10. Public online consultation in Lithuania: A political declaration or the real empowerment of citizens?

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1   INTRODUCTION

The growing need to enhance democratic governance, empower citizens and provide them with more practical channels of participation has led to the emergence of various e-participation initiatives (Macintosh and Whyte, 2008). The widespread use of information and communications technology (ICT) was expected to serve as a new tool to increase political engagement (Sæbø et al., 2008). However, high initial expectations have not always become a reality in terms of users' willingness to participate (Toots, 2019).

It is important to elucidate the main reasons behind the existing mismatch between governmental expectations for e-participation and the uptake of these tools. To account for the outcomes of e-participation initiatives, scholars have analysed the successes and failures of e-participation platforms, identified research gaps and elaborated frameworks for further analysis (Gulati et al., 2014; Panopoulou et al., 2014). Despite general agreement that the implementation of e-participation initiatives is influenced by various macro-, meso- and micro-level factors, the interplay of barriers and drivers contributing to the success of e-participation platforms is still unclear (Steinbach et al., 2019).

The application of e-participation tools rarely interests Lithuanian scholars. Greater attention has been paid to the analysis of these practices at the municipal level (Petrauskas, 2012), which came into focus as a result of European Union (EU) financial support for e-democracy in 2007–2013. However, no recent research exists on the application of e-democracy tools.

This chapter aims to fill this research gap by conducting a case study on the implementation of public online consultations announced on the E-Citizen platform until the second quarter of 2020. E-Citizen is a part of the Office of the Government webpage 'My Government' providing access to government information and e-democracy tools. This initiative is important for three reasons. First, despite increasing awareness among Lithuanian citizens of the possibilities for e-participation, their engagement in decision-making processes remains rather low (LR Vidaus reikalų ministerija, 2018). Second, in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) action plan for 2016–2018, Lithuanian authorities pledged to introduce a uniform public consultation standard based on a single public consultation methodology with the aim to foster civic participation and engagement in public governance (Office of the Government, 2016). Third,

E-Citizen is the sole tool of the Office of the Government that promotes online consultation with citizens during policy-making processes on the national level.

The analytical framework is based on synthesizing existing literature on e-participation, covering the aspects of success and failure of e-democracy initiatives, ranging from adoption to evaluation. Recent empirical findings highlight the need to move beyond a technological perspective in assessing e-participation (Medaglia, 2012). The chapter proposes a more integrated approach towards the evaluation of e-participation tools, bringing together the most relevant variables at the national, organizational and individual levels into one framework.

The empirical research is based on desk research, a documentary analysis of available administrative information and 11 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders of public online consultations. Together, the data collected provide sufficient empirical evidence on the application of the tool and offer a better understanding of the factors and motivations behind its use.

The aim of this chapter is to assess whether the principle of government openness declared by Lithuanian authorities has resulted in the empowerment of citizens and which set of factors can account for the success or failure of the initiative. The study addresses two main questions. First, how successful is the Lithuanian platform for public online consultation? Second, which factors have the most significant impact on the results of this e-participation initiative?

This chapter is structured as follows. After the introduction, the analytical background and empirical research methodology are presented, followed by the analysis on public online consultations on the *E-Citizen* platform. Next, the contextual factors surrounding the Lithuanian online consultation initiative at the national, organizational and individual levels are discussed. Finally, the evaluation of the initiative is presented and the chapter concludes by discussing the main factors that influence performance of the platform.

2   ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Recent research points to various barriers and drivers associated with the e-participation process. The effectiveness of e-participation tools is usually related to the national culture, the political system, technology or management strategies, without any in-depth analysis of their interdependence (Steinbach et al., 2019). In line with the transformational approach that has previously been applied in public administration research (Verhoest et al., 2010), it is claimed in this chapter that the influence of national-level factors can be transformed by organizational-level and individual-level factors and vice versa, thus shaping the implementation of e-participation initiatives.

