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E-Democracy in Europe - Prospects of Internet-based political participation

Interim Report - Phase I

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DIRECTORATE GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES
POLICY DEPARTMENT A: ECONOMIC AND SCIENTIFIC POLICY

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY OPTIONS ASSESSMENT

E-Democracy in Europe – Prospects of Internet-based political participation

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GENERAL INFORMATION

This document is the result of the consultation phase of the STOA-project "*E-Democracy – Technical possibilities of the use of electronic voting and other Internet tools in Europe*". This phase ran from January to March 2010. During this period the research focus of the STOA-project "E-Democracy" was defined, resulting in the interim report *E-Democracy in Europe – Prospects of Internet-based political participation*.

This interim report mainly deals with the framing of the project "E-Democracy". This title refers to all electronic and particularly Internet-based means of information exchange and communication that have the potential to contribute to democratic processes. All major dimensions of democracy may be relevant for e-democracy, including accountability, control of public affairs, responsiveness, legitimation, citizen empowerment and emancipation, and inclusion. Depending on the techniques employed, e-democracy theoretically has the potential to

- improve access to and availability of information on political issues and increase the transparency of political decision-making processes;
- support organisational processes and networks aiming to influence public affairs;
- provide mechanisms to enhance the (direct) involvement and participation of citizens in political decision-making processes, and
- improve the quality of opinion formation and provide new opportunities of public deliberation.

We argue that there is particularly a need to reflect on the potentials and realistic prospects of Internet-based applications to contribute to the democratic practices of the evolving political system of the European Union and the formation of a European public sphere.

The main objective of this first project phase was the development of a detailed plan for the next three phases of the project. A preparatory meeting, held already in November 2009, and several telephone conferences during the consultation phase with the project partners were very instrumental in discussing and prioritising research themes and issues.

An important element of the whole project is the involvement of those MEPs who are particularly interested in the issue of e-democracy. We are convinced that taking the perspective of these representatives into account will help to generate recommendations that are considered useful by European decision-makers and practitioners. Therefore, we are particularly grateful for the generous support and encouragement provided by Vice-President Silvana Koch-Mehrin, the supervisor of this STOA-project.

PART A: E-DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE – STATE-OF-THE-ART IN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT "E-DEMOCRACY"

Since the late 1990s, the WWW has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in the area of political communication in developed democracies. Already with the looming rise of the Internet as a medium of mass communication, the question of the Internet's potential to change politics, the patterns of political participation and democratic decision-making – both in terms of quality and quantity – quickly captured the attention of many scientists and practitioners.

In the early phases of the debate on 'Internet and politics', numerous and often far-reaching claims about the new media's transformative potential were made. Due to the Internet's technological features and its impressive communicative capacity, many authors enthusiastically argued that the Internet will fundamentally change democratic politics by providing easy and universal access to information, undermining established structures of political power, democratising the processes of agenda-setting, increasing the rates of political participation, improving the quality of deliberation and making plebiscitary forms of decision-making feasible.

These optimistic accounts have to be understood in the context of the debates on the crisis of representative democracy. Declining turnout rates, eroding party memberships, political apathy and growing discontent with governments and politicians in established democracies are the most obvious trends raising concerns about the future of democracy and its institutions. In addition to the growing disenchantment with the *classe politique* and the disengagement from the democratic processes in many European nation states, the European Union is facing particular challenges such as the poorly developed European public sphere and the – real or merely perceived – democratic deficit of its institutions. Against this background, the new Internet-based channels for information exchange, communication and participation are often presented as a possible cure to these democratic ills.

Today, 10 to 15 years after the rise of the WWW as a mass media and due to a large number of practical experiences with new applications being used for political communication purposes, the debates on the Internet's effects on democracy are considerably less enthusiastic and speculative.

The discussions about the potential of the Internet in the area of political communication and participation have triggered a variety of support and research activities on the national and multinational level over the last years. Among the most important examples are:

- The European Commission's eParticipation Preparatory Action (DG Information Society and Media) was initiated by the European Parliament and launched in 2006 with the aim to demonstrate how modern information and communication technologies can improve citizens' participation in decision-making and contribute to better legislation.[1] Within the eParticipation Preparatory Action, numerous pilot projects promoting e-participation were funded. In 2009, an EU-funded study on the services and development of e-participation in the EU was completed (European Commission 2009).
- The Council of Europe's Ad Hoc Committee on E-democracy (CAHDE) was introduced in 2006 to examine developments on e-democracy and e-participation at the European and at international levels.[2] Its aim is to consider in particular the issues of measuring the effectiveness and impact of e-democracy initiatives and devices and their complementarity and interoperability with offline forms of democratic engagement and participation. Thus far, the CAHDE process produced a number of recommendations on issues such as e-democracy, e-voting and Internet literacy.
- Other international organisations such as the UN, the ITU or the OECD are also dealing with a broad range of issues related to new media technologies and their role in political communication and participation (e.g., digital divide, Internet governance, e-parliament, to name just a few).
- Basically in all EU member states researchers and research groups have been dealing with e-democracy and e-participation from a multitude of perspectives, involving numerous scientific disciplines and approaches since the 1990s. So far however, a common understanding about the potentials of the Internet to revitalise democratic practices has not been reached within this quite heterogeneous scientific community.

Despite a growing body of literature and numerous research projects analysing the political dimension of new media technologies, there are currently many uncertainties with respect to the actual potential of the Internet to effectively address the contemporary problems of representative democracy and how this potential could be tapped. Moreover, the specific challenges and exigencies related to institutions and processes of the European Union are still not adequately addressed.

STOA-project "E-Democracy"

The STOA-project "*E-democracy: Technical possibilities of the use of electronic voting and other Internet tools in European elections*" will deal with the potential of Internet-based applications to improve political participation and the quality of democratic decision-making at the European level. To this end, the role of new media technologies in creating a European public sphere will be investigated. Another major focus of the project will be the formal opportunities for European citizens to participate at the European level by the means of Internet-based applications, including e-voting solutions. Good practice examples of e-participation activities performed by the member states as well as NGOs will provide a useful basis for recommendations for European decision-makers.

[1] http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/egovernment/implementation/prep_action/index_en.htm

[2] http://www.coe.int/t/dgap/democracy/Activities/GGIS/CAHDE/Default_en.asp

The purpose of this interim report is to give an introductory overview of the central issues and research questions in the field of electronic democracy. Based on this cursory overview, the relevant research questions were identified in Part A. Part B presents a detailed plan on how these questions will be answered.

This interim report is the first deliverable of the STOA-project "E-Democracy". It summarises the results of the first project phase which lasted from January to March 2010. On January 20, 2010, a kick-off meeting with the project partners was hosted by the supervisor of the project, Vice-President Silvana Koch-Mehrin, at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. During this meeting, Vice-President Koch-Mehrin kindly offered to support the project by facilitating contacts between the researchers working on the project and MEPs interested in the issues at stake. In order to inform MEPs about the project and invite them to share their perspective as elected representatives and contribute advice, 67 MEPs received an invitation to actively participate (e.g., by attending the workshops which will be organised in the third project phase) and background information on the objectives of the project.

This interim report consists of two main parts. Part A presents an introductory overview of the debates on e-democracy and the Internet's potential to transform democratic politics. Against this background, the main research perspectives of the project are discussed in detail. Finally, the project's research questions are presented. Part B describes the project plan, gives an overview of the project schedule and the deliverables.

2. E-DEMOCRACY: THE DEBATE ON THE POTENTIAL OF THE INTERNET TO CHANGE POLITICS

2.1. From early debates to current research: the crisis of representative democracy and the hopes for e-democracy

Until the mid 1990s, many praised the Internet as a media technology that will bring about a fundamental transformation of established politics. Internet-based political communication was often attributed with the potential to deeply alter existing power relations and entrenched hierarchies by handing over political authority directly to the citizens. The democratic utopia of the ancient Greek agora was to be put into practice in modern mass democracies with the help of new information and communication technologies.[3] From today's perspective, the majority of these far reaching accounts have not (yet?) been fulfilled. On the contrary, after over a decade and a half since the advent of the WWW, the basic "rules of the game" in liberal democracies seem largely unchanged. As a consequence, the debates on the effects of the Internet on democratic politics have clearly become much less enthusiastic during the last ten years.

