MAPPING
DIGITAL SOCIAL INNOVATION

5: DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

ePaństwo Foundation

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Introduction

DSI4EU aims to support the growth and scale of digital social innovation (DSI), tech for good and civic tech in Europe through a programme of policy, research and practical support. This document, part of a series of introductory texts covering different social areas, gives an overview of the landscape, challenges and opportunities for DSI in the field of digital democracy. It also includes preliminary policy recommendations which will form the basis of our policy engagement over the coming year.

This text was written by Krzysztof Izdebski and Aleksandra Kamińska at ePaństwo Foundation and edited by Matt Stokes and Codrina Cretu at Nesta.

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Methodology

The findings of the report come from desk research. Sources include websites of projects and organisations, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, toolkits, event agendas. We’ve looked for different networks and international projects to identify already existing co-operations.

We have extensive experience in the field of digital democracy, upon which this builds: developing tools, policy work, community building and organising events both within and outside the DSI4EU framework.

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Designed by Codrina Cretu at Nesta.
Across the world, we are witnessing growing mistrust in democratic institutions and governments, the rise of politics of populism and fear, the shrinking of civil society spaces and the emergence of misinformation. This is particularly striking in Europe, long considered - for all its challenges - a bastion of functioning democracy.

These challenges are vast and multifaceted and strike at the heart of our societies. But with these great challenges comes great opportunity. Within this context, digital democracy has become an increasingly popular topic across the EU. Cities and countries are implementing participatory budgets, opening up data sets, crowdsourcing information from residents and facilitating better forms of public discussion and debate. Citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) are monitoring governments' budgets, elections, public procurement and urban planning, to name only a few.

This research is based upon the typology presented by Nesta in the report “Digital democracy: The tools transforming political engagement”, as well as our knowledge and experience in the field, which broadens this typology, especially within the “Citizens monitoring and assessing public actions and services” group. It is important to underline that the term ‘digital democracy’ is not the only one used by practitioners in the field - equally or even more common are other terms like 'civic tech', 'govtech', 'e-participation', ‘e-democracy’ and ‘e-government’.

Image: Digital Democracy: The tools transforming political engagement (Nesta)
Trends

In our research we have observed several trends in the development of digital democracy initiatives, including digital democracy in cities, spaces for collaboration and networking, hackathons, open-source tools, data visualisation and fact-checking.

More and more European cities are coming to understand the potential of digital tools in their daily contact with citizens. Municipalities can both provide information to, and receive information from, citizens (for example, through apps like FixMyStreet or open data platforms), as well as enabling citizens to deliberate or collectively work on specific proposals. One current trending topic in European cities is participatory budgeting. For example, since 2018, Polish cities with county (powiat) rights have been legally required to implement participatory budgeting, with most of them opting to develop their own tools so far. On the either side of the continent, the Consul project has developed open-source tools which were first used in Madrid and are now used in cities across the world.

The idea of creating collaboration spaces for civic innovators came from New York City, where Civic Hall was established in 2015. Since then a number of other spaces have emerged, including Civic Hall Toronto and 1991 Civic Tech Center in Kiev. Within the EU, there are a few similar initiatives, though many are at earlier stages: in 2016 the Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, announced the opening of a Civic Hall in Paris while a space is also planned for Barcelona in October 2018. Open Knowledge Foundation Germany is developing a concept for a CityLab Berlin and London has spaces including Newspeak House, a space for “political technologists” open since 2016.

Hackathons are well-established but still popular as a catalyst of innovation - at the EU level (EU Datathon), national level (e.g. Hack for Sweden, KodujProCesko) and city level (KrakHack), and with organisers including central and local governments and CSOs. Hackathons receive some criticism for creating products or services “in search of a solution”, running the risk of recreating what already exists, and not creating sustainable projects. We do not have enough data to know if these criticisms are valid, and in the future would like to take a closer look to find out if the tools developed during hackathons are finished and promoted afterwards.

When it comes to governmental data, it is crucial to present the information in an attractive way if it is to be used, understood and acted upon. In recent years we have seen rapid growth in the use of data visualisations such as maps and charts, often interactive and clickable, which is useful for showing things like municipal budget spending (such as Transparency International Slovenia’s website), corruption cases (such as a map of Romanian corruption cases handled by Directia Națională Anticorupție) and elections results (such as results in Karlsruhe, Germany).

In an attempt to hold politicians to account and to combat the rise of fake news, fact-checking websites and tools have risen in popularity. An increasing number of funders, including the European Commission and Google, are offering grants for this, while other initiatives, portals and apps are appearing on the market. Examples of these include the Romanian Factual and Poland’s Demagog Association.