2.1   National Level

The politico-administrative context plays an important role in the adoption of e-participation tools. Political institutions and processes provide a background for individual expression, transmission of information and social choices (Jho and Song, 2015). Academic research proves that e-democracy initiatives achieved better results in countries with stronger democratic institutions (Gulati et al., 2014) and a more professional and efficient public sector (Norris and Moon, 2005). In addition, the behaviour of civil servants is shaped by the policy and legal context, which in turn affects the use of e-participation tools. Regulations might

determine conditions for democratic participation, including access to technology and information, the right to participate and safeguards for participants (Berntzen and Karamagioli, 2010).

The dominant *public-administration culture* should also be considered: citizen engagement might interest a civil service oriented towards standardized administrative procedures (Rose et al., 2015). The dominant values are of the highest importance as they set a standard for the practices or activities of the organization (Esteves and Joseph, 2008). If practices are institutionalized, civil servants might gradually turn them into a mode of behaviour. Thus, citizen engagement is the outcome of long-lasting relationships between different government institutions as well as those between government and citizens (Jho and Song, 2015).

The aforementioned factors might also affect citizen behaviour. The introduction of ICT does not stimulate citizen engagement itself. On the contrary, it mirrors usual participation challenges and supplements them with ICT specificities (Le Blanc, 2020). There are a few success factors for e-participation on its demand side. First, there are citizens who are 'willing but unable' to participate. This might be due to a variety of reasons, ranging from language barriers to disability. As a digital divide might also play an important role, it is necessary to evaluate *digital governance*. Second, the strength of *civil society* matters. There are citizens who are 'able but unwilling' to participate, which may be caused by low interest in politics, limited knowledge or time resources. Political efficacy is also relevant, referring to the feeling that citizens might influence socio-political changes and their content (OECD, 2009).

2.2   Organizational Level

e-Participation projects usually involve various stakeholders, which brings organizational-level barriers into play. The *ownership* of e-participation initiatives matters, as research points to varying success between bottom-up (initiated by citizens) and top-down (initiated by state authorities) projects. Despite usually failing to mobilize citizens, ownership of public authorities is necessary to 'place e-participation at the heart of public debate' (Maier and Reimer, 2010, p. 47).

Partnerships with other stakeholders could soften the drawbacks of ownership. Collaboration with civil society or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), public services or other groups attracts stakeholders who would not otherwise be involved. In addition, partners transfer their knowledge and experience to other stakeholders, thus promoting e-participation (Sánchez-Nielsen et al., 2014).

In addition, *administration and funding* matter in maintaining the incremental development of e-participation initiatives within administrative contexts (Panopoulou et al., 2011). Funding is important not only in terms of sufficient direct investment, but also as additional financing for human resources. Programme-defeating frustration might occur when managers and employees are required to maintain a new initiative in addition to their regular jobs (Rose and Grant, 2010).

Finally, it is important to ensure that e-participation initiatives are sustained after the official project life cycle has ended. This is closely related to the experience and knowledge gained in the implementation phase (Sánchez-Nielsen et al., 2014). Changes in *organizational culture* in terms of civil servants' openness to innovation are necessary to achieve this goal, which may be promoted by normative pressure, rules or policies (Welch and Feeney, 2014).

2.3   Individual Level

The change in organizational culture and the overall success of e-participation initiatives depend on the role of *political and bureaucratic leaders*. Permanent leadership is regarded as one of the main success factors for e-democracy tools as it helps to maintain personnel commitment as well as attract financial resources (Carrizales, 2008). If state authorities understand the potential of e-participation tools, they can translate the idea for implementors, make it a priority and support it to its conclusion (Panopoulou et al., 2014). Fostered throughout the various levels of bureaucracy, support for a programme may not only lead to short-term positive outcomes of the cooperation (Rose and Grant, 2010), but also change the organizational culture in the long term.

