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# Prospects for e-democracy in Europe

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## Part I: Literature review

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### STUDY

Science and Technology Options Assessment

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**Scientific Foresight Unit (STOA)**

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# Prospects for e-democracy in Europe

## Literature review

Study

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### Abstract

A long-standing and continuing democratic deficit of the European Union is detected in public and scholarly debate. This democratic deficit is explained by the complex and mutually reinforcing mix of institutional design features of the EU and it is held to contribute to a lacking sense of European citizenship and the negative and nation-oriented public discourse around the EU. It is still believed by many that the perceived democratic deficit of the European Union indicates the need for fostering a European public sphere as a space of debate across national public spheres. Moreover, there is a consensus that the new modes of political communication and participation via the internet can play a role in that respect. Redressing the democratic deficit is obviously a daunting task which cannot be accomplished through the introduction of e-participation tools alone. Far-reaching expectations of a fundamental reform of modern democracy through the application of online participatory tools are vanishing after two decades of e-democracy. However, if properly designed and implemented, e-participation has the potential to contribute to accountability and transparency, trans-nationalisation and politicisation of public debates, and the improvement of exchanges and interactions between EU decision-making and European citizens. A common critique on e-participation practices at the EU-level is that they are a successful civic instrument but not a convincing policy instrument. Many e-participative projects suffer from a lack of direct, or even indirect, political or policy impact but seem to provide personal added value for participants and community building.

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## Executive Summary

E-democracy nowadays is a widely applied term and describes a broad scope of practices of online engagement of the public in political decision making and opinion forming. As regards to theoretical concepts of democracy, e-democracy is mostly based on models of participatory and deliberative democracy. Far-reaching expectations of a fundamental reform of modern democracy, through the application of online tools for political participation and public discourse, are vanishing after two decades of e-democracy. There is, however, no doubt that e-democracy adds new modes of communication among citizens and between actors of representative democracy and their constituencies.

Unfortunately, a continuing deficiency with e-democratic projects is a lack of direct, or even indirect, political or policy impact, although many of them provide personal added value for participants and community building. This study investigates how to continue with e-democracy at the EU level in a way that supports public debate, deliberation and community building AND has an impact on political decision-making. The two central research questions are:

- What are the conditions under which digital tools can successfully facilitate different forms of citizen involvement in decision-making processes?
- And how can we transfer these tools – and the conditions which make them successful – to the EU-level?

This executive summary starts with a short description of the research design and continues with the results from the literature review on building up a European public sphere by using digital communication and e-participation. Based on a case analysis, the summary proceeds with a description of six necessary conditions for e-participation tools to have an impact on political decision-making and agenda-setting. We conclude with policy options to improve e-participation at the EU level.

## Research design

The research design consists of three elements:

1. Systematic literature review of around 400 seminal publications about: 1) e-participation in the context of decision making, 2) democratic impacts and effects, 3) lessons regarding success and failure, 4) application on EU level and 5) the European public sphere.
2. Qualitative comparative analysis (csQCA) of 22 case studies at the local, national and European level. The case studies are based on desk research and 45 interviews with organisers and researchers and can be categorized in five groups: 1) **Websites that monitor politics**: TheyWorkForYou, Abgeordnetenwatch.de, 2) **Informal agenda setting tools**: Petities.nl (Dutch e-petitions site), Open Ministry Finland (crowdsourcing for law proposals), 3) **Formal agenda setting tools**: constitution Iceland (crowdsourcing for a new constitution), Future Melbourne Wiki (co-creating a city planning vision), Predlagam.vladi.si (Slovenian platform for e-proposals and e-petitions), European Citizens' Initiative (citizens' proposals for new EU laws); Participatory budgeting in Berlin-Lichtenberg, Internetconsultatie.nl (Dutch e-consultation on draft legislation), Futurium (consultation on EU -digital- policy making), Your Voice in Europe (public consultation on EU policy), European Citizens' Consultation (pan-European consultation on the future of Europe), 4) **Non-binding decision-making tools**: Pirate Party Germany, Five Star Movement, Podemos, participatory budgeting Belo Horizonte, participatory budgeting Paris, Betri Reykjavik (Participatory Budgeting and agenda setting tool), 5) **Binding decision-making**: e-voting in Switzerland, e-voting in Estonia and e-voting for Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 EP elections within the Green Party.

3. Assessment of EU suitability, via desk research and experts on the EU level, about 1) Improving existing digital tools and 2) new possibilities for e-participation at EU level.

This first part of the final report consists of the findings from the literature review.

## The results of the literature review

As regards the relevance of e-democratic tools and procedures for the functioning of democracy on the level of the European Union, it first of all has to be stated that scholarly debate, as well as research on the European public sphere and on European citizenship and identification with Europe as a political community, has intensified over the last years, due to the symptoms of an actual crisis of the EU institutions and the idea of European integration. There is a consensus that the new modes of political communication via internet have to play a role in attempts to overcome the so called democratic deficit of the Union, by offering new modes of communication among the European citizenry and between the European democratic institutions and the European citizen, also - or exactly - in times of crisis. However, far-reaching expectations and optimism envisaging the internet as a panacea to political disenchantment and as a way to establish new transnational spaces of European bottom-up political communication are scarce compared to a decade ago.

Research supports the notion of a Europeanisation of political publics in the European Member States. Although recent research on media coverage of various aspects of a crisis of Europeanisation (financial crisis, refugee policy) shows a growing dominance of national perspectives and interest in public discourse on the EU, this does not necessarily dismiss the notion of a European public sphere. It is held that the more there is dispute among elites and national parties about European issues, the more Europe becomes visible in the national media – which, however, implies a strong position of EU-critical perspectives. So far research on the relevance of political communication via the internet for building up a European public sphere or supporting the Europeanisation of national public spheres is still scarce. It is held by many researchers that in principle the use of interactive tools of e-participation at the European level can contribute to fostering the legitimacy of the EU and to promote a more substantial EU citizenship. However, it is observed that the role of citizens is often reduced to just posting statements or commenting on statements by policy-makers rather than engaging in a European citizens' debate and jointly working out policy options to be forwarded to policy-makers. Also the notion (as put forward in the STOA report from 2011), that public spaces established by consultation processes offered by European institutions are often restricted to expert communities and at best help to establish segmented issue related elite publics on the European level, is confirmed by recent research. Research on the use of social media and internet sites by civil society organisations active on the European level is just about to emerge. Scarce results available so far indicate that the restriction of publics at the European level to “epistemic communities” and experts is not easily ruled out by internet-based networks organised by NGOs.

An area to which the literature has also paid much attention is social media. Opinions seem to differ greatly regarding the impact social media use (such as Facebook and Twitter) has on online and offline participation. Results range from Facebook use leading to decreased participation in all areas to online participation, and even offline protests, being promoted by the same site. In general it does appear, however, that there is a tendency for mobilization to be medium-specific. While political websites tend to still mainly serve an informative purpose, more and more politicians become accessible through the use of social media platforms such as Twitter, allowing for a dialogue between elected officials and citizens. An interesting phenomenon which adds to the difficulty of mobilization is the fact, that being confronted with political opinions which differ from your own can lower political interest and engagement. Political deliberation and discussions on social media sites can therefore have negative effects on a person's willingness to engage in similar dialogues in the future. One must of course also not forget the various technical and privacy problems associated with e-democracy, as well as the fact that many countries still possess a significant digital divide.

## 1. Introduction

*“There exist more opportunities than ever before for citizens wishing to have their say, via the media or directly to local and national governments, but there is a more pervasive sense of disappointment than ever before that citizens are outside the citadels of power, and that those within do not know how to listen to them.”* (Coleman and Moss 2012: 4)

According to the UN’s e-participation index (UN, 2016), e-participation is expanding all over the world. The index measures e-participation according to a three-level model of participation including: 1) e-information (the provision of information on the internet), 2) e-consultation (organizing public consultations online), and 3) e-decision-making (involving citizens directly in decision processes) (UN, 2016: 54). In the present report we reserve the term ‘e-participation’ for all forms of political participation making use of digital media, including both formally institutionalised mechanisms and informal civic engagement.

The drivers behind e-participation are digitalization, the development of digital tools that can be used for citizen involvement – social media, deliberative software, e-voting systems, etc, and the growing access to the internet. In European countries, especially those which rank prominently among the top 50 performers, citizens have more and more opportunities to have their say in government and politics. According to the UN, the largest share of e-participation initiatives relates to central and local governments giving access to public sector information and public consultation via digital tools. Recently there has been a growing focus on citizen involvement in policy-making, although progress in this field has been modest so far.

### A democratic deficit

However, it is not only digitalization that has been advancing e-participation. Nowadays many European citizens are invited, especially by their local governments, to be more involved. Because of the economic recession and budget cuts, civil service reform and de-centralization of public tasks, citizens are now expected to be more self-sufficient (i.e. taking over activities that were formerly public services). At the same time, citizens themselves actually want to be more involved. The UN report (2016: 3) states that *“advances in e-participation today are driven more by civic activism of people seeking to have more control over their lives.”* This is confirmed by surveys such as the [European Value Studies](#) (2008) where the majority of European citizens indicate they want to be more involved in political decision making.

From other surveys it is clear that many European citizens do not feel as if their voice counts or their concerns are taken into consideration. For example, in the European Social Survey (2014), the majority of the respondents gave a negative reaction to the question *“How much would you say the political system in your country allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?”*. The same holds true for the question: *“And how much would you say that the political system in your country allows people like you to have an influence on politics?”*. When it comes to the EU, the [Eurobarometer](#) tells us that exactly half of the EU citizens disagree with the statement that their voice counts in the EU. And in almost all European countries there was an increased number of respondents that disagreed with the statement that the European Parliament takes the concerns of European citizens into consideration. In general, it was a majority of 54% that disagreed with the statement.

This ‘democratic deficit’ (Grimm 1995) at the EU level is also felt by EU officials and EU parliamentarians. EU politics as executed by the European Commission and the European Council is lacking democratic legitimization and responsiveness to European citizens. The fact is that the roles and powers of the European Commission are growing while the European government has no direct accountability to the European citizens. It is enacted and controlled by a multilevel system of policy making and often operating outside the control of formalized systems of representative democracy. The trust in European



governmental and political institutions by European citizens remains quite low: according to the [Eurobarometer](#), 46 per cent of European citizens tend not to trust the EU.

## Expectations of e-democracy

E-participation and in a broader sense e-democracy - the practice of democracy with the support of digital media in political communication and participation - are seen as a possible solution for democratic shortcomings at the European level (as well as on the local and national level). From the start, and especially in the 1990s, the expectations for renewing democracy through new media were far reaching. Those hopes were based on the idea that e-democracy could strengthen the ties between the sovereign, the citizens, and their political representation - governments and policy makers. It was expected that new technologies would facilitate direct communication, allow more transparency of decision making, and increase the responsiveness of public authorities to the needs and expectations of the constituency, all things which would lead to a revitalization of democracy.

However, after a few decades of e-democracy and e-participation practices on all levels of policy making from municipalities to transnational bodies, the reality has been sobering. After 25 years of e-democracy, Jan Van Dijk - a scholar of e-democracy - concludes that, up until now, the primary achievement of e-democracy has been a significant improvement in access to, and the exchange of, politically relevant information. Evidence on the realization of e-democracy supporting public debate, deliberation and community building was mixed, and - most disappointing from the perspective of direct democracy - *"no perceivable effect of these debates on decision-making of institutional politics"* was detected (Van Dijk 2012: 53 ff). Furthermore, van Dijk asserts that e-participation is largely confined to the initial and the final stages of the policy cycle, and that it rarely allows for entries into the core stages of decision-making and policy execution. This is more or less (still) in line with the UN report on e-participation (2016) which states that there is a modestly growing focus on citizen involvement in policy-making. Although the initial high expectations can be so adjusted, e-democracy and e-participation are a reality and both have changed the communication between citizens and governments in, without a doubt, many beneficial ways, for example by providing better and faster access to all kinds of public information for citizens, procedures of e-consultation or e-budgeting. And in this decade, social media have been offering a new mode of direct political communication among citizens, communities and policy makers.

In this study - taking the STOA report from 2011 as a starting point - we investigate how to continue with e-democracy at the EU level in a way that supports public debate and has an impact on political decision-making. We start from the viewpoint that e-democracy is one of several strategies for supporting democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes, and spreading democratic values. Its main objective is the electronic support of legitimate democratic processes and it should be evaluated on these merits. In other words, e-democracy is additional, complementary to, and interlinked with, the traditional processes of democracy (Council of Europe 2009: 11). Or as the Council of Europe also states in its recommendation on e-democracy: e-democracy is, above all, about democracy.

## Research questions

In order to investigate how to continue with e-democracy at the EU level, 22 cases of digital tools have been analysed and compared. The majority of the cases (15 of the 22 cases) was individually requested in the project specifications, as defined by STOA. The 22 cases:

- are organised at different political and governmental levels (local, national, European);
- enable citizen involvement at different stages of political decision-making (agenda setting, decision-making and monitoring);
- are possibly suitable to be implemented and used at the EU level in order to counteract the deficit in European democratic processes.

The two central research questions that will guide the analysis are:

- What are the conditions under which digital tools can successfully facilitate different forms of citizen involvement in decision-making processes?
- And, how can we transfer these tools – and the conditions which make them successful – to the EU level?

Our study is divided into three phases:

1. A literature review with a particular focus on the most recent and relevant literature;
2. An empirical assessment and comparison of 22 cases of digital tools;
3. Lessons for existing EU e-participation tools and new options to improve e-participation at the EU level.

This part of the report consists of the findings of phase 1: the literature review.

## **Reading guide to part 1 of the report**

Chapter 2 discusses the methodology of the first phase of the study: the systematic literature review.

Chapter 3 describes the results of the literature review (from 2011 onwards) with regard to a) general concepts of e-democracy, b) the democratic deficit in Europe in relation to the EU governance system, c) the European and transnational public sphere and the role of mass media and internet, and d) the assessment of digital tools for citizen involvement at different stages of decision-making (e-information, e-petitions, e-initiatives, e-campaigning, e-deliberation, e-consultation, e-budgeting and e-voting).

## 2. Methodology and resources used

In methodological terms the current study rests on two central pillars: a systematic literature review and 22 empirical case studies. An expert workshop on suitable digital tools at the EU-level served as an additional component. In this chapter we will go into the methodology behind the literature review.

In order to form a complete, or at least more reliable, picture of the state of the art, a systematic review has been undertaken of the relevant literature on e-democracy published since the completion of the STOA (2011) study. However, with the resources at hand the sheer mass of relevant sources necessitated a limitation as regards the scope of languages covered. Our systematic literature review is focused on sources published in English and German. We are aware that this decision has its limitations, as discussions that for instance solely take place in French or Spanish literature do not come to the fore. In the case of French discussions around e-democracy not all points have found their way into English speaking publications. This is a certain limitation of our systematic literature review we had to accept. Being aware of this restriction, one can still assume that a large body of relevant work originally published in other languages finds its way into English publication channels, seeing as English can be considered a leading lingua franca in modern scientific communication.

### 2.1. Systematic literature review

A flow-diagram of our literature review can be found in Figure 1.

Our initial search was conducted using the Thomson Reuters database, results stemming primarily from the Web of Science Core Collection. We had access to a total of 50,478,338 records through the virtual private network of the University of Vienna. We divided the subject matter into 14 separate topics with their own search terms (see the Annex I). In total 2,781 hits were scanned, with 1,790 being adopted for further use and 991 being excluded. The exclusion criteria at this point were languages other than English or German, records pertaining to different subject matter, retracted articles and patents. The exclusions were based on title or abstract. When checked for duplicates within the records adopted from the Thomson Reuters database, 211 duplicates were identified and removed, leaving a total of 1.579 records.

A second search was conducted using SCOPUS, an abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature including conference proceedings, owned by Elsevier. The search was conducted in a similar fashion as for the Thomson Reuters database, with the same categorization into 14 topics with separate search terms. A total of 3.626 hits were scanned, of which 2.694 were adopted for further examination. When checked for duplicates 429 duplicates were identified and removed, leaving a total of 2.265 records.

In order to cover the most relevant German literature a third search was conducted using u::search, the online library search engine of the University of Vienna. For this search the subject matter was divided into 12 separate topics, each with their own search terms. A total of 821 hits were scanned, resulting in the adoption of 264. The low adoption rate can be explained by the high number of duplicate entries and low relevance. After the removal of 72 duplicates, 192 records remained.

The records of the Thomson Reuters and SCOPUS database searches as well as the online library search of the University of Vienna were then combined in one library. 810 duplicates between the different sources were found and removed, leaving a library consisting of 3.226 records.

In addition, specifically relevant journals from 2011-2016 were examined. This search included the following titles as specified in the proposal: *European Journal of Political Research*, *European Journal of Social Theory*, *European Law Journal*, *Government Information Quarterly*, *International Journal of E-Politics*, *JeDEM – eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government*, *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *New Political Science*, *Political Communication*, *Political Science* and *The Information Society*. Based on the literature research conducted so far, the following journals were additionally identified as being specifically relevant for our research question and added to the search: *Contemporary European Studies*, *Democratic*

*Theory, Democratization, European Journal of ePractice, Policy & Internet and Political Science Quarterly*. A total of 209 references were adopted. These 209 references were added to our library consisting of 3.226 records from the database searches, resulting in a library of 3.385 references after the removal of 50 duplicates.

Lastly we added a body of literature already documented during the course of previous projects. We collected relevant publications dated between 2011 and now, covering peer-reviewed as well as grey literature. These references were gathered through a mix of database searches via Google Scholar and the snowball method. A total of 338 references were available from these sources for the specified time frame. A total of 93 duplicates were found between these 338 references and our library of 3.385 references from the database searches and the journal search, resulting in a library of 3.630 references. A similar systematic literature review on e-democracy was undertaken by Santos and Tonelli (2014), who identified a total of 1.044 documents up to August 17, 2013 (and finally selected 14 articles). Throughout the course of the literature research relevant new publications gathered were added to this category.