At the same time, the disillusionment about the transformative potential of the Internet has reduced the influence of normatively and philosophically charged speculations in favour of more realistic accounts about the role of new media in political communication processes. This normalisation of the debate paved the way for more sound empirical analyses and theoretically well-grounded research.

However, while this process is undoubtedly to be welcomed, three interrelated factors which have fuelled the early enthusiasm about the Internet should not be forgotten as they continue to help explain much of today's assessments of the Internet's role in politics as well: (1) The widespread perception of a crisis of representative democracy in most established democracies, (2) the undoubtedly fascinating communicative capacity of the Internet and (3) the proponents' fundamental normative views about the democratic process.

(1) A common vantage point of many hopes for e-democracy is a perception of a crisis of representative democracy and established politics. Particularly during the last three decades, the public debates in established liberal democracies experienced a number of waves of criticism about the existing political order. Empirically, the criticism was spurred by continuously declining rates of participation in elections and other forms of traditional civic engagement such as party memberships or participation in large societal organisations. In addition, surveys continually report widespread feelings among the respondents that governments and political representatives are remote, disconnected and untouchable (Norris 1999; Skocpol/Fiorina 1999; Zittel/Fuchs 2007; Blais 2010).

[3] For these optimistic accounts see for example Rheingold (1993), Negroponte (1995), Budge (1996), Grossman (1995).

Many observers coined these developments with terms such as "crisis of motivation" (Habermas 1977: 106) or "crisis of disengagement" (Coleman/Blumler 2009: 1). While more traditional forms of participation and established channels of representation have obviously lost some of their attractiveness, alternative forms of political activism and participation, in many cases circumventing established representative institutions and organisations, seem to have a stronger appeal at least to some parts of the citizenry. Of course, making sense of these complex developments remains a challenge, but it can cautiously be concluded that democratic systems are at the risk of losing popular support and legitimacy. Yet, as the downward trend in traditional political participation is at least in part compensated by new forms of engagement (Skocpol 1999), citizens do not seem to have turned their backs on democracy per se.

(2) The technical infrastructure of the Internet and its applications established a new type communicative arena in which both traditional and new modes of communication can be combined. In effect, the Internet makes available an impressive array of different forms of communication, ranging from interpersonal communication (one-to-one), public uni-directional mass communication (one-to-many) to public bi-directional mass-communication (many-to-many). In addition to a high degree of communicative flexibility with regard to the sequence of information exchange in the communication process (synchronous vs. asynchronous communication), the digital technology of the Internet also makes available multimedia content (text, audio, video) in a multitude of configurations.

Thus, from the perspective of the individual user, the Internet provides for an impressive number of communicative options: the user can choose and easily change its communicative role (sender, receiver), the preferred communication sequence, the degree of publicity (interpersonal, semi-public or public) as well as the type of media content (Burnett/Marshall 2003: 56). Most importantly, the marginal costs of Internet-based communication are exceedingly low compared to traditional offline media and broadcasting, giving individual users the opportunity to not only benefit from the abundant information available on the Internet, but also – theoretically – to become producers and senders of content for a potential mass audience. Another key characteristic that distinguishes the Internet from traditional media is its high degree of interactivity. And it is particularly this alleged interactivity that makes the Internet highly interesting for political communication (Rössler 1998: 32; Downes/McMillan 1998: 159). These basic features of Internet-based communication are one of the main reasons why many observers credit the Internet with far-reaching transformative powers as it has the potential to empower the individual user, alter the conventional processes of agenda-setting which are dominated by commercial media corporations and organised interests, and revitalise the public sphere. It is important to note, however, that the specific way in which the technical potential of a communications medium is actually put into practice is largely a result of complex factors such as the socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural context of the individual user (Lindner 2005: 836ff.).

(3) Similar to previous media innovations, the early debates about the Internet and its potential to change democracy were marked by enthusiastic and pessimistic scenarios. The views and speculations about the future role of the Internet in politics expressed by representatives of both sides were largely dominated by normative accounts. Theories that postulate the social construction of technological artefacts (Bijker 1995; Pinch/Bijker 1997; Scolve 1995; Sholle 2002) emphasize a high degree of *interpretative flexibility* during the early stages of technological developments. This interpretative flexibility characterises the initial processes of attaching symbolic-semiotic meaning to technologies before the artefacts receive their ultimate meaning in the processes of stabilization and closure (Bijker 1995; Hoff 2000: 14; Degele 2002: 101). The large arena available for interpretations is strongly shaped, particularly during the early phases of technological adoption, by the normative values, ideology, and interests. This is a reflection of different assessments of the new media's role in politics and society. The expected risks, chances and potentials associated with the Internet in politics are shaped or at least strongly influenced by normative concepts held by authors, observers and political actors (Barber 1998: 585; Dijk/Hacker 2000: 209; Lindner 2007: 72f.). Thus, in order to comprehend the accounts made with regard to the possible effects and desired role of Internet-based communication in politics, it is valuable to consider the democratic values held by the actors involved.

In short, a complex mix of context factors, technological possibilities and individual predispositions have influence on the debate about the implications of new media for democratic politics. Against this background it is useful to have a closer look at the different concepts associated with electronic democracy and their underlying visions of democratic politics.

2.2. Theories of democracy and the Internet

Despite the fact that since the early days of the Internet an impressive amount of literature dealing with e-democracy has been generated, this emerging field has not yet succeeded in establishing a sound and discrete conceptual status within general democratic theory (Lindner 2010). A cursory overview of different approaches to e-democracy reveals that different authors have – explicitly or implicitly – different conceptions of democracy in mind, and these conceptions differ with regard to how far reaching the transformations induced by applying Internet-based applications in political communications should or could be. To date, a broadly accepted definition of "electronic democracy" or related terms such as "digital democracy" is still not agreed upon.

A quite useful systematisation of different conceptual approaches is presented by Hagen (1997). He differentiates three concepts of electronic democracy: (1) teledemocracy, (2) cyberdemocracy and (3) electronic democratisation. The criterion of distinction between these concepts is the scope of the aspired political transformation.

(1) Teledemocracy: This concept was already developed and promoted in the 1970s and 1980s in an attempt to bring about more direct democratic participation by applying electronic means of communication (e.g., cable TV, later digital network technologies). The proponents of teledemocracy wanted to strengthen the political influence of the individual citizen by using electronic polling systems and by transferring the idea of the traditional US-American town hall meeting into electronic networks.

(2) Cyberdemocracy: Proponents of cyberdemocracy are convinced that the new digital network media have the power to generate a radical transformation of society, politics and the economy. This digital revolution would result in a completely new digital social order. Cyberdemocrats intend not only to supplement representative democracy with plebiscitary elements, but to completely replace existing representative institutions with direct democratic practices.

(3) Electronic democratisation: Compared to the other two concepts, electronic democratisation is the least far reaching with regard to the desired democratic transformation. Instead of aiming at introducing mainly direct democratic modes of decision-making or a revolutionary replacement of representative institutions, electronic democratisation adheres to the basic institutional logic of representative democracy. The reform proposals of this concept are based on the assumption that the problems of established democracies are based on poor information exchange between rulers and the ruled and insufficient transparency of the decision-making processes within governments. Followers of this concept are convinced that these problems can be resolved by using new media technologies in order to improve access to information, reduce the distance between citizens and representatives, and increase the quality of public deliberation by providing substantial information on the issues at stake.

Of course, these three concepts do not cover the large number of different approaches which have been developed on the issue of electronic democracy during the past decades. But these examples are useful as they shed light on the possible range of democratic views often associated with e-democracy. Moreover, it draws attention to the fact that the term "e-democracy" is used to express very different democratic values and aims. Keeping these differences in mind is important if past and current debates on e-democracy are to be understood.

However, if the ideological underpinnings of the different views on e-democracy and the democratic potentials of the Internet are to be made transparent, drawing on the well established typologies of democratic theory seems a more suitable approach than applying conceptually immature models such as teledemocracy or cyberdemocracy. For this purpose, a heuristic model will be presented which relates general models of democracy to general modes of communication and decision-making.[4] Arguably, most approaches to e-democracy and the associated communication practices can be linked to a specific normative view about the way democracy should work.

[4] For a more detailed description of this heuristic see Lindner (2007: 78-80).