2.4   Methodology

A definition of success is vital for determining the success of e-participation tools. Despite varying perceptions of this concept (e.g. Macintosh and Whyte, 2008), this chapter considers the outputs, outcomes and impact of *E-Citizen* during the assessment (Smith et al., 2011). Outputs are defined by the quality and quantity of consultations (their amount, the specificity of the topic, the structure of questions). Outcomes cover specific objectives that are mostly related to the participant side (their amount and target groups). Finally, impact stands for broader societal change. However, as part of this information was unavailable or it was too early to evaluate the impact of the *E-Citizen* platform, individual measures of possible impact (e.g. availability of results and further steps) were analysed. The evaluation of this platform was carried out by combining a general overview with the analysis of individual e-consultations.

   To address the research aim, the study was carried out in three stages based on a qualitative case study method. First, desk research was executed exploring national-, organizational- and individual-level factors in order to understand the context of the initiative. Second, an in-depth analysis of the e-consultations implemented on the *E-Citizen* platform was performed. Third, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted in spring-summer 2019 and summer 2020 with the main stakeholders of the initiative. The following interviewees were selected based on purposeful sampling: a representative of the Office of the Government; two representatives (who participated in the interview together) from business consultancy Civitta; an expert in political participation; a participant in the programme 'Create Lithuania' (professionals with international experience contributing to government strategic projects); civil servants from five Lithuanian ministries performing public online consultations; and two members of NGOs who participated in public consultations. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, all respondents gave informed consent. Data were analysed using open, selective and axial coding.

3   OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

3.1   Cultural-Historical Context

The heritage of the Soviet administrative tradition produced a lack of accountability, low levels of trust in external control mechanisms and rigidity in hierarchy and legislation (Palidauskaitė et al., 2010). Although Lithuania has achieved an irreversible break from the Soviet administrative system, public administration remains very legalistic and follows the 'Rechtstaat' tradition. Legalism permeates the civil service where laws delineate the duties and responsibilities of civil servants, effectively limiting their discretion (Nakrošis, 2018). Despite going through 'a transitional period in terms of culture and attitudes' (Interview with a participation expert), most representatives of state institutions are still not familiar with the main tools of public participation (Pilietinės visuomenės institutas, 2015).

3.2   Politico-Administrative Context

Lithuania, with a population of approximately 2.8 million inhabitants, is a unitary state and a semi-parliamentary democracy. It has a dual executive: the president and the government. The prime minister and 14 ministers form the cabinet in the executive. The 2016–2020 (coalition) government led by Prime Minister S. Skvernelis was in office at the time of writing this chapter. The country's legislative process has been found to be ineffective, suffering from a large volume of legal acts and frequent changes thereto (National Audit Office, 2018). The legislative process lacks timely evidence-based analysis due to the rarity of impact assessment, stakeholder consultation and policy evaluation, which might be related to the legalistic nature of policy making. In addition, a substantial number of laws are deliberated according to the procedure of special urgency, which limits the possibility of thoroughly discussing proposals with citizens (Nakrošis et al., 2018).

3.3   Policy and Legal Context

Over the last decade, Lithuania has established an enabling legal, institutional and policy framework for citizen participation (OECD, 2015b). Support for more open and inclusive governance is rooted in long-term strategic documents, such as National Development Strategy Lithuania 2030. It has also been a re-occurring topic in Lithuanian government programmes, backed by a few medium-term strategies (e.g. Programme for the Improvement of Public Governance 2012–2020), which highlight the need to develop e-democracy tools and mention public consultation as the main tool for citizen inclusion in policy making. The obligation to consult with stakeholders on draft laws is foreseen in the Public Administration Law and the Law on the Legislative Framework without providing specific details on the form or method of consultation. Moreover, the latter law connects consultation to the use of the Legislative Information System on the Seimas website that suffers from insufficient time allocated for contributions, belated involvement of citizens in policy making and low enthusiasm of the executive branch (OECD, 2015a). Despite government interest in the development of e-participation as expressed at the strategic level, the current regulation leaves a great deal of discretion to state institutions.

