Editorial of the Special Issue on E-Participation in Southern Europe and the Balkans: Issues of democracy and participation via electronic media

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There has been a growing interest of public sector researchers and practitioners in the last 25 years in the involvement of citizens in government decision-making and policy development. This is seen as a complement and reinforcement of representative democracy where citizens not only elect their representatives, who take responsibility for government decisions and policies, but also provide their feedback to them on a continuous and systematic basis. A sound theoretical foundation for these ideas has been developed, which has been followed by practical application in many countries all over the world. Barber (1984)[1] introduces the concept of 'strong democracy', which is characterized by active citizen participation and discussion among opposing views. However, he argues that this is not easy, since 'it entails listening no less than speaking, it is affective as well as cognitive...', and also requires sufficient 'civic education', which can strengthen public discourse and participation in the democratic process. He proposes three forms of civic education for this purpose: formal education in citizenship (including teaching on a nation's constitution, legal system and political practice), private sphere social activity focusing on debate about its effect on local issues and participatory politics itself, which he argues is the most successful form of civic education. In the same direction Held (1987)[2], combining work of previous researchers, defines an emergent new model of democracy, which he termed as 'participatory democracy'. A key principle of this model is that "the equal right to self-development can only be achieved in a participatory society, a society which fosters a sense of political efficacy, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of a knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a sustained interest in the governing process". In a subsequent work Held (1996)[3] distinguishes nine different models of democracy; one of them is the participatory model, which reflects the need to engage both citizens and civil society organizations in the policy-making process. However, he emphasizes that in order to achieve this it is important that citizens are sufficiently informed and active. Fishkin (1997)[4] criticizes political opinion surveys that force people to judge instantly issues on which they may have no opinion or have given little thought, and proposes "mass" deliberation by citizens instead, which should complement "elite" deliberation by elected representatives. He states that 'A major part of the problem of democratic reform is how to promote mass deliberation – how to bring people into the process

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[1] Barber B., *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.

[2] Held D., *Models of Participation*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987.

[3] Held D., *Models of Democracy*, Cambridge, Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

[4] Fishkin J. S., *The Voice of the People - Public Opinion and Democracy*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997.

under conditions where they can be engaged to think seriously and fully about public issues'.

Another research stream focuses on understanding the nature of public policy problems and the methodology of finding solutions for them, and concludes that they gradually become less well-defined and more complex, and for this reason extensive public participation is required for defining and solving them. Rittel and Weber (1973)[5] argue that previously public policy problems, though they were not trivial, had clear and widely accepted definition and objectives, and could be solved mainly by experts using 'first generation' methods; these methods are based on mathematical optimization algorithms and focus on achieving some predefined objectives with the lowest possible resources. However, this situation has changed dramatically and public policy problems tend to become 'wicked': they do not have a clear and widely agreed definition and objectives, and are characterized by high complexity and many stakeholders with different and heterogeneous problem views, values and concerns. This new generation of problems cannot be solved with the above 'technocratic' first generation methods, and require a different 'second generation' approach, which should combine public participation and technocratic analysis. In particular, the first and fundamental step for addressing them is consultation and argumentation among problem stakeholders, which includes discourse, reasoning, arguments and negotiation taking place, aiming to synthesize different views and formulate a shared definition of the problem, the objectives to be achieved and the existing alternative solutions. Having this as a base it is possible then in a second step to proceed to a technocratic analysis performed by experts using mathematical optimization algorithms for solving the problem that has been defined in the first step. Subsequent research on such problems has revealed that the above participative/argumentative approach to addressing them can be greatly supported by 'Issue Based Information Systems' (IBIS)[6], which support structured deliberation among the stakeholders of the problem.

Based on the above theoretical foundations the concept of public participation has been gradually formulated. The OECD[7] defines public participation as a combination of three main activities: provision of information by the government to the citizens concerning future public policies under development, consultation on them with the citizens and also support of citizens' active participation and initiatives (such as suggestion of new policy options or discussion topics in addition to the ones proposed by government). Rowe and Frewer (2004)[8] define public participation as 'the practice of consulting and involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making and policy forming activities of organizations or institutions responsible for policy development'. They view it as a move away from an 'elitist model', in which

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[5] Rittel H. W. J., Weber M. M., "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning", *Policy Sciences*, 4, pp. 155-169, 1973.