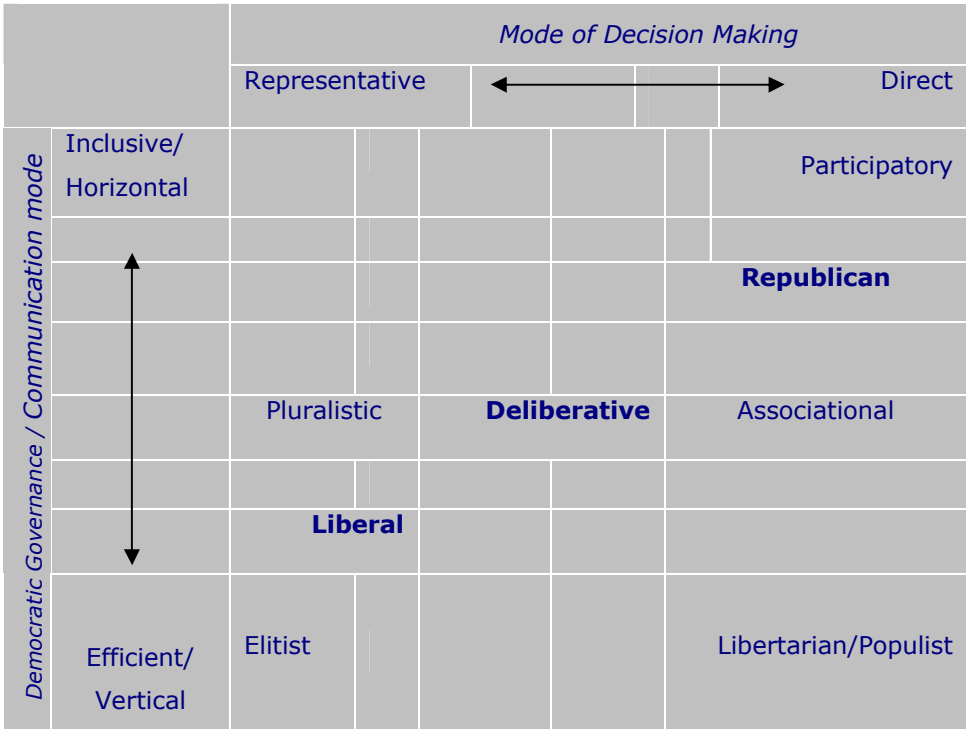
Political science has developed numerous typologies of normative democratic theories (Held 1996; Macpherson 1983; Schmidt 2008). If historical contexts and constitutional developments are set aside in favour of a higher level of abstraction, the broad array of normative views of democracy can be traced back to three main models of democracy: the liberal, the republican, and the deliberative model (Habermas 1992; Held 1996: 157-291; Schultze 2004: 125).[5] The three models are based on different understandings of the *conditio humana*, different ethical norms, different methods of gaining legitimacy and establishing an ideal equilibrium between individualism and collectivism. For the purpose of developing a manageable heuristic model, the three main models of democracy will be employed.

Heuristic Model

The following two-dimensional heuristic model was developed in order to link fundamental views of democracy with certain modes of communication (Lindner 2007: 79f.). The basic concepts of democracy are mapped on a two-dimensional space. One dimension differentiates between different modes of democratic decision making, illustrating the degree of representative versus direct decision making procedures. The other dimension embraces two elements concurrently. Firstly, the chief aim of democratic governance is indicated. On this continuum, the objectives of efficient versus inclusive decision making are represented. Secondly, the prevailing mode of communication – vertical versus horizontal communication – is specified. From a communication perspective, these two elements are closely related: efficient governance tends to emphasise information exchange in the vertical dimension, whereas decision making procedures intending to reach a high degree of inclusiveness put particular emphasis on horizontal information exchange. This model presents the central objective of democratic governance to one side, with the broad communicative capacity of information and communication technologies on the other, merged into a joint analytical dimension. The concurrence of these two elements helps to systematically link and eventually operationalise the empirically identified patterns of political online communication with the respective democratic models (see Figure 1).
The foundational types of democracy displayed in Figure 1 are the three main models of democracy as defined by Habermas (1992). With regard to the basic normative alignments, every concept of democracy is predominantly rooted in one of these three main models. Other related models or variants such as pluralist, elitist, libertarian or participatory democracy can be grouped around these three models according to their position with regard to the preferred mode of decision making and the objective of democratic governance.

[5] The models will not be portrayed in detail as it can be assumed that their basic elements and fundamental principles are generally known to the readers. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the definitions and labels of the models are not coherently applied in the literature. Particularly in the Anglo-American context, the republican model is often called participatory (Hagen 1997; Cunningham 2002), communitarian (Dahlberg 2001) or plebiscitary (Barber 1998).

Figure 1: Models of Democracy and Modes of Communication



Source: Lindner (2007: 80).

The main objective of the heuristic model is to provide orientation for the empirical analysis of Internet-based political communication patterns and the debate on e-democracy. Arguably, preferences for a certain model of democracy will most likely determine the type of e-democracy a proponent seeks to establish. For instance, if a promoter of e-democracy belongs to the supporters of deliberative democracy, he or she will probably prefer a mix of representative and plebiscitary modes of online democratic decision-making and put special emphasis on Internet-based discussion fora, whereas members of the liberal camp are likely to favour forms of online participation that reflect the principles of representative democracy. Against this background, the disappointment about the e-democratic practices of governments which is frequently expressed by observers and promoters of e-democracy can be better understood and put into perspective.

3. MAJOR RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

Within the discourse of e-democracy, there is a wide range of issues to be discussed and further analysed. During the consultation phase for this project, the participating researchers identified three areas which need to be worked out in detail: (1) The Internet and the European public sphere, (2) good e-participation practices in Europe, (3) e-voting in Europe. The following sections describe these issues and research perspectives in more detail.

3.1. The Internet and the European public sphere

The public sphere plays an indispensable political role for the democratic legitimisation of politics and policies. In Habermas' (1992b) concept of deliberative democracy the public sphere functions as an intermediate between political decision makers and a politically attentive citizenry or the "demos". The public sphere is neither an institution or organisation nor a particular form of a collective body: "The public sphere should rather be perceived as an open field of communicative exchange. It is made up of communication flows and discourses which allow for the diffusion of intersubjective meaning and understanding" (Trenz 2008: 2). In Habermas' view the construction of a Europe wide public sphere (besides a European civil society and political culture) is a central functional requirement for a democratically constituted Europe as well as for European identity and citizenship (Habermas 2002: 18).

The public sphere is an inherently normative concept. It describes features that are necessary for a functioning democracy. There must be room for public deliberation to take place in order to establish a link between the constituency and its representatives – i.e. to process the content of policy-making among those who will be affected by the decisions to be taken and those who delegate their representatives to the decision-making bodies. Thus, "public sphere" does not simply denote some form of public communication but always implies a certain (deliberative) quality that transforms public communication into public opinion and will formation (Frazer 2007; Trenz 2008). The discourse of engaged citizens is the backing for political decision-making in the representative system as the citizens (directly or via media) provide the political institutions with ideas and articulate their interests, concerns and fears that should be taken into account in the political process.

In political as well as scientific discussions on the integration of Europe and the further development of the European system of democratic governance, the formation of a European (political) public sphere is one of the most important challenges on the agenda. A "public sphere" related to policy-making on the European level can only emerge – if at all – on an "issue by issue" basis, and is usually restricted to small "expert-communities".

The European Commission addressed this (among other issues) as being a central barrier to the development of democratic governance in Europe (European Commission 2001: White Paper on European Governance) and has developed a plan to "stimulate a wider debate between the European Union's democratic institutions and citizens" (European Commission 2005: Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate). A crucial role in this respect has been assigned to the Internet as a means of involving the public in ongoing processes of policy-making.

The European Union as a political body, over its roughly five decades of existence, has been given more and more policy-making competences from its member states. This growth of political authority at the level of the Union is in many respects an indispensable condition for the establishment of Europe as a unified socio-political area with common and equal rules, rights and standards of living. The expansion of political responsibilities of the EU always has been and still is accompanied by complaints about an inherent democratic deficit, since the executive branch of the EU is not directly accountable to the European citizenry. As a reaction to the expansion of competences and as a means to overcome the democratic deficit and fostering the legitimacy of EU decision-making, the role of the European Parliament has been successively strengthened so that in the meantime the parliament is equipped with powers resembling those held by national parliaments. However, a fundamental problem of European democracy cannot easily be overcome by institutional changes but is connected to the social and cultural persistence of the nation state. This has been coined the "communication deficit" of Europe (Meyer 1999) rooted in the lack of an active political public sphere at the European level.