More recently there have been some attempts at creating algorithms to fact check and crowdsourcing the process,
but these have had mixed success. Movements such as “Code for...”, as well as other activists and innovators, strongly support the idea of open-source tools. Some of the best examples of such projects within this field are Alaveteli, a freedom of information request software developed by MySociety, Consul, mentioned above, and ckan, a data portal platform which is a base for many open data portals. The “Code for...” chapters themselves publish code of their projects on GitHub, and have had some significant successes such as Code for Romania’s Monitorizare Vot app for election monitoring.

Finally, we are seeing new ideas take shape and grow in popularity. For example, liquid democracy - a process whereby people can delegate their votes to experts on particular issues - is gaining ground. Examples include Beteiligung.in, a platform for participation, collaboration and ideas collection; Licracy, a “virtual parliament of the people”; and Sovereign, “an open source and decentralized democratic governance protocol for any kind of organization”, which uses blockchain technology.

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**MONITORIZARE VOT**

Code for Romania is a movement of young professionals using their skills to build civic apps to help make Romania a better place. Hundreds of volunteers across the country and abroad have been working together over the last two years, putting in almost 40,000 working hours with the hope of transforming Romania into a country its citizens want to live in, one app at a time.

Election monitoring in Romania has traditionally been a pen-and-paper process. There were no video, photo or audio recordings that could be shared in real time, and handwritten reports were centralised long after elections, limiting the impact of their findings.

Monitorizare Vot is an election monitoring service designed for both polling staff and regular citizens.

It has three key components:

- A national mobile app (iOS and Android) through which commissioned observers can easily report back throughout the election day;
- A platform for NGOs that centralises the reported information in real time;
- An online platform that allows voters to report voting irregularities.

If photo and video evidence exists, Monitorizare Vot allows observers to attach supporting files on the system, which further aids the documentation process and can be forwarded to the relevant public authorities.

During the last Romanian elections, the app’s was used widely:

- 562 out of a total of 1100 observers used the app on election day;
- 1,346 voting stations in 37 counties and the diaspora were observed;
- 5,1250 messages were sent, out of which 322 messages signaled irregularities.

The greatest technical challenge they faced was making sure the app uses as little battery as possible and that people could use it offline. Therefore, graphics were reduced to a minimum without impeding usability, and the app allowed for updates to be saved offline, and uploaded them once the device was online.

Creators of the service are currently working on adding several new features and real time reporting tools. Moreover, they are currently talking to organisations in Ukraine, Croatia, Poland, Mexico and Moldova who are looking to replicate their model. From the beginning, the tool was programmed to be easy to replicate by anyone. Any organisation wanting to use it simply has to upload their own observation form and the service is ready to use.

Monitorizare Vot is the first app of its kind to be developed and used in Romania and one of the few used in Europe and worldwide. The app won the award for Civic Behavior and Public Participation at the Romanian Civil Society Gala in June 2017.

**Twitter:** @Code4Romania

**Website:** [http://monitorizarevot.ro/](http://monitorizarevot.ro/)
Opportunities and challenges

The key areas of opportunity and challenge for DSI initiatives in this field centre on citizen engagement and promotion; funding, maintenance and sustainability; Knowledge of the landscape, scaling and replication, impact measurement and policy developments.

Citizen engagement and promotion of projects

Engagement from citizens is, of course, a prerequisite for DSI digital democracy projects to succeed. Unfortunately, gaining this is not an easy task. People have busy daily lives, and may feel disengaged from political processes and therefore not see the benefit of getting involved. For this reason, it is important that projects are easily accessible and have excellent user experience, and that all processes are seen as two-way streets, where citizens contribute but also receive feedback and results. Research shows that citizens are more likely to engage, and stay engaged, if they know the results of their contributions and participation.

Fortunately, there are several examples of citizen engagement done very well. Some of the Spanish digital democracy initiatives, like Decide Madrid and Decidim in Barcelona, have carried out assessments of who is taking part and found that not only are numbers high, but they are also broadly representative and inclusive of the population as a whole. Initiatives which use existing platforms, such as Romania’s Funky Citizens (which uses Facebook as its main channel of engagement), have also been successful at gaining and maintaining citizen engagement.

An emerging potential challenge for digital democracy concerns youth preferences to use offline tools. Although there is limited evidence of this, one survey conducted by the National Democratic Institute showed that young people (aged 16-29) in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia prefer to sign petitions offline (HU 19%, PL 64%, SK 41%) over online (HU 13%, PL 44%, SK 27%). It is important to follow up on those findings to see if it is connected with decreasing trust towards digital activity. Equally, it is important that digital initiatives combine online and offline activities to maximise participation and accessibility.