[6] Kunz W., Rittel H., "Issues as Elements of Information Systems", *Working Paper* No. 131, University of California, Berkley, 1979.
Conklin J., Begeman M., "gIBIS: A tool for all reasons", *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 40(3), pp. 200 – 213, 1989.
Conklin J., "Dialog Mapping: Reflections on an Industrial Strength Case Study", in P. Kirschner, S. Buckingham Shum and C. Carr (Eds.) Visualizing Argumentation: Software Tools for Collaborative and Educational Sense-Making, *Springer Verlag*, London, 2003.

[7] Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development – OECD, "Engaging Citizens in Policy-making: Information, Consultation and Public Participation', *PUMA Policy Brief*, Paris, 2001.

[8] Rowe G., Frewer L. J., "Evaluating Public-Participation Exercises: A Research Agenda", *Science, Technology & Human Values*, 29(4), pp. 512-557, 2004.

public sector managers and experts are the basic source of public policies, to a new model, in which citizens have a more active role and voice in that. However, it is made clear that the objective of such a participatory democracy is not to replace representative democracy and establish a new order, but to improve and strengthen it, and contribute to overcoming the existing "democratic deficits" and the growing abstention and disengagement of citizens from politics.

Governments of many countries have made considerable efforts in order to apply the above ideas[9], promote public participation and strengthen their relations with the citizens. In particular governments initiate and support the above mentioned three types of interactions with their citizens in various stages of the public policy-making cycle (starting from the agenda setting stage up to the monitoring and evaluation stage):

I. Information Provision: a 'one-way relation', in which government produces and delivers information to be used by citizens (it includes both 'active' information initiated by government and 'passive' as a response to citizens' demand).

II. Consultation: an asymmetric 'two-way relation', in which citizens provide views and feedback to government on issues and questions that government has previously defined.

III. Active participation: a more symmetric 'two-way relation' between government and citizens, in which citizens have a wider role in proposing new policy options and discussion topic, in addition to the ones proposed by government, and in shaping the policy dialogue in general, though the government still has the responsibility for the final decisions.

The main objectives that governments have in initiating and supporting these three types of interactions are:

− improving the quality of public policies, by taking advantage of valuable policy-relevant sources of information, knowledge and also perspectives and viewpoints that exist in the society,

− responding to the expectations of citizens that their voices should be heard and their views should be seriously considered in public decision and policy making by all levels of government,

− responding to calls for greater government transparency and accountability,

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[9] Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development – OECD, "Citizens as Partners – Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making", *OECD Publication Service*, Paris, 2001.

Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development – OECD, "Engaging Citizens in Policy-making: Information, Consultation and Public Participation", *PUMA Policy Brief*, Paris, 2001.

Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development – OECD, "Evaluating Public Participation in Policy Making", *OECD Publication Service*, Paris, 2004.

Curtis, G. G., "Issues and Challenges - Global E-Government/E-Participation Models, Measurement and Methodology - A Framework for Moving Forward", *Workshop on E-Participation and E-Government: Understanding the Present and Creating the Future*, Budapest, Hungary, 2006.

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Timmers, P., "Agenda for eDemocracy – an EU perspective", *European Commission*, Brussels, 2007.

United Nations, "United Nations e-Government Survey 2008 - From e-Government to Connected Governance", *Department of Economic and Social Affairs* - Division for Public Administration and Development Management, New York, 2008.

- strengthening public trust in government and reversing the declining confidence in politics and key public institutions.

For achieving these objectives governments use several 'off-line' methods designed to inform, consult and involve those affected by particular decisions and public policies[10]; the most widely used of them are public hearings/inquiries, public opinion surveys, citizens' juries/panels, focus groups, citizen/public advisory committees, consensus conferences, negotiated rule making and referenda.