The European public sphere

It is widely held by researchers that the problem of European democracy is not primarily caused by a deficient democratic state of the European institutions but rather by an imbalance between the increasing transfer of political power from the national to the European level and the continuing national orientation of political debates and opinion formation, i.e. of the public sphere (Brüggemann et al. 2006, Eriksen/Fossum 2000; Gerhards 2000; Scharpf 1999).

So far, European citizenship in terms of active engagement in European affairs is at best beginning to develop. The turnout at European elections is significantly lower than in national elections. Media coverage of European issues has expanded as European policy increased its relevance for national policy-making. However, policy debates and opinion formation as being reflected in media remains to be nationally focused. In other words: there are several national public spheres taking up European issues but there is no cross- or transnational European media system covering European issues and the separate national public spheres (as e.g. reflected in mass media) are not interrelated to each other. The latter fact is most problematic as a vivid European public sphere will most probably not develop as a separate sphere of trans-national space of political communication but will grow out of a gradual Europeanisation of the public spheres of the member states.

Systematic empirical research on the role of the media in the formation of a European public sphere has been growing since the 1990s but is still in its infancy (for an overview: Bärenreuter et al. 2009). A basic problem of empirical research is the definition of indicators for a functioning public sphere, i.e. to translate ambitious assumptions of democratic theory into research design. In communication and media research there are basically two approaches to measure the European public sphere (Risse 2003). One approach is to measure how often terms like "Europe", "European Commission", "European Institutions" are mentioned in media reporting. Generally the level taking up European items in comparison to national items is rather low (Gerhards 2000). However, a slow increase of mentioning "Europe" has been reported over the last decades. Another approach is to measure media coverage of European issues (e.g. EU enlargement). These studies show simultaneous reporting about European issues in the media of the member states at a comparable level of intensity. It has been regarded as an indicator for an existing proto European public sphere, that in the various national media European topics are framed in the same way leading to the same interpretative schemes. There is also evidence for a growing importance of European issues in public debates in the member states. However, the level of media coverage of European issues is generally significantly lower than in the case of other political issues, and there is almost no interrelatedness of political debates as covered by the media of member states. In media research the lack of a common European media space is regarded to be rooted in socio cultural factors (languages, cultural identities), institutional factors (lack of transparency of the European policy-making process, lack of possibilities for citizens to participate) as well as media specific factors (fragmentation of media, national fixation of journalism) (Latzer/Saurwein 2006).

In the political as well as scientific debate three different notions of the European public sphere can be discerned (Brüggemann 2006: 3):

(a) A European public sphere will hardly flourish as there is no common language, no common media and no European civil society and identity. Thus, European policy-making needs to earn legitimacy in a different way than at the level of the nation state.

(b) A European Public sphere would imply communication in different countries about the same topic at the same time with the same frame of reference.

(c) The most ambitious notion regards the European public sphere as a network of Europeanised national public spheres connected by information flows, converging political agendas and camps in debate, transnational media and transnational speakers, and a European identity and citizenship.

The idea of the European Commission's White Paper on governance (2001: 12) of how to provide for democratic legitimisation is as follows:

> "The aim should be to create a transnational "space" where citizens from different countries can discuss what they perceive as being the important challenges for the Union. This should help policy makers to stay in touch with European public opinion, and could guide them in identifying European projects which mobilise public support."

This is very much in line with the Habermasian understanding of the democratic role of the public sphere. Moreover, this concept very much resembles the ambitious model (c) of the European public sphere given above. The Commission is not satisfied with national discourse arenas being Europeanised by adopting more European issues to their agendas but the commission conceives of the European public sphere as a genuinely European arena of exchange of citizens across borders and with the European political bodies.

The European public sphere, the media and the Internet

It can be argued that the public sphere, albeit developed historically in the context of the formation of nation states, nowadays is evolving into a transnational arena of communication which is largely driven by a global media economy. With the Internet giving most citizens instant access to information and enabling virtually every user to publish to a global community of Internet users, the development of a political public sphere as a global communication space beyond and across the boarders of the nation state is at least conceivable (Trenz 2008: 2).

However, research so far shows that political communication even on the global media space "Internet" is to a high degree still a nationalised event (Zimmermann/Koopmanns/ Schlecht 2004). Research on the use of the Internet as a platform for political communications (for an overview: Grunwald et al. 2006) includes studies on the design, use and discursive quality of political dialogue formats (fora, chatrooms) as organized by political institutions. This type of studies has also been carried out for online fora that have been run by European institutions, such as the EU platform "Your Voice" (Winkler et al. 2006). Other studies explore how different political actors (public authorities as well as societal groups) use the Internet as a channel of political promotion and campaigning as well as studies on carrier of political issues on the Internet as compared to reporting of mass media. Although the majority of these studies is dedicated to restricted questions of quality of websites offered and to specific political issues or events, some tentative conclusions with regard to the Internet's potential to contribute to public political discourse can be drawn: The Internet will not substitute the public sphere made up by mass media, but is and in future will increasingly be used as a means of political information. Many functions of the political public sphere will be influenced by the Internet (opinion formation, deliberation, agenda setting) and the relevance of political online communities will grow (Grunwald et al. 2006). Although participation in online debates and Internet-based public consultations etc. is low, these formats are important for linking decision-making to the processes of opinion formation of well informed and engaged citizens. The discursive quality is often rather high. However, online discussion fora offered by political institutions often lack a viable link to (and impact on) established decision-making processes.

In media research there is some evidence for a dissolution of the national public spheres, due to individualisation, a retreat of the citizen from the public to the private and in particular due to a fragmentation of the mass media landscape: Do audiences of different TV channels or newspapers really share the same public sphere? There are hints that a basic pillar of public opinion formation – a world of shared news and shared topics to be discussed at the same time within the same frame of reference – is vanishing (Trenz 2008). Similar problems are also discussed with regard to the Internet. The Internet opens up opportunities to actively intervene in debates and publish as well as getting instant access to any information provided by Internet users. On the other hand, to get the opportunity to publish does not automatically imply your voice is heard in the public sphere (Lindner 2007: 58f.). The Internet is a dispersed and segmented galaxy of communication and information. The segmentation of the public in separate spaces for particular groups and communities is even increased by the Internet and its user communities. Thus, the character of the Internet as a political public sphere is twofold: It is a sphere of exchange and discourse that can be used for political communication as well as a sphere of segmentation, specialisation and dissolution of a common sphere of communication (Grunwald et al. 2006).

European institutions are making use of the Internet by setting up fora or dialogue offers addressed to the European citizens, such as the Commission's website "On the future of Europe", which is meant to stimulate the European discourse on the institutional reform of Europe and the European constitution.[6] Other examples are online platforms for public consultations on European legislative matters.[7] These approaches can be regarded as being attempts to foster the growth of a European public sphere by involving citizens in the preparatory phase of decision-making. So far, however, little is known about the actual reach and possible achievements of the implementation of political dialogue via Internet. It is also amazing that – in contrast with discussions on the European constitution – the European Parliament is only addressed marginally in debates on democratic governance and the use of the Internet at the European level.

3.2. Good e-participation practices in Europe

An impressive number of e-participation activities have been carried out or are already integral elements of established political institutions (e.g., parliamentary e-petition systems) in Europe since the mid 1990s. In addition to the initiatives of public institutions, Internet-based applications are also widely used by civil society actors for a broad range of purposes. While the activities of governments and parliaments in the area of e-democracy and e-participation are embedded in and constrained by existing institutional requirements and formalities, the application of Internet technologies by civil society and NGOs tend to be more diverse, dynamic and up-to-date. As one of the consequences, the political dynamics of interest representation, lobbying and campaigning are shifting due to this changing media environment.