3.4   Digital Governance

Eighty-two per cent of Lithuanian households have access to the Internet, and people within the age group of 16–34 use it daily. Despite a significant growth in the United Nations e-participation and e-Government Indexes, the country's e-democracy practices attract a minor share of Internet users: only 1 per cent of them submitted draft legislation, and 3 per cent of users provided suggestions for improving such decisions (Official Statistics Portal, 2019). When searching for information about state institutions, most citizens still prefer direct interaction (LR Vidaus reikalų ministerija, 2018). This may be related with the digital divide, as elders, disabled people and citizens living in rural areas or having a lower income tend to use the Internet less (Informacinės visuomenės plėtros komitetas, 2018). There are a few e-participation platforms initiated by state institutions or civil society representatives, but they are usually not well developed or are no longer operational; therefore, *E-Citizen* is the main tool for facilitating collaboration between the government and citizens.

3.5   Civil Society

The culture of participation was abandoned during the Soviet period, and Lithuanian authorities have not yet found an effective prescription for rebuilding it (Šiugždinienė et al., 2019). Even though citizens' awareness of their potential influence on public affairs has been increasing, their engagement in policy making remained low during the last decade (Pilietinės visuomenės institutas, 2020). Low levels of civic engagement are often associated with low levels of trust in state authorities – only 10.6 per cent of the population trust parliament and 26.8 per cent trust the government at the time of writing, which is below the EU average. In addition, residents identify other root causes of their low interest in participation, such as disbelief that they could influence decisions, lack of time, information or initiative from public officials and insufficient cooperation or feedback (LR Vidaus reikalų ministerija, 2018). Finally, society generally lacks policy knowledge that could enable adequate understanding of government policy making and facilitate participation (Nakrošis et al., 2018). However, those who are competent to participate in decision-making processes choose more proactive tools (e.g. sending official letters to ministries or asking to be involved in work groups) due to the doubtful effectiveness of *E-Citizen* (Interview with representatives of NGOs 1, 2).

4   DESCRIPTION OF *E-CITIZEN*

Although public consultation is not a new tool for increasing citizen engagement in policy making, no common approach existed to facilitate this process in Lithuania. Moreover, civil servants lacked the specific skills necessary to design and execute public consultations (OECD, 2015b). This issue became more salient in the context of Lithuania's accession to the OECD, when the need for better engagement of Lithuanian citizens in decision-making was identified (Trumpytė, 2018). Lithuanian authorities committed to improving the public consultation system in the framework of the OGP third action plan (2016–2018). The Office of the Government launched the project Open Government Initiatives and contracted business consultancy Civitta to develop a public consultation methodology, a toolkit for practitioners

and a monitoring methodology, testing them in practice and familiarizing civil servants with the new system.

The new Public Consultation Methodology provides a detailed overview of public consultation, including its principles, the main steps in the process and the methods. One of its drawbacks, however, is a broad definition of public consultation that does not set a clear professional standard of what public consultation entails (Interview with representatives of Civitta). Unlike the European Commission's better regulation guidelines concerning stakeholder consultation that clearly distinguish between public (online) and targeted (offline) consultations (European Commission, 2017), the methodology makes no mention whatsoever of the term 'public online consultation'.

According to the methodology, a consultation entails seven main steps: the decision on its implementation, planning, implementation, analysis of results, use of contributions, evaluation of the consultation and its communication through all stages of the process (LR Vyriausybės kanceliarija, 2018). The document recommends using the *E-Citizen* platform as the main channel for communication. Launched in 2015 as part of the Internet gateway to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 'My Government', *E-Citizen* aims to bridge the gap between the government, its institutions and citizens by including them in decision-making and providing various e-democracy services (e.g. the possibility to make a request, offer or complaint; to make an appointment with a minister; or to use e-services of the government and ministries). Thus, the section on public online consultations contributes to the overarching aim of more open and inclusive governance, based on citizen participation.