Our next task was to reduce this large amount of 3.630 references to a library consisting of the most relevant core literature. As a first step reductions were made by scanning the title list, with all suggested changes being examined by a second individual before being finalized. Criteria for exclusion was the presence of duplicates which had remained unrecognized up to this point, publications by the same authors with overlapping content (the more comprehensive version being kept) and references with expected low relevance for the research question. Abstracts were examined for publications with vague or inconclusive titles. A total of 2190 references were removed through this process, leaving 1440 publications to make up our library. Full text versions were subsequently collected to allow for the final selection step based on a relevance check by closer inspection. Following the outlined reduction, 240 of the 1440 publications stemmed from the category previous research and hand search, meaning that their full text versions were already collected and the full text search was only conducted for the remaining 1200 references. This main full text search was carried out through the virtual private network (VPN) of the University of Vienna, which granted access to many publications which would otherwise be inaccessible due to paywalls. Additional effort was made to gain access to references which could not be acquired through the University of Vienna VPN, but which were identified as being potentially relevant for this study, with the members of the literature research team investigating access through additional VPNs at their disposal. Full text versions for a total of 815 publications from the database and journal searches could be identified. The 385 publications which could not be accessed with the given resources and within the time-frame primarily consisted of articles locked behind paywalls, despite our VPNs, and publications in the form of printed books which were not made available online. These 815 references in addition to 240 references from previous research and hand search formed the basis for further evaluation and analysis with a total of 1055.

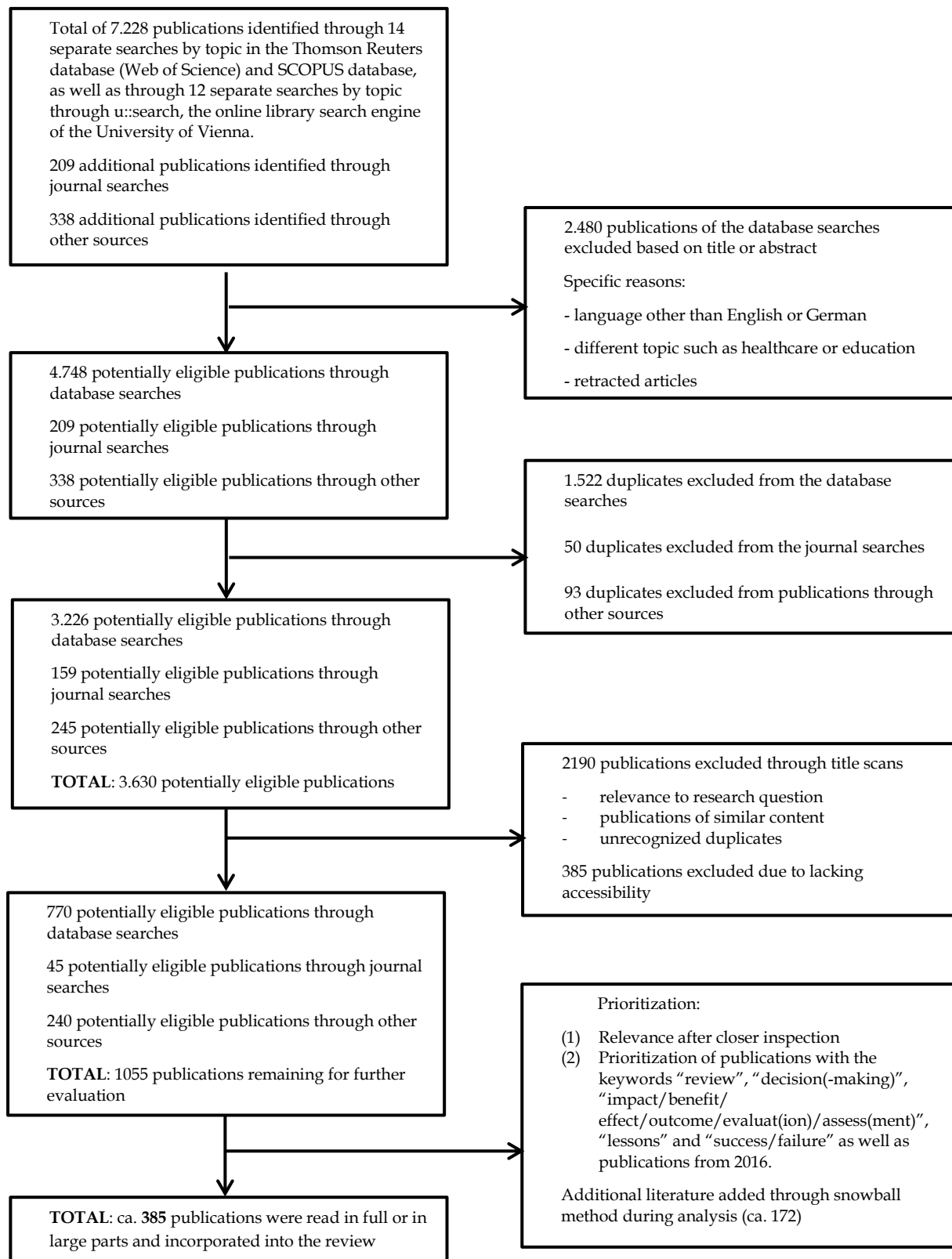
The enormous amount of publications in the period since 2011 could only be analysed within the given limits of time and resources by choosing a certain focus. According to the research questions of this study priority has been given to reviews and original contributions on:

- experiences with online platforms and interactive tools that allow citizens' direct participation and involvement in decision-making processes,
- assessments and evaluations of democratic impacts, effects, outcomes and benefits,
- lessons regarding success and failure,
- with particular attention to applications at EU level and consideration of sources from the most recent past (2016).

These publications were identified through keyword searches within the titles and abstracts.

During the analysis phase much additional literature was found via the snowball method, and we ended up incorporating a total of around 385 publications in this report (during the conclusion of the literature research), 308 of which are dated within the 2011-2016 timeframe.

Figure 1. Flow Diagram of the systematic literature review



## **2.2. Limitations of the research**

### **2.2.1. Systematic literature review**

In order to form a complete, or at least more reliable, picture of the state of the art, a systematic review has been undertaken of the relevant literature on e-democracy published since the completion of the STOA (2011) study. However, with the resources at hand the sheer mass of relevant sources necessitated a limitation as regards the scope of languages covered. Our systematic literature review is focused on sources published in English and German. We are aware that this decision has its limitations, as discussions that for instance solely take place in French or Spanish literature do not come to the fore. In the case of French discussions around e-democracy not all points have found their way into English speaking publications. This is a certain limitation of our systematic literature review we had to accept. Being aware of this restriction, one can still assume that a large body of relevant work originally published in other languages finds its way into English publication channels, seeing as English can be considered a leading lingua franca in modern scientific communication.

### **2.2.2. Recent developments**

Public debates about digital manipulation of political information from foreign powers have emerged during our research endeavour, and came up in some of the last interviews. Unfortunately we were not able to address this issue in this research convincingly. Our research strategy, to build on existing literature and to reflect on past experiences of digital participation, did not enable us to make a thorough analysis of this development and risk. The issue of (foreign) digital manipulation of voters should be thoroughly studied on its own, in a future study.

### 3. Literature review

#### 3.1. Organisation and theoretical framework

The chapter starts with an introduction of a number of basic concepts which will be applied in the ensuing chapters of this report. This includes a very brief overview of key theoretical concepts of liberal, participatory and deliberative democracy with the aim of proving conceptual orientation with regard to the different concepts of e-democracy that will be dealt with in greater detail in this report. A comprehensive account and discussion of the rich political and theoretical debates on democracy is neither feasible in the context of this study nor would such an exercise advance our understanding of potentially fruitful e-democratic practices in Europe. Given the special European perspective of this project and the role of political communication, the concepts of European citizenship and the European Public Sphere are introduced as well. The chapter continues with a look at the democracy-related potentials of new ICTs and explicates the various dimensions of e-democracy, before it turns to the anchoring of participatory democracy in EU-level legal frameworks (3.1).

We continue with an assessment of Social Media as a new potential which is in the focus of political and scholarly attention nowadays (3.2). As the role of social media for e-democracy can be said to currently be in the focus of research and debate, the relevance of social media for political communication is touched on briefly in the chapter on the European public sphere and is presented with regard to its potential for e-participation in the chapter on “digital tools”. Apart from touching on specific aspects of “social media” we deem it to be necessary to enter into the more general discussion on the expectations and the (assumed or observable) potential of social media to induce fundamental changes to political communication that can be regarded as introducing new modes of the political or the public sphere.

We then enter into the current debate on the so called “*democratic deficit*” of the European Union and the possible role of the European public sphere in overcoming this and supporting legitimisation of EU policies and the emergence of European citizenship (3.3). On the basis of results from recent research on the existence and workings of the European public sphere, we enter into the discussion of the possible role of internet communication for the establishment or fostering of a European space for democratic debate and opinion forming.

The following chapter (3.4) is dedicated to explore – on the basis of findings in recent literature – experiences with and the potentials of a broad scope of e-participation tools and formats in policy making. This overview closes with an extended subchapter looking at recent research and scholarly debate on the use of e-participation at the European level, namely deliberative citizen involvement projects and e-consultations as applied by the EU, recent experience with the European Citizen Initiative and the use of e-petitioning at the European Parliament.

The literature review is closed by summarizing the most relevant findings and conclusions (3.5).

For the presentation of the results of the literature review it was a challenge to at the same time cover the broad scope of articles and books included in the review and, nevertheless, deliver a concise and concentrated text. For this purpose we tried to avoid lengthy introductions of basic concepts (e.g. public sphere) as much as possible, as far as this had already been dealt with in the STOA report on e-democracy from 2011. We also tried to avoid repetition of discussions or controversies already expanded on in this STOA report. However, we refer to the 2011 STOA study whenever we can clearly state that assumptions and statements from 5 years ago can either be clearly confirmed or rejected or have been put into doubt by recent literature.



### **3.1.1. Introduction of basic concepts**

Since the early days of the World Wide Web, the idea of using new media for political participation and democratic practices was framed as novel, modern and highly innovative. While these claims seem justified with regard to the information and communication technologies enabling Internet-based democratic processes, it is important to keep in mind that the different proposals for electronic democracy draw on – explicitly or implicitly – well-established concepts of democratic theory. In this sense, the normative views, aims and approaches represented by the different conceptualisations of e-democracy are based on and can thus be traced back to the fundamental tenets of democratic theory. As is the case with any normative conception of democracy, each variant of Internet-based democracy is driven and inspired by a specific understanding of an ideal-typical view of the political community and the political decision-making process. What are the main objectives of democracy? – Depending on the normative position, the answers to this question will be quite different. Some views of democracy put their main emphasis on a high degree of representativeness, others promote the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, and others strive for inclusive and comprehensive involvement of the citizens (Schmidt 2008, 236f.). With the aim of clarifying these conceptual and normative relationships, the following will provide a brief overview of the main models of democracy as they have been established in the relevant academic literature.

If the discussion of procedural variants and details are set aside in favour of a higher-level of abstraction, the large number of different normative understandings of democracy can be related to the essence of three ideal-typical models of democracy: the liberal, the republican (or participatory) and the deliberative model (cf. Habermas 1992; Held 2006; Schmidt 2008, 236-253; Schultze 2004, 125). These three models can be distinguished according to their diverging assumptions of the human nature, the ascribed role of the individual in relation to society and citizenship, and the understanding of civil liberty. The following overview of the three main models is mainly based on Habermas (1992). It should be noted that these variants are ideal-typical models of democracy and do not exist in the pure form in reality. Given the extremely large number of different conceptualizations of democracy, putting the focus on the key elements of democratic decision-making seems more expedient than attempting to provide a comprehensive account of all real-typical models.

#### **3.1.1.1. The liberal model of democracy**

Most democratic systems in the world are based on key elements of the liberal model. A chief characteristic of this model is its strong emphasis on procedures. Instead of attempting to realise a pre-defined form of society, this model concentrates on processes and institutions that ensure generally-binding decision-making. By and large, the democratic process is conceptualised as a market-like competition between strategic actors such as interest groups, political parties and elites. The citizen is conceptualised as a consumer whose political participation is more or less limited to the periodic expression of individual preferences. Processes of political will-formation, based on public debate and learning, do not receive heightened attention in this model. Thus, the political will of the democratic entity is understood as the result of the interplay of competing interests and the aggregation of individual voter preferences. In the liberal model, the status of the citizen and his/her private sphere are protected by a number of fundamental, defensive rights against arbitrary state intrusion.

#### **3.1.1.2. The republican or participatory model**

Compared to the liberal model, the participatory model of democracy is highly demanding for its citizens. It requires a community which shares a broad set of common values, and citizens who are able and willing to overcome the pursuit of individual interests in favour of an orientation towards the common good. The model's understanding of the political reaches far beyond mere procedures for collective decision-making. Instead, the political process is conceptualised as the central medium through which society is constituted and becomes aware of itself as a community. Here, the liberal model's



scepticism towards political participation is replaced by the primacy of citizen involvement. Collective processes of will-formation between free and equal citizens are seen as a value in itself, and participation is understood as a holistic and integral feature of life. The state is assigned primarily with the function of guaranteeing processes of inclusive involvement and not so much the protection of individual rights.

### 3.1.1.3. The deliberative model of democracy

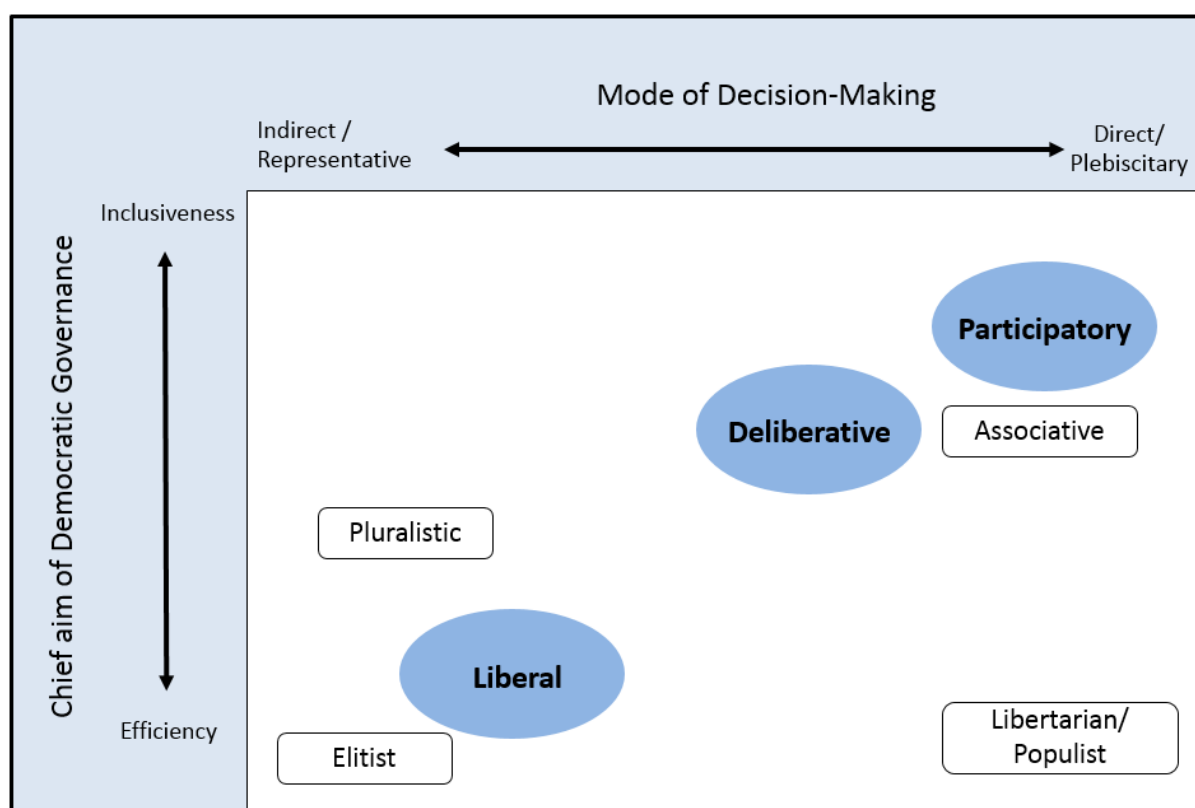
The deliberative model is closely related to the participatory model but incorporates important elements of the liberal model. A specific and demanding understanding of the communication conditions under which processes of public will-formation are performed lies at the centre of this third ideal-typical model. It is a result of a critical analysis of both the liberal and the participatory models: While the first privileges individual autonomy in order to prevent the 'tyranny of the majority', the second puts popular sovereignty centre stage. Instead of pitching individual rights and popular sovereignty against each other, both aims receive equal weight in the deliberative model. The decisive integrative step is the establishment of sophisticated conditions for rational and fair public deliberation. Ideally, these conditions should include openness for all potential participants and points of view, reasoning, and equal and free speech. In contrast to the participatory model, this procedural orientation does not require a far-reaching ex-ante agreement on a certain form of society or other substantive sources of legitimacy such as the nation or a founding myth. The questions which norms should be constitutive for the community are referred to the processes of public deliberation. At the same time, the deliberative model incorporates constitutionalism and the guarantee of individual rights and freedoms. Thus, in the deliberative model, political power remains to be tied to the institutions of the constitutional state and its established procedures for decision-making. The idea of popular sovereignty is realised through rational deliberations in the public sphere and in the networks of civil society organisations which exercise their communicative power to influence the political decision-making system. In the sections below, the role of the public sphere for the democratic process is outlined in greater detail.

In comparative terms, both the participatory and the deliberative models see participation as a value in itself. Or put differently, they place the main focus on the input side of democratic decision-making, sharing the hope of changing the political process through more, inclusive and better participation and deliberation, ultimately aiming to "democratize democracy" (Schmidt 2008: 236ff.). In contrast, the liberal model is preoccupied with the output dimension, aiming to achieve stability and efficient decision-making.