6 http://www.europa.eu.int/futurum

7 http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/consultations/index_de.htm

Hence, in order to identify examples of good e-participation practices for the European level, it is important to apply a broad focus by not only examining state-of-the-art activities of governments and parliaments, but also by taking into account the diverse approaches and solutions implemented by non-governmental actors. Arguably, the analysis of top-down approaches mainly performed by governments as well as bottom-up approaches of NGOs will be beneficial in the development of useful recommendations for the European level.

3.2.1. E-participation activities of NGOs and civil society actors

As the public sphere addresses the space between the state and civil society, it fulfils an important mediating function between these poles and is an important source of legitimacy (Nanz 2007: 11). Civil society actors include entities such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social movements, community groups, registered charities, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, business associations, self-help groups, coalitions and advocacy groups (LSE 2008). They are major actors in the public sphere, often being intermediaries between political authorities and citizens on issues of public interest. Bottom-up directed or generated political participation is in the foreground here.

The Internet has stimulated the development of new forms of communication practices and interactions (Kamps 1999; Leggewie 2003). There are some common features and potentials of information and communication technologies (ICT) which are particularly relevant for their use in political communication by civil society actors. First of all, the decentralised network structure of the Internet indeed provides the suitable space for a broad scope of political interactions. Equally important is the assumption of a logistic advantage of Internet communication for resource poor actors, or in the words of Street and Scott (2001: 46): "High impact on little resource". As the Internet reduces transaction costs of political communication and mobilisation due to its speed and outreach, it facilitates organisational strategies of political communication such as decentralisation as well as transnationalisation, especially of political campaigning (Baringhorst 2009: 19). It is still a question to what extent this will effectively change the capabilities of civil society actors to articulate political positions, their roles in (co-)shaping the public sphere and their influence on political decisions. At least one further argument supporting a possible strengthening of the position of civil society actors by the Internet in the context of political communication is the significantly reduced threshold and effort for implementing applications and platforms for political interactions in the world of Web 2.0 and social media.

Scope of political processes and functions supported by ICT

A first cluster of functions for which the Internet is employed by civil society actors comprises, on one side, organisation, coordination and fund-raising, and political mobilisation, agenda setting and campaigning, on the other side.

Many civil society groups recognized the Internet from early on as an important technology with potentials for political activity which are in accordance with their distributed organisational structures. NGOs use ICT to coordinate, organise, finance their activities and engage their constituency. They provide many different forms and shades of web-based political interactions which can contribute to the creation of new spaces for a public sphere (Leggewie 2003). In the beginnings of Internet communication, NGOs and other civil society actors started to use the web mainly for organising themselves; followed by first approaches to initiate campaigns, mobilising engaged individuals in terms of political activism and raising public awareness for different political issues. The Internet extends the repertoire of collective action as it both serves the functions of information and framing, and as a tactical medium in political campaigning (Baringhorst et al. 2009).

A related category of civil society uses of electronic political communication concerns the articulation of protest and elite-challenging actions. There is a broad scope of different projects and applications reaching from ICT-supported citizen initiatives and activism supporting or opposing certain political issues, electronic forms of protest and demonstrations (e.g., European campaign against software patents[8], protest against the EU data retention directive and for protecting civil rights[9]).

With Web 2.0 and social media becoming mainstream, the communication channels and forms of interaction have been multiplied. Nowadays NGOs are not only applying ICT to support their organisations and structures, they increasingly use the Internet for creating a counter-public sphere to the general public sphere and for their role as intermediaries between political authorities and citizens (Plake et al. 2001). How counter-public spheres can influence public opinion has been exemplified inter alia by the absorption of alternative communication practice into journalism (Wimmer 2009: 43).

Another cluster of ICT-supported functions includes awareness raising, information transparency, representative accountability and issue-oriented cooperation with authorities. Awareness raising and improving transparency is exemplified by NGO web sites and activities in different fields, e.g., interactive websites that inform on public spending[10] or disclose subsidies in agricultural policy[11], or applications for awareness raising on environmental issues and climate change (e.g. ecological footprint calculators[12]). This shows that e-participation projects of civil society actors span a variety of sophisticated and mature forms of interaction at all three generic levels of participation (information, communication, participation/collaboration).

8 http://www.nosoftwarepatents.com
9 http://www.vorratsdatenspeicherung.de
10 http://www.wheredoesmymoneygo.com
11 http://www.farmsubsidy.org
12 http://footprint.wwf.org.uk

A related group of bottom-up fed or generated collaboration of civil society actors with state institutions on issues of public concern has become known under labels such as crowdsourcing, participatory sensing, or citizen science (Paulos 2008). A typical application field is the development of strategies against environmental pollution and noise pollution with the support of local measurements by citizens in collaboration with professionals (e.g. the NoiseTube project[13]). The paradigm of participatory sensing builds on the use of mobile devices to establish sensor networks that enable the collection of measurement data, the analysis and sharing of local knowledge, the support of local campaigns and citizen science.

A genuine role of civil society for an active democracy is played by the growing amount of e-participation projects with a focus on improving communication, deliberation and public discourse. Typical means are Internet platforms providing a public discussion forum on political issues. Web-based opportunities for exchange between civil society and political stakeholders are another example, establishing a link between citizens' ideas and opinions and political representatives[14]. Questions to be clarified and needing further research include the nature and quality of deliberation as well as the influence of such communication in political decision-making and the contribution to community empowerment (Pratchett et al. 2009).

Overall, NGOs and other civil society actors engage in a relatively broad scope of different e-participation forms and applications, whereas these can be distinguished between top-down and bottom-up oriented approaches. Top-down approaches for e-participation (e.g. e-consultations, participatory e-budgeting, e-legislation, etc.) are often at least backed by government institutions in some respect or even co-financed by government institutions. This facilitates the awareness and public visibility of such projects. Bottom-up oriented e-participation (e.g. e-activism, e-campaigning, e-deliberation) is usually owned, financed and implemented by civil society stakeholders themselves without additional support. Thus, top-down approaches are expected to have a more direct impact on policy and decision-making processes. However, on the other hand, bottom-up projects tend to be seen independent from government (Delakorda/Delakorda 2009; Pratchett et al. 2009).

3.2.2. "Wiring up" government: e-participation opportunities offered by governments and parliaments

Many public institutions on all levels of government in Europe have been and still are active in using Internet-based applications in order to disseminate information, communicate with citizens and provide channels for political participation. Elected representative bodies such as the Scottish Parliament, the German Bundestag and the European Parliament are operating Internet-based petition systems (e-petitions), and governments at all levels regularly carry out web-based consultations (e-consultations) as part of their policy-making routines.

[13] http://noisetube.net/

[14] Examples include http://www.writetothem.com, http://www.theyworkforyou.com or http://www.meinparlament.at

Many other ICT-applications which can be used in democratic decision-making processes, such as participatory budgeting or urban planning processes which seek to create public consensus about policy priorities on the municipal level, are still at an experimental stage.

In the following, the e-democracy activities of governments and public bodies made available to citizens will be discussed in more detail. In a first step, a rather conceptual approach will be applied in order to sketch out the contemporary e-democracy initiatives of governments in relation to certain democratic functions and the processes of policy-making. A second step will deal in more detail with the most common forms of e-democracy currently provided by governments in Europe.

E-democracy offered by governments: general considerations

Since the mid 1990s, governments, parliaments and other public bodies and their representatives use the possibilities of the Internet in a broad rage of ways. Undoubtedly, the bulk of the Internet-based activities of public institutions fall into the realm of so-called "e-government" which primarily deals with Internet-based administrative service transactions between public institutions and citizens or businesses. "E-democracy" activities, which are primarily concerned with political processes of opinion formation, interest articulation and policy-making, tend to receive considerably less attention and resources from governments. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that all governments in liberal democracies are engaged in e-democracy in one way or the other since at least ten years. If the e-democracy activities of national governments are compared, differences become apparent with regard to the speed with which Internet-based applications were adopted, the range of different offers made to citizens, the quality of the technical solutions, and the relative weight online channels are given compared to offline activities. Regardless of these national (and regional) differences, it can generally be observed that with a rising degree of interactivity and formally binding character of the online offers, these e-democracy activities are actually less often made available to citizens by governments.