Although the methodology is intended to be used by both state and municipal institutions, the design of *E-Citizen* limits the scope of consultations to the central government level. The decision to implement consultations is made by ministries and supported by recommendations of the Office of the Government, which marks the draft legislation that may need consultation (Interview with a representative of the Office of the Government). The content of public consultation is developed by the person responsible for the coordination of a project or the preparation of a draft law, usually in cooperation with a communication unit of the ministry. There is no mandatory structure, but the majority of public consultations published on *E-Citizen* contain the following information: organizer, expiry date, subject matter of the consultation and its aims, stakeholders, method, information on how contributions will be used and results of the consultation.

Offline, online or mixed public consultations are announced on *E-Citizen*. There are two types of online public consultation: surveys and calls for comments and suggestions contributing to both policy analysis and policy formulation. The platform's technical specifications allow for the creation of surveys or open-question forms on the page, but links to other platforms or requirements to send comments via e-mail are used more often. Participation in consultations is open to everyone, ranging from individual citizens to organized interest groups. However, the platform suffers from a lack of transparency. As input is only visible to the receiving institution and performance indicators are rarely published, it is impossible to track the number and type of participants, the content of their contributions and the decisions made on their use.

After the closure of the consultation, organizers are encouraged to publish the results on *E-Citizen* and send them directly to participants. However, communication with contributors is limited: usually they do not receive even a confirmation message (Interview with a repre-

sentative of NGO 2). In some cases, participants are asked to evaluate their experience, but emphasis is put on the organizational side. Participants' attitudes are also not reflected in the 'Report on Pilot Monitoring of Public Participation in Public Governance Processes' (Office of the Government, 2019), which keeps the impact of consulting practices on democratic legitimacy and sustainable civic empowerment unclear.

5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

5.1 Formal Ownership

The Office of the Government is responsible for the maintenance of the *E-Citizen* platform and coordinates the public consultation process at the central level. However, a common standard of public consultation is not internalized in ministries and the process lacks clear ownership. Only three out of 14 Lithuanian ministries (Ministry of Transport and Communications, Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Agriculture) have described the use of public consultations on *E-Citizen* in the Work Regulations of the Ministry until the end 2020. This indicates a low level of institutionalization of the practice and a lack of formalized procedures in its implementation. The need to consult with society is briefly mentioned in the Work Regulations of three more ministries (Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and Ministry of Justice), but the process is not linked with the *E-Citizen* platform. None of the ministries included the organization of public consultations in the job descriptions of their employees, but this function is delegated to specific coordinators in a few cases.

5.2 Partnerships

This project is implemented by the Office of the Government together with the agency Invest Lithuania, which advises global companies on doing business in Lithuania. As part of the OGP activities, Invest Lithuania together with the Ministry of Economy and Innovation established the programme Create Lithuania, whose participants must carry out a public consultation while implementing their projects (Interview with a participant in Create Lithuania). The main project partner was business consultancy Civitta, which provided services to the Office of the Government from November 2016 until June 2019. The consultancy delivered training for civil servants, but this has not been embedded in the main activities of state institutions. There is no supporting network due to the unstable nature of the Lithuanian civil service: institutions tend to fall back into old habits when people trained in public consultations leave their positions (Interview with a representative of the Office of the Government).

5.3 Administration and Resources

The *E-Citizen* platform is funded by the Office of the Government. The project Open Government Initiatives, with a budget of 1,924,000 euros, has been partly financed by the European Social Fund (ESF). Except for strategic priority projects, where a ministry can purchase external services to implement a public consultation, no additional funding exists, and

this process is often in addition to the regular workload of civil servants. Therefore, there is a risk that after completion of the ESF-funded project at the end of 2023, the attention given to public consultations will deteriorate.

From 2015 to 2017, the consultation process was steered by the Public Management and Social Affairs Department in the Office of the Government, whose director initially acted as leader of the project Open Government Initiatives. However, after the reorganization of the Office of the Government, the status of this project was somewhat downgraded in the administrative structure by moving this task to the Customer Service Division and treating it as more of a technical task than a specific reform initiative. The use of *E-Citizen* for public consultation is established in the Work Regulations of the Office of the Government stating that the Customer Service Division provides methodological assistance on the organization of public consultations and publishes information about them. One of seven employees in the division is responsible for the maintenance of *E-Citizen* among other duties. There is also a separate division of three employees responsible for the implementation of Open Government Initiatives.