The main differences of these and related models can be mapped on a two-dimensional space, depicting the chief aim of the democratic process (efficiency vs. inclusiveness) and the preferred mode of decision-making (indirect/representative vs. direct/plebiscitary) (figure 2). The three main models of democracy can be located in this two-dimensional space according to their basic normative orientations. Other variants of democracy, such as elitist, pluralist, libertarian or associative democracy etc. can be grouped around the three models accordingly (Lindner et al. 2010: 12).

The purpose of the two-dimensional space is to provide some basic orientation with regard to the different understandings of democracy in general and the Internet-based variants in particular:

*"Arguably, preferences for a certain model of democracy will most likely determine the type of e-democracy a proponent seeks to establish. For instance, if a promoter of e-democracy belongs to the supporters of deliberative democracy, he or she will probably prefer a mix of representative and plebiscitary modes of online democratic decision-making and put special emphasis on Internet-based discussion fora, whereas members of the liberal camp are likely to favour forms of online participation that reflect the principles of representative democracy. Against this background, the disappointment about the e-democratic practices of governments which is frequently expressed by observers and promoters of e-democracy can be better understood and put into perspective."* (Lindner et al. 2010: 14).

**Figure 2. Models of Democracy: Aims and preferred mode of decision-making**

Source: based on Lindner (2007: 80).

#### 3.1.1.4. European Citizenship

As already outlined, in the classical republican or participatory model democracy is more than a process of bargaining for individual interests, but presupposes that citizens act, strive for and argue about public concerns and the common good. Thus, a sense of belonging to a community and sharing a common set of values based in common traditions is necessary for a democratic community to function. “*The formation of a *volonté general* is possible because citizens are equal and share common values and notions of the public interest*” (Eriksen 2007, 29). It is contested to what extent a functioning democracy requires citizens to share certain values that constitute an identity, a sense of belonging and commonality, such as it is being promoted by so-called communitarian concepts of democracy. A strictly liberal concept of democracy would neither presuppose an active civil society nor a sense of public concerns on the part of citizens. A third middle position is held by deliberative concepts of democracy, which do not see the need for or possibility of a shared substantial cultural identity, but regard the mutual acceptance of citizens as equal holders of rights to be a sufficient basis for rational societal deliberation on the common interest. This latter position is very much in line with arguments put forward in order to support the possibility of trans-national or European citizenship. The development of citizenship in the sense of political and legal rights of the members of a political community, as well as in the sense of cultural identity and a sense of belonging historically, has been bound to the emergence of the nation state (common origin, heritage and language). This is why many have doubted that the concept of citizenship, which includes rights as well as a sense of belonging and identity, can be transferred to the trans-national, European level (Grimm 1995). On the other hand, it is argued (Fraser 2007, contributions in Eder/Giesen 2003) that with globalisation and increasing migration the foundations of national citizenship are vanishing and national democracies need to establish a form of political and cultural identity that goes beyond national traditions and common values rooted in language and history. In the course of globalisation and migration the legal and political aspect of citizenship will be uncoupled from cultural identity.

The concept of European Citizenship ranks quite prominently in official EU politics. The European citizen is directly addressed in EC programmes and conceptual papers. The involvement and engagement of the European citizen is regarded to be crucial for overcoming the democracy deficit and for the democratic legitimisation of EU politics. A “European citizenship” has been officially introduced to the foundations of the EU with the Maastricht treaty (Article 8): *“Citizenship of the European Union is hereby established. Every person holding the nationality of a member state shall be a citizen of the union”*. Beyond this formal status, an active civil society and a public sphere, as well as structures that allow for direct legitimisation and control of the EU institutions by the European constituency, can be regarded to form the foundations of European citizenship in the sense of a European political identity. Debates on European citizenship stress that it would include citizens' rights that go beyond individual liberties and “*market membership*”, but cannot be based on cultural membership in the ethnic sense. Therefore, a direct relation between the European institutions and its citizens, and hence active political rights, moves into the centre of debate on European citizenship. Thus, it is ultimately the establishment of a European public sphere that allows for as much deliberation as possible on European public concerns which would support the development of a post-national political identity and feeling of belonging to a political community. It can be argued (Eder 2007) that the opportunity for citizens to meet as equal partners and exchange their arguments and claims initiates a process of democratisation that in turn comprises the development of a public sphere as well as of citizenship as two sides of the same coin. The extent to which the internet opens up additional opportunities for political discourse across national borders and induces new options for direct interaction between European decision makers and their constituencies, ‘e-democracy’, can be seen as a means to foster European citizenship.

#### 3.1.1.5. European public sphere

In Habermas’ (1996, 1992) concept of deliberative democracy, the public sphere functions as an intermediate level between political decision makers and a politically aware citizenry, or the “*demos*”. In this perspective the public sphere is not an institution or organisation, nor is it a particular form of collective: *“The public sphere should rather be perceived as an open field of communicative exchange. It is made up of communication flows and discourses which allow for the diffusion of intersubjective meaning and understanding”* (Trenz 2008, 2). The public sphere is thus a concept with inherently normative aspects. It describes features that are necessary for a democracy to function. There must be room for public deliberation, in order to establish a link between the constituency and its representatives – i.e. to process the content of policy-making among those who will be affected by the decisions to be taken and who delegate their representatives to the decision-making bodies. Thus, “public sphere” does not simply mean some form of public communication, but always implies a certain (deliberative) quality that transforms public communication into public opinion and will formation (Fraser 2007, Trenz 2008). The discourse of actively participating citizens is the backing for political decision-making in the representative system, as the citizenry (directly or via the media) provides the political institutions with ideas, interests and demands that have to be taken into consideration in the political process. In Habermas’ view, the creation of a trans-European public sphere (in addition to a European civil society and political culture) is a central functional requirement for a democratically constituted Europe, as well as for a European identity and citizenship (Habermas 2001, 18).

The idea of the EC's White Paper on governance (CEC 2001) of how to provide for democratic legitimisation is very much in line with this concept: *“The aim should be to create a transnational “space” where citizens from different countries can discuss what they perceive as being the important challenges for the Union. This should help policy makers to stay in touch with European public opinion, and could guide them in identifying European projects which mobilise public support.”* The Commission is not satisfied with national discourse arenas being europeanised by adopting more European issues to their agendas, but does conceive of the European public sphere as a genuinely European arena of exchange of citizens across borders and with the European political bodies.

The extent to which this communicative space develops or can fulfil its function as an intermediate level between the European citizenry and the European institutions of representative democracy is regarded to be dependent on a common identity and a feeling of solidarity and public concern among the constituency (citizenship, see above) that backs up the institutions of representative democracy. In academic discussions it is widely agreed that the public sphere cannot be conceived of as being one common general communicative space. On the contrary, besides a general overarching public sphere that is open to any citizen (and mainly based on mass media communication), there are segmented publics that evolve around policy networks dealing with particular issues and problems to which particular communities relate. To what extent types of public spheres (general and issue-related) exist at the European level is being debated. The Europeanisation of state functions, a discursive construction of the EU as well as an Europeanisation of political agency is ongoing, but these processes have “... *indeed not yet found an appropriate correlate or foundation in European society*” (Zimmermann and Favell 2010: 507f.). Those who expect the EU to evolve by strengthening the deliberative dimension of policy-making, however, anticipate that in the course of this process a multi-layered structure consisting of European issue-related, national and overarching general public spheres will necessarily emerge. While an overarching general public sphere may remain latent for a longer period, one can perceive many strands of development that indicate the emergence of European publics.

New pathways of political communication among citizens, as well as between policy making institutions and their constituencies as opened up by internet communication and e-participation, are expected to hold the potential of strengthening the European public sphere: a European space of political communication and deliberation, a European civil society and European citizenship. However, whether this strengthening and supportive function can be achieved is highly dependent upon the way e-participation is connected to the established processes of political will formation and decision making.

### **3.1.2. The concept and definition of e-democracy**

Already since the early 1960s futurists and scholars alike have heralded new information and communication technologies (ICT) as carrying massive potential to transform existing practices of political communication and political systems (cf. McLuhan 1964). Over the years reflections gave rise to a fast extending interdisciplinary discourse and a continuously growing, meanwhile enormous, body of literature dealing with a wide range of issues and implications of ICT for the political process in theory and practice. Umbrella terms which became most often used to signify the subject are ‘electronic or e-democracy’ (cf. Schaal 2016) and ‘digital democracy’ (cf. Hague and Loader 1999; Hacker and van Dijk 2000a), whereas the use of the terms ‘teledemocracy’ (cf. Becker 1981), ‘virtual democracy’ or ‘cyberdemocracy’ was largely confined to earlier stages of the debate. Various attempts have been made to structure the historical evolution of this discourse and the different perspectives (cf. Hagen 1997; Vedel 2006; Oblak Črnič 2012; Santos and Tonelli 2014).

However, despite the long history of these concepts and the ideas behind them, no common nomenclature has been developed to date and generally agreed upon definitions are lacking. Among the numerous more or less different conceptions, one can discern definitions with a normative flavour and more neutral ones. In the following we will briefly review some of these to establish the basic concepts and an outline of the theoretical framework for our analysis of digital tools and systems to strengthen participatory and direct democracy.

A collection of contributions which focus both on theoretical and practical issues involved with the relationship between new media and democracy offers an authoritative starting point (Hacker and van Dijk 2000a). The editors introduce ‘digital democracy’ as the key concept, providing a definition with normative ingredients:

“Digital democracy is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media (e.g. the internet, interactive broadcasting and

digital telephony) for purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication.” (Hacker and van Dijk 2000b: 1)

Just a few lines later they rephrase this conceptualisation in more neutral terms: “We define digital democracy as a *collection of attempts to practise democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using ICT or CMC instead, as an addition, not a replacement for traditional ‘analogue’ political practices.*”

In a more recent contribution van Dijk (2012: 51) provides a more concise version of the earlier definition: “Digital democracy can be defined as the *pursuit and the practice of democracy in whatever view using digital media in online and offline political communication.* The online-offline distinction should be added because political activities are not only happening on the internet ...” (p. 51f.).

Both Hacker and van Dijk argue in favour of the term ‘digital democracy’ as preferable to all other related concepts for various reasons. However, this does not mean that digital democracy should displace the use of traditional communication media and face-to-face communication; on the contrary, a reasonable combination of virtual and traditional media is regarded as the most fruitful practice. Although they decline the term ‘electronic democracy’ for being too general (since some old media of broadcasting or telephony were electronic as well), other more recent conceptions suggest to use ‘electronic or e-democracy’ as synonymous terms to ‘digital democracy’. For example, Päivärinta and Øystein’s (2006: 818) conception sounds very similar: “E-democracy refers to the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in political debates and decision-making processes, complementing or contrasting traditional means of communications, such as face-to-face interaction or one-way mass media”.

Coleman and Norris (2005) also confirm the preference for ‘e-democracy’ as the key concept. Having presented a range of definitions of e-democracy, they point out an essential commonality and opt for a wide, again normative, understanding of the notion: “*A common thread ... is the assumption that e-democracy has something to do with the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance democratic structures and processes.*” (p. 6ff.) ... “*E-democracy is both top-down and bottom-up; it is both about the institutional processes of hierarchies and the more fluid arrangements of networks*” (p. 32).

We will therefore use the terms ‘e-democracy’ and ‘digital democracy’ interchangeably as key concepts of the theoretical framework for our analysis of digital tools and systems to strengthen participatory and direct democracy.

A milestone among political frameworks on e-democracy is the Council of Europe’s Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on electronic democracy (e-democracy). Its core consists of 12 recommendations, including the following two basic ones: “*The Committee of Ministers, in accordance with Article 15.b of the Statute of the Council of Europe [...]. Recommends that Member States: 1. consider making use of the opportunities afforded by e-democracy to strengthen democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes; 2. consider and implement e-democracy as the support and enhancement of democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes by means of ICT, and linked to the engagement and re-engagement of citizens in democracy; [...]*” (Council of Europe 2009: 5, 7). The Appendix to Recommendation CM/Rec (2009)1 includes a long list of 80 ‘Principles of e-democracy’ and 102 ‘Guidelines’. Just to mention two fundamental principles: “*When introducing or taking steps to improve electronic democracy, stakeholders should take account of the following principles of e-democracy:*

- *E-democracy, as the support and enhancement of democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes by means of ICT, is above all about democracy. Its main objective is the electronic support of democracy.*
- *E-democracy is one of several strategies for supporting democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes and spreading democratic values. It is additional, complementary to, and interlinked with traditional processes of democracy. Each process has its merits: none is universally applicable. ...”* (Council of Europe 2009: 11). Among the guidelines the document also points out different “sectors of e-democracy” (including further explications in later paragraphs): “*E-democracy encompasses, in particular, e-parliament, e-legislation, e-justice, e-mediation, e-environment, e-election, e-referendum, e-initiative, e-voting,*



*e-consultation, e-petitioning, e-campaigning, e-polling and e-surveying; it makes use of e-participation, e-deliberation and e-forums” (Council of Europe 2009: 15).*

Building on these various contributions we can briefly summarise our use of the two key concepts e-democracy and e-participation as follows: We understand e-democracy as the practice of democracy with the support of digital media in political communication and participation. E-participation stands for all forms of political participation making use of digital media, including both formally institutionalised mechanisms and informal civic engagement.

### 3.1.3. Democracy-related potentials of ICT

Debates around e-democracy have essentially been nourished by various expectations about potentials of new ICT which would substantially change the conditions of political communication and democratic practices. The numerous claims that have been made about effects of new ICT on democracy have been summarised as follows:

1. *“ICT increases the scale and speed of providing information. This helps create more informed citizens;*
2. *Political participation is made easier and certain obstacles like apathy, shyness, disabilities, time, etc., can be lessened;*
3. *CMC creates new ways of organizing with subject-specific groups for discussion, cheap distribution costs, etc.;*
4. *The Net allows new political communities to arise free from state intervention;*
5. *A hierarchical political system becomes more horizontal by increasing political CMC;*
6. *Citizens will have more voice in creating agendas for government;*
7. *CMC will help remove distorting mediators like journalists, representatives and parties;*
8. *Politics will be able to respond more directly to citizen concerns as ICT and CMC enable a kind of political marketing research; and*
9. *ICT and CMC will help resolve problems of representative democracy such as territorial bases of constituencies, etc.” (Hacker and van Dijk 2000b: 4).*

However, the relationship between the use of new technologies and democratic politics is more complex and contested since assessments of effects on democracy depend on the democratic model they relate to. From early on a polarity of perspectives can be observed in different shapes: Van Dijk (1996: 44ff) contrasts views which expect a strengthening of direct democracy and a rebirth of the Athenian agora with the views of defenders of representative democracy who fear the turn to a “push-button-democracy”. Others name the dichotomy between expected improvements in the responsiveness of political institutions and the enhancement of direct citizen participation in public affairs versus fears of diminishing deliberation and an impoverishment of the political debate (Dutton 1999: 222). Van Dijk (2012: 50ff.) observes four waves of utopian visions:

1. The ‘teledemocracy’ perspective in the 1980s, for example Barber (1984), expecting increased equality in access to information, more active public participation and debate and stimulating electronic polling and voting.
2. ‘Virtual community’ perspectives in the early 1990s, for example Rheingold (1993) with hopes of regaining community experience lost in modernisation processes.
3. Visions of a ‘new democracy’ around the turn of the century, expecting a broadening of participation in democratic processes through internet-supported means, and
4. Currently popular ‘Web 2.0’ perspectives, heralding an increase of citizen engagement in policy-making and democratic life in a great variety of new formats.

In contrast to these positive visions of new media effects there are also various dystopian perspectives which depict potential risks to democracy (cf. van Dijk 2012: 50ff.): for example, they regard direct democracy as inadequate given the complexity of modern societies; digital tools would speed up deliberation to a superficial level; they would support populism, increase information inequality, and be incapable to counter a basic lack of political motivation among the citizenry; the internet would even be more concentrated than traditional media and the ease of placing messages on the internet would not be

matched by similar options of being heard. Finally, a serious threat that has been gaining special attention in connection with dramatic events of political extremism in the recent past is the increased radicalisation and mobilisation potential of the internet (von Behr et al. 2013). In addition to the function as an “echo-chamber”, hypothesised causal mechanisms for such effects include the lowering of transaction costs and promoting homophilous sorting, i.e. lets birds of a feather flock together (cf. Farrell 2012). Such outcomes can be strengthened by a so-called “filter bubble”, created by search algorithms which select results on the basis of information on prior search behaviour and excludes results which disagree with the user’s preferences and viewpoints.

The various conceptions of democracy (including some additional labels to the ones introduced above) have been differentiated into six ideal-typical models with different views of the roles and implications of new media (van Dijk 2012: 51ff.):

1. *‘Legalist democracy’*: the classical Western type procedural view of democracy as defined by the constitution and other basic laws. The role of new media is mainly to enhance information provision by appropriate measures and information retrieval by citizens.
2. *‘Competitive democracy’*: parties and leaders competing for the electorate, focused on representation and efficient decision-making. The primary use of ICT is for information and election campaigns.
3. *‘Plebiscitary democracy’*: puts forms of direct-democratic decision-making such as plebiscites and referenda centre-stage. Here, ICT is pivotal for holding online polls, referenda and discussions.
4. *‘Pluralist democracy’*: pluralism in political processes and discussion is seen as most important, combining practices of direct and representative democracy. There are plenty of options for support by ICT, especially for discussions and debates. *‘Deliberative democracy’* shares much with the pluralist model and focuses still more on open and free exchange on political issues. The importance of digital media is especially seen in their functions for online discussions.
5. *‘Participative democracy’*: the focus is on promoting active citizenship, political opinion formation on a broad scale, based on the principle of combining direct and representative democracy. ICT is important for many functions, from public debates and education to all kinds of participation, access for all being a value.
6. *‘Libertarian democracy’*: shares some views with the pluralist and plebiscitarian visions and focuses “on autonomous politics by citizens in their own associations” (p. 53). Digital media are especially relevant in their networking functions, among others even bypassing institutional politics with Web 2.0 applications and content generated and shared by citizens.