A cursory overview of governments' activities in the area of e-democracy in Europe shows that the following online offers can be observed (European Commission 2009; Grunwald et al. 2006):

- Provision and transmission of information: Making information available to citizens on the Internet is clearly the most common activity related to e-democracy governments and other public institutions perform.
- Consultation and advice: Governments actively seek input from citizens and experts on selected issues through the Internet. These e-consultations are very common in many member states and at the European level.
- Complaints, proposals and petitions: Governments offer opportunities to citizens and groups to raise issues, file complaints or submit petitions (e-petitions) online. In the meantime, a number of member states, the European Commission and the European Parliament provide this type of e-participation channel.

- Deliberation: Processes of opinion formation can also be supported by electronic means. Most common are various forms of online discussion fora. Other examples of Internet-based participation with the explicit objective to generate consensus on selected issues are deliberative polling or participatory budgeting.
- Decision-making based on voting: In contrast to all previous e-participation channels, this type of e-participation guarantees that the citizen's involvement has a certain impact on a decision-making process (e.g., binding online votes or referenda). Empirically, this form of e-participation is quite exceptional.

Of course, if these different forms of e-participation are analysed with regard to the democratic functions they fulfil, a certain degree of overlap can be observed. For instance, providing substantial and high-quality information on current policy issues plays an important role for processes of deliberation. Likewise, deliberation processes can be designed to function as an integral element of a binding online referendum.

Apart from the question which types of e-democracy activities are actually performed by public institutions, these offers can also be linked to different stages of the policy process. At least theoretically, e-democracy can be relevant for any phase of the democratic decision-making and governing process. An often applied heuristic in order to structure processes of public policy-making is the policy-cycle.[15] This framework presents a simplified and ideal-type model of the policy process; it is nevertheless useful to systematize and structure the highly complex processes of policy-making. A common conceptualisation of the policy-cycle differentiates five different phases:

1. Problem definition and articulation: Recognizing a policy problem or the need for policy change and expressing the necessity of state intervention.
2. Agenda setting: Selection of a recognised problem and putting it on the government's (formal or informal) agenda for serious consideration of public action.
3. Decision-making and policy formulation: Proposals and demands are transformed into government policy documents, actions or programs. This includes the definition of objectives and consideration of alternatives as well as the development of legislation and regulation.
4. Policy implementation: This usually includes the specification of program details and the execution or enforcement of a given policy by the responsible agencies.
5. Policy evaluation: This involves the evaluation and review of the policy in action, research evidence and views of actors concerned. The insights gained in this phase opens the possibility of a feedback loop to the first or second phase, perhaps resulting in a new policy initiative or a revision of an existing policy.

15 For a brief overview see Jann/Wegrich (2007).

If the different e-democracy offers made to citizens by governments are related to the phases of the policy-cycle, it seems that certain forms of e-participation are applied more frequently in some phases than in others. For instance, e-petitions and other electronically submitted complaints and proposals tend to relate to the phase of problem definition and articulation. E-consultations are usually initiated in a later phase of the policy process in order to support ongoing policy formulation after the policy agenda has already been set. Some e-consultations which are addressed at selected expert communities (Lindner 2008) also deal with specific technicalities of the implementation process of a policy or program. A closer examination of the relationship between the policy cycle and different forms of e-participation might be useful to be able to better assess the political impact which is to be expected from certain e-participation activities.

Information and communication opportunities provided on the Internet: increasing transparency and responsiveness?

Information and communication are at the core of any political process. If democracy is understood as a specific form of information exchange between citizens and governments, it can be expected that the way this is organised and which technical systems are used to transmit the information will have effects on the quality of democracy itself (Pal 1998: 106). As already noted above, providing information on the Internet was not only one of the first activities of governments to be observed in the early days of the WWW, this very fundamental contribution to democratic processes remains to be the most dominant and prominent activity related to e-democracy. Comparative research on the type and quality of information made available by parliaments on the Internet shows that the potentials of the new media technologies are realised quite differently by different parliaments (Grunwald et al. 2006; Lusoli et al. 2006; Zittel 2000). The degree to which background information is made available and accessible to citizens differs considerably between different national and regional parliaments. Obviously, the different degrees of information transparency displayed by parliaments reflect different cultural and institutional traditions (Riehm et al. 2009a).

Similarly, governments and parliaments show different patterns of behaviour with regard to the way communication exchanges between citizens and public institutions are organised (Zittel 2008). Some parliaments tend to provide more opportunities to exchange information with members of the public than others. Apart from the question which factors shape the communication strategies of democratic bodies, the issue of a possibly transformed quality of representative democracy due to the usage of Internet-based applications is raised as well. The central mechanism with which this might be achieved is the concept of responsiveness. Responsiveness denotes the degree to which the views and interests of the public are effectively taken into account in the processes of decision-making of representative bodies. Of course, the degree of institutional responsiveness is influenced by numerous factors, including the constitution, the institutional setting, the prevailing political culture, and the structure of the communication relationships between the ruled and the rulers. With regard to the later, governments and parliaments have considerable leeway to determine their own communicative capacity.

This may be achieved by increasing the number of contact points for citizens, the way information and content is made available, the degree of transparency etc. (Lindner/Riehm 2009: 511f.). Against this background, analysing governments' and parliaments' approaches to the provision of information and communication opportunities for citizens via new media technologies is particularly relevant for the question whether and under which circumstances the Internet has the potential to contribute to a revitalisation of representative democracy.

E-consultations and e-petitions

In contrast to the rather "fuzzy" approaches of public bodies to provide information and communication opportunities to citizens, e-consultations and e-petitions are two quite common forms of e-democracy activities that can be grasped more easily for the purpose of analysis. Both forms of e-participation have in common that they are well integrated in the institutional logic of representative democracy. In both cases, the final decision on and responsibility for a policy remains with the elected representatives; as such, e-consultations as well as e-petitions have an advisory or consultative character. Nonetheless, these forms of political participation can contribute to the quality of policy-making and the legitimacy of the political system as a whole (Riehm et al. 2009b). These two e-participation channels differ with regard to the initiation of the participation process: the agendas of e-consultations are usually set top-down by government or parliament. E-petitions, on the other hand, are initiated bottom-up by citizens or groups. Moreover, e-petitions tend to give participating citizens more procedural guarantees with regard to the petitioning process compared to e-consultations.

Given the large number of public e-consultations and the growing number of e-petition systems operated by governments and parliaments in Europe, a comparative analysis of selected cases is most likely to deliver fruitful results with regard to the identification of good practices. Moreover, these insights will be instrumental in the process of assessing the possible role of and developing recommendations for the design of an Internet-based participation channel in the future European Citizens' Initiative.

3.3. E-voting: A means to increase electoral participation?

The election to public office, which represents the most fundamental, common and egalitarian channel for political participation, has so far not been transferred to the Internet on a broad basis. To our knowledge, online voting (e-voting) in general elections and referenda has thus far been introduced as a regular and guaranteed feature only in Estonia. Most governments which have seriously inquired into the issue eventually refrained from introducing regular e-voting due to unresolved political, legal and technical challenges. Undoubtedly, given the fact that elections are at the core of representative democracy and that a high degree of integrity of the election process is a prerequisite for the legitimacy of the democratic system as a whole, a cautious approach to the introduction of e-voting seems necessary.

During the last decade, an impressive number of technical solutions both for online voting as well as for voting machines have been developed and partially made available on the market. Particularly computer scientists and information technologists have developed a marked interest in the design of technical solutions and software for electronic voting. While academics and researchers in this dynamic field seem to be mainly attracted by the professional challenges to build reliable and secure technical systems, a number of companies identified the market for e-voting systems and particularly voting machines as a profitable commercial niche. Compared to the large research and development efforts and the progress of their commercialisation, there is a remarkable lack of research on the potential benefits, risks and challenges related to the introduction of e-voting in general elections.[16] A preliminary examination of the issues raised by a possible introduction of e-voting in general elections reveals the following unresolved questions and problems:

- Increasing turnout rates: Promoters of e-voting usually argue that e-voting will increase turnout rates due to the lower individual costs for participation. However, so far there is no evidence for this claim and it is not obvious why voters should have more interest in elections in which casting the vote is electronically supported. Especially in the case of convinced non-voters and the complex reasons for their abstention, the expected effect seems doubtful. Estonia was among the first countries to implement an e-voting system via Internet. One of the major arguments for this was the expected increase of voter turnout. However, this did not happen, e-voting did not seem to have a positive impact on voter turnout. On the contrary, the turnout in this first election with ICT-support was (with about 47%) much lower than in elections without e-voting.[17]
- Constitutional and legal compliance: It is uncertain whether e-voting can be implemented in a way that fulfils constitutional requirements. A recent e-voting pilot in Finland was declared unconstitutional because more than 200 votes where lost due to a system failure.[18] A similar decision has been taken by the German Federal Constitutional Court in March 2009. The court declared the use of voting machines as unconstitutional.[19]
- Verifiability: For opponents of e-voting one major risk of this election procedure is the lack of verifiability. A conventional election can be verified by election observers. In the case of e-voting, this becomes highly complex. Observers have to be technical experts and the whole voting system (e.g. analysis of components and source code) has to be revisable ex-ante and ex-post. Therefore, manipulations are hardly detectable and the potential damage for democracy is estimated as being high.