Funding, maintenance and sustainability

Funding is a significant barrier for digital democracy projects, particularly with regards to maintenance and sustainability. There is a fair amount of funding for projects in their early stages, although sources vary across countries and region and have changed in recent years. For example, the CEE region used to be supported by the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe and Open Society Foundations, while Polish, Czech, Hungarian and Slovakian organisations can apply to the International Visegrad Fund.

More recently, some organisations have focused more efforts on regions with more precarious democracies, although current affairs over the past five years have shown the continuous need to actively protect the rule of law. EEA and Norway grants have also been supportive for CEE, Spanish and Portuguese organisations. Alongside these structural funds, support often comes from development agencies (e.g. USAID, UNDP) and embassies (e.g. American, British, French, Swedish) and more widely across the continent,
funders such as Omidyar Network or Sida.

Nevertheless, funding often comes on a project basis which can be a barrier to maintenance. There is no end of budget visualisations, election reports and databases which stop being maintained or updated after funding runs out. Software quickly becomes outdated - and potentially insecure - if it is not resourced properly. Relying on volunteers (such as the “Code for…” networks) can be extremely effective in some cases, but relying on volunteers in the long-run can be a risky strategy.

**Knowledge of the landscape, scaling and replication**

There are hundreds of projects in the field across Europe, working on a range of areas including anti-

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**CITIZEN BUDGET**

Canada-based Open North's Citizen Budget is a powerful, interactive online budget consultation tool that opens up budget consultations to the entire community while educating residents and collecting their feedback at the same time. Through a 5-7 minute exercise, citizens deepen their understanding of how municipal services are delivered and learn about the costs and trade-offs involved in the budgeting process. The Citizen Budget tool was initially developed by Open North for a local Montreal borough, the Plateau Mont Royal.

This project seeks to empower groups that are traditionally disengaged or marginalized from local democracy by decentralizing the decision making process.

By consulting citizens on important decisions, the exercise demystifies decision making processes, educates them on a range of issues and priorities, and creates more informed dialogue about local issues. Finally, the knowledge and relationships created during the exercises encourage the formation of new leadership and networking opportunities for those who want to engage with their local governments.

Authors of the projects build, customize and code online consultations for citizens using real fiscal data from municipalities and local governments. They adapt their consultations to specific needs and have 4 different modules:

- **Participatory Budget:** Offers an electronic solution for voting: instead of physically collecting votes and adding them together, Citizen Budget is customized to be an online voting platform for city projects.
- **Balanced Budget:** Allows citizens to engage with the challenging exercise of balancing the annual budget.
- **Tax:** Allows citizens to decide on how tax money is spent.
- **Capital Projects:** Consults residents on capital project spending by comparing different scenarios with different impacts.

Open North has been using a mixed methods approach, and, after 5 years of implementation, they did a blind observational/longitudinal study. They started tracking public meetings and documents (in particular related to budgetary deliberations) and established a framework of tangible impacts (qualitative evidence, policy decisions, reports and plans, policies, new institutions, new processes) vs intangible impacts (participant empowerment, social learning, willingness to participate in the future, increased “trust” in government, improved understanding of government). This approach and research was presented at TICTEC 2018 in Lisbon.

According to Open North, results have been positive and they found clear evidence of the impacts noted above. However, the work on understanding impact is still ongoing. Measuring “increased government trust” has been particularly challenging, since government trust is such a debated concept.

As participatory and online budgeting are relatively new processes, it has been difficult to measure the effectiveness of these tools. Moreover, there has been no significant research in the area of participatory budgeting to date. Because of this, Open North find there is a gap in the field that they’re trying to fill, as most civic tech and open data initiatives tend to stay clear of engaging with participatory/online budgets.

**Website:** [http://www.citizenbudget.com/](http://www.citizenbudget.com/)
corruption, procurement, policymaking, accountability, transparency, open data and much more. However, there is not yet a networked ecosystem of actors, and practitioners are often unaware of others who may be doing similar things elsewhere. In turn, this leads to duplication and wasted resources and lack of scaling, and ultimately reduces impact.

This is perhaps not surprising given the EU has 24 official languages, 28 members states and countless contextual differences between places. But, surprisingly, we found that even within existing networks like Transparency International or Open Knowledge International there are differing approaches to developing and implementing DSI. To that end, it would be helpful to gather knowledge on similar projects and solutions in one publicly available place, ideally in an open-source and machine readable format. This is what we have been doing so far through DSI4EU, but we realise this is still far from comprehensive.