These models, despite using slightly different labels, can also be mapped on the two-dimensional space of democratic processes and modes of decision-making provided in Figure 2 (p.26).

Today the concept of e-democracy, at least in terms of online engagement of the public in political decision making, draws mainly on the concepts of participatory democracy and deliberative democracy. Advocates of participatory democracy emphasize the intrinsic value of political participation and its contribution to social integration of liberal societies. In modern liberal democracies, however, political participation is primarily implemented in the form of parliamentary and representative democratic systems, in which formal participation of the demos is largely concentrated on casting votes in elections. From the perspective of liberal democratic theory, the instrumental functions of political participation – legitimate selection of representatives, legitimate distribution and limitation of political power, and efficient decision-making – are in the foreground. The relation between citizen participation and democratic legitimacy must also be seen in the light of Scharpf’s (1997) distinction between input and output legitimacy: the former depends on mechanisms linking decisions in the political system to the citizens’ will, the latter on policy outcomes which effectively achieve the goals of common concern.

Since the mid 1990s and reinforced with the advent of Web 2.0, libertarianism and a normative individualism, based on the ideal of voluntaristic individual action, have become more and more influential. In the current debate on e-democracy two concepts have gained increasing importance:

‘wikidemocracy’ and ‘liquid democracy’ (cf. Schaal 2016). Noveck (2009), who has elaborated on wikidemocracy in depth, uses the terms ‘collaborative democracy’ and ‘wikigovernment’ largely synonymously for this concept. Digital media play a crucial role in these models, since they stand for new modes and procedures of decision-making which have only become possible on a large scale through the internet. Wikidemocracy as well as liquid democracy are normatively based on the vision of a voluntarist, network-type collaboration of peers in which the co-creation of ideas and content is a guiding ideal. The idea of decentralised “peer networks” as the cornerstone of a new political worldview, named “peer progressivism”, has been elaborated and propagated to become a new social movement by Steven Johnson (2012). Although the concept of co-creation has not been a special focus of our literature review, information on such practices is part of two cases of wikidemocracy (Melbourne wiki and Iceland) provided in the case studies section of this report.

Views of **wikidemocracy** imagine citizens as individuals engaged in multiple networks, either in a communitarian perspective as new forms of community-building, or in a liberal-libertarian version with a focus on decentral organisation mediated by ever increasing capacities of information processing. In the latter view participation is primarily seen as being of instrumental value, autonomy-enhancing and bringing about better collective decisions. According to Schaal (2016: 287), the innovative contribution of *wikigovernment*, as coined by Noveck (2009), is to democratise the throughput sphere of policy-making in liberal-representative democracies, e.g. in the specification of laws and decrees, supported by the internet and ‘civic software’, such as wikis. The idea is to raise the epistemic quality of decisions by using the ‘wisdom of crowds’. However, two critical points are the violation of the principle of political equality because of the involved issue-dependent restriction of participants and unresolved issues of privacy and data protection (Schaal 2016: 294 f.).

**Liquid democracy** has recently become popular, especially in Germany, propagated as a software-based model of internal opinion formation by the Pirate Party. The case studies part of this report contains information on the organisation of decision-making processes within the German Pirate Party. The concept of liquid democracy, however, has potential beyond party politics as an innovative democracy model, which bridges direct and representative democracy by making the boundary between representation and direct democratic input more “liquid”. Rooted in the theory of delegated voting, this model only became realizable with the emergence of Web 2.0 and is based on the principle of delegating one’s voice to other people of trust. In contrast to classical representation this form is conditional, plural, limited by issue or time and reversible. In all political decisions every citizen can decide between direct use of his/her voice or delegation (Schaal 2016: 292). Proponents of this model regard it as an adequate response to two problems: to use competent delegates to improve the decision quality and to counter political alienation by a relationship of trust. Criticisms brought forward against the liquid democracy model include insufficient theoretical elaboration, the tension between demands of aggregative and deliberative democracy, and the lack of viable suggestions for its institutionalisation.

### 3.1.4. Dimensions of e-democracy

E-democracy, as defined above, represents a wide variety of uses of ICT in support of democratic communication and includes all levels and modes of involvement of the public (citizens and civil society organisations). The scope reaches from more passive modes of involvement, such as social media or online monitoring for purposes of informing oneself on developments in society, making processes of decision making and underlying documents accessible and transparent, to more active and co-operative modes, such as involving citizens in decision making by providing for online voting procedures as well as for online spaces for public consultation, debate on salient political issues and co-writing of political documents.

Various attempts have been made to bring some structure into the diverse forms and functions of ICT use in democratic practice.



For example, van Dijk (2012, 54 f.) provides a table listing 13 categories of “eParticipation” across five stages of the policy cycle (however, including two categories of “eGovernment services” because his concept of “eParticipation” goes beyond e-democracy and extends to the relationship of citizens with public administrations). Santos and Tonelli (2014, 6) suggest another set of concepts for describing e-democracy adding a number of “sectors” such as “e-legislation”, “e-parliament” or “e-polling” which can be regarded as sub-categories. Hoff and Scheele (2014) provide a theoretical framework that can be used to analyse all types of political and administrative web applications and demonstrate its potential with an analysis of e-democracy at local level in Denmark.

Speaking of electronic or in short “e-participation”, we prefer an understanding of internet-based political participation in the wider sense, including both formally institutionalised mechanisms and informal civic engagement. The spectrum of participation in public affairs with a political character extends from various forms of active participation to more passive engagement such as reading politically relevant information (“the monitoring citizen”), political talk and other forms of “expressive” participation. An elaborate conceptual and empirical analysis by Gibson and Cantijoch underlines this multidimensional nature of e-participation. “(O)ffline types of political engagement are re-emerging online” (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013: 714), tend to include more and more social-media based political activities (e.g. posting to political blogs) and also lead to novel forms of engagement such as combined offline and online participation.

The STOA study ‘E-public, e-participation and e-voting in Europe’ distinguished three overarching dimensions of e-democracy by separating issues of the electronic public sphere (in brief: e-public) from issues of electronic participation (e-participation) in its manifold forms, and electronic voting (e-voting) as a category sui generis (STOA 2011: 58 ff.). The e-participation landscape was structured by level of participation (information, communication and collaboration), relevance across the policy cycle (problem definition, agenda setting, decision-making and policy formulation, policy implementation, policy evaluation), and organisation top-down (government-centric) versus bottom-up (citizen-centric). Top-down forms are initiated, organised, implemented or sponsored by governments whereas bottom-up type e-participation are activities initiated or carried out by citizens and civil society actors. Related concepts in use are the distinction between “invited” vs. “uninvited” participation (cf. Wehling 2012).

For the purposes of the present study we suggest a simple threefold structuring of major digital tools used in different types of participation serving different functions of citizen involvement as displayed in table 2.

**Table 1. Functions, types and tools of e-participation**

Function of citizen involvement	Type of e-participation	Tools
Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E-information</li> <li>• E-deliberation</li> <li>• E-complaints</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tools for monitoring, questioning and advising MPs</li> </ul>
Agenda setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E-petitions</li> <li>• E-initiatives</li> <li>• E-campaigning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizen initiatives</li> <li>• E-petition</li> </ul>
Decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E-consultations</li> <li>• E-participatory budgeting</li> <li>• E-voting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crowdsourcing for law proposals</li> <li>• Crowdsourcing for policy-making</li> <li>• Internet consultation</li> <li>• Collaborative decision</li> </ul>

		making within political parties <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultative participatory budgeting</li> <li>• Participatory budgeting</li> <li>• E-voting</li> </ul>
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This conceptualisation of dimensions of e-democracy will serve us to structure the literature review as well as to guide the selection of good practice cases for our case studies. The different types of e-participation have been sorted according to their most typical function in citizen involvement but can also play a role for another function.

### 3.1.5. Participatory democracy in EU legal frameworks

Long-term trends of a transformation of political participation, together with a persistent distance and mistrust of EU citizens towards EU institutions, have called for suitable counterstrategies. Starting more than a decade ago, important steps have been taken in order to better connect European institutions and representatives with the European citizenry and civil society. Various reforms claiming to open European governance to civil society and improve opportunities for participation at EU level have since been initiated. An early document of this strategic turn, the White Paper on European Governance, succinctly summarises the goal:

*“Democratic institutions and the representatives of the people, at both national and European levels, can and must try to connect Europe with its citizens. This is the starting condition for more effective and relevant policies. (...) The White Paper proposes opening up the policy-making process to get more people and organisations involved in shaping and delivering EU policy. It promotes greater openness, accountability and responsibility for all those involved.”* (EC 2001: 3).

The Treaty of Lisbon (EU 2010) has put special emphasis on strengthening democratic elements in the EU. It has, among other things, introduced the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) as an EU-wide instrument of participatory democracy with the potential to stimulate public debate on European issues and to involve European citizens and organised civil society in policy-making at the EU level. As a key element within the architecture of participatory democracy it complements the general commitment to representative democracy in the institutions of the EU. Table 3 presents a summary of the Treaty’s formal provisions for direct participation in the democratic life of the EU.

In addition to the ECI, which occupies a central position, the main features of the EU’s provisions for participatory democracy are enshrined in explicit citizens’ rights for direct participation, in petition rights for every citizen as well as in obligations of EU institutions to provide for horizontal and vertical civil dialogues and consultation procedures.

**Table 2. A holistic view of participatory democracy elements enshrined in EU norms**

<b>Art 10.3 TEU / Art 15 TFEU</b> <b>„Citizen Centered Democracy“</b>  Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizens	<b>Art 11.1 TEU</b> <b>„Horizontal Civil Dialogue“</b> The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action	<b>Art.11.2 TEU /Art 16 TFEU</b> <b>„Vertical Civil Dialogue“</b>  The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society
<b>Art 11.3 TEU</b> <b>„Consultation Procedure“</b>  The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Unions actions are coherent and transparent	<b>Art 11.4 TEU</b> <b>„European Citizens’ Initiative“</b> (...) one million (...) of (7) member States may take the initiative of inviting the EC, within the framework of its powers, to submit (...) where citizens consider ...to implement Treaties	<b>Art 17.1 TFEU</b> <b>„Spiritual Dialogue Partners“</b>  The Union respects and does not prejudice the status ... of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States
<b>Art 17.2 TFEU</b> <b>„Secular Dialogue Partners“</b>  The Union equally respects the status under national law of philosophical and non-confessional organisations	<b>Art 17.3 TFEU</b> <b>„Dialogue of Values“</b>  Recognising their identity and ... contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations	<b>Art 24 TFEU / Art 44 ChFR</b> <b>„Petition Right“</b>  Every citizens shall have the right to petition the European Parliament ... Every citizen shall have the right to apply to the Ombudsman ...

TEU = Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union

TFEU = Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

Source: Pichler (2011: 22)

The role of public participation and citizen engagement in EU governance has clearly grown in importance over the past decade. Major steps were the introduction of participatory democracy as a principle into the Constitutional Treaty signed in Rome in December 2004 and of the relevant Article on the European Citizens’ Initiative – although without its original heading of “Participatory Democracy” – into the Lisbon Treaty; an upswing of “civil society” consultations, increasingly via Internet, through a so-called “transparent consultation mechanism” by European institutions; the EC’s launch of a “Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate” in 2005 aiming to “go local, listen to and engage with citizens”; a White Paper on the European Communication Policy with a similar mission; two large-scale meetings for exchange between civil society organizations and MEPs in the European Parliament in 2007 and 2009 (“European Agora”); the launch of a Green Paper on the European Transparency Initiative; and most recently a proposal for a Directive on the European Citizens’ Initiative (cf. Saurugger 2010; EC 2010). In 2011 the European Parliament held Citizens’ Agora processes on “The Economic and Financial Crisis and New Forms of Poverty” and in November 2013 a “Citizens’ Agora on Youth Unemployment”. This noteworthy upgrade of participatory elements represents a major shift in the governance regime of the European Union.

According to Saurugger (2010), a “participatory turn” emerged in the official discourse at EU level during the 1990s and was gradually transformed into a norm in basic documents and into governance reform programmes. However, the actual quality and scope of the postulated “participatory turn” is still contested and ambiguous in its implementation. At least it is questionable whether the turn has effectively taken place to the same extent in practice as in rhetoric (Kohler-Koch and Quittkat 2013). Nevertheless, the participative democracy discourse has also had some repercussions in the Member States, as traditional governance regimes have been questioned and participatory elements have received more attention there as well. The upgrading of participation at both EU and national levels has not only been a reaction to perceived “democratic deficits” and a widening cleavage between citizens and EU

institutions. There is also a growing demand for the knowledge and expertise required for coping with increasing problem complexity in the multi-level governance of advanced societies. This change encourages citizen participation because of the benefits of inputs which are functional for enhanced problem solution and decision quality. Some commentators argue that participation has even become both a moralising discourse, expecting responsible citizens to actively contribute to problem solution, and a normative discourse, treating participation as a means to cure the alienation between governments and the governed (Smith and Dalakiouridou 2009: 3; Jessop 2003). The thriving availability of new electronic means is certainly reinforcing the upswing of the participation discourse and to some extent also participation practice at EU level.

## **3.2. Web 2.0 and social media – untapped potentials for democratic renewal?**

### **3.2.1. Introduction**

The debate about the democratic or political effects of new internet based modes of communication has always been characterised by a polarisation between far reaching positive and optimistic expectations on the one side and pessimistic expectation of detrimental effects on democratic structures and processes on the other. This discursive feature also applies to discussions around the most recent format of internet communication, which is the use of social media by all kinds of political actors. Contrary to five years ago, when the first STOA report on e-democracy was published (STOA 2011), social media is very much in the focus of political and scholarly attention nowadays. We therefore start our literature review by giving an overview of the arguments put forward with regard to this recent development of e-democracy in scholarly literature, starting from 2011.

The focus of this section is the relationship between the use of social media, political communication and democratic politics in general. Where appropriate literature was identified, special emphasis will be directed towards citizen participation, the role of interest groups, social movements, and politicians/parliamentarians. The relevance of social media will also be briefly touched upon from a specific perspective in the following chapter on the European public sphere (3.3) and in the chapter dedicated to a differentiated exploration of the scope of “tools” available for e-participatory activities (3.4).

The question of social media’s impact on and relevance for political communication and democracy is triggered by a number of phenomena: Firstly, social media are the newest wave of socio-technical innovation in the field of Internet-based communication, making available new and different kinds of opportunities for users to interact online (Boulianne 2015, 524). Secondly, social media and social networking sites attract extremely high user numbers. The social networking site Facebook has over one billion users worldwide. Youtube, Facebook, Wikipedia, Twitter and LinkedIn are among the most popular websites in the world (Alexa 2016). And thirdly, numerous political events involving social media have heightened interest in the interplay of politics and the use of social media for political purposes (Gibson 2014, 2; Sandoval-Almazan/Gil-Garcia 2014, 365). With regard to political upheavals, protest movements and campaigns such as the anti-government Zapatistas in Mexico, the anti-capitalist “Battle in Seattle”, the “outraged” protests in Spain or the Arab Spring, many observers concluded that social media were was an important, if not even decisive, factor for the political efficacy of these movements (della Porta et al. 2006; Khamis 2011; Khondler 2011; González-Bailón et al. 2013).

As with previous media innovations, the rise of social media quickly spurred hopes for democratic renewal. Particularly the open and collaborative features of many web 2.0 applications prompted debates about the new media’s transformative and democratic potential (Loader/Mercea 2011, 757). And as to be expected, the initial discussions about social media’s impact on democratic politics fell into opposing camps of enthusiasts and pessimists (Price 2013), echoing the basic patterns of utopian and dystopian expectations about the role of the Internet in the 1990s and early 2000s (Lindner et al. 2016; STOA 2011).

At this point however, there seems to be considerably more disagreement about the role of social media in the political sphere than in most areas in the field of Internet research. Both theoretical and conceptual contributions as well as empirical investigations often deliver contradictory claims and lines of reasoning, making it particularly difficult to identify a common ground of understanding in the field. Both pessimistic and optimistic accounts find support (Skoric et al. 2016, 1818). One reason for this deep disagreement within the academic literature might be that the discussions about the role of social media in democratic politics are facing higher levels of complexity compared to the debates of the 1990s. Since then the media landscapes have become much more developed, and the new media today are deeply embedded in and entwined with daily practices, increasing the difficulties for analysts to capture their impact (Dahlgren 2013, 1).

In fact, social media have strongly transformed the way people use the Internet, taking advantage of new possibilities to connect, interact and exchange information (Price 2013: 520). In comparison, social media allow for undemanding, fast establishment and maintenance of online social networks and personal ties. The structural characteristics of the new Internet ecology (Skoric et al. 2016: 1818) enable forms of decentralised production and co-creation of content, ideas, discussions, and novel forms of online network organisations (Bennett 2008; Reichert 2013).

In the following, the key debates on the role of social media in political communication and democratic politics, as represented in the relevant academic literature, will be summarised. After providing an overview of the main theoretical and conceptual lines of reasoning, the research findings related to social media's impact on political engagement will be presented.

### **3.2.2. Key tenets of the debate about social media's role in political communication**

To a large extent, the interest in social media and their potential impact on political communication and democracy has to be understood in the context of the broader discussions about liberal democracy and what many would label as a crisis. The challenges contemporary democracies face include declining civic and political engagement, declining party loyalty and low turnout rates, growing cynicism and a sense of decreasing political efficacy. At the same time, new, alternative forms of political engagement outside the formal representative institutions – sometimes labelled as “counter publics” or “alternative politics” – seem to be thriving (Imhof et al. 2015; Lindner et al. 2016; Voss 2013; Grofman et al. 2014; Macková 2014).

Against this background, many argue that social media have the potential to cure democratic ills, revive citizens' involvement in politics or even contribute to new forms of democratic organisation. These accounts are primarily based on specific features and characteristics of social media. Most importantly, social media are credited with the ability to foster horizontal communication, making it easier to connect individuals and groups online, support diversity and provide spaces for opinion formation beyond and independent from established institutions (Dahlgren 2013; Imhof 2015). Loader and Mercea (2011, 762) identify further impacts of social media on political communication and democratic politics. These include the power of collaboration and sharing, as demonstrated, for instance, by Wikileaks, or the increasingly blurring divisions between mainstream news media and social media as the large media corporations are relying more and more on political blogs and other forms of user generated content (also Imhof 2015, 16; Jenkins 2006).