16 For a critical assessment of electronic voting in the USA see Alvarez/Hall (2008).

17 http://sciencev1.orf.at/science/filzmaier/149954

18 http://futurezone.orf.at/stories/1602230/

19 http://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/pressemitteilungen/bvg09-019en.html

- Vulnerability of technical infrastructure: In 2007, the e-voting pioneer Estonia was the victim of a cyber attack[20] which partially cut-off government sites from the Internet. This incident demonstrated the vulnerability of a country with a high Internet penetration rate. The fact that it is still unclear who was responsible for this attack shows that this type of technical infrastructure is highly vulnerable and online-voting could be an attractive potential target. In case of a successful attack against an online-election, the legitimacy of a political system would be severely damaged.
- Secret suffrage: One crucial aspect of voting is to ensure the voters are identified and that the secrecy of the vote is guaranteed at the same time. At this point it is uncertain how e-voting can make a personalization of a vote impossible. Despite of the technical measures to contribute to this crucial requirement (e.g. blind signatures) this threat cannot be eliminated as e-voting per se is built on electronic devices that are generally traceable (unique hardware and software identifiers e.g. MAC-address, IP-address, geo-location, etc.).
- Symbolic meaning of the voting procedure: The rather intangible effects of technically induced changes of the actual voting procedures are not yet understood: Some experts argue that the act of physically going to the polling station, filling in the ballot paper and eventually dropping the ballot into the voting-box fulfils important political functions, both with regard to the symbolic meaning of the vote itself (e.g. demonstrating a citizen's belonging to a political community) and concerning the opportunity to reflect on the voting choice during these activities (Buchstein 2000).
- Complexity of handling for voters: Voters are generally aware of traditional election procedures and know how to cast their ballot. E-Voting requires different skills compared to traditional voting and is expected to require a certain degree of media competence. In an online-voting process, individuals do not have any direct personal support. Thus, voter turnout might even decrease if the complexity of the voting procedure exceeds individuals' media literacy.
- Reduction of costs: This expectation remains to be based on unproven assumptions as e-voting requires a tremendous technical effort and high technical expertise. Enormous costs are not only to be expected regarding implementation and set-up of the technical infrastructure. Permanent maintenance and support, updates, measures for security and protection against attacks, crisis management, etc. are expensive.
- Consultative polling: A less contentious approach for e-voting might be the combination with other forms of e-participation. E-voting could be integrated as an optional part of public participation, e.g. for polling on different proposals elaborated by citizens concerning a specific topic. This could be a useful addition for e-participation with fewer risks than those associated with the current aim to install e-voting as further channel for conventional and legally binding elections.

[20] http://futurezone.orf.at/stories/189099/

E-voting is to be seen as a "technisation" of established election procedures with high risks and potential threats to the integrity of the vote on the one hand and yet unproven assumptions regarding benefits on the other. A closer examination of the issues briefly mentioned above is necessary in order to develop a better understanding of the potential benefits, risks and challenges related to the introduction of e-voting in general elections. For this purpose, the analysis of the technical solutions and procedures of the e-voting systems and concepts need to be discussed in and assessed against the broader context of established election procedures and democratic values. With regard to the possible introduction of e-voting in elections to the European Parliament, particular attention needs to be given to the special conditions in which these European elections are held, e.g. the different national electoral systems, voting procedures and traditions need to be taken into account (Nohlen/Stöver 2010).

4. MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the previous sections of this interim report a number of important issues with regard to e-democracy in Europe were raised and discussed in detail. The main objective of the desk research was to identify, sharpen and substantiate relevant perspectives and topics for the remaining phases of this STOA-project. Based on the insights gained, the main research questions for the project were developed. In the following, these questions will be presented in three issue clusters:

- The Internet and the European public sphere
- Good e-participation practices in Europe
- E-Voting

Part B (project plan) of this interim report will clarify how these questions will be answered during the course of the project.

The Internet and the European public sphere

In order to identify obstacles of as well as concepts to support the formation of a European Public, a review of scientific literature on institutional characteristics of European policy-making and the role of a European public sphere will be carried out. Available studies on the political potential of the Internet will be scanned in order to come to conclusions regarding the role Internet communication might play in supporting the further development of the European public sphere. For an assessment of the "European potential" of Internet communication it will be helpful to look at different dimensions of a possible Europeanisation of the public sphere, such as (Brüggemann et al. 2006):

- Monitoring governance (i.e. attentiveness in the public spheres of the member states towards the performance of European political institutions),
- mutual observation (of policy-making among the member states across boarders, enlargements of the scope of public discourse horizontally into a wider European public sphere),
- discursive exchange (political communication on joint topics across boarders of member states, a European opinion formation by mutual exchange), and
- collective identification with Europe (development of a subjective European citizenship, development of a sense of belonging to a common European public).

Particularly with regard to the European Union, to what extent and by which mechanisms does the Internet contribute to transnational political debates, a shared communication context and eventually to the formation of a European public sphere?

Good e-participation practices in Europe

In order to develop a better understanding of the potentials and political impacts of different forms of e-participation made available to citizens, interesting examples of past and existing e-participation endeavours in Europe will be identified and analysed. For that purpose, the e-democracy relevant activities of public institutions as well as those performed by non-governmental actors will be included in the examination. By incorporating the e-participation activities of civil society actors, particularly innovative and dynamic forms of Internet-based political communication can be taken into account as well.

This part of the STOA-project will incorporate and assess the key findings and conclusions of the relevant research conducted in this field, address the specific needs of the European Union's political processes and institutions, and, based on the results of this research, develop recommendations that are relevant for actions of European decision makers.

Major research questions with regard to the e-participation practices of governments and parliaments are:

- What role does the Internet play in the provision, retrieval and exchange of politically relevant information, who are the beneficiaries of this changing information environment, how does this affect the dynamics of politics and policy-making?
- To what extent do new media technologies have the potential to change and broaden patterns of political participation, mobilise politically underrepresented and/or disenchanted groups?
- Under which circumstances do e-participation opportunities provided to citizens by governments have the potential to change/improve the quality of democratic processes?
- How can formal participation channels made available by governments and parliaments be productively complemented by and combined with the informal e-participation opportunities provided by NGOs and civil society?

Despite the growing number of different forms of bottom-up initiated e-participation it remains rather unclear, whether and how these forms become relevant for political decision making. One major determinant is the pre-existence of partial publics for specific political issues (Donges/Jarren 1999). Thus, an important precondition for potential political impacts of e-participation is the link between online communication and common traditional communication spaces and the relationship of e-participation to the policy process (Donges/Jarren 1999, Kamps 1999).

This part of the STOA project will also provide an overview of existing forms of e-participation developed by civil society stakeholders and their potentials for amending institutionalised forms of e-participation. The analysis will focus on their (potential) relevance for policy processes. Inter alia, the following questions will be of interest:

- How do civil society actors use ICT for democratic bottom-up empowerment?
- In which respect are e-participation projects and applications in Europe capable of contributing to a European public sphere?

- To which extent do bottom-up oriented e-participation activities contribute to raising awareness and to improving transparency and understanding of complex issues (e.g. budgeting, etc.)?
- What can be learned from informal e-participation applications which are primarily used by civil society actors? How could these applications be connected to formal decision-making routines of representative institutions?

E-Voting: A means to increase electoral participation?