The rapid development and the growing penetration of ICT, and especially the Internet, provide tremendous opportunities for a wide and cost effective application of the above ideas. ICT can drive significant transformations in the quantity and quality of communication and interaction of government agencies with citizens. This enables government agencies to gain a better and deeper understanding of the problems, needs, concerns and values of groups of citizens and in general the societies they are serving, and therefore make in a timely fashion the required decisions, public policies, programs and legislations. These capabilities resulted in the emergence and gradual development of electronic participation (or e-participation). Saebo et al (2008)[11] define it as the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative processes through the exploitation of ICT. The OECD[12] provide a more detailed definition of e-participation as the use of ICTs for supporting the provision of information to the citizens concerning government activities and public policies, the consultation on them with the citizens and also their active participation in all the stages of the policy-making life cycle: agenda setting, policy analysis, policy formulation, policy implementation and policy monitoring/evaluation. Macintosh and Whyte (2006)[13] suggest that e-participation concerns the use of ICT for supporting not only the "top-down" engagement of citizens, e.g. via initiatives promoted by the government, but also "ground-up" efforts as well, in which citizens, organizations of civil society and other democratically established groups to convey their needs and opinions to elected representatives and government.

The ICT offer unprecedented huge capabilities for increasing citizens' access to government information, promoting transparency, accountability and fighting corruption. They enable governments to make available through the Internet large amounts of information concerning their activities, decisions, spending and financial situation in general, and policy whitepapers; furthermore, they provide citizens with powerful tools for searching, selecting, and integrating the large amounts of governments' information, in order to satisfy their particular information needs and interests. However, this poses several challenges. Highly important is not only the quantity of government information provided online to citizens, but also its quality as well, in terms of its accessibility, relevance and utility to citizens wishing to be informed and participate in policy-making. The design of electronic provision of government information should start from the perspective of the end-users of it, and

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[10] Rowe G., Frewer L. J., "Public Participation Methods: A Framework for Evaluation", *Science, Technology & Human Values*, 25(1), pp. 3-29, 2000.

[11] Saebo O., Rose J., Flak L. S., "The shape of eParticipation: Characterizing an emerging research area", *Government Information Quarterly*, 25, pp. 400-428, 2008.

[12] Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development – OECD, "Engaging Citizens Online for Better Policy-making", *OECD Observer Policy Brief*, Paris, 2003.
Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development – OECD, (2004a), "Promise and Problems of e-Democracy: Challenges of Online Citizen Engagement", *OECD Publication Service*, Paris, 2004.

[13] Macintosh A., Whyte A. (2008), "Towards an Evaluation Framework for eParticipation", *Transforming Government: People, Process & Policy*, 2(1), 16-30.

should be based on an assessment of their needs and their capacity to find, understand and use this information. Enhancing the accessibility of online information can be achieved by various means, such as organization of online information in terms of specific life events or policy issues and provision of search engines, online glossaries (explaining basic legal and technocratic terms used in government documents), multilingual translations of government documents and software tools making them more intelligible (such as visualizations of the main points of major documents in a simple schematic manner[14], which can be understood by a much wider mass of citizens than the initial documents). If the above challenges are not effectively addressed, then the benefits of online government information provision will be much lower than its real potential, and mainly limited to some highly educated and knowledgeable groups of society.

Furthermore, the huge interactivity capabilities offered by modern ICTs has the potential to expand the scope, breadth and depth of government consultations with citizens and other stakeholders on key government policies and decisions. Many ICT tools have been developed and are available to governments for collecting citizens' views and suggestions on important issues, such as government consultation spaces, e-mail lists, online discussion forums, online mediation systems for supporting deliberation and also various means of ICT support of 'traditional' consultations. Additionally, there are advanced ICT tools for increasing the quality of the government-citizens interaction by enabling more structured and focused e-consultations[15]. However, there are many challenges that should be addressed in order to exploit this huge potential. The e-consultations usually produce large amounts of citizens postings, which include useful input, views and knowledge, so they have to be analysed, exploited and integrated in the policy-making process; also feedback has to be provided to citizens on how their comments and suggestions have been used for reaching decisions or policy proposals. Therefore it is necessary to develop appropriate processes and ICT tools for these purposes. Another issue is 'self-selection' of the participants in these e-consultations, among those who already have access to ICTs, raising the risk of over-representation of a small cross-section of the population and the resulting increase of the already existing 'digital divide'[16]. This term is increasingly used in the last decade to denote that despite the increasing