5.4   Organizational Culture

Despite some variation across state institutions, there is still no institutional commitment to use public consultation as a policy-making tool rather than a political declaration (Interview with a representative of ministry 2). The quality of a consultation usually depends on the dominant organizational culture: if the participatory process is treated as beneficial, more effort will be put into its implementation (Interview with representatives of Civitta). However, suffering from the intense workload, public servants treat the consulting process as an additional 'check-box' to their usual duties; moreover, 'they take it very personally and treat it as a criticism of their work' (Interview with a representative of NGO 1). In some cases, additional work involved in the organization of societal consultations has resulted in a passive attitude: 'I am not announcing consultations because nobody asks me to do so, nor do I look for them because, well, nobody asked me to look for them' (Interview with a representative of ministry 1).

In addition, institutions still prefer offline consulting that is similar to their usual collaboration practices, such as closed meetings of working groups (Interview with a representative of the Office of the Government), and gives more freedom during execution (Interview with a representative of ministry 5). This could be also related to issues of representativeness, as it would be impossible to control the socio-economic background of participants in e-consultations (Interview with representatives of Civitta). However, in some cases, offline participation is chosen as the preferred method of interaction (Interview with a representative of ministry 3).

5.5   Presence and Role of Leaders

Stable political attention contributes to the sustainability of a participatory practice (Interview with a representative of the Office of the Government), while the role of leaders is key to policy and organizational change, as they mobilize the team and set the tone for its work: 'Public consultations in the ministry are happening in the manner shaped and transmitted by political authorities' (Interview with representatives of Civitta). The role of top management

as a facilitator of change in organizational culture was mentioned as a cause for success – the culture of inclusion has permeated through several levels of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, while the current political authorities of the Ministry of Environment took a more negative approach towards consulting practices (Interview with representatives of NGOs 1, 2).

Improving legislative procedures, opening government data and introducing a uniform practice of public consultation were among the priority tasks of the 2016–2020 Lithuanian Government. However, when a new commission for strategic projects was set up, public consultation was not included on this priority list. The most successful societal consultations were carried out during 2017–2018, with no major consultation work launched by the Office of the Government during 2019–2020. Despite the increasing number of consultations in Lithuanian ministries, it seems that the initial political attention paid to this initiative at the governmental level has declined over time.

6   EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

6.1   Output

Despite the fact that only around 5 per cent of all public consultations were published on *E-Citizen* (Interview with representatives of Civitta), desk research revealed growing willingness on the part of Lithuanian authorities to consult with citizens and the increasing popularity of online consultation methods. A total of 85 public consultations were implemented on the *E-Citizen* platform from its launch in March 2014 until March 2020, 54 of which were based on online participation tools. As Table 10.1 demonstrates, the number of online consultations conducted during 2019 more than doubled compared with 2018.

Table 10.1   Public consultations announced on the E-Citizen platform

Year	Offline public consultations	Public online and mixed consultations	Total
2020 (first quarter)	2	3	5
2019	19	26	45
2018	4	11	15
2017	6	6	12
2016	0	7	7
2014	0	1	1
Total	31	54	85

The most frequent user of the *E-Citizen* platform for online consultation is the Office of Government itself (46.3 per cent of consultations on *E-Citizen*), followed by ministries and institutions subordinate to the ministries (44.4 per cent). Create Lithuania also conducted a significant share of e-consultations (9.3 per cent). Eight ministries published at least one consultation on *E-Citizen* in the period of research, while six of them have never used the tool. However, the users of the platform do not treat it as their main tool for disseminating information about consultations as the platform lacks a wide audience (Interview with a representative

of ministries 1, 2, 3). Despite considerable growth in citizen interest (from 573 unique users from July to December 2018 to 1381 from January to July 2019), a gradual slowdown is visible (1105 visitors from July to December 2019), justifying doubts about the effectiveness of *E-Citizen*.

