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Patterns and Causes of Electronic Democracy Advancement in the Eastern Europe and the Baltic States

Contemporary digital technologies enable more resource-efficient and inclusive participation of citizens in public affairs. Still, while e-governance has become a trend in public administration, offering numerous e-services, wide e-participation remains a challenge. In many respects, the Baltic states have pioneered in establishment of e-democracy instruments. In recent years, such e-democracy initiatives are being introduced in post-Soviet Eastern European states. And each country has certain cases, which can be praised as best practices. Therefore, this study aims to understand due to which factors the observed e-democracy initiatives succeeded. The research methodology primarily relies on expert interviews, complemented by content-analysis of online cases, related self-reported statistics, and country-level statistics. It became evident that the six geographically close, but politically different countries – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova – have followed different trajectories in the advance of digital democracy. Due to commitments to international organizations and consensus among the ruling elites, the Baltic states have implemented a rather top-down model of e-governance with opportunities for e-democracy, which are underused by the public. The revolution in Ukraine has brought a boost in civic activism, which has been channeled into democracy-building with high participation rates offline and online, while openness of authorities and the support by international donors help its institutionalization. Protests in Moldova also increased participation, but recent concentration of political power in one ruling party block real democracy. Belarus, being almost authoritarian, allows only a kind of guerilla online democracy.

Democracy, electronic democracy, digital democracy, participatory democracy, e-participation

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, its six republics, located in Europe – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova – have started from similar politico-economic conditions, but followed different trajectories. Their external geopolitical settings interacted with internal politics, predisposing different political institutions. This represents an interesting *ex post facto* experimental design in social change.

Of all related transformations in these countries, this study explores their democratic developments. The international agreements they engaged in required changes in legislation, some of which related to democratic institutions. The dynamics of internal politics also pushed these polities to different positions on the democracy-authoritarianism scale. And in line with the digitization of economy, governance is also becoming increasingly digitized, turning into e-governance. Digital technologies enable large-scale transparency and accountability in the public sector, and wide opportunities for online participation. Thereby, this inquiry focuses on the advance of electronic democracy in the selected countries.

The central research question is which factors contribute to successful initiatives of electronic democracy? Here, success means: official establishment in legislation, impact on public policy, and high participation rate. Exploring this implies clarifying a list of related questions. What instruments of electronic democracy are introduced in the countries studied? What stages of policy-making cycle do they affect? What are their major achievements and challenges? Which can be counted successful? How they were introduced? Which factors make them succeed? Ideally, the knowledge of the identified conducive conditions and lessons learnt from the best practices would assist stakeholders to implement better solutions for their e-democracy initiatives.

Theory

While a number of academic sources examine digital democracy as a phenomenon (Held 2006; Hindman 2009; Levine 2002; Margolis Moreno-Riano 2009; Norris 2000; Gibson Rommele Ward 2004; Hilbert 2009; Saco 2002), others analyze the cases of its application (Alvarez Hall 2008; Clift 2004, 2003, 2013; Cullen Sommer 2011; Lee Chang Berry 2011). As a source of secondary data for this study, the most useful are the publications by IGOs, INGOs, and think tanks (United Nations 2016; OECD 2003; e-Governance Academy 2017a; e-Governance Academy 2017b).

In this inquiry electronic democracy is understood as democracy utilizing modern information technologies for its procedures. Essentially, these forms embrace emails, digitally signed documents, online feedback forms, specialized deliberation, voting, and monitoring platforms, discussions and campaigns in online television and social media.

Electronic form of democracy is important in several respects. Primarily, due to dramatically reduced participation costs, digital technologies make possible massive democratic participation at large scale – on regional, national, and even supranational levels. They also can merge several instruments and make it easier to participate at all stages of policy-making cycle. Overall, hypothetically, e-democracy should reduce transaction costs, increase participation rates, inclusion of diverse social groups, enhance more complex and long-term participatory projects, and accelerate feedback iterations.

Traditionally, democracy is viewed as based on the principles of transparency, accountability, and participation. Sometimes, the fourth pillar of civic education is added. Among these principles, this research focused on participation online – e-participation. Therefore, to be viewed, an instrument of e-democracy should contain a component of an impact of individual citizens or organizations on policy making.

To have a more profound impact on policies, democratic processes should be linked to governance. Therefore, all democratic initiatives operating outside public policies, are beyond the scope of this study. Only the ones directly influencing policy making are considered. The classic policy-making cycle includes agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and control. Therefore, each e-democracy instrument under investigation relates to the stages of policy-making it affects.

The existing e-participation instruments, linked to relevant stages of policy-making, embrace:

- Agenda-setting: e-polling, online deliberation, e-campaigns, problem mapping;
- Policy formulation: e-consultations, e-petitions, drafting platforms, argument mapping;
- Decision-making: e-voting, e-elections, e-referenda, online participatory budgeting (e-voting);
- Implementation: crowdsourcing, crowdfunding, online participatory budgeting (co-implementation) hackathons, idea mapping;
- Monitoring and control: online performance dashboards, open data analytics, journalist e-investigations.

Methods

The study covers six countries: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as the Baltic states, and Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine as the Eastern European states. They were selected as European countries, which in post-Soviet period have followed diverse politico-economic routes and ended up with different political contexts and resulting outcomes with respect to e-democracy.

Essentially, this is an exploratory qualitative inquiry, aiming to reveal patterns in emergence and development of successful e-democracy initiatives in different political contexts and to identify factors making these cases viable.