[14] Renton A., Macintosh A., "Computer Supported Argument Maps as a Policy Memory", *Information Society Journal*, Vol. 23(2), pp. 125-133, 2007.
Loukis E., Xenakis A., Tserpeli N., "Using Argument Visualization to Enhance e-Participation in the Legislation Formation Process", *IFIP First International Conference on e-Participation - ePart 2009*, Linz, Austria, Sept. 2009.
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[15] Gordon T. F., Karacapilidis, N., "The Zeno Argumentation Framework", *Paper presented at the Sixth International Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Law (ICAIL '97)*, 1997.
Karacapilidis N., Loukis E., Dimopoulos S., "Computer-supported G2G collaboration for public policy and decision making", *Journal of Enterprise Information Management*, 18(5), pp. 602-624, 2005.
Xenakis A., Loukis E., "An Investigation of the Use of Structured e-Forum for Enhancing e-Participation in Parliaments", *International Journal of Electronic Governance*, 3(2), pp. 134 – 147, 2010.
[16] Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development – OECD, "Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide", *OECD Publication Service*, Paris, 2000.
Norris P. "Digital divide: civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide", *Cambridge University Press*, New York, 2001.
Mossberger K., Tolbert C. J., Stansbury M. "Virtual Inequality: Beyond the Digital Divide", *Georgetown University Press*, Washington, DC., 2003.

penetration of ICT, and especially the Internet, in large parts of the populations of many countries (mainly of high or medium economic development), there are still considerable groups (e.g. citizens of low income, low education or old age) without access to ICT and/or without sufficient skills for using them; this is increasing their exclusion from the highly ICT-dependent modern economy and society, so it might increase the already existing social inequalities. However, such risks can be reduced by serious government efforts to enable wider access to ICT by citizens who cannot afford it (e.g. community centres, public kiosks, etc.), and also adequate promoting and supporting e-consultations, so that there is wide participation in them of citizens from various social groups. Another question is what will be the impact of e-participation on the role of the traditional mediators of citizens' voice (e.g. elected representatives, civil society organisations, etc.)? Are we going to have similar phenomena with the ones observed in the e-business world[17] (removal or reduction of power and role of many existing commercial intermediaries between producers and consumers, and at the same time emergence of new ICT-based intermediaries)?

Finally, ICT can also support and facilitate a more active participation of citizens, through online tools and discussion formats which enable them to set the agenda for discussion (e.g. raise new issues that have to be discussed, in addition to the ones raised by the government), submit their own proposals and policy options and in general shape the final outcomes. This dimension of e-participation is the least explored, with only some types of ICT tools having been investigated for this purpose, such as e-petition spaces[18] (in which citizens can enter petitions to the government or parliament, and solicit support and signatures), electronic discussion groups supporting the development of new policy options and the deliberation on them and online referenda. The main barriers to the wider use of these more active and innovative forms of e-participation are not technical, but mainly cultural, associated with government's resistance to these new forms of partnership with citizens and civil society in policy-making.

The high potential of ICT in supporting, facilitating and enhancing the above three dimensions of public participation has lead, on the one hand, to a first application of these ideas in many countries (mainly electronic information provision, much less electronic consultation, and to a limited extent ICT support for active participation)[19]. On the other hand it has lead to the emergence of a lively e-participation research