There are some networks, like Transparency International and Open Knowledge International, but also the TransparenCEE Network, Clarity and the “Code for...” European chapters (Romania, Poland, Netherlands, Germany, Croatia, Ireland), but these have had varying levels of success in scaling and replicating tools among and between both EU and non-EU countries. Methods for doing so include developing open tools, sharing experiences and expertise or events; two good examples of this happening are Red Flags and Open Legislation.

There are also networks which unite projects or organisations working on the same type of tool. For example, the ParliamentWatch network brings together organisations developing parliamentary monitoring tools “to promote democracy through innovative digital technology dedicated to monitor parliament activities (...), ensure accountability in politics and reinforce dialogue between citizens and their representatives”. But this network only has seven partner organisations, three of whom (Germany, Greece and France) are European; we know of many other similar initiatives - such as in Poland, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Portugal and Lithuania - which could be part of the network, but currently are not.

Finally, events can be an excellent opportunity for networking and knowledge exchange. Conferences and workshops in the field of Digital Democracy usually focus on one main theme or one kind of activity, such as youth participation or e-participation, or are connected to specific projects. Two leading European conferences in the field are mySociety’s TICTeC conference, which gathers civic tech researchers every year, and Personal Democracy Forum CEE, organised by ePaństwo Foundation, which offers a platform for CEE activists fighting for transparency and accountability. Digital Democracy activists have also opportunities to meet with various stakeholders during Open Government Partnership Summits (mostly with representatives of governments) or International Open Data Conferences - often attended by entrepreneurs.

Impact measurement
Impact measurement is essential not just so that projects can continuously improve and refine their work, but also so that digital democracy projects gain legitimacy among policymakers, funders and citizens. Unfortunately, this is a
relatively undeveloped area within the field.

For example, the majority of projects do not even publish basic information (like the number of users) which could prove impact, relevance and activity. Furthermore, success stories which would show the impact of projects, and mentions in the media, are few and far between. Again, there are some examples of best practice, particularly those related to FoI services (like the Czech Informace Pro Vsechny or Access Info Europe’s Ask The EU), petition and campaign websites (like the French WeSign.it or Poland’s Akcja Demokracja), and citizen reporting websites/apps (like Italy’s ePart).

These difficulties are compounded by the fact that there is no consensus on what constitutes “impact”; for example, some see involving citizens more closely in governance as an end in itself, while others might focus on better outcomes from policy, while others might focus on cash savings from policy.

Policy developments

Policy developments can be both an opportunity and a challenge for digital democracy initiatives. For example, many are benefiting from relatively progressive Freedom of Information laws and regulations, although these tools still come with practical challenges. AsktheEU.org, for example, is struggling with the practice of verifying the identity of people making requests to access documents by asking for their postal addresses, while some countries are not willing to share public software code and algorithms with the broader public. Similarly, the European Commission is also heavily supporting improvement of open data regulations and policies by placing them in the Digital Single Market Agenda.

To take another example, the GDPR is likely to have both positive and negative implications for the civic tech community as a whole. Some may profit from GDPR - for example because it might increase public trust in digital platforms - while others see it as a significant risk, with organisations using personal data in building data repositories on public procurement, government contractors, assets declarations and so on particularly concerned. On the other hand GDPR may increase trust of the general public in using digital platforms.

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PRZEJRZYSTY KRAKÓW

There are many reasons why having public access to information about the plans and actions of local authorities is important. Without access to information, it is impossible for citizens to have a say in decisions regarding their cities.

That’s why Stańczyk Foundation gathers information on issues that are important to local residents on the Przejrzysty Kraków portal. Some of the things the website provides access to are:

- Recordings from sessions of the City Council, its committees and district councils;
- Documents related to the daily activity of the City Council;
- Election campaign monitoring information.

The website uses data scraping tools to collect information from websites belonging to the Krakow municipality, business registry, Ministry of Finance and more. The website
Based on the overview of organisations and projects mapped in Digital democracy cluster and the expertise of ePaństwo Foundation, we can define two levels of emerging policy intervention. The first relates to the need to introduce direct support for organisations by reshaping funding initiatives at the European, national and local government level. The second relates to improving legal and institutional frameworks securing access to data, reuse of public sector information and responsiveness of public officials to the feedback received from CSOs.

Funding
As mentioned above, many initiatives struggle to maintain their projects beyond project-specific funding periods. Far too many are suspended or abandoned. We must work to understand more about why this - low organisational capacity, insufficient funding or lack of citizen engagement could all be reasons. However, there is a strong argument for more funding to be allocated towards maintenance and core costs, even if this is initially less attractive to funding organisations.