In order to assess the potential benefits, risks and obstacles of e-voting solutions in general elections in Europe, the following key questions need to be addressed:

- How does e-voting relate to other forms of Internet-based political participation in the contemporary debate on e-democracy?
- What are the potential effects of e-voting applications for democratic processes and political participation in Europe?
    - Particular attention needs to be given to the special legal, procedural and political requirements elections to public office must meet. In addition to the fundamental principles of democratic elections (universal, equal, direct, and secret suffrage), the interdependent issues of trust, legitimacy, procedural integrity need to be taken into account.
    - Moreover, the rather intangible effects of technically induced changes of the actual voting procedures need to be analysed and assessed.
    - There is a pronounced need to assess the potential effects of e-voting on turnout by taking the consolidated findings of social science research on voting behavoir and abstention into account.
- How do the technical solutions correspond and relate to the legally codified procedures of elections to public office (e.g., voter registration and voter lists, absentee voting, voting for disabled persons, counting and re-counting provisions)?

For this purpose, the analysis of the technical solutions and procedures of the e-voting systems and concepts will be discussed in and assessed against the broader context of established election procedures and democratic values.

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PART B: PROJECT PLAN "E-DEMOCRACY"

Project phases in detail

With the submission of this interim report, the consultation phase of the STOA-project "E-Democracy" **(Phase 1)** has been finalised. The purpose of this consultation phase was to sharpen the concept of the project, outline and substantiate the research questions and, based on preliminary insights, develop a detailed project plan.
In the following, the objectives of the next three phases of the project will be described. In addition, an overview of the planned activities, deliverables and the timing of the project will be presented.

Phase 2: Theoretical Framework and Overview - In-depth examination of three selected areas

In this phase, the project will explore the potentials of e-democracy and e-participation both from theoretical and empirical perspectives. The outcome of the first phase of the project will be three working papers which will deal with the above mentioned subjects in detail. The working titles of these papers will be: (1) The Internet and the European public sphere, (2) Good e-participation practices in Europe, and (3) E-voting in Europe.

1) Based on current theoretical and conceptual accounts, the potential role of new media applications in the political process of establishing and guaranteeing democratic legitimacy, accountability and inclusiveness will be discussed. The development of a European public sphere and the risks and chances of Internet-based political information and communication in this context will be a major focus in this analysis.

2) As most member states have piloted e-participation activities or are even offering official online channels for participation such as e-petitions and e-consultations, in the second working paper we will give an overview of these activities and present selected cases that qualify as good practice examples. In addition to these formal e-participation opportunities offered by public institutions, a cursory overview of informal state-of-the-art e-participation applications such as social networking sites, which are primarily used by NGOs, will put the e-participation activities of public institutions in perspective. In addition to the opportunity to learn from successful informal e-participation initiatives, this perspective also provides a basis to identify promising mechanisms to improve the productive exchange between informal e-participation channels and formal decision-making routines of representative institutions.

3) The issue of e-voting or online-voting represents a case of its own as preliminary scientific findings suggest that the technical transfer of existing voting procedures into an online context does not adequately address any of the above mentioned problems of contemporary representative democracy, particularly the trends of declining electoral participation rates. At the same time, however, the issue of e-voting is on the agenda of some member states. Furthermore, as the elections to the European Parliament are currently held under 27 different national electoral systems and voting regulations, the establishment of a common European technical solution for e-voting currently seems more than ambitious. Thus, within this working paper, the potential risks and benefits of e-voting will be analysed by drawing on existing studies of e-voting solutions and the consolidated explanations of research on vote abstention in liberal democracies. It has to be noted that in the context of this study, it will not be possible to provide a comprehensive analysis of all possible e-voting solutions. Rather, we will summarize the different approaches, technical solutions and experiences in a synoptic way. In addition the chances of combining certain e-voting solutions as an optional part of other forms of political (e-) participation (such as non-binding online polling on selected issues), will be discussed.

The three working papers will provide the basis for the third phase of the project.

Phase 3: E-Democracy at the European Level

In this phase, one or more aspects of the E-democracy discussion will be dealt with in greater detail and supported by two interactive workshops. The focus will primarily be directed towards e-democracy and e-participation activities of the European Union. The selection of one or more specific activities will be based on an overview of the e-participation opportunities offered to European citizens which will be provided in a first step in this phase. The questions to be asked in the following will be for example: To what extent do these activities have the potential to effectively address the problems of the democratic deficit, the development of a European public sphere and the disenchantment of large parts of the citizenry with the European institutions? How can these activities be improved and what additional opportunities for Internet-based participation might be promising? In this regard, special attention will be given to the future European citizens' initiative, the regulatory details of which are currently being discussed. How and to what extent might new information and communication technologies help to support this new European plebiscitary participation channel, and how should the citizens' initiative be designed in order to enable online participation? The analysis of these questions will function as a basis for the planned workshops.

As mentioned previously, the desk research in the third phase will be complemented by two workshops. Based on the working paper on e-voting (phase 2), one workshop will discuss the chances and likely obstacles of introducing e-voting in the context of the elections to the European Parliament. The second workshop will bring together European e-participation practitioners and interested MEPs to discuss and validate the preliminary findings and recommendations of the project. If necessary, the focal issues to be discussed in this workshop may have to be adapted to recent developments or priorities set by MEPs.

The expected outcome of this third phase is an analysis of the current situation and future prospects of e-democracy and e-participation at the European level, and a set of preliminary recommendations for European decision-makers on the issues at stake.

Phase 4: Reporting

The fourth project phase will be the phase of reporting and quality control. It will include a critical internal review of the key findings and recommendations generated by the project. The aim is to produce a high quality final report that will be considered useful by European decision-makers.

Deliverables and dates

The research questions which were described in the section above translate into the project plan for the project "E-Democracy" in the following way. First of all, the researchers participating in this project will write three working papers in which they describe in more detail the theoretical framework of E-Democracy and the activities of member states of the European Union concerning E-Participation as well as the current knowledge about E-Voting practices and perspectives.
These activities form phase 2 of the project (phase 1 was the consultation phase which resulted in this interim report) and will be carried out from April 2010 to October 2010:

Phase 2: Theoretical Framework and Overview

- Working paper 1: European public sphere and new media technologies (Summer 2010)
- Working paper 2: Good e-participation practices in Europe (October 2010)
- Working paper 3: E-voting in Europe (October 2010)

Deliverable:

- Report containing 3 working papers (30 October 2010)

Phase 3: E-democracy at the European level

The background papers will serve as a knowledge base for the following activities which will have an explicit communicative focus and in which we will put our analysis up for discussion in the scientific and political community. For that matter, we will organise two workshops in spring/early summer of 2011. Workshop No. 1 will bring together scientists, politicians and administrative representatives with experience in participatory processes and will discuss the preliminary results and conclusions from working paper No. 2.
Workshop No. 2 will discuss the results of working paper No. 3 accordingly and deal with the subject of E-Voting in Europe.
These activities form phase 3 of the project and will take place from November 2010 until April 2011. The activities are intended to extend, balance and update the analysis documented in the three working papers of phase 2.

- Draft conclusions as input for the workshops (April 2011)
- Workshop: E-voting for elections to the European Parliament (spring/early summer 2011)
- Workshop: E-democracy and e-participation at the European level – discussion of preliminary results (spring/early summer 2011)

Deliverables:
- 2 Workshops (Spring 2011)

Phase 4: Final reporting

Phase 4 of the project consists of the final reporting, which will include the results from the two workshops. Phase 4 will last from May 2011 until September 2011.

- Integration of workshop conclusions and MEP comments (August 2011)
- Final report (September 2011) (ISI)

Deliverables:
- Draft conclusions paper of the two workshops (31 May 2011)
- Final Report (30 September 2011)

Overview over deliverables and dates

Phase 2: April 2010 - October 2010	**Date of delivery**
Working Paper No. 1 "Public Sphere"	31 August 2010
Working Paper No. 2 "E-Participation in Europe"	31 October 2010
Working Paper No. 3 "E-Voting"	31 October 2010
Phase 3: November 2010 - April 2011	
Workshop No. 1 "E-Participation"	within March/April 2011
Workshop No. 2 "E-Voting"	within April/May 2011
Phase 4: May 2011 - September 2011	
Draft conclusions paper of the 2 workshops	31 May 2011
Integration of workshop conclusions in Working Papers 2 and 3	31 August 2011
Final Report	30 September 2011