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[17] Jelassi T., Enders A., *Strategies for E-Business: Concepts and Cases*, FT Prentice Hall, London, 2008.
Chaffey D., *E-Business and E-Commerce Management: Strategy, Implementation and Practice*, FT Prentice Hall, London, 2009.
[18] Santucci D., "Studying e-petitions: State of the art and challenges", *ESF-LIU Conference on Electronic Democracy*, Vadstena, Sweden, 2007
Cruickshank P., Edelmann N., Smith C., "Signing an e-Petition as a Transition from Lurking to Participation", in Tambouris E., Macintosh A., Glassey O. (Eds.) *Second IFIP International Conference on Electronic Participation – ePart 2010*, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2010.
[19] Hoff J., Lofgren K., Torpe L., "The state we are in: E-democracy in Denmark", *Information Polity*, 8, pp. 49–66, 2003.
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area[20], which investigates the use of various types of ICT for public participation purposes, the extent of exploitation of the above potential of ICT, the benefits and in general the value they generate, and the impact on political processes and on society in general, the effects of various contextual factors, the critical success factors and also the above mentioned challenges that e-participation poses. Furthermore, recently it has started dealing with the exploitation of the emerging web 2.0 social media, which have already attracted large numbers of users, for extending public participation[21]. The e-participation research area is by nature interdisciplinary, combining elements from the technological, political, social and administrative sciences.

This Special Issue aims to contribute to the investigation of the above research questions in a very special national context, the one of the Southern European and Balkan countries. The Balkan countries are characterised as 'semi-periphery' or 'late development' ones[22], as on the one hand they are part of the economically developed world, but on the other they did not directly participate in the big transformations that took place in the Western Europe and lead to the development of the industrial capitalism and the concomitant political institutions and culture. These big economic and political transformations were 'imported' later in Balkans from the 'early development' countries of the Western Europe, and were greatly shaped by and combined with local institutions and practices. Later these countries lived for a long time under communist regimes, and their return to market economy and representative democracy was followed by an outbreak of conflicts among ethnic groups, or even violence in the case of former Yugoslavia which lead to its disintegration. All these resulted in underdeveloped democratic institutions and culture in the Balkan countries. However, the state in Balkan countries, despite its democratic deficits, had traditionally a dominant role in the economic activity and development. The Southern European countries (Greece, Portugal, Italy and Spain) are characterised by some distinct specificities and differences from the Northern (Scandinavian) and West European ones with respect to the role and the basic characteristics of the state[23]. In

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[20] Rose J., Sanford, C., "Mapping eParticipation Research: Four Central Challenges", *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, 20, pp. 909- 943, 2007.

Saebo O., Rose J., Flak L. S., "The shape of eParticipation: Characterizing an emerging research area", *Government Information Quarterly*, 25, pp. 400-428, 2008.

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[21] Punie Y., Misuraca G., Osimo D., "Public Services 2.0: The Impact of Social Computing on Public Services" JRC Scientific and Technical Reports. European Commission, *Joint Research Centre - Institute for Prospective Technological Studies*, 2009.

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[22] Mouzelis N., *Modern Greece: Facets of underdevelopment*, London, Macmillan Press, 1978.

Mouzelis N., *Politics in the semi-periphery: Early parliamentarism and late industrialization in the Balkans and Latin America*, London, Macmillan Press, 1986.

Mouzelis N., *From reform to modernization*, Athens, Themelio, 2002.

[23] Maravall, J. M., "Politics and Policy: Economic Reforms in Southern Europe", in L. C. Bresser Pereira, J. M. Maravall and A. Przeworski (Eds.) Economic Reforms in New Democracies: a Social Democratic Approach, Cambridge, *Cambridge University Press*, pp. 77–131, 1993.

Southern Europe the state has 'assisted' the development of capitalism to a much greater extent than in the Northern and Western Europe, resulting in the establishment of an 'assisted capitalism' which is contrasted to the 'competitive capitalism'. The role of the state in South Europe includes ownership of important corporations, protectionism and patronage of certain industrial sectors and social groups. As result many groups became accustomed to depending on the state for their wealth and power (e.g. businesses relying on state for loans and contracts, public sector employees relying on state for obtaining much better social insurance, health and pension schemes than private sector employees). At the same time all the above mentioned Southern European countries experienced dictatorship periods during the 20th century, which undermined democratic institutions and culture. The above history has resulted in some distinct characteristics of the state as to its relation with society: political clientelism 'at the top' (extensive politicization of the higher civil service) and 'at the bottom' (parties offering to their voters jobs in the public sector), uneven distribution of public servants (as another form of clientelism 'at the bottom': some highly desirable public services offering very good employment terms were overstaffed, while some others, though critical for society but not much desirable, were understaffed), excessive legalism and formalism (overproduction of laws, decrees and regulations resulting in high inflexibility and at the same time informal arrangements) and lack of administrative elite (with the exception of the Spain).