Since more than half of the consultations (59.3 per cent) are oriented towards a very narrow subject requiring specific knowledge of the field, the scope of potential participants is limited to experts. Surveys (42.6 per cent) or calls for comments and suggestions (40.7 per cent) are used as the main tools for consulting, sometimes in combination (16.7 per cent). Broad formulations, such as 'make suggestions and comments on a draft law' are used frequently (33.3 per cent).

The consultation method depends on its aim. Public online consultations are used for policy analysis and to inform decision-making (46.3 per cent) as well as to include citizens in policy formulation (42.6 per cent) by asking their opinion on a possible solution to policy problems. Even though the methodology recommends organizing consultations before the creation of a draft law, this process usually begins in the late stages of the law-making process when it is extremely difficult to make changes as a result of the consultation (Interview with a representative of the Office of the Government). In addition, some consultations (11.1 per cent) are directed towards evaluation or feedback on services and tools.

6.2   Outcome

Due to the limited availability of data, it is impossible to measure the average number of participants in consultations, but it varies from zero to slightly more than 30,000. For example, during the two-week consultation period, only nine people filled in a survey of the Ministry of Health on factors of economic activity for the health of the population, while a survey on the new memorial for the Lukiškės square in Vilnius, organized by the Office of the Government and the Ministry of Culture, attracted unusual attention: more than 31,000 people voted in two weeks. Although the number of participants might not be the most relevant criterion for success, it does reveal the ability of the platform and its users to reach the target audience.

The communication of public consultations is usually marked by lock-up within the internal circle of a ministry. In addition to publishing the initiative on *E-Citizen*, the same invitation is sent to the ministry's contact list of institutional partners instead of being widely circulated (Interview with a participation expert). Civil servants themselves also stress the problem of being unable to ensure suitable communication strategies (Interview with representatives of Civitta), leaving a major part of society unaware of the process.

Most public online consultations are aimed at society at large, naming citizens, organizations, inhabitants, social partners, public institutions and experts as their target group (79.6 per cent). Keeping in mind the high specificity of consultation topics, this might lead to unsatisfied expectations of both civil servants and citizens. For example, the likelihood that a highly technical contribution proposing precise changes to the draft law will be put to use is higher than in the case of a general idea (Interview with the representative of NGOs 1, 2), but also requires particular knowledge and skills that are usually not available within a broad audience. The structure of participants is rarely presented, making it impossible to estimate whether it is individual citizens or organized groups that best represent their interests, but 'there are permanent players in every field' (Interview with the representative of NGO 2).

6.3   Impact

There are three possible stages in a public consultation on the *E-Citizen* platform: ongoing, expired and reviewed. If the consultation is reviewed, citizens can download the report and examine the results. However, almost half of the consultation cases (42.6 per cent) were not reviewed, with only one-fifth of consultation reports stating the further steps in the use of results (14.8 per cent). As a result, it is difficult to evaluate the actual impact of citizen contributions. In the case of surveys, data are used, for example, to inform policy making by finding out citizens' preferences or opinions. The common phrase 'the best proposals can be used in the legislative process' is usually employed when requesting comments and suggestions on draft legislation, but the actual use is seldom mentioned in the consultation reports. This deters citizens from further participation: 'There is no reason to come back if you have no clue how your time was used, unless the issue matters to you a lot and you want to express this' (Interview with a representative of NGO 2).

Overall, it seems that the development of a common methodology for public consultation has not yet reached its initial goals. Even though the number of online consultations announced on the *E-Citizen* platform is increasing, the form of consultation and the quality of prepared materials varies. Due to limited publicity, the government's message about public consultation has not reached the wider society, while citizens' inclusion suffers from the lack of feedback and results.

7   DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Lithuanian case study points to a complex interplay of various factors at different levels, determining the limited success of the public online consultation platform. Public consultations on *E-Citizen* have not yet turned into an effective policy-making mechanism due to the lack of support from both civil servants (only a minor part of consultation possibilities are announced on the platform and no clear use of citizens' contributions is visible) and civil society (citizens are not aware of the tool or remain sceptical about its effectiveness).

