



Summary

In June 2001, the Estonian government launched a public participation portal named “Today I decide” (known under the Estonian acronym “TOM”). The tool gave citizens an opportunity to propose, discuss and vote on new legislation, after which decision-makers are obliged to deliver a motivated response to the entered initiatives.

This tool has proven to be a success, with over 7.010 registered users proposing and discussing 1.187 new initiatives. It has helped citizens’ participation by allowing them to launch new ideas and to discuss them on an open forum, while guaranteeing them a concise answer from the decision-making level. Seven years of experience with this tool have made clear that it can be a meaningful instrument for all governments and public bodies throughout the European Union.

The present project, TID+, is all about disseminating the tool and the lessons learnt from it to interested parties in the EU. It re-evaluates and ameliorates the present solution, makes accessible comprehensive documentation on how it can be used optimally, and makes a software solution available free of charge for non-commercial use to all interested actors as a tool to increase citizens’ participation. In this light, the main objectives of the project are

1. to develop and disseminate an online tool, based on open source solutions, that allows for citizens’ initiative and participation in proposing and discussing regulation; this tool should be easy to use by citizens, and should be easily adaptable by interested governments and institutions.
2. to develop and disseminate the necessary documentation and guidelines that allow a productive and effective use of the tool in proposing and discussing regulation; this documentation should include past experiences, information on traps and pitfalls that could render the tool ineffective, and pointers on how best to use the outcomes of citizens’ initiatives and participation.

Framework of the TID+ project



The TID+ project was entered under a 2006 call for proposals for projects concerning eParticipation in the context of legislative processes published in the Official Journal of the European Union (C 176) on 28 July 2006).

eParticipation is a Preparatory Action which aims at harnessing the benefits of the use of Information and Communications Technologies for better legislative processes and better legislation at all levels of governmental decision making, and for an enhanced public participation in such processes.





TID+ was approved for funding together with five other projects. The project started on January 2006, with a projected end date of June 30th, 2008.

In a second round (eParticipation 2007/1), a further 8 projects were approved. Amongst these is the Momentum project, which is meant to support all other projects and to strengthen political, social, scientific, and technological excellence in eParticipation by integrating results and practices of relevant initiatives building upon the ICT research capacities of individuals and organisations spread across Europe. The Momentum project therefore co-ordinates the projects and takes part in the dissemination of their results (for further information, visit www.ep-momentum.eu).

Project partners

The TID+ project is a joint effort by a consortium of three organisations.



The e-Governance Academy (eGA) is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation founded for the creation and transfer of knowledge concerning ICT in governance and democracy and the development of civil society.

The e-Governance Academy is both an observer and initiator of eDemocracy initiatives, and adheres to a pragmatic and independent approach to the use of ICT to enhance citizens' involvement in democratic processes.



RIIGIKANTSELEI

The State Chancellery of the Republic of Estonia supports the Government of the Republic and the Prime Minister in policy drafting and implementation, and supports the activities of Ministers who do not lead a ministry. The State Chancellery helps ensure good governance.

As it was responsible for the TOM tool, in which the TID+ project found inspiration, and now manages osale.ee, a new Estonian eParticipation portal, the State Chancellery has intimate knowledge of what eDemocracy involves from the side of government and administration.



The European Union Democracy Observatory (EUODO) within the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy, is an independent academic organisation. Its goal is to produce a permanent and periodic assessment of democratic practices within the EU. EUODO also serves as a forum to exchange ideas and best practices and constitutes an indispensable resource for policy makers, academics and, crucially, citizens throughout Europe.





EUDO and the EUI add an indispensable experience concerning the analysis of the impact of eParticipation on civil society.

This involvement of partners from civil society, academia and government ensures a multi-perspective approach to the topic of eParticipation, and has led to a comprehensive result.

Inspiration and aspirations

TID+ is inspired by the experiences with the TOM tool, which has been available to Estonian citizens since June 2001 and which has now merged with the new Estonian eParticipation portal, Osale.ee.

TID+, however, is much more than an internationalised version of the old TOM tool. The software developed under the TID+ project does not just copy what existed as TOM, but incorporates the experience derived from it to create an enhanced solution that offers more functionality for citizens and administrations alike.