It is therefore quite interesting to examine the interaction between the emerging e-participation ideas and this special national context, and gain an understanding of how e-participation is shaped by this context and at the same time what impact it can have on this context. In this direction the Special Issue includes six papers, which describe and analyse pilot applications of these e-participation ideas in seven Southern European and Balkan countries (Spain, France, Italy, Serbia, Albania, Greece, Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)) using a variety of approaches (both qualitative and quantitative ones). The first paper titled 'Using Advanced Information Technologies for Increasing Public Participation in the Greek Parliament' by Euripidis Loukis describes and evaluates a first attempt of the Greek Parliament to use two advanced ICTs, computer supported arguments visualization and structured e-forum, for increasing the quantity and quality of public participation in the legislation formation process. From the quantitative and qualitative multi-perspective evaluation it has been concluded that using visualizations of the main parliamentary documents can make them more understandable by the citizens, contributing to a wider dissemination and discussion of them and promoting transparency and accountability. With respect to the use of structured e-forum it has been concluded that it can enhance the quality and focus of the e-consultations on legislation under formation, promoting interaction with the society and accessibility. However, the structure it imposes necessitates high mental effort from the participants, and this might make it less suitable for and usable by lower education groups of the society, limiting the above benefits to the higher education groups and contributing to an increase of the existing 'digital divide'.

The second paper titled 'Electronic Participation Pilots in the Western Balkans: Lessons from the Field' by Sotirios Koussouris, Yannis Charalabidis, Loukas Kipenis, Dimitrios Askounis and Odetta Stavri describes and evaluates a series of successful e-

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Pagoulatos G. "Financial Interventionism and Liberalization in Southern Europe: State, Bankers, and the Politics of Disinflation", *Journal of Public Policy*, 23(2), pp. 171–99, 2003.

Sotiropoulos D. A., "Southern European Public Bureaucracies in Comparative Perspective", *West European Politics*, 27(3), pp. 405 — 422, 2004

participation pilots in the Western Balkans (Albania, FYROM and Serbia), an area with intensive national and international tensions and conflicts, and rather young and immature democratic institutions. The pilots are conducted using an Internet-based ICT platform which allows citizens to comment and discuss the news items as they appear in the News Agencies' web sites. The conclusions of the evaluation of the usability and political usefulness of this ICT platform were in general positive, and this advocates the potential of e-participation ICT in such special and highly difficult contexts (with tensions, lack of trust, immature democratic institutions, etc.). The participants felt that such e-participation systems might have a positive impact on the local political life, and contribute to highlighting and addressing certain political issues, and also to the improvement of cooperation between NGOs, governmental organizations, news agencies and parliaments, and in general to bridging the existing gaps between citizens and governments. However, the existing tensions between the above countries had a negative impact on the cross-country e-consultation attempts.

The third paper is titled 'Using Participative GIS and e-Tools for Involving Citizens of Marmo Platano-Melandro Area in European Programming Activities' and has been authored by Beniamino Murgante, Lucia Tilio, Viviana Lanza and Francesco Scorza Marmo Platano–Melandro PIT (Territorial Integrated Projects). It presents and analyses an e-participation pilot using web 2.0 tools (such as blogs) and geographical information systems (GIS) in Marmo Platano–Melandro, Italy, aiming at the collaborative elaboration of a local development program. This Internet-based approach shows a high potential to provide effective means through which planners can fully engage with the communities they serve through a more informed and 'bottom-up' planning process. However, the authors remark that such bottom-up participative local development planning processes are an exception in current practices, due to a lack of such a culture in most local governments, so too many resources are devoted to manage administrative procedures rather than to develop effective planning.

