On the Way to *e*-Governance?

Bureaucracy on-line or democracy on-line

Course: **Challenges of a New Europe:**

In between local freeze and global dynamics

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Introduction

The state is not a constant entity; it is changing in relation to the general societal development. The modern western state is characterised by its democratic political system which itself means a permanent process of transformation to attain idealistic goals of democracy. There are normative aspects of this process (what should be done) as well as technical aspects (how to do it). I argue in this paper that the relation between both aspects is not of one-way causal pathway but of mutual interdependence. In other words, means we use to attain some goals may eventually modify the goal itself. The recent use of New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT) as a mean of improving democratic functioning of European democracies is closely interconnected with the deliberation upon for instance what should be decided by public scrutiny and what should stay under elitist regulation as well as upon the structure of those who will benefit the most from the online services.

The focus of the paper is the use and probable impact of NICT by the EU to enhance its democratic political system. Beside the theme, the paper is also limited spatially (the concentration is on the EU itself) and in terms of time (recent development since the end of nineties). The research question may be thus stated as follows: To what extent do NICT affect public involvement in the EU? It is slightly soon to answer such question in strictly scientific way. Therefore I combine the classical research paper based on hard empirical data, mainly from European benchmarking surveys, with a less positivist considerations of possible future scenarios.

1. To Be On-Line or Not

To be on-line or not to be on-line: Is there still such question? Sooner or later, viable political systems adjust to the technological development. History demonstrates that many times political elites were even the main proponents of inventions.[1] New

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[1] In older history we may mention an egregious guillotine brought to perfection by its first victim

technological tools are particularly favourite among those elites who need to legitimize certain political system. The European Commission (Commission) is especially active in this way. Being perceived as a bureaucratic elitist body, furthermore isolated from European citizens, the Commission frequently comes up with new proposals on enhancing governance using less common methods and tools. Besides promotion of networked (Commission of the European Communities 2001b) and multi-level governance in Europe (Commission of the European Communities 2001c), the Commission has recently devoted much resources exploring NICT. It launched European e-government initiatives after 2001, in relation to the Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs. Series of e-government conferences (altogether four conferences)[2] and action plans followed. Similar with the Lisbon strategy, both (conferences and action plans) seem to always postpone declared deadlines for e-initiatives and eventually giving the impression of the 'radiant future' for e-Europe.

The linkage with the Lisbon strategy stresses the focus on e-government instead of e-governance (the difference is discussed in the chapter 2) and thus leaves important questions apart. As the Lisbon strategy is market-oriented consequently the principal words are efficiency, effectiveness and words alike. Three out of five main objectives of the latest Action plan are of economic nature. (see European Commission 2006) Only the first (no citizen left behind) and the last goal (strengthening participation and democratic decision-making) touches upon genuine democratic values whereas the other three (making efficiency and effectiveness a reality; implementing high-impact key services; putting key enablers in place) are rather particular interests. Stressing this fact does not mean that democracy should omit questions of productivity and good management. By contrary, there is a clear link between long-term economic successes and the general support for the democratic political regime. Economic success is often a great legitimization base for political regimes. However, economy is only a subsystem of the political regime (see Metcalfe 1993, 173-189) and thus should not fully frame politics as not all values can

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Louis XVI. A bit later Napoleon built his regime on number of new inventions such as money in notes and the central bank. Great wars too have always been times of new technological inventions used by political elites to improve their productivity. Those inventions became not only means of the political regimes but even their symbols.

[2] The last conference took place in Lisbon in September 2007.

be handled by price.

2. E-Government vs. E-Governance

"Fully-fledged e-government will not just reshape administrations but also civil society and the public sphere at large." (Leitner 2003, 10)

In many ways, e-government is a child of the famous doctrine in public administration, the so-called New Public Management (NPM), used by Margaret Thatcher and her adherents since the beginning of eighties. NPM was based on the belief that market does it better, quicker, in higher quality and at lower cost. But soon the idea of the market accomplishing the public services and other fully governmental tasks struck the fact that there were services which market did not want or could not tackle.

Hence, e-government is a part of intermediary sphere enabling citizens to get what they need from the public authority (quickly, in high quality and at low cost). The World Bank offers this very simple definition: "E-Government refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government." (World Bank 2008) This definition contains a little grain for the transformation. However, in e-government the concentration is on the service delivery or in other words on the operational functions of the state. The citizens pay through their taxes for the services and the state, keeping the power monopoly, is obliged to execute those services. These activities between citizens and the state are of administrative nature and they take place within a regulated sphere so they do not intervene directly into the process of governance.

E-governance, on the other side, differs from e-government in its "pro-active" character. Or put it in other words: "E-governance is much more than just the act of automation (computerisation) itself." (Saxena 2006, 503) One should note that the difference between the two is similar to quantitative and qualitative measure.