This study supports the idea that the application of e-participation tools depends mainly on the culture and practices dominant in the public sector (Norris and Moon, 2005). The three main factors at the national level – the dominant legalistic approach to public administration, a weak civil society and decreasing political attention to *E-Citizen* – create unfavourable conditions for the development of public online consultation. The slow uptake of public consultations on *E-Citizen* can be explained by the heavy workload and fast pace of law-making as well. Despite the requirement to consult with stakeholders, the use of *E-Citizen* (as well as the methodology) remains optional, while declining political attention during the current political term diminishes the urgency of changes.

Both political actors and citizens influence whether and how public administrators use e-participation tools (Steinbach et al., 2019). This permeates the organizational level, as the institutionalization of public online consultation and its internalization in state institutions remain rather weak. Although civil servants have become familiar with public consultation practices and the functionalities of *E-Citizen*, the mere existence of online tools has not ensured their effective application. Having no formal responsibilities for public consultation and facing a pressing workload, civil servants are rarely willing to take consultation initiatives

on their own. Despite increasing awareness of the benefits of citizen inclusion, public consultations are usually organized when legislative acts are already almost complete and making any substantive changes would be complicated. As a result, it serves more as a formal tool for legitimizing decisions rather than a real invitation for co-creation.

Low political interest in public (online) consultations is especially harmful in the context of a weak civil society. In a substantial number of cases, the tool remains restricted to the inner circle of the country's administration, without reaching the broader society. *E-Citizen* does not help to resolve citizens' doubts as to whether their contributions will be properly taken into consideration and will make an impact on policy decisions. This, in turn, might dissuade citizens from more active participation. The consultation process is therefore locked in a vicious circle: Lithuanian ministries are reluctant to announce their consultations on the platform because of its low effectiveness, while citizens are unwilling to visit it because of its limited activity and impact. As a result, despite its potential to become key to better informing policy making and empowering citizens, public online consultation on *E-Citizen* currently remains a declaration of the government's openness rather than an effective policy-making practice.

7.1   Lessons Learned

1. A clear standard of consultation is necessary to ensure high-quality e-participation. Since Lithuanian ministries followed different consultation practices before the development of the new methodology, it is difficult for them to grasp the need for improving and embracing *E-Citizen* as a communication channel. Currently, the content of consultations on *E-Citizen* varies greatly across state institutions. In addition, the lack of a shared understanding of the aims and steps of a consultation (e.g. preparing a communication strategy, matching the information with the needs of target groups, publishing results) led to the low-quality implementation or even failure of the practice, which in turn causes reluctance to apply it in the future.

2. The political attention of authorities is intrinsic for the successful implementation of public online consultation. It is up to political leaders to set the general attitude towards inclusion of citizens. First, political attention is important to overcome the legalistic approach towards policy making. If higher-level authorities are supportive of openness, early inclusion of stakeholders in the decision-making process and prioritize the quality of legislation, these norms will be transferred to the lower levels of the institution as well. Second, if the political leaders treat the topic or the process of consulting as a priority, more resources will be allocated to addressing them. This leads to a better quality of communication strategies, effectiveness in their implementation and, consequently, a higher number of participants as well as more meaningful contributions.

3. The evaluation of public online consultation is necessary to grasp the impact of this tool. e-Participation practices are highly valued for their impact on encouraging active citizenship, increasing levels of trust in government, its democratic legitimacy and the quality of decision-making. However, the limited transparency of the E-citizen platform, insufficient communication of results and the limited impact of the consultation might have a negative effect on building trust and sustainable relations between citizens and the government. Specific performance indicators could be set and evaluation arrangements established in order to assess citizens' experiences, their perception of procedural justice and their

willingness to engage in further decision-making processes. In addition, this would help to evaluate the impact of public (online) consultations on the quality of policy making.

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