Inspired by the technical opportunities offered by social media, some authors view the new virtual spaces as media for creative, playful identity constructions and self-constitution. With regard to the political sphere, these accounts are closely related to characterisations of social media as spaces facilitating dialogue and democratic participation (e.g., Benkler 2006; Bruns 2008). Imhof (2015, 16) even diagnoses a broadly accepted expectation among many authors that social media will realise a global democratic participatory culture. Sceptics counter that the availability of these communicative capacities will not



automatically change patterns of political engagement. Political participation is the result of the complex interplay of different factors, of which access to digital media may only be one (Dahlgren 2013; Vowe 2014). What is more, empirically, activities related to politics are extremely rare compared to dominant activities aimed at sociality, entertainment and consumption.

This brief overview touched upon different contentious areas of debate in the literature. In the following, two of these themes will be presented with greater detail.

### **3.2.3. Re-defining the political towards personalised politics?**

While few dispute that the characteristics of online communities and discursive spaces facilitated by social media differ significantly from the types of communicative exchanges constituting the public sphere (at least in its ideal-typical, theoretical guises, see Chapter 3.3), the literature debates the question if established understandings of what constitutes ‘the political’ and the public sphere need to be re-defined in view of the phenomena to be observed in social media contexts.

A number of researchers argue that the traditional definition of the political needs to be broadened to include more than rational debate (understood as the contrary to affect and sentiment) (Caldon 2016: 2133). In view of the new forms of mediatised discourses and emergent types of affiliation in social media, some propose to integrate non-rational dimensions in contemporary understandings of the political. In her book “affective publics”, Paracharissi (2015) argues that the dominating conception of the political is outdated. It should be developed further with the aim of taking into account affective dimensions such as personal emotions, feelings, storytelling and the like, which are increasingly becoming relevant in political discourse. Beyer (2014) shares this basic view and argues that our understanding of the political in virtual spaces is being transformed due to the ubiquity of digital media in daily life. As the boundaries between online and offline, public and private, are progressively blurring, she argues that anonymous, fragmented and often unfocused online associations in social media can potentially influence the political sphere. Banaji and Buckingham (2013) also attempt to contribute to a re-definition of the political and the concept of citizenship. Similar to Papacharissi, they view features of popular culture such as emotions and pleasure, which are currently not part of traditional political discourse, as possible elements of new forms of “cultural citizenship” (Banaji and Buckingham 2013: 5). In this regard, Dahlgren (2013: 2) is more prosaic but follows similar lines of reasoning when he states that the constituency of politics has become more complex given the many new representations it can take, including personal-, single issue-, lifestyle-, cultural-, identity-politics, etc.

Taken together, this discussion suggests a critical revision or even replacement of the established model of the public sphere (Loader and Mercea 2011: 758). Instead, conceptions of a networked citizen-centered model which provides the opportunity to connect private spheres of autonomous identity to a multitude of deliberately chosen political spaces are receiving some attention (Paracharisse 2010; Loader and Mercea 2011: 758). This would entail a departure from ideas of rational deliberation and its understanding of the republican citizen, re-focusing on the “[...] citizen-user as the driver of democratic innovation through the self-actualized networking of citizens engaged in lifestyle and identity politics” (Loader and Mercea 2011: 758).

Of course, these predominantly theoretical reflections cannot yet deliver answers to the question if and to what extent the claims about the emergence of this type of ‘personalised politics’ becomes manifest. But the discussion does prompt research to be analytically open for the emerging models of political communication that reach beyond rational deliberative exchanges. These new playful repertoires of using social media could in some ways be regarded as facets of the political. Regardless of its empirical validity, many will point to the likely dangers associated with this deterioration of rational debate, reaching from negative campaigning and populist rhetoric to extremism and celebrity politics (Loader and Mercea 2011: 761; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2009).

### 3.2.4. Social media and their potential impacts on political participation

In the following, the qualitative effects of the broadened repertoire of communicative actions made available through social media will be discussed with regard to different aspects of political participation. As is well known, a fundamental prerequisite for any form of active political involvement is the access to and reception of politically relevant information. Social media are said to have a high potential to change both the traditional patterns of information flows as well as their production. The current research landscape in this field is highly specialised and, on the whole, tends to be rather inconclusive at this point.

With the advent of social media, the number of discursive online spaces has expanded significantly. While this observation is not disputed in the literature reviewed, the characteristics, meaning and effects of these ever expanding virtual spaces on political communication are highly controversial (Caldon 2016: 2133). Do these discursive spaces, often labelled as micro- or counter publics, spill-over into the real world of politics? While some studies show the emergence of counter publics under certain conditions (e.g., Leung and Lee 2014), the effects for the public sphere are increasingly being discussed. Some authors question the political relevance of the communities occupying the social networking sites. Imhof (2015: 18f.) differentiates between predominantly group-oriented, self-referential communication in social media contexts and the principally impersonal communication which constitutes the public sphere. The online communities are constituted by the reproduction of emotional ties, in-group and out-group differentiation and shared norms (Gebhardt 2010: 327ff.). As the communication patterns observed are predisposed towards the reproduction of shared life-views and moral beliefs, online communities tend to become homogenous. These processes of social closure can be reinforced by the effects of search engines and the like-algorithms of Facebook which are based on previous online activities, offering users systematically more of the same (Andrejevic 2011; Gerlitz 2011; Hong and Nadler 2015: 104). From this perspective, communication patterns in social media are currently far away from establishing a worldwide participatory culture (Imhof 2015: 18).

#### 3.2.4.1. Social media and political communication

Price (2013: 522) notes that at least in theory, social media provide many additional opportunities to contribute to a better informed public, thereby increasing the diversity of sources and views. However, Chen (2012) observes that relevant information which actually triggers political activity is most often provided by already existing, well-established groups and organisations. Some literature suggests that through social media sites such as Facebook, users are exposed incidentally to news that they are not actively seeking out. This might have mobilising effects, also because this type of news has been filtered through the users' personal online community networks (Bode 2012; deSilver 2014). Other strands of literature focus on social media's effects on social networks and how this might impact on the news exposure of the users (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Tang and Lee 2013). Some findings in this literature suggest that social media enlarges social networks of individuals, and this might increase the likelihood of exposure to politically relevant, mobilising information (Boulianne 2015: 525). Others view the role of ties to political or activist organisations as decisive. Findings suggest that people who belong to more organisations are also more likely to engage in political or civic activities (Bode et al. 2014; Tang and Lee 2013). And yet another strand of research emphasises the influential role of peer views within the online network on own activities (Vitak et al. 2011).

#### 3.2.4.2. Social media and the quality of deliberation

In addition to the – currently unresolved – question if and how social media impact on mobilisation and participation in terms of quantity, the literature also reflects on the quality of the communicative exchanges in these online environments. On the whole, the literature reviewed tends to share critical perspectives.

Primarily drawing on the work of Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012), Thimm and Berlinke (2007), Zimmermann (2006), Gerhards and Schäfer (2007), Imhof (2015: 17) critically questions many of the high expectations

associated with deliberation in social media contexts. Empirical research has shown that political blogs tend to be strongly opinion-based, are weak with regard to the representation of facts and often offer radical positions. This is supported, for instance, by Chen (2012: 113ff.), who observes forms of anti-social communication in his empirical research and points to examples of racist, sexist, hate-filled and uncivil communication. And with a focus on the quality of dialogue on Twitter, Jericho (2012: 234) draws rather skeptical conclusions about this micro-blogging platform as a forum of debate. He observes that political tweets are dominated by “twitspits” where political opponents engage in political confrontation but not in real dialogue. Similar findings are reported in Loader and Mercea (2012: 125).

Contrary to many expectations about the potential to infuse more diversity into public debates, political blogs tend to overwhelmingly respond to topics and stories presented by mainstream news media. Along this line of reasoning, some authors also observe the shrinking of the blogosphere, thereby further reducing the potentials for more diversity of views, perspectives and opinion. This process is said to be caused by two developments. Since the early 2000s, blogs have progressively been sucked into the so-called “Walled Gardens” (e.g., Paterson 2012) such as Facebook. And particularly political blogs run by ambitious lay journalists are increasingly being linked to and cooperate with large media corporations as part of their social media strategies, creating structures of co-dependency (Davis 2012: 77; Imhof 2015: 16f.). Fox and Ramos (2012: 39) also contend that the broad range of opportunities to retrieve information through the Internet and particularly social media has encouraged content providers to increasingly target information to different, politically narrow audiences, thereby increasing the likelihood of spreading misinformation. However, Redden (2011: 70) argues that the new news sources do counter and challenge much of mainstream media coverage.

#### **3.2.4.3. Political activism and social media**

Given the decline in traditional political participation in political parties and established interest groups such as labour unions, Social media have often been seen to have the potential to facilitate alternative routes for participation due to their specific characteristics such as low entry barriers and low costs. In fact, Chen (2012: 137ff.) observes that online-based social movements present online activism to their potential members as an alternative to traditional party membership and forms of political participation. However, these online-based forms of political participation are being debated with regard to their political impact. The literature is skeptical about forms of online activism that do not reach beyond the comfortable media-centered mode of political engagement where political commitment remains largely effortless (Dahlgren 2013: 4). Others also question the depth of “slacktivism” or “clicktivism”, defined as a *“disconnect between social media’s expressive politics and ... the shallowness of these users’ political interests and commitments”* (Chen 2012: 77).

#### **3.2.4.4. Political consumerism**

A variant of political participation, which has received increasing attention in the last five to ten years, is political consumerism (e.g., Baringhorst et al. 2007; Stolle and Micheletti 2013). Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2013) attempt to address the question if people using social media are more likely to engage in political consumerism compared to those who are not active on social networking sites. While this expectation is by and large supported by the data analysed, the authors raise the interesting question whether political consumerism is actually political. Given the characteristics of political consumerism as a form of lifestyle politics, Gil de Zúñiga et al. propose to label this type of civic engagement “civic consumerism” (2013: 13). In this view, the characteristics of political consumerism as a lifestyle choice and a form of civic action, which is subject to sharing and peer commentary, might explain the positive relationship between social media use and conscious, ethically motivated consumption.

#### **3.2.4.5. Social media and elected representatives**

Social media provide the opportunity for individual politicians and parliamentarians to engage in exchange and dialogue directly with citizens. Being independent from the gate keeping powers of



traditional media, politicians can send their views to anyone who is interested in receiving the messages, and recipients have the choice to respond and comment (Ross and Bürger 2014: 46). A number of studies have examined the social media use of parliamentarians and political parties, leading to rather sobering findings. Jackson and Lilleker (2009) show that most political parties refrain from taking advantage of the interactive features of social media, primarily initiating uni-directional information flows. Other research identifies a tendency on the side of party organizations to keep communication activity under control (Pedersen 2005). With regard to parliamentarians, the analyses of Ross and Bürger (2014), Williamson (2009) and Lawless (in Fox and Ramos 2012: 228) show that most politicians use digital media as a means for information distribution rather than an opportunity to genuinely engage with constituents.

#### 3.2.4.6. Effects on political opinion and behaviour: inconclusive results

Much research is done on the impact of social media on political opinions and behaviors of citizens. Dahlgren (2013) attempts to understand the role of social media within social contexts, in order to identify what true democratic potential they hold. He warns that weaknesses in democratic systems cannot be solved through social media or media technologies alone, but that this is a job which must lie with citizens. Dahlgren summarizes the often mentioned positive aspects and hopes for social media as follows: an increase of communication between citizens, cost-effectiveness, room for creative participation, opinion formation, mobilization and the potential for placing a spotlight on political issues, e.g. through “going viral”, and personal gains such as empowerment. A special emphasis is placed on the value of social media for alternative politics. On the other hand, you also have concerns, such as the digital divide, the fact that political engagement does not follow purely from internet and social media access, cyber bullying and harassment and of course the fear of social media being abused for political surveillance and control. Dahlgren goes on to remind that *“political participation is more than merely media access or communicative interaction; these are often necessary, but never sufficient for genuine politics. Politics always involves some degree of contestation – struggle – in the societal world.”* (Dahlgren 2013: 3).

Burnett and Bloice (2016) examined Twitter posts during three televised debates about Scottish Independence leading up to the 2014 Scottish Referendum, concluding that posts linking to a variety of resources did have positive effects on unifying perspectives and supporter activism, but did not change political opinions. This makes the impact of social media on the outcome of the 2014 Scottish Referendum questionable. Riezebos et al. (2011) detected no impact of social media on voting behavior, but changes in political party perception were present according to their analysis of an online questionnaire during the Dutch national elections in 2010. Hong and Nadler (2016) support findings from Hindman (2009) that the rate of political mobilization is not increased through the use of the internet, stating that online political voices are mostly made up of a small number of large organizations and networks (see also van der Graaf et al. 2016). In the course of a literature review, Dini and Sæbø (2016) make the observation that social media does not take the role of mobilizing and creating participation if there is no active community already in place and that challenges such as exclusion, information misuse, security threats, data leaks and privacy issues must be considered when social media is employed. The question of whether social media leads to online or offline participation has been posed often, results being inconclusive and in part even contradictory. Vissers et al. (2012) point to medium-specific mobilization effects in the course of an experimental study, meaning that online mobilization leads to online participation and offline mobilization to offline participation, with there being no spillover effects. This result was supported by Vissers and Stolle’s (2014) work based on a two-wave panel survey of undergraduate students in Canada in 2014, claiming that political Facebook participation does indeed promote online participation, but has no effects on offline participation with the exception of engagement in offline protests. Nam (2012) determines, based on the Citizenship Involvement Democracy survey in the USA, that *“[while] the degree of internet use positively affects the level of activeness in online political activity, internet use intensity has a negative impact on offline activity.”* (Nam 2012: 94). Contradicting these results is the conclusion of Theocharis and Lowe (2016) that the use of Facebook has clear negative impacts on all forms of participation, based on their experimental study involving young Greek participants. Gibson

and Cantijoch (2013) were interested in the question of whether “[...] *online and offline activities are merging and being performed interchangeably [...] or does the medium matter and the two activities constitute separate and nonrelated spheres of action [...]*” (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013: 714). They conclude with mixed findings regarding this question, with online and offline versions of participatory activities such as petitioning or contacting politicians being interchangeable. Other activities, such as news consumption, appear to be medium-dependent (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013). In addition to this finding, they caution that they find there to be an “*underlying multidimensional structure to online participation*” (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013: 714), which they deem responsible for the various differing findings in the area of political mobilization through the internet, seeing as the measurement of e-participation requires a higher level of discrimination. Gibson and McAllister (2013) claim that political participation is positively affected by social interactions in the offline world, and that it is therefore of interest to closer examine the effects of different online networks. They used the Australian Election Study, a national self-completed survey conducted after federal elections, from 2007 in order to examine the effects of interactions with “bonding” and “bridging” networks. According to Gibson and McAllister, bonding networks consist of individuals with whom one has an already established relationship in the offline world, while bridging networks are new networks consisting of people who may have little in common in terms of background or culture. Gibson and McAllister could show that there is in fact a difference between these two network types regarding mobilization of offline participation: “*The findings show that bonding, and not bridging, online social contact predicts offline participation, suggesting that online interactions that do not build on existing offline networks are not as effective in mobilizing “real world” participation*” (Gibson and McAllister 2013: 21).

Nam (2012) also voices the, though limited, potential of the internet to increase inclusiveness and therefore equality of civic participation in political matters. This is enforced by Cho and Keum (2016), who demonstrate that socio-economic factors play a smaller role for political expression on social networking sites than in political discussions held in the offline realm. Strauß and Nentwich (2013: 5) summarize the main potentials of social network sites as lying in the following areas: “[...] *social learning; new options for participation; strengthening community building; developing social capital; and enhancing political empowerment.*”. A further positive effect is documented by Warren et al. (2014) in the course of a survey analysis, concerning trust towards institutions, which increases through the use of social media in context of civic engagement.

Bicking et al. (2011) present the results of a comparative analysis of MOMENTUM, a support action with the purpose of coordinating e-participation pilot project activity, initiated by the European Commission. They note the lack of a social media strategy in most observed cases, leaving untapped potential in the areas of opinion mining and bidirectional thought exchange, as well as raising the number of participants and gathering support. It could generally be observed that most of the cases did not successfully achieve any direct policy changes, though policy contributions were made (Bicking et al. 2011).

Local government websites in the US seem to not have any influence on the participation of citizens in the policy-making process (Garrett and Jensen 2011). However, the design of the website can be an important factor in mobilizing citizens (Zheng and Schachter 2016), design of online spaces having an impact on political participation and deliberation of citizens (Steibel and Estevez 2015). According to Følstad and Lüders (2013), a survey among 90 participants in Norway resulted in 64% stating an online environment for political purposes would result in higher political engagement on their part, fostered by a feeling of having influence, having access to political debate, being regularly updated on events, raising awareness and motivating engagement in the local political sphere. In order for citizens to engage in political debate online there must be an engaging topic, a certain will to contribute, frustration with a situation and reciprocal learning (Følstad and Lüders 2013). Party websites must offer high quality information as well as a space for user interactions in which differing views are tolerated (Følstad et al. 2014). Følstad et al. prioritize informational content above website engagement features for regular users of the website, advising the information to be complementary to other online content, local, and possessing marked perspectives or opinions.

It is not only of interest how the public engages with social media, the social media use of politicians can also provide helpful insights in how the dialogue between citizens and government officials is changing and whether this is leading towards higher levels of e-participation. Stieglitz and Brockmann (2013) examined smartphone use of German politicians they categorized as “heavy smartphone users” through means of a survey, concluding that there is an increasing intensity to be found in the dialogue between politicians and citizens, enabled by social media. Here they recognize potentials for increased e-participation. Zheng et al. (2014) also emphasize the role of elected government agents in producing opportunities for e-participation, naming the willingness of government as the key factor. Reddick and Norris (2013) used a national survey of e-participation among US local governments to determine demand to be the driving factor behind political support, with the success of e-participation efforts relying on top level support, citizen demand and formal planning.