E-governance has parents of two generations: the father is the one of NPM of the eighties and the mother of the governance generation of the nineties. The basis is

the technologically-skilled society (advanced e-government) which is fully aware of multilateral communication channels and can use them even spontaneously. Therefore, e-governance is not just about executing administrative tasks but also about attaining individual interests. E-governance means a real empowerment of citizens. (Carlitz and Gunn 2002, 394.) The new channels are integral part of the political system and not only the means that can be occasionally replaced by for instance classical paper form. E-governance can not afford to be elitist in the way that certain citizens can use "better" (means faster and cheaper) services because they are enough computer-skilled and have technological equipment while others stay on the sidelines using classical administration services. In genuine e-governance, there are not parallel administrative systems producing two classes of citizens – the IT "have-nots" citizens and "e-citizens". (OECD 2003, 60-61)

At this stage, the attitude of the Commission deserves a word or two of comment. Albeit the Commission values the word 'governance' very much in this particular case it prefers e-government. Surprisingly, it seems the Commission tends to remain rather apolitical regulatory agency (see Majone 1998) then to build a proper democratic polity by the exploitation of the internet potential in building popular support and cross-European networks. Or it may first opt for a several stages strategy with the promotion of e-government being just the first step to gain a popular support among business and later on also European citizens.

3. On-line Services in EU member states: Beneficiaries and Outsiders

Recent benchmarking executed by Eurostat shows growing tendency in using the internet for obtaining information from and interact with public authorities. The benchmarking in online availability of public services published in the autumn 2007 (EC – DG for Information Society and Media 2007, 10-11) elaborated 'the sophistication of on-line services model' which recognises following four steps leading to fully-fledged e-government. The provision of the information, *one way interaction*, through the internet is the very first step in the development of e-government. It thus requires public institutions to communicate with general public

though publicly accessible websites and post there any further downloadable forms and brochures. Following step is a *two-way interaction* between the user of the service and the service provider which is done mostly through electronic forms. The penultimate step is *transaction* which means the case is fully handled electronically. Usually, individual accounts are created for this purpose. *Personalization* being the last step is based on pro-active automated system of public service execution. In average, EU member states met 76 % of e-government requirements in the last year survey (EC – DG for Information Society and Media 2007, 15) which means the increase of about 10 % since 2004 (EC – DG for Information Society and Media 2004, 16).

Nevertheless, not all groups of European citizens benefit from the development of online service delivery equally. For all surveyed years, the percentage of enterprises using online services has been higher than the one of general public in all EU member states, although the difference is smaller for certain member states such as the Netherlands. (Commission of the European Communities 2007, 102-103) On the other side, the Czech republic constitute the most striking example of the citizens/enterprises gap rating with 75,6 % of enterprises using e-government services above EU average of 63,7 % and with 17,4 % of population using online public services below the EU average of 23,8 %. (Commission of the European Communities 2007, 72-73)

The explanation must consider both, the supply as well as the demand side of online services for citizens. The deficiency on the supply side means uneven provision of online services for enterprises and citizens for instance due to the pursuit of predominantly economic objectives on the national political agenda. The demand side is much more complex as citizens may avoid using internet to communicate with public authorities for many reasons: computer illiteracy, limited internet access, mistrust in NICT, preference for personal contact etc. Beyond any doubt, considerate policy may deal successfully with all stated obstacles and defaults and eventually attain equal level of online service provision as well as use. In case no proper policy steps tackle the digital gap between citizens and enterprises, the prospect of achieving genuine e-governance is very limited.

4. Opportunities and Challenges

Some e-governance enthusiasts may call a certain aspect of NICT an advantage whereas some realists may see in the same thing great risks and potential danger. For this reason, words opportunities instead of advantages and challenges instead of risks are preferred throughout this chapter. It points to the fact, that both – opportunities as well as challenges – contain a grain of positive and negative consequences depending on the way of use.

4.1. Opportunities

The most obvious argument for the use of NICT in politics is the *increased popular participation*. It is expected that e-governance belongs to principal long-term solutions for the decreased participation among growing e-generation. Internet is a common tool used by more and more citizens in their everyday life. Especially for younger generations, it may be more comfortable to change a website for the governmental portal and use the e-voting or online consultation than to come to polling rooms at the City Hall. The second argument goes hand in hand with the first one as increased participation *bolsters legitimisation and support for public policies*. Citizens are therefore much more interested in public affaires and much more informed by the governmental bodies for the reason of the argument of *low transaction cost of information delivery*. Being well equipped with information, citizens are much more competent voters and ground their votes not just on information but on knowledge (meaning individually processed information). (see Hobolt 2007) Lastly, all the mentioned above is the precondition for the genuine *knowledge society* founded on the multilateral communication channels where the voice of an individual citizen counts.