The fourth paper titled 'Constructing and implementing e-participation tools in the Emilia Romagna Region: assemblages and sense making' by Andrea Resca presents a study of an e-participation project led by the Emilia Romagna Region, Italy, in collaboration with other Italian public administrations. Initially the involved public administrations put in collaboration together already existing technological artefacts that each of them had developed previously and composed an ad hoc technological solution for supporting e-consultations, which was then used for two e-consultations on two controversial issues of the Municipality of Modena. This 'assemblage' is examined from three perspectives: technical compatibility, functional compatibility and institutional compatibility, and the main problems/issues identified in the first two perspectives are discussed. The analysis of these two e-consultations shows that though the numbers of participants and postings was lower than the expectations (indicating that the use of 'social brokers' for attracting more participants would be useful) the discussion was fruitful, new ideas emerged and inputs from participants led to interventions that were effectively put into practice; also hostile attitudes that existed gradually vanished.

The fifth paper is titled 'Learning from e-Participation initiatives of regional and local level authorities in Greece and Spain' and has been authored by Eleni Panopoulou, Efthimios Tambouris, Elena Sanchez-Nielsen, Maria Zotou and Konstantinos Tarabanis. It examines and compares the e-participation capabilities offered by the official websites of regional authorities of Greece and Spain, and also success stories of e-participation at the city level. It concludes that although e-participation is a

political priority at the EU level, it is not yet adequately advanced in the regional and local authorities of these two countries. Spain scores good in electronic information provision and average in e-consultation, while Greece scores average in both; however, ICT-supported active participation measures are very low in both countries.

The final paper is 'Participatory Policy Process Design: Lessons Learned from Three European Regions' by Clelia Colombo, Mateja Kunstelj, Francesco Molinari and Ljupčo Todorovski, and focuses on the organization of e-participation. It presents a participatory workflow model, providing useful guidance for connecting various regional off-line participation and e-participation sessions, and for integrating them in the policy-design process at the EU level. The paper assesses the benefits of implementing the proposed workflow in three South-European regions (Catalonia-Spain, Toscana-Italy and Poitou Charentes-France), presents the lessons learned and discusses its potential. It is concluded that ICT have a big potential for supporting citizen participation in public decision-making, although their effectiveness in participatory processes is highly related to the design and implementation of the whole project and the political will. Also, it is of critical importance to sustain coherence between the various offline participation processes (taking place in different locations and times) and the corresponding virtual debates on the same topic; an electronic debate platform could be used for this purpose, enabling us to maintain previous debates online, detect the main opinions, standpoints and arguments among participants and publicize documents of interest for the participatory process.

The papers of this Special Issue provide evidence that ICT, and especially the Internet, can be a very useful tool for increasing the quantity (more participating citizens) and the quality (better, more substantial and deliberative political discussions) of public participation in various government decisions and policies (such as legislation formulation, regional development planning, city regulations, etc.) in the national contexts of the Southern European and Balkan countries. These national contexts are characterised by a highly important and strong role of the state in the economic and social development on one hand, and at the same time deficiencies in its communication with and control by the society on the other, due to weaknesses of the democratic institutions and culture (more in the Balkan countries and less in the Southern European ones). The findings of the above papers, though they are based on pilot and small scale e-participation applications, indicate that ICT have the potential to contribute to closing this gap and increase the transparency of government and its interaction with society; the asynchronous and remote non face-to-face communication capabilities offered by modern ICT can enable a more calm, thoughtful and argumentative political dialogue even in very difficult situations characterised by lack of trust, negative feelings and hostility. However, this is not going to be an easy task, as there are many preconditions for this, such as appropriate ICT tools that can be used even by citizens of low education and ICT skills (while highly complex ones might finally result in increasing the 'digital divide'), overcoming cultural resistances from government employees (who are not accustomed to such intensive interaction with society) and using appropriate promotion and 'social brokers' for attracting participants. Also, in some difficult cases with a lot of conflict among opposing social or/and ethnic groups it might be necessary initially to take some trust building actions, before starting even an electronic discussion among them. Finally, it should be emphasized that governments in this area are currently exploiting the potential of e-participation only to a limited extent (using ICT mainly for information provision, but less for consultation and much less for supporting more active forms of citizens' participation), so it is

necessary to experiment more with these advanced forms of e-participation as well.

Short Bios

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