Before concluding this chapter, the contribution of social media to new social and political movements should be acknowledged, such as in the cases of the London and South African demonstrations in 2011 and 2008, the protests in Stuttgart and Istanbul in 2010 and 2013, the 2012 Occupy movements and the Arab Spring (Norris 2012 as quoted in Kersting 2013). Social media can be utilized for information dissemination and organization outside of traditional media, which can be under government control (Wilson and Corey 2012 as quoted in Dunne 2015). Dunne (2015) points to regional differences concerning mobilization through social media, claiming that certain Western citizens simply do not harbor a strong enough will to increase online or offline direct democracy, due to lack of time or interest, arguing that we would otherwise see more protests of individuals trying to effect change.

### 3.2.5. Summarizing perspectives

The discussions and findings for the academic literature dealing with the role social media play in political communication and democratic politics presented in this review by and large reflect a field of academic inquiry which is still in full motion. Key questions are currently far from being settled – an assessment which comes at no surprise given the relatively recent advent of social media.

Nonetheless, at a general level some very tentative conclusions might be drawn from the literature review on the political dimensions of social media. Research tends to agree that social media are playing an increasingly important role in civic and political life, as these communication opportunities are taken up by social movements and activists. However, while numerous studies have attempted to provide evidence for tangible political effects of social media use, by and large the transformative power often associated with social media still remains more a potential possibility than a firmly established reality (Williamson et al. 2010; Loader et al. 2012; Ross and Bürger 2014, 50; Hong and Nadler 2015). Even if finding evidence for these far-reaching expectations about the impact of social media on democracy remain a pressing topic for research, academics and experts in the field should also address the issue to what extent social media are able to fulfill core functions of public communication such as critique, legitimation and integration (Imhof 2011). In this regard, social media seem to challenge established understandings and models of the public sphere. Making sense of the allegedly increasing role of the private, the personal affective and emotional perspectives in politics, and thinking ahead about ways for democratic institutions to respond to this possible transformation seems expedient.

Finally, in order to avoid the reproduction of old myths about the transformative potential of social media, future research in this dynamic field should also take the broader media ecology into consideration. More careful contextualisations, which reflect the dynamic interrelationships between traditional news media, digital media and the publics, will help to avoid the traps of technological determinism.

### 3.3. The European public sphere and the internet

#### 3.3.1. Introduction

Motives and driving forces for e-democracy are manifold. However, at the centre of all efforts of (not only but in particular) the European Union to apply e-democracy and e-participation tools is the particular problem that the EU (and other transnational political bodies) have to directly refer and relate to a specific constituency, causing problems of legitimizing its policy. The so called “democratic deficit” of EU institutions, caused by its only indirect legitimisation by the European constituency is closely connected with the problem of European citizenship. Democratic legitimisation as its backbone needs, besides objective formal rights of citizens (as enacted in the Treaty of the European Union), the joint commitment and feeling of belonging of citizens to a community. This cultural fundament historically emerged or co-developed with the nation state so that national democratic systems can rely to some degree on a general overarching solidarity of citizens that allows for conflict and dissent in particular political issues and acceptance of majority decisions also by those members of the constituency that disagree. To what extent the European Union can rely on a European “demos” in this regard is a matter of contention. The same applies for a European public sphere as a space of societal debate and political exchange that at the same time controls the European institution’s policies and informs them about and feeds them with society’s expectation, demands and interests. Public opinion forming and exchange about European politics is almost exclusively taking place in nationally organized mass media publics and there is no specific overarching trans-European public sphere. Trans-European media (TV or press) have a marginal relevance and national mass media – due to among other things language problems – offer no or only weak options for trans- or inter-European exchange across borders (STOA 2011). This problem has been the core motivation for all attempts of the EC throughout its history to explore and invest in new options for political communication via means of new media and especially the internet.

In a tour d’horizon of the history of the EC communication strategies Lodge and Sarikakis (2013) regard this to be a long and winding road of attempts to establish a European public sphere which have often been confused with goals such as mobilizing electoral support, or strategies of positioning the EU in national media. Later, with the “Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate” (see STOA 2011) the strategies for mediating a European public sphere adopted the goal of including the European citizen directly in political discourse by means of (online) public consultation, and recently by establishing the European Citizen Initiative by means of which citizens can invite the Commission to put forward proposals on EU policy issues supported by a sufficient quorum of citizens from all over Europe. The relevance of e-participation tools has also been highlighted in the EC’s action plan on e-governance 2010 to 2015 (EC 2010) in order to “... improve the ability of people to have their voice heard and make suggestions for policy actions in the Member States and the European Union as a whole.” (EC 2010, 8). The undeniable fact that nowadays political communication is to a great extent taking place via internet websites, blogs and in social media, puts speculations and hopes to the fore that the lack of a mass media European public sphere finds a remedy by the emergence of a “networked” European public sphere. The relevance of expectations and hopes that the internet has the power to at least support public debate on European issues, in a way that also helps to foster a European identity amongst European citizens, is underlined by the fact that it is believed by many that the EU’s democratic deficit will not find “redress” as long as no European wide public sphere is emerging (Hoffmann and Monaghan 2011).

#### 3.3.2. The democratic deficit of the European Union

The problem of the European public sphere and the role of new media and internet communication in contributing to make a European public sphere emerge or work as a proxy for a so far missing mass mediated European public sphere will be in the focus of the following section of the literature review. The body of literature on the European democratic deficit, on the state of a European public sphere and about the option for E-Public in Europe has been growing massively in the period under consideration in this report (2011 – 2016). The discussion of this body of research and scholarly debate will necessarily

have to find a focus. We mainly draw on literature dealing explicitly with the European context (we refer to more general literature on problems of trans-national publics in general where necessary). We will also widely avoid general discussions of underlying concepts (democratic deficit, public sphere etc.) as far as this has already been subject to the previous report by STOA on E-democracy in Europe (STOA 2011). It cannot come as a surprise that the issues of the European democratic deficit, of European identity and citizenship as well as of the European public sphere come into specific perspective with regard to the recent symptoms of a crisis of the EU. The consequences of the legitimisation or democratic deficit of EU politics has been drastically revealed by the increasing EU-scepticism during the last years of financial, and sovereign debt crisis, followed by fierce recession in some of the weaker economies of Member States, the discussion about the bailout of Greece, and most recently in the British referendum showing a majority of voters opting for the “Brexit”. Thus, the effect and reflection of these recent developments in scholarly debates and research will be in the focus of this section. The section starts with an outline of outstanding recent contributions to the discussion of the EU democratic deficit and the so called “no demos” problem and the debate about European citizenship and European identity – mainly in the light of insights from the EU crisis. This will be followed by an outline of the recent discussion on the state of the mass media based European public sphere, for which the recent EU crisis also is of some relevance. Finally the chapter will discuss the state of research on the Internet’s capacity to support the emergence of a (renewed) public sphere. Here we focus on options for political actors to use the internet for communication and campaigning and the related establishment of segmented issue related publics, as well as on social media as the most recent innovation.

### 3.3.2.1. Legitimisation of EU politics in times of crisis

Even with direct parliamentary European elections and after fostering the initiative and controlling rights of the EP, the EU is still regarded by many - including European policy makers - to suffer from what has been coined a “democratic deficit” (Grimm 1995). This is due to the fact that the EC, with its growing competences as a European government, has no direct liability to the European citizens but is enacted and controlled by a multilevel system of policy making, as a rather indirect mode of democracy. The EU at the same time acts as a body representing European citizens and functions as “... a uniquely large and complex body of specialized decision-making, often operating outside the control of formalized and territorially bound systems of representative democracy” (Michailidou and Trenz 2013: 260).

In a summary of the democratic deficit discussion and with a view to the current EU crisis and wide spread criticism of the EU institutions’ crisis management, Habermas (2015, 547) refers to the term by noting an “increasing distance separating the decision making processes of EU-authorities from the political will formation of European citizens in their respective national arenas”. Thus, the “democratic deficit” of the EU institutions continues to be a central feature of discussions about the future and the further development of the European Union. It becomes more relevant with the obvious problems to arrive at an integrated widely accepted European solution with regard to problems such as the currency crisis or the EU refugee policy. The central question is then, to what extent can the European institutions evolve into a European government with extended responsibilities (particularly with regard to social welfare and transfer politics) and how can this European government be democratically legitimised? Or is it unrealistic to expect exactly this because the given diversity of Europe in terms of political culture, economic power and development of social welfare cannot simply be overcome by democratic structural reforms (e.g. strengthening the European parliament and a European government elected by the parliament)?

In a recent seminal dispute between public intellectuals about the future of Europe, both positions are prominent: On the one hand it is held that there is a need to expand EU competences and that this has to (and can) be done by democratising the EU political system, in order to overcome the democratic deficit as well as the symptoms of EU crisis (Habermas 2014a/b, 2015, Offe 2013a/b). On the other hand, there is the notion that it is the crisis itself which makes it obvious that further integration of Europe, as well as a way out of the legitimisation crisis by giving more competences to Brussels, is not an option (Scharpf 2014, 2015, Streeck 2013, 2015). Both positions hold that EU-politics, as executed by the European



Commission and the European Council, is lacking democratic legitimation and responsiveness to the European citizenry. However, from the one perspective (Scharpf, Streeck) this leads to the demand of restricting the competences of the EU to the advantage of national governments, keeping the EU in the status of a “regulatory state” (Majone 1996, see STOA 2011). From the other perspective (Habermas, Offe) this leads to demands of expanding the competences of the Union at the costs of national governments and at the same time strengthening the democratic legitimation of the European institutions by making them subject to direct elections and control by the European citizenry.

Especially the Euro crisis has led to vivid debates about the legitimacy of the EU institution’s policy, the dominance of the European Central Bank over the Parliament and the relation of national and European sovereigns, in the context of a discussion about the EU fiscal policy which cannot be discussed in detail here (see contributions in DeWitte et al. 2013, see also Streeck 2015). It is, however, striking with regard to the Euro crisis, that for both positions held with regard to the right fiscal policy, the democratic deficit “strikes back”. Those who support the austerity and neo-liberal program of forcing Greece into a process of lowering the level of social welfare are confronted with the accusation that technocratic institutions are overruling democratically legitimized governments in Member States without being backed up by democratic legitimization themselves. For those in favour of reacting to the crisis by installing a European fiscal and social policy (including a fiscal union) a backing by a transnational solidarity consensus is needed that is not in sight, given the apparently even deeper separation of the EU citizenry and the public sphere by predominant national interests.

Fritz W. Scharpf’s (1999) influential distinction between input and output legitimacy helps to understand the particular relevance of the democratic deficit in times of crisis. Due to their transnational character, EU institutions’ legitimisation cannot be rooted in strong channels of information from citizens to the Commission (input legitimacy) and thus must rely on legitimising its policies by the quality of its output, i.e. its decisions and regulations being in the best interest of and thus being supported by the citizenry. The fact that also in the latter respect the means of the EU institutions are restricted has a special bearing in times of crisis. The missing input legitimacy becomes all the more problematic the weaker out-put legitimacy is getting, with apparent difficulties to establish a consensus on a European way out of the fiscal crisis or a joint European policy to solve the refugee problem. In a situation where strong decisions have to be taken at the EU level (beyond national interests), input-legitimacy is urgently needed. For this reason some regard a rearrangement of the EU institutional setting to be necessary. In order to (re)establish the bridge between the European citizenry and the European political elites, a strong European parliament is needed. This implies a European electoral contestation between European (not nationally defined) political parties on the basis of which the Commission is being transformed into a government which is accountable to the Parliament representing the European citizenry. Offe (2013a), regarding the growing competence of institutions like the European Central Bank, considers it to be detrimental to the project of European integration that those institutions which are “*farthest remote from democratic accountability*” have the “*greatest impact on daily life of people*”. He regards this to have developed into a “deep divorce between politics and policy” at the European level. Politics is based on often populist national mass politics with limited implications for the life of people, whereas policy making becomes an elitist matter that “has no roots in, no links to nor legitimation through politics” (Offe 2013a: 610). Also in Habermas’ view the democratic deficit has been deepened in the course of establishing the Fiscal Compact and the European Stability Mechanism, because the European Parliament alone did not benefit from the increase of competences of EU institutions (Habermas 2015: 551)

As a way out of the democratic deficit as well as of the crisis of EU integration, Habermas (2015) - despite the current climate against it - considers a far reaching institutional reform to be necessary. Due to the transnational character of the Union, the democratic legitimisation of the institutions has to be backed up by a double “sovereign”, represented in two chambers: on the one side the parliament (citizenry) and on the other side the European council, which he would like to see as the second legislative “leg” alongside the Parliament, representing as a second sovereign the European Member States and their peoples (‘house of states’). He regards this to be the way to take account of both the transnational character of the

union and the European citizens' interest in having their ways of living and wealth protected by their national governments. This is in line with the conceptualisation of "trans-national" democracy in articles 9-12 of the Lisbon treaty (Bogdandy 2012). The concept of "people" is reserved for the nation state whereas individual citizenship (with individual political rights) is seen as the foundation of democratic legitimacy of the European Union.

On the other hand it is argued that the conditions for expanding the competences of parliament and deepening the integration are not given. The crisis, affording strong decisions on redistribution of resources which have to be taken according to the majority rule, reveals that European solidarity is weak. The crisis has obviously brought about a re-orientation towards national interests. As Offe (2013b: 75) puts it: the bank crisis has been transformed into a crisis of state finances (via the obligation that have been taken over by national governments to save the banks), the latter now turned out to cause a crisis of European integration, where rich countries force poorer countries into an austerity policy in order to re-establish trust of the financial industry. This widely leads to "*a renationalization of solidarity horizons*" in the European Union (*Renationalisierung der Solidaritätshorizonte*). Thus, what is needed for institutional reform and a further integration of the Union is actually lacking more than ever before (Scharpf 2014 and Streeck 2015). More generally it is believed that the heterogeneity of Europe with regard to local, regional and national ways of living and economies only allows for a democratic European constitution that acknowledges these differences by way of far reaching autonomy rights, which, with regard to financial constitutional questions, implies low mutual obligations of financial solidarity among partners (Streeck 2013).

Thus, beyond any debates of actual problems of European policy making, the discussion points to the more fundamental problems of European citizenship and the European public sphere. It can be argued that exactly in times of crisis it would be necessary to legitimize far reaching decisions that will deeply influence living conditions in the European Member States through a vivid process of deliberation about pro and cons, about needs, demands and duties. This, however, appears to have even less chances of being fostered, precisely due to the crisis mechanism that leads to focusing on national interests (Scharpf 2014, Streeck 2015).

Is there enough homogeneity and European citizenship that can motivate European integration, and is there a European public sphere that can provide the fundamentals for joint democratically legitimized European political action? In the following we will first discuss the question of the European "demos" and then turn to actual research on the state of the European Public sphere.

### 3.3.2.2. "No Demos"? European identity and citizenship

It has always been a major pillar of the legitimisation of the European integration project that it will bring about increasing prosperity and general welfare through stimulating economic growth. Thus, it cannot come as a surprise that in an economic situation causing obvious difficulties to come to consensus about common solutions on the European level, citizens expect their national governments to look at national economies first and protect them against a loss in welfare. Accordingly, a study of the average European's identification with Europe as part of their identity as citizens based on Eurobarometer data could show that "a sense of being European" dropped significantly in many European countries during the financial crisis in the period of 2005-2010. The general decrease in identification with Europe was strongest in those countries which suffered most in terms of decrease of per capita GDP or increase in unemployment as a result of the recession caused by the financial crisis. Namely the Baltic states, Great Britain, Italy, Ireland, France and Greece (Polyakova and Fligstein 2016).

It is this observation of weak European solidarity and predominance of national perspectives that actually feeds the so called "No Demos" discussion among scholars of European politics. The debate dates back to the 1990ies and starts from the notion that in order to work, democracy needs to be rooted in a "demos", a political (as opposed to an ethnic) community which is rooted in "a strong sense of community and loyalty among a political group" – this being, as it were, the socio-cultural prerequisite

of democracy (Risse 2014: 1207). The assumption that a “demos” of this kind does not exist at the European level, but only on the national level, and that the different “demoi” of the Member States do not form a meta-national demos, implies that democracy on the transnational level cannot (and must not) be based in input legitimacy but mainly in the quality of the output of the political system. Authors such as Scharpf (see above) hold, that due to the heterogeneity (cultural as well as economic) of living conditions in the Member States there is no basic consensus – or subjectively felt citizenship – which could function as a cultural backbone holding the community together against conflictive majority decisions in the (reformed) European Union. The acknowledgement of majority decisions that might be against the own interests (at least until the next elections) can only be expected on the grounds of an implicit cultural consensus based in shared citizenship.

In other words, no pre-political community exists for integration on the European level that is comparable to the integration on the level of the nation state. Europe is not a nation state but can be thought of as a “mixed commonwealth”, in which national and supranational identities coexist with each other. Europe “... possesses aspects of a nation, but it is a rather watered-down version of it [...]. It relies on a body of treaties that provides a framework of ‘constitutionality’ but without a constitution. It offers membership, but subordinated to the stronger Member State form. Its members are related, but with a link much weaker than that of ordinary polities. Such a link is based on some commonalities – which ground a very vague shared political identity among its members, but not comparable with political identities at nation state level.” (Lobeira 2012: 516)

This type of observation is not contested by those who are optimistic about the possibility of European citizenship, they however hold that it neglects the specific character of trans-national compared to national citizenship (Habermas 2015, see also STOA 2011). Instead, it is argued that European democracy is not in need of a “demos” in terms of a cultural (national) community but that the European citizens’ commitment to the fundamentals of the European political constitution is sufficient to establish a new form of “citizenship”. This “constitutional patriotism”, together with a well-functioning European democracy, would be sufficient as a solidarity fundament for the European Union (see STOA 2011).

