. Indeed, digital technological solutions enable the emergence of new social innovations in citizen participation, both in the context of deliberative processes and direct decision-making.

The article focuses on the development and implementation practices of social innovations in connection with digital technologies in Austria, Croatia, Hungary, and Slovenia. A significant contribution of such approaches is that they contribute to democratic change in the urban environment. Shortly, we can expect further changes in the processes of citizen participation in political decision-making, mainly due to the awakening of European civil society, which wants more political power and change in the current parliamentary democracy.

All five countries have access to public information at national and local levels. Only in e-participation, in Greece, Italy and Croatia, is much more developed than in Austria and Slovenia at the local level. In Austria, only the city of Vienna stands out with its website. In Greece, we must mention Trikala, where the first began developing an e-participation platform. Unfortunately, at the local level, except for necessary information and e-service, Austria and Slovenia are not offer their citizens e-participation solutions. All countries provide only basic options for informing and commenting on proposed draft legislation at

the national level. Civil society plays a much higher role in raising awareness and developing e-participatory tools in Austria, Slovenia, and Italy. Developing and introducing the e-participatory tool will require consensus in all four countries between the public institutions and citizens. Public institutions will have to invest in innovative e-democracy technology, while citizens will have to be aware of these tools' importance and use them carefully.

The main limitation is that it is a conceptual text, and it is not based on previous research but derives from a review of the literature and case studies of technology implementation.

Further research on e-democracy in selected countries will be focused on the professional public opinions about the next steps of implementing e-democracy tools and their importance for the emergence of new models of democracy, as well as socio-technical perspectives. It will also be necessary to survey the citizens and identify their pro and contra opinions and suggestions about the e-democracy and its further emergence.

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