That enhancements and improvements were needed before the system could be presented to the international community was clear through the observation that, after its initial success, the use of and enthusiasm for the TOM system rapidly declined. Exactly why, however, was scarcely assessed and therefore not known.

Moreover, at the time the TID+ project was conceived, the discussion on the faith and future of the TOM system in its original form was lively. Convinced of its potential, the project partners felt strongly that the system and the experience surrounding it held great importance for e-participation world-wide and could not go to waste, which was precisely the motivation to initiate the TID+ project.

The TID+ project therefore aimed to analyse, and learn from, the use and success of the original TOM tool, to offer improvements and modernisations that effectively lead to an increased take-up by citizens, and to make the tool – thus far a purely Estonian exercise - available to interested parties throughout Europe and beyond. This last goal is realised through making the software available under open license, in English, and adaptable to local conditions, and by developing a set of documentation that provides fundamental insights into how it can be used optimally.





Project results

The TID+ project offers two important results:

1. A software solution, ready to use

The software developed under the TID+ project provides interested governments and organisations with a place to start: an example of a functional, elaborate solution through which citizens can channel their ideas for regulation.

This software solution is neither static nor proprietary, and can be freely adapted and enhanced upon, following the needs of the specific setting in which it is deployed.

Those who wish to deploy the software are presented with a set of choices as to functionality and localisation, through the use of interfaces. Not only can everything be easily translated without the need for intervention by developers; options that affect the core functionality of the tool can be set as well.

This possibility to customise the software empowers decision-makers to set up the system directly, reflecting their own ideas on how eParticipation through such a system should work and without the need for expensive development. The software allows, for example, to easily change how the identification of participants works, or to set the level of support that is required before an idea is formally passed on to the government. An array of options can be changed without the need to adapt the software code.

Those who wish to further adapt the software are enabled and encouraged to do so. To this end, the software is made available under an accommodating license, allowing change and redistribution, provided that the resulting (changed) system is made available to others under the same license. In this way, the project team hopes that enhanced versions will emerge beyond the project horizon, offering even more choice for decision-makers and more opportunities for the deployment of systems that give citizens an active say in their governments' decision-making processes.

In short, the software is built in a way that improves its chances for a wider use:

- language: the software resulting from the TID+ project is available in English and can be translated into any other language;
- availability: the source code of the software is made available under an accommodating license, allowing anyone to use, add and change;
- enhanced functionalities: the software contains functionalities that may or may not be implemented by the entity using it – these choices are presented as options, and can be selected at will.





2. Guidelines on how and why to offer eParticipation

Where the software offers a tool that can be used, accompanying documentation on lessons learned in Estonia and abroad provides decision-makers with insights on what eParticipation means, and how to approach the subject.

A large part of this is offered under the form of an extensive analysis of the use of the TOM tool over the course of seven years. This analysis offers a unique insight in what works and what does not, gathered in a real-life setting, with a working system. In addition, documentation is provided on what eParticipation means from the point of view of the administration which implements it, and from the point of view of civil society.

It is the aspiration of the project partners to add to this documentation by keeping the issue alive beyond the scope of the TID+ project, further documenting subsequent experiences gathered through the use of both TID+ and other systems, as they become available.

What lies ahead...

A project such as TID+ has little meaning if it is not followed by concrete actions to put its results to good use. Now that the experiences concerning eParticipation are made accessible and a functional software solution is ready for use by all, the real test will be in its actual implementation. The e-Governance Academy, the European University Institute and the State Chancellery of the Republic of Estonia will continue to disseminate the TID+ project results and will actively promote its potential.

You can help, by assessing the software yourself, by sending us your insights and by advocating the project results in your daily activities.

All information and the software itself are published on www.tidplus.net, a site which will continue to be updated until the end of June and, with your help, in the years to come.

Other resources

- Information on all projects in the eParticipation Preparatory Action is provided through the Momentum project: www.ep-momentum.eu
- Interactive information on eGovernment, eInclusion and eHealth is brought together in the ePractice portal, created by the European Commission: www.ePractice.eu