In the aspect of causality, the number of instruments established (both unique forms and all initiatives within those forms), implementation rates (absolute numbers and percentages of requests approved as laws, decrees, and other governmental decisions), participation rates (absolute numbers and percentages of adult population), international rankings (e-participation index) and estimations of impact on policies serve as dependent variables, while a wide range of micro-level (motivation, leadership, management, partnership) and macro-level (freedoms, party competition, international support) indicators serve as independent variables.

The primary data comes from expert interviews of stakeholders, collected specially for this study, supplemented by content-analysis of online cases, statistics, self-reported by administrators of these instruments, as well as country-level statistics by international organizations.

The informants were selected by these criteria (ranked in the order of priorities):

- 1) stakeholders with a nation-wide perspective, strategic or helicopter view;
- 2) actors directly involved in specifically e-democracy or e-participation projects in roles of development, implementation, analysis, communication, or advocacy;
- 3) different stakeholder groups (civic activists, scholars, IT experts, think tank experts, INGOs, politicians, authorities);
- 4) awareness of any of e-dem tools (e-petitions, open data analytics, advocacy or public awareness campaigns, e-polling, e-consultations, e-referenda, e-voting, online participatory budgeting, crowdsourcing/ crowdfunding, accountability platforms).

The fieldwork lasted from March 6, 2017 till June 6, 2017. A total of 70 interviews have been collected. The experts are civic activists (primarily), scholars, IT experts, think tank analysts, INGOs representatives, politicians, and authorities. The distribution of interviews among countries is the following: Estonia – 10, Latvia – 14, Lithuania – 10, Belarus – 10, Moldova – 12, Ukraine – 14.

Where possible, particular e-democracy online platforms were inspected to identify participation forms and obtain usage statistics. Additionally, self-reported usage statistics and impact statistics was collected from online reports.

In order to locate the countries on e-participation field and to find independent variables, explaining successful cases, country-level data of the United Nations E-Government Survey, World e-Parliament Report, European Commission e-Government Factsheets, and other reports of international organizations were used.

Findings

In the studied countries, most e-democracy services emerged in late 2000s – early 2010s. They came to the Baltic states earlier than to the Eastern European states. The initial push was from EU institutions, which provided roadmaps and funding. In a way, Estonia stands out, as it went further and established a comprehensive X-Road, making e-governance and e-democracy its international brand. The role of INGOs was also remarkable in Moldova. In Ukraine, e-democracy initiatives were genuinely grassroots, later supported by international donors and authorities. In Belarus, some were initiated by the public and some by authorities.

One way to analyze e-democracy advance is to review the stages of policy-making it has an impact on. The simplest and, evidently, less binding forms of e-participation were related to deliberation, like e-consultations with no obligations for authorities to integrate any particular input. Later they expanded to agenda setting, usually in the form of e-petitions. Monitoring and control emerged about the same time and were initially volunteer pet projects. The rarest and the most binding forms of e-democracy relate do decision making, like e-voting, and co-implementation, including crowdsourcing and crowdfunding.

E-petitions and e-consultations seem to be the most widespread forms of democratic participation. Nevertheless, their efficiency varies. They are almost useless in Belarus, where authorities tend to answer them formally, without solving underlying issues. While in Latvia as much as 50% of successful e-petitions become draft laws. Of course, the business process of their preparation matters. While usually anybody can submit any e-petition and they simply compete for popularity, in Latvia they do a pre-moderation well before submission. Authors are consulted professionally, so by the time their petitions are submitted, they become well-formed legislative proposal.

Among the countries studied, only Estonia went so far as to introduce e-voting for elections. Though it might seem that it was mostly due to a developed infrastructure (digital ID, digital signature, security measures), most importantly, contending parties and citizens trust the system. Despite some contestation of e-voting, especially about security risks, there is no single proof of e-voting abuse in Estonia. This is almost unimaginable in Ukraine, where even offline elections results are contested and there are numerous cases of administrative pressures, manipulations of results etc.

The three Baltics states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) have joined the European Union, OECD, and Eurozone. Quite symbolically, recently they have been officially classified by the United Nations as part of the Norther Europe. The other three Easter European countries (Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova) are not in EU, but have engaged in EU Eastern Partnership policy initiative; moreover, Moldova and Ukraine have signed an Association agreement with EU. Simultaneously, Belarus and Moldova sustain intensive commercial and diplomatic ties with the Russian Federation. Besides, each of the six countries has developed its own internal political system. While the Baltics states are full democracies, Moldova and Ukraine are limited democracies, and Belarus is an authoritarian stated.

Conclusion

The studied countries represent a definite spectrum of e-participation. While Belarus, due to authoritarian regime, has the lowest participation rate, and Ukraine, due to an impetus from the revolution of 2013-2014 has the highest participation rate, other countries have rather average e-participation. Still, the causes of these rates differ. In Moldova, people seem to avoid participation because they distrust the government. In Estonia, people might opt out of participation because they actually have a high trust in government. And Latvia and Lithuania are somewhere in between.

There is a clear set of conditions, favorable for a quantitative and qualitative advance of e-democracy. These include: an overall high offline participation rate, triggered by elections or mass protests; high Internet penetration; external impetus from international organizations; openness of authorities, either due to a political agenda, leadership, or pressure from civil society; clear strategy, either government-generated, INGO-elaborated, or civil society-developed; funding sources, either public or from donors; successful cases; clear communication messages for the public.

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