It is also clear that all too often similar projects are funded by different programs or funders, and that opportunities for collaboration are not exploited. Funders should cooperate more with each other to share knowledge, to co-fund projects, to align stages of funding, and to reduce duplication. This would not require changes in law and a number of successful collaborative funding programmes (such as Making All Voices Count) could be used as inspiration.

Funders should also support projects to better understand and measure their impact. When surviving hand to mouth, as many DSI initiatives do, projects are unlikely to dedicate time or resources to this unless there is a requirement and support from funders in the form of finance, tools, frameworks and indicators. These should of course be tailored to project needs, iterative and flexible, and focused on real results and impact rather than just numbers and KPIs. In turn, this would help DSI initiatives to gain further support, and inform funders’ future decisions.

Law and policy
Digital democracy initiatives rely on data accessibility in at least two contexts: access to data as the part of exercising FoI or the right to reuse public sector information; and guarantees of

Emerging policy recommendations

uses an API set up by mojepanstwo.pl, the biggest open data repository in Poland, created by ePaństwo Foundation in 2012.

The information on the website is often used by other civic initiatives. For example, before local elections in Krakow, Demagog.org.pl, the biggest fact-checking organization in the country, used the website to conduct research on how well local councillors fulfilled their campaign promises. Video streaming of Council meetings through the website has pushed local authorities to introduce their own streaming service on their website.

On the other hand, the initiative is struggling with issues of funding and sustainability, as the Stańczyk Foundation only received funding to create and develop the tool.

Website: https://przejrzystykrakow.pl/
adequate data standards and formats. As alluded to above, GDPR might cause some disturbance in the free flow of data containing personal information (e.g. of politically exposed persons, candidates to parliaments, lobbyists etc). Therefore, digital democracy initiatives should monitor GDPR implementation at the national level, conduct strategic litigations where necessary and address data protection and information commissioners or other relevant bodies (e.g. Ministries responsible for data protection and access to public information) when they detect problems. Because of recent developments regarding the proposal for a revision of the Reuse directive, relevant organisations should monitor the direction of changes and take an active role in public consultations on the EU level, also by gathering evidence from their specific fields of work. In turn, the European Commission should actively involve smaller players from across Europe in the development of new policies.

Local governments and other public entities should be encouraged to implement open data policies (e.g. as in the International Open Data Charter) to release data in open formats and meet open data standards. They should also commit to working with external, civil society organisations to enable bottom-up approaches to democracy which actively involve citizens in aspects of public life and public administration.

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**MOONSHEEP**

Poland and Hungary are among the few remaining European countries where declarations of assets forms can only be filled in manually, scanned, and then published. This makes the digital analysis of documents difficult and, as a result, over 90% of submitted documents are not subject to checks. Moonsheep is a technological tool that allows volunteers to transcribe and create massive collections of transcribed documents. The information is then converted into spreadsheets, CSVs, or JSON APIs.

Moonsheep facilitates the following activities:

- **Governments** can bring their archived data into the digital age and move towards greater transparency and efficiency;
- **NGOs** can more easily investigate and analyse large amounts of paper and PDF sources, keep governments accountable, uncover corruption, and track money flows;
- **GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums)** can improve metadata and digitise content, to extract new meaning from their exhibits and items;
- **Researchers** can crowdsource and automate their data collection, to broaden their research horizon.

The tool was co-created with support from TransparenCEE Network and TechSoup. They have also partnered with organisations with past experience in the topic: Engine Room, who organized two replication sprints and performed a thorough evaluation of existing tools; Open Data Kosovo, who supported Engine Room in the Quien Compró implementation and who has recently created Decode Darfur (microtasking website for Amnesty International); and K-Monitor, who have practical experience with transcribing and verifying data using Vagyonnyilatkozatok. The co-creation process is described in more detail by TransparenCEE Network on their website.
DSI4EU’s ePanstwo Foundation is currently supporting organisations in Hungary, Ukraine, Poland, Romania and Russia to implement the tool to tackle local needs.

Moonsheep’s impact and reach is dependent on its ability to engage users. Through their work, K-Monitor showed that building an open database is possible with support from volunteers: “With a few dozen volunteers we liberated the data (more than 2000 pages of scanned PDFs) just hours after the publication and published it in an open, searchable and comparable database.” said Attila Juhasz from K-Monitor.

The tool is now being scaled to Romania (Code for Romania) and Ukraine (OPORA) and the tool creators are testing different models of funding including commercializing some services.

**Website:** moonsheep.org

**Twitter:** @Transparen_CEE

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Got stacks of documents and crowd to help out digitize them?

Moonsheep digitizes massive collections of documents into structured data through crowdsourcing and cutting edge technology.

*Image: moonsheep.org*
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