With the current conflicting mode of policy making in the EU, this position is confronted with new scepticism. A prominent observer from abroad, the US philosopher and communitarian thinker Amitai Etzioni (2013), considers neither the democratic deficit, nor a weakness of the European political system, as Europe’s current main problem. From his perspective what proves to be crucial in this crisis is what he calls the “communitarian deficit”, i.e. the lack of a post-national sense of community or European citizenship: “The insufficient sharing of values and bonds – not the poor representative mechanisms – is a major cause of alienation from Brussels’ and limits the normative commitment to make sacrifices for the common good” (Etzioni 2013: 312). He holds that there needs to be more than constitutional patriotism to establish enough solidarity to solve the problems of economic disparities among European Member States: “Membership in a more interdependent EU involves not just rights but burdensome duties (such as bailing out the Greeks) that will only be voluntarily met if citizens feel the value of communal obligation to those beyond their national borders” (Etzioni 2013: 315).

Contrary to this communitarian view, it is believed that European citizenship cannot be understood according to national citizenship coupled with cultural identity as it emerged with the constitution of the nation state in early modernity (STOA 2011). Transnational identity or citizenship and the related sense of belonging “... involves starting from a different standpoint, one that sees belonging as an identity ‘in the making’ and that imagines it to be “deterritorialised” and set in a transnational dimension” (Scalise 2014: 52). Indeed, there are at least weak indications from some qualitative research that a “mixed identity” can be found in Europe. Based on interviews with a group of 40 people from a local community in Italy, Scalise (2014) undertook to reconstruct the narratives about Europe that emerge and are shared among “average” European citizens and highlights this specific type of identity and citizenship in the following way: “Different narratives of Europe are shared among Europeans: stories related to the cultural and historical roots of the continent, institutional and ‘official’ narratives of the EU, biographical stories weaved together with collective memories. Multi-level stories, a mixture of values and references coming from the local and national heritage and linked to the European post-national plot. In the broad range of the narratives which have emerged, the



*influence of the local context, where the stories originate, can always be identified. The stories of Europe are embedded in the regional territories. [...] There is a dynamic relation between the local, national, supranational and transnational dimensions. These levels interact in the European identity construction process.” (Scalise 2014: 59)*

To what extent this can be regarded as an indication of a general European identity is of course an open question and has to be confirmed by much broader research approaches. Beyond this, however, proponents of a further integration of the EU base their cautionary optimism with regard to the “Europeanisation of European citizens” in the further development of the discourse about Europe and thus in the further development of the European public sphere (see next chapter). From this perspective the development of European identity and solidarity depends on the chances and opportunities to discuss and define what is in the common European interest via a common European political discourse. For this – the democratic deficit comes into perspective again – it is necessary for the European parliament to function as a European public space, which foremost implies that the societal interests and political debate on the “common good” are not organised alongside national party lines but are fostered by European (trans- national) party groups (Habermas 2014a: 94). A European party system is a precondition for overcoming the national restriction of perspectives and would prepare the ground for a will formation on a European level, i.e. in the light of shared (and not nationally divided) normative principles of social justice and with regard to shared assessments of the problems at stake and the way out (Offe 2013a: 606f.) The constitution of the EU generally has the effect that the European citizens in their national contexts are not confronted with alternatives of European policies to be discussed publicly but are just affected by the results of EU policies decided on by the Commission and the Council of Ministers. In this perspective identity is not culturally given (as supposed by a communitarian perspective, see Etzioni, above) but evolves in a political process. In this way citizenship must (and can) emerge exactly out of debates and conflicts about the public good - as was the case for national identities in the conflictual emergence of the nation state (Habermas 2015). Thus, it actually is important to what extent the EU polity allows for a vivid political discourse among citizens. It clearly makes a difference whether the citizenry is consulted by means of e-participation methods (see below) or to what extent institutional innovations, like the European Citizen Initiative, add to the set of citizen rights by giving citizens a voice in law making (Ene and Micu 2013).

### **3.3.2.3. Politicisation of Europe and European citizenship**

In this respect the contestation of European issues in the context of the fiscal or refugee crisis is regarded by many not necessarily to be an indication of disintegration but as an indication of the Europeanisation of politics. Scholars of European politics thus speak of a „politicisation of the European integration“ with positive connotations, meaning that there is an observable tendency to publically address issues and problems of the European multi-level democracy (Wendler 2012, deWilde and Zürn 2012, Hooghe and Marks 2008). The contestation of European integration has already for around a decade been observed as being based in conflicts around cultural identity (Hooghe and Marks 2008, Kriesi et al. 2007), in the lack of compatibility of national and supranational institutions (Schmidt 2006) and in resource and distribution conflicts in the context of regulations of the European market (Hix 2009, Majone 2002). The so called “permissive consensus”, characterised by wide implicit EU-scepticism but with citizens not engaging with EU issues and leaving the playing field to political elites, with the effect of the de-thematisation of Europe in national public spheres, has come to an end. Underlying conflicts now come to the fore and make Europe a public issue (Hooghe and Marks 2008).

Politicisation of European integration is then regarded as being driven by an expanding public discourse that provides for transparency of decision making, includes civil society and provides for critical feedback to decision makers and thus has a “democratising function”. Also the contestation of Europe in the actual crisis is regarded as being a sign of a functioning Europeanised public sphere with a potential to democratic reform of the European polity (Statham and Trenz 2012, 2015). However, as far as this reform will not take place, the weakness of the EU institutional system will be further exposed in the public sphere which will foster scepticism even more (ibid.)

Despite the obvious fact that politicisation of the issue of European integration in the Euro crisis is accompanied by national interests and the dominance of national stereotypes in national public debates, many observers (Risse 2015c, Hutter and Grande 2012, Rauh 2013) hold that politicisation, when coupled with an opening of national public spheres in terms of Europeanisation (see below), can be regarded as an indicator of increased awareness and relevance of Europe for the Europeans. It depends on the framing of EU issues whether or not the growing politicisation of EU affairs increases the sense of community in Europe. In this respect it is also held that politicisation of the European integration is clearly induced by the growing authority of European institutions since the 1980ies. It is therefore believed that it is decisive to actively address and deal with the problem of growing authority of EU institutions and the need of backing this up by fostering their democratic legitimacy. (De Wilde and Zürn 2012).

An overview of recent research about European identity even concludes that there are indications for a gradually growing identification of citizens with Europe as well as Europeanisation of national public debates. In a 2013 Eurobarometer poll 59 % of polled citizens showed some degree of identification with the EU and only 38% identified exclusively with the nation state. No significant divisions could be found in creditor and debtor countries of the Eurozone in this respect (Risse 2014: 1208 f.). There are also indications that identification with Europe does not mainly come as a symbolic attitude. According to Kuhn and Stöckel (2014), polling data shows that the more people identify with Europe the more they are also prepared to support policies of economic governance with re-distributional effects to overcome the Euro crisis. Thus, the crisis and related conflicts do not necessarily lead to reduced solidarity. Risse (2014: 1210) summarizes that available opinion poll data challenges the “no demos” thesis, leading to an optimistic notion that, “... *the European polity is more mature than many scholars assume. A sense of community does exist among Europeans and this community might even be prepared to accept redistributive consequences*”. In the same vein, based on opinion polls and a long term panel research with citizens from six European countries, Harrison and Bruter (2014) conclude that there is evidence that the politicization of European issues can be seen as a cause as well as a result of the emergence of a European identity. This implies that the more people appropriate to the European polity “*the more politicized is their perception of their - thereby appropriated - system*” (Harrison and Bruter 2014, 166).

However, these optimistic conclusions are of course not uncontested and with a look at nationalist and populist EU-scepticism all around Europe, not least after the Brexit, it can reasonably be argued that neither politicisation nor an increase in Europeanisation of media reporting in the current crisis (if observable) will have positive effects on identities. The crisis clearly brings new forces and actors to the fore that are not supportive of European integration and offer views that focus on national interests and thus help to strengthen national identities (Checkel 2015; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009). Based on a media analysis in six European countries up to 2012 (thus including the Euro crisis), Grande and Kriesi (2015) report a substantial increase in politicisation as well as Europeanisation of public discourses, but are sceptical with regard to the effects of this on the identification of citizens with Europe. They hold that since negative framing of the European integration goes across the left-right party political cleavage, the politicization under the given political structures will contribute to more EU-scepticism.

There is, however, consensus - also among observers with a more pessimistic view on the current state of European solidarity and citizenship - that the European public sphere has a strong bearing on the development of a European identity: “It is in public debate that collective identities are constructed and reconstructed and publicly displayed thereby creating political communities.” (Pfetsch and Heft 2015: 30). It is therefore decisive to understand to what extent a public sphere in Europe exists.

### 3.3.3. A European public sphere?

The public sphere can be understood as a space of political communication among members of a territorially defined entity with a normative, legitimizing function for a particular political institution (see STOA 2011). Historically the development of a political public sphere is connected with the

emergence of the nation state, so that up to the 1980ies speaking of a public sphere implied to speak of national public spheres. However, with the globalisation of politics, policy making is to a growing extent related to transnational problems and problem solving, and consequently the space of political communication is one that transcend national borders. Europe is without doubt an example of transnational policy making (Hepp et al. 2012: 22 ff.). It is, however, subject of debate to what extent transnational policy making is accompanied and thus legitimised by a functioning trans-national European space of political communication.

### 3.3.3.1. National public spheres “Europeanised”?

According to a recent review of the scholarly discussion on the European public sphere, the following can be regarded as being consensus among researchers of the European public sphere: *“The concept of a utopian European public sphere, defined as a singular supranational space that echoes the national public sphere, is nowadays rejected in the literature under the evidence of a missing common European identity, the lack of significant purely European media, and communication difficulties, namely language differences”* (Monza and Anduzia 2016: 503). This confirms our findings in the 2011 STOA report.

The European public sphere is almost exclusively conceptualised as Europeanisation of national public spheres. Europeanisation is then observable by a change of national public spheres in three respects: (1) European issues, policies and actors are visible in the “national” public spheres, i.e. in mass media coverage of political issues; (2) there is reference in national media not only to EU policy making actors (vertical) but also to actors from other European Member States (horizontal); (3) the same issues are addressed in the different national public spheres and similar frames of reference or claims and arguments are put forward. In all these respects there is apparently a consensus in research that Europeanisation of public spheres has taken place. Mass media studies have shown that over the past 15 years, national publics have become more European in terms of visibility and salience of EU issues and actors, the presence of other Europeans in national public spheres as well as with regard to the similarity of interpretative frames of reference or claims across borders, also without the existence of European-wide media (Koopmann and Statham 2010, Hepp et al. 2012, Sicakkan 2013, Risse 2014, contributions in Risse 2015b). It can be said that positions claiming that the emergence of a European public sphere, due to structural or mainly language barriers, is impossible (e.g. Grimm 1995), are almost not visible anymore (Risse 2015a: 3). Meanwhile the Europeanisation of national public spheres has also been found by many issue specific media studies, such as on the discourse on the EU Diversity directive in France (Dressler et al. 2012), the media coverage of the EU’s growth and job strategy (De la Porte and van Dalen 2016), media coverage of the discussion about a common EU foreign and security policy (Kandyla and de Vreese 2011), or by analysis of reference to the “European citizen” in national media (Walter 2015). Additionally, a methodological approach different from the usual news content analysis supports the notion of horizontal integration of the mediated European public sphere. Data provided by Veltri (2012) via a network analysis of information flow between central European high quality newspapers (UK, Germany, Spain, France) indicate that from 2000 to 2009 information flow developed to be less dense among the newspapers analysed, but that a more balanced network of information flows among European newspapers took shape that can be interpreted as a signal of a qualitative transformation of the European communicative exchange in the direction of horizontal integration.

### 3.3.3.2. Features of the Europeanised public sphere – mass media research

Beyond this, general findings research on the European public sphere in recent years has brought about results that help to understand in what respect we can speak of Europeanisation and also what the limits of Europeanisation are. Despite growing interest in Internet based public communication and the role of social media (see next chapter) the vast majority of empirical work regarding the European public sphere is still on the coverage of European issues, actors and institutions in (national) mass media (mainly press). Our Literature review harvested around 40 studies published in the last five years on a broad scope of

European issues, which cannot be covered in detail in this report. In the following we try to briefly sketch the most interesting findings.

### **Dominance of EU executive institutions at the costs of the European Parliament**

As regards to the visibility of European actors, it appears that the European Parliament lags behind other European institutions in being referred to in national mass media reporting and that national actors gained visibility, obviously due to the role of European institutions in the financial crisis. Koopmanns (2015) explores the degree of Europeanisation on the basis of newspaper reports in six European countries from 1990 to 2002 and newspaper reporting on the financial crisis from 2010 to 2012 in Germany. He found for the debate on monetary politics that the visibility and roles of actors from the EU central institutions (vertical Europeanisation) as well of those from other European countries (horizontal Europeanisation) in the newspapers coverage of European issues was comparable to the roles of national central and regional actors in reports about national politics. However, the European level was “*more present as a target than as a speaker of claims in their own right*”. Nevertheless he concludes that “*with one third of claims coming from [...] European-level actors (mainly the European Central Bank), they make a substantial contribution to opinion formation*” (Koopmanns 2015: 81). For Germany he found that in the years of the financial crisis, 2010 to 2012, the discursive influence in media reports in Germany “*was almost equally balanced among domestic, transnational, and European-level actors*”, whereas during the introduction of the Euro (2000 to 2002) there was a strong dominance of European institutions. Koopmanns concludes that all in all europeanised political communication “*stand the comparison to the yardstick of national public debates*” (Koopmanns 2015: 82). From the German case he concludes that the fact that national parliaments and other national political actors regained influence in media reports on European financial issues can be read as a welcome signal for the democratization of European politics, whereas the significant losses of discursive influence of all European institutions (except the ECB) indicates the emergence of a more “*intergovernmental*” and “*domesticated*” Europe at the costs of a supranational European polity (Koopmanns 2015: 82).

### **EU-scepticism as an indication of Europeanisation of public spheres**

Not surprisingly the growing EU scepticism of the recent years is reflected in the media coverage of European issues, however, this can also be seen as an indication of the Europeanisation of the public sphere. A study on the mass media reporting in The Guardian, Le Monde, El Pais, La Stampa, and Süddeutsche Zeitung on the last EP elections (2014) revealed a significant Europeanisation of reporting in terms of the visibility of the EU campaign in the media analysed, as well as visibility of EU institutions and actors (Belluati 2016). Despite national particularities the study also found converging narratives on the elections and on European integration. Paradoxically the significant role of Euroscepticism in the elections campaign (such as the UKIP in Great Britain, FN in France, AFD in Germany or 5star movement in Italy) led to a politicization of the issue of European integration that can be read as a “*Europeanisation*” of public debates, without necessarily supporting a Eurosceptic tendency in the media reporting. The study holds that the broad coverage of the EU election campaign, apart from the Euroscepticism issue, was due to the fact that “*...the electorate has gained a more direct voice in the selection of the President of the European Commission*”, and EP parties “*for the first time have selected candidates for this position, hence structuring the electoral campaign and giving visibility to such candidates...*” (Belluati 2016: 131). This finding could possibly support the argument of the salience of a European party system for the emergence of European will formation beyond national borders as discussed above.

A broadly setup empirical study ([www.Eurosphere.org](http://www.Eurosphere.org)) conceptualized the European public sphere as a “*conflictive space*” by which the “*vertical, pro-European, elite dominated trans-European public sphere*”, which is constituted by the EU-institutions’ policies of European integration, comes into a relationship of conflict and contestation with existing national and regional public spaces. The study’s results suggest that this mode of Europeanisation of the public sphere is an existing reality (Sicakkan 2013: 2). The study comprised interviews and media analysis on the EU’s integration policies in 16 European countries and found that EU policies managed to link national constituencies with the EU to a clearly discernible extent.

This vertical European public sphere, however, is dominated by an elitist and expert discourse of democratisation, inclusion and Europeanisation. However, the “populist” reaction against this discourse has transformed national publics into “horizontal trans-European publics” (Sicakkan 2013, 68). Thus the criticism against the Europeanisation itself – as it were – is “Europeanised”.

### **Dominance of political elites, lack of visibility of civil society actors**

The notion of a dominant role of political elites and EU administration in Europeanised public spheres is supported by findings of Koopmann and Statham (2010). Studying media coverage of European political issues in the period of 2001 to 2004 they found support for the notion that a European public sphere exists in terms of visibility of EU politics in national media. But it is mainly the political elites that are represented, whereas the civil society remains underrepresented as political actors on EU issues. For the period covered by the study they found that this was connected with an overly supportive voice to European integration – remarkably with the exception of the British media coverage of European institutions and issues. Thus they found a lack of contestation regarding EU issues (reflecting what has been called the “permissive consensus”, see above). Studies covering the period of the politicisation of Europe reflect the move away from the “permissive consensus” of the recent years (see below).

### **National frames of reference and cultural differences remain relevant**

One of the most salient results is that Europeanisation does not exclude and diminish the role of national differences. It is obvious that with a lack of a common European language or European media, political discourse on Europe still and despite Europeanisation “...comes largely by way of national political actors speaking to national publics in national languages reported by national media and considered by national opinion” (Schmidt 2013: 13). It adds to this picture that only a small minority of educated EU citizens observe foreign media (Gerhards and Hans 2014, based on Eurobarometer surveys 2007, 2010). It also must be acknowledged that generally EU issues still often rank after national issues. A study of the media coverage of 2004 and 2009 European elections in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Kovář and Kovář 2013) found that - in line with the low voter turnout and the “second order elections” thesis (that EP elections are politically less relevant than national ones) - media only marginally cover EP elections and particularly less than national “first-order” elections. Additionally coverage of EP elections is dominated by domestic EU political actors, whereas visibility of EU actors was low. Both applied especially for private TV stations and to a lesser degree for quality newspapers.