Application of classical input/output model of the political system (see Easton 1957) combined with the policy cycle model on a hypothetical example of the real European environmental policy – Natura 2000,[3] help us to distinguish scopes of online consultation. First, there is a demand for a policy change on the input

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[3] This policy example is real. Environmental network Natura 2000 exists and is being implemented at the moment. But the measures I use to document the scope of NICT are modified to fit our example.

function; for instance a well-grounded request for the enlargement of the "special areas of conservation" delivered to the Commission through a specially established Natura 2000-based internet fora from the side of environmental NGOs. The Commission then estimates the urgency to take action, analyses the situation from an expert point of view and looks for a compromise among diverse stakeholders. In terms of the input/output theory this is conversion process inside of the political system. All is done thanks to the extensive information exchange. Thirdly, after the legislative proposal is formulated and legally accepted, there is an implementation of the legislative act on the output of the system. For this phase, a close collaboration and communication exchange among involved actors (European Commission, NGOs, state agencies etc) is necessary as the administrative power of the Commission is rather very weak. All these phases share a strong need for as quick, coherent and complex multilateral information exchange as possible.

4.2. Challenges

Elaborating on the above mentioned pro-arguments, we may look at the other side of the coin. *Unequal access* might be the price for the increased participation, mainly if there is *inadequate infrastructure* and *low adoption of technology*. In the worst case, such societal set-up institutionalises *inequality in power sharing* and privileges one group over another. It is more than possible that such highly interactive society suffers from *insufficient political and administrative capacities* to lead a constant dialogue with citizens and moreover to keep policy coherence which results in *political fragmentation*. At last, delivered citizens will is not transfer into real policies due to *lack of political commitment*. Even though the transparency is often classified as an advantage of e-governance it is not difficult to imagine a situation when the whole e-governing process takes place in a kind of magical black box with input on one side and output on the other one. Transparency may be thus a victim of NICT specialists. If the transparency is rather weak then there is not much space for political accountability either.

Let us return the case study of Natura 2000 and fictitious online consultation. The selection of the stakeholders to be consulted on legislative proposals does not

have to meet the standards of proportionality. By contrast, a closed elitist network could be formed instead. Once the network Natura 2000 is institutionalised it is impossible for outsiders to intervene into decision-making. Plus speed of development makes the actors on the side exponentially disadvantaged. Lastly, as much as e-governance helps to promote particular interests of certain groups as much it obstructs to the other group to do just the same.

5. Future Scenarios for the EU: Two Different Views

5.1. Deliberative e-democracy

The Commission manages to transform NICT potential into a dense network working on a basis of self-governance and cooperation with other units. European initiatives in the area of issue-based and policy-based online forums, online consultations, e-voting and indicative pollings incrementally modify the view of European citizens on the former bureaucratic nature of the Commission. Brussels is perceived as another political arena where collective as well as individual interests can be promoted if they are not successful at the national level. The Commission identifies itself with the role of a European manager, of a neutral disputes mediator and of a communication enabler and it elaborates a genuine partnership with all stakeholders including national, subnational and local actors.

Political commitment to reflect the output of online consultation is ensured by the legislative framework. Certain output of internet ballot is legally binding, other polling may be an early indication for the decision-makers whether their proposals have public support or not. Indicative polling is of great importance for the Commission to find out more about ethical questions that usually differ across nations.

European communication channels does not disorganise the nation state, on the contrary, it improves national communication capacities. The range of options a citizen can use to make the governmental agency known his/her preference consists of several stages. Vertically, citizens needs and preferences tend to be accommodated at the lowest level which in fact means at municipality. At this stage, it is still possible to use personal or online communication. For communication with upper

governmental institutions NICT are commonly used. Horizontally, online forums get people in touch with each other and help make their interests and preferences visible. The core feature of the system consists in the numerous alternatives people can use to promote what they want and in the fact that their preferences always matter.

5.2. Cold regulatory e-democracy

The extensive use of NICT gives the Commission appearance of legitimacy and serves as a cloak for the realization of elitist goals. Very soon, citizens come to a subjective conclusion that their voice does not change anything in decision-making and there is no real communication exchange but one-way polling highway finishing in the black box of Brussels. But there is little chance to prove such doubts. For the impression of perfect e-democracy, it is difficult to call the system into question. To some extent, the final decisions reflect public opinions - just another kind of hiding the true nature of European politics and playing with the public. Nobody can say who governs as the public accountability is blurred.

The Commission becomes the biggest regulatory agency in the world, distributing societal values in the form of material and human resources of immense amount over whole Europe. The scope of the Commission decisions is constantly growing. Digitalisation of personal data helps elites keep an eye on citizens and reorganise the European labour market in details to enhance European productivity. The Commission advocates its decisions in the way that those decisions are economic rather than political in nature and thus improving public scrutiny is not relevant.

Moreover, unique technological capacities overcomes the more modest ones of member states which appear to be more and more on losing side in the decision-making process in Brussels. The Commissions succeeds in building cross-European networks but retain a hierarchical order instead of co-operation. The multi-level governance gradually changes into the information absorbing networks disintegrating nation-states from within.

Conslusion

E-governance has neither positive nor negative connotation. It is a complex system in which the use of NICT is an enabler of political and societal change. Deliberative use of NICT potential may lead the transformation towards a genuine e-democracy. There is not anymore a question whether the state should follow e-government/e-governance perspective as it will be sooner or later forced to do so by the circumstances in Europe. The main political questions are nowadays how to build such legislative and institutional set-up so that the result is an interactive, inclusive and knowledge based European society instead of the contrary.

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