In those countries (according to opinion polls, Eurobarometer) with a more positive attitude to the European Union, media coverage of European Union issues is also more intense than in countries with lower support for the EU in public opinion, as was found in a study on press coverage of the European Parliament in six EU countries between 2005 and 2007 (Gattermann 2013). Beyond these differences in the level of Europeanisation national discourses often differ significantly, and the way European issues are communicated by mass media is still to a great extent based in national identities, which e.g. is reflected by a more sceptical and detached attitude towards European integration in Britain as compared to a more positive in Germany, as is shown by Novy (2013). Hepp et al. (2012) analysed the development of references to Europe and European policy making in the content of quality and boulevard press in six European countries, using media samples from the period of 1982 to-2008. They clearly confirm the otherwise supported finding that the national public spheres have over the period of 26 years been transnationalised more and more, i.e. Europeanized in terms of referring to European policy issues and discussing this with a view to other public spheres in other EU Member States. Beyond this, Hepp et al. - via interviews with journalists and observation of journalism practice in the countries included in the study - found segmentation at national level of an existing European public sphere by different national discourse cultures which affect the practice of journalism. This e.g. shows up in different references to transnational (European) issues: Whereas e.g. in DK and GB reference to European issues is made in a more distanced way, segregating these issues from the national, in Germany, France and Austria such reference is made by relating it to the national context, regarding the national as part of the transnational, European context. Despite such effects of national discourse cultures Hepp et al. conclude that in all



countries involved (except for Britain) reference to Europe is a routine part of journalism in Europe and that it is general practice to “construct” the own national identity in the context of other European nations, so that somewhat paradoxically “... *the stability of national political discourse cultures are an aspect of the ‘substructure’ of a transnational European public sphere*” (Hepp et al. 2012, 209, own translation).

Scarce studies dedicated to media analysis in new Member States often show more negative results as regards the Europeanisation of public spheres. This sceptical perspective is supported by an analysis of the role of EU issues during Czech national parliament election campaigns in 2002, 2006, and 2010 (Urbanikova and Volek 2014). The authors conclude from the low number and the content of articles that referred to the EU, that in the Czech press the EU agenda was less and less visible over the period observed. Moreover, they discovered that it is increasingly negatively framed. The study also found that the EU agenda was mainly discussed with regard to economic and monetary issues, indicating that the EU agenda “*is increasingly reduced to an economic agenda*” (Urbanikova and Volek 2014, 468), obviously indicating the growing importance of the fiscal and monetary debate (not only in the Euro Zone), at least since 2009. Differences in the national framing among Member States have to be taken into account and media coverage of EU issues is more frequent in old Member States than in new ones. The attitudes of actors prominent in media reports also tend to be more negative towards European integration in the new rather than in old Member States – as is supported by data from the Eurosphere project (eurosphere.eu) on media coverage of the issues of the “Reform Treaty” and the “EU Constitution” in 2008 (Zografova et al. 2012).

### 3.3.3.3. Politicisation of the European public sphere

As with the debate about European identity, the notion of a “politicisation” of Europe and the future of European integration is prominent in discussions and research on the European public sphere. Despite the strong current of EU-scepticism that comes with it, politicisation is believed by many to indicate a vitalisation of the European public sphere (Statham and Trenz 2015). “Politics is back”, as a volume with contributions on the latest state of debate about the European public sphere puts it (Risse 2015b). Europe - its future, its mode of policy making, and its democratic legitimacy - is an issue of vivid public debate more than it has been before. A few empirical studies are available on the effects of the crisis and the subsequent politicization of European integration on the “European public spheres”. Their results show a growing dominance of national perspectives and interest in public discourse on the EU, but do not necessarily dismiss the notion of a European public sphere.

Findings of a large-scale media content analyses of newspaper and television news in the EU-15 (1999), EU-25 (2004) and EU-27 (2009) in relation to European Parliament elections show, that media coverage of EU issues is dependent on the elites’ or party positions in the respective countries (Boomgaarden et al. 2013). The more disputes among elites and national parties about European issues, the more Europe becomes visible in the national media – which, however, implies a strong position of EU critical positions. It could be shown that “...*increases in EU news visibility were strongest in a situation in which there was both increasing negativity about the EU in a country’s party system and increasing party disagreement about the EU*” (Boomgaarden et al. 2013: 621). The authors conclude, that “... *ironically, euro-scepticism, in the form of elite polarisation, is one of the best chances for improving EU democracy by sparking news coverage of EU affairs*” (Boomgaarden et al. 2013: 625).

A study (Monza and Anduiza 2016) focusing on exploring the visibility of the EU and European subjects in national media during the financial and Euro crisis started from the plausible hypothesis that with the strong consequences from EU policies, the salience of EU issues in the news should have been increased especially in those countries who are subject of the EU austerity policy. The study - based on a set of articles with reference to the crisis, recession or austerity from leading newspapers in Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and UK in the period of 2008–2014 - found that the visibility of European actors (in terms of claims made related to the crisis as reported in the media as well as addressees of claims) was surprisingly low as compared to national actors, indicating that the national perspective and national policy makers were dominant in the crisis discourse. The visibility of EU actors



was highest in Germany (11% of the sample) and Greece (11%) and lowest in the UK (4%) and Switzerland (1%). Differences in the visibility of EU actors and issues were not correlated with the countries degree of negative effect from the recession. The relative prominence of European issues and actors in Germany and Greece can be explained with the German governments leading role in debates on the Greek bailout and with Greece being the main addressee of the European institutions austerity policy.

An analysis of news coverage of the Euro crisis (2010-2013) and the 2009 parliamentary elections in online media news platforms, held by leading national newspapers or TV channels in 13 European countries (Michailidou 2015), found that in all countries covered by the study the EU was uniformly contested and criticized from the perspective of national politics, which in all cases were the key defining frame of media reporting. The results of the content analysis suggest that there is indeed a European wide pattern of discussing the issue of financial crisis and the role of EU politics, mainly made up by EU contestation which is referring to the issue of (lacking) democratic legitimation of EU politics, however, mainly in a diffuse or emotional manner. Interestingly, especially concerning the online comments to EU news posted by readers, the study could show, that *"...democracy is the most frequently used category to contextualise or justify not only Eurosceptic comments but evaluations of the EU polity across the entire 'affirmative European to anti-European' spectrum. What unites the user community is its anti-elitism and self-understanding of constituting the people's voice that mobilizes in defence of the representative system of democracy or more frequently against the corrupt, decaying version"* (Michailidou 2015, 332). What appears to be interesting about this finding is first that the crisis apparently brought the issue of democracy into the centre of debate, thus stressing the relevance of the "EU democratic deficit" issue for the European public sphere in times of crisis. This comes with an inclination to populist connotations, however, not exclusively as a subject pushed by anti-EU segments of the European citizenry.

Whereas in the politicised and Europeanised national public spheres the national perspective in times of crisis appears to be dominant, one study on the few broadcasting formats of transnational European level found the framing of European issues in terms of European solidarity to be dominant (Williams and Toula 2016). In an analysis of the debate program "Talking Europe", which is produced with the sponsorship of the European Parliament and the Commission, and has been broadcast on "France 24" since early 2009 it was found *"... that the solidarity frame is used to define problems and causes of issues and events as attributable to a lack of solidarity between EU members and also to present the solution of increasing solidarity as a means to enhance policy and practice. Moral judgments are introduced to cast blame on those actors who do not demonstrate solidarity. Problems framed in terms of solidarity deficits are then remedied through three-pronged solutions of integration, harmonization, and calls for greater solidarity"* (Williams and Toula 2016: 8). The analysis focused on episodes dealing with the Eurozone crisis between January and November 2011.

All in all empirical research on the effects of the crisis on the Europeanisation of national media publics appears to show mixed results. "Politicisation" is an indicator of European issues coming to the fore of national agendas, but this, of course, does not necessarily lead to issues being framed as questions of common European concern requiring European solutions. It depends on discursive structures and dynamics whether politicised debates about Europe foster European common thinking and identities or renationalization. Politicisation must come with Europeanisation: With a view to the Brexit it is interesting to note that research has shown that in the British public sphere Europe is highly politicised but to a much lower degree Europeanised (with respect to frames and visibility of European actors, Koopmanns et al. 2010, see also Koopmanns 2015). It thus appears to be important whether or not pro-European elites use the politicisation of Europe for rethinking democratic structures of the EU and/or actively engage in a discussion about options to address the democratic deficit (Risse 2015c). The fact that issues of European integration, European democracy as well as modes of European governance are found to be increasingly contested in the European public spheres does not necessarily imply dysfunctional workings of European political communication. Contestation and conflict are as much a necessary function of the public sphere as striving for consensus and compromise or aggregation of political will. It even can be said that if empirical studies should find a lack of disagreement on central constitutional

issues - as are at stake in debates on the legitimacy of EU policy interventions in times of crisis - this might not be taken as an indication that “*desired consensus processes has run its course in the European public spheres*” it could also be seen as an indication that public arenas are not yet “*fully developed and utilized in a truly democratic manner*” (Follesdal 2015: 254). In other words, as is obviously held by a broad scope of scholars of European studies, the actual contestation of Europe as a democratic project is as much an indication of a failure of the European public sphere as the long period of the so called “permissive consensus”, with a low level of discussion about European integration was an indication of its functioning.

#### **3.3.3.4. Deficits of Research**

The discussion of media analysis of the European public sphere has brought up some reflection of shortcomings and deficits of research that are important to be noted when interpreting research results. Especially with regard to the increasing EU-criticism in some new Member States it has to be taken into account that research so far mainly focused on the old EU15 and there is not much data about the development of the public sphere in new Member States (especially in those countries currently being front runners of EU-scepticism). Data showing a widely Europeanised public sphere (with the exception of GB) is mainly from central and western European Member States. On the one hand research would expect, that “in the course of time differences in the Europeanisation of old and new Member States seem to vanish” since they observe a “pattern of catch-up Europeanisation” (Kleinen von Königsłow and Möller 2009: 101, cit. Pfetsch 2015: 45). Others hold a more pessimist view with regard to this “modernisation story” and point at the different historical backgrounds of new Member States in central and Eastern Europe, as well as cultural aspects like a strong and orthodox religious current in some countries that might resist (Checkel 2015: 236f.)

It is discussed that since media analysis is mainly done by using data from quality newspapers, which are read mainly by elites, the finding of a step by step Europeanisation found here might not apply so much for TV or other papers which are the reference for the average public (Koopmanns 2015). It has also been stressed that we have to take into account that the focus of research on elite mass media communication neglects the relevance of new internet based communication networks mainly applied by social movements, which can be regarded as an Europeanisation of public spheres “from below” (Bennett et al. 2015). Focus of research on mass media might on the one hand overstate Europeanisation and on the other might underestimates the diversity of publics and its segmentation, the latter coming into focus in research on political communication via the internet.

#### **3.3.4. The internet and the public sphere**

The idea of the internet as a “virtual” or a “networked” public sphere - as articulated by e.g. Castels (2008) - starts from the notion that due to the option of interactive communication unrestricted with regard to time and space, the web is enabling a new and enhanced public sphere that transcends national boundaries. For example, it provides new options for civil society actors to make their demands visible and reinforces communication between constituencies and their political representatives. Recent years have brought about more detailed empirical analysis of the internet’s relevance for political communication, thus complementing the so far mass media focussed research on the public sphere. With a view to the widespread use of political blogs and social media by political actors of all kind there can be no doubt about the fact that the web has developed into a new space of political exchange besides the mass media. Political actors can address their communities and followers directly and forward their comments and news via internet platforms and social media (and vice versa). Mass media themselves have built up web-based news platforms and use the web as a source for news production. However, research and scholarly debate on the virtual public sphere – an overview of which is given in the following pages - do not give uncontested evidence for a new or revitalised public sphere realised by the options of political internet communication.

### 3.3.4.1. The democratic potential of the internet as a public sphere

Bohman (2004, see also STOA 2011) regarded the internet to open up a new mode of trans-national political publics, due to the possibility of allowing for communication across restrictions of time and space and also national and linguistic boundaries. He thus expressed some optimism that, while we find a decline of national public spheres with passive audiences and disenchantment with politics, the internet could support the emergence of a trans-national public sphere that is more inclusive and deliberative and is rooted in a transnational civil society. Such far reaching expectations are scarcely put forward nowadays.

There is, without doubt, a growing importance and public visibility of so called “dot.com” protest platforms and social media based exchange across national borders on humanitarian or environmental issues observable, which is held to show features of an emerging global civil society. Local protest movements can have outreach to the world and make their demands known and gather support globally – like e.g. the movement of the outraged in Spain and Greece. The “Occupy Wall Street” movement managed to engage on a global level via social media. World economic summits and climate change summits are regularly accompanied by online mediated activities of NGOs. Thus, globalization on the economic and governmental level can be regarded as being complemented by an internet-supported global civil society organizing counter- or protest discourse (e.g. Frangonikolopoulos 2012). Bohman (2004, see STOA 2011) conceptualized this internet based transnational public sphere as consisting of multiple issue related publics, thus creating a public of publics with a distributed rather than a centralized structure. Additionally, nowadays observers who are more sceptical with regard to the emergence of a transnational public sphere underline the capacity of internet communication to induce global political communication in an “... *indirect and networked sense – not as a supra-national sphere, but as a multitude of mediated and unmediated discursive processes aimed at opinion formation at various levels, interconnected directly and indirectly*” (Rasmussen 2013: 103). If this is a correct description of the Internet’s structure as a public sphere then the decisive question is to what extent these multiple publics are related to or cut off from each other. Smith (2015) regards the ease of creating new websites or digital platforms (by everybody and for any purpose) to politically be a “double-edged sword” as it makes it “*both easier to create common realms open to all and to leave the common world and create one’s own little realm where no opposing viewpoints can be heard*” (Smith 2015: 256). Thus, the internet would have the potential for both creating new public spaces and weakening the general public sphere.

A fundamental critique of the discourse on the virtual public sphere looks at the economic fundamentals of social media and peer-to-peer networks. From this perspective the democratic potential of the internet’s ability to allow for self-production of content, independent of the restrictions of the mass media, is called into question. The explosion of self-production and exchange of content is regarded as being fundamentally based in a growing economy of transmission and exchange of data by providers such as Google or Facebook. With a view inspired by Michel Foucault’s analysis of governmentality, Goldberg (2010) concludes the following in his criticism of the scholarly discourse on the “virtual public sphere”: “*On the internet there is no ‘debating and deliberating’ that is not also ‘buying and selling’ [...]; participation is a commercial act. Every instance of participation involves a transfer of data which has been economized, driving the profitability and viability of the networking industry and of internet based companies like Google that cover infrastructure costs through innovative advertising, ‘freemium’ business models, and other methods.*” (Goldberg 2010: 749).

Also Jürgen Habermas, as one of the most important thinkers of the model of deliberative democracy postulating the decisive and indispensable function of a lively public sphere for modern democracy, appears to be rather sceptical as regards the potential of the internet to foster a modernised, renewed democratic sphere of public discourse. When asked in an interview in 2014 “Is internet beneficial or unbeneficial for democracy?” his answer is “neither one nor the other” (Habermas 2014b). He substantiates this notion by referring to what in his view was and is the central function of the public sphere for democracy, which is allowing for the simultaneous attention of an undefined number of people to public problems. Despite the increased transparency and access to information for everybody

as well as the option to make every reader an author of statements on the web, the web in Habermas' view does not help to "concentrate" the attention of an anonymous public on a few "political important questions". By opening up a vast scope of single issue spaces the web rather "distracts and dispels". The web thus is a "mare magnum" of digital noises with billions of communities as "dispersed archipelagos" in it and is not able to bring about a space of common (public) interests. In order to bring about "concentration" "skills of good old journalism" are still needed (all quotations from Habermas 2014b).

The conclusion by West (2013, following Dahlgren 2005) that the internet may be best understood as an agent of mobilization of sub publics with regard to all kinds of issues as an "extension" for the mass media public sphere, appears to catch a seminal feature of internet political communication but also underlines the restrictions of its democratic potentials: *"The ability of the internet to quickly rally people, as in the 2011 'Occupy' movements, is difficult to contest. But, as subsequent events has (sic!) shown, the ability of the new electronic media to transform those movements into lasting social change, or to use the new media as a public sphere whose discourse must be reckoned with, is not yet evident"* (West 2013). In this respect the conclusion from the 2011 STOA report that the internet at best is an emerging public sphere would still hold. However, a lot of differentiation with regard to different modes and formats of political internet communication is visible in the scholarly debates and empirical research in the publications of the last five years.

#### **3.3.4.2. A new landscape of political communication – a public sphere from below?**

The widespread use of new modes of political communication via the internet indicates that internet communication is indeed about to modify the public sphere from one mediated by mass media (and mass communication) to one mediated by a multitude of networks based on the interpersonal exchange and interactivity allowed for by the internet. From this point of view the public sphere then exists of a network with nodes being made up by web-based spaces of political discussion, organized on websites or social media sites held by individuals, social interest groups, governmental authorities or political parties. Ideally, these different nodes are connected to each other so that the different issue related or socially organized political communication spaces are not completely isolated but form some new sort of networked public sphere. As far as such networks also go across national borders one might speak of "trans-national public spheres" emerging "from below" rather than "from above" by mega television networks offered to world audiences (Munteanu and Staiculescu 2015).

Transnational issue advocacy networks of Civil Society Organisations mainly mediated via social media (Twitter, Facebook, Youtube) and NGO websites are held to have the capacity "to engage large publics directly" and bring them into contact with government institutions and enable people to coordinate action across national boundaries (Bennett 2012: 6). In the social science literature on the political relevance of social media there are both expectations that social media have the potential to empower underrepresented interest, as well as more sober assessments which doubt that social media would help to reduce inequalities in the political sphere. Despite these far reaching and contradictory expectations a recent analysis of literature on interest groups' use of social media concludes that *"systematic, quantitative literature of social media use of interest groups is scarce"* (van der Graaf et al. 2016: 121).

The new modes of communication via internet have quite obviously modified formats of mass communication. Nowadays there is probably almost no mass media which do not host an internet based news site besides their print or broadcasting version. These news sites regularly have comment sections, which offer the opportunity for online readers to comment and discuss the news articles offered at the site. Thus, so far passive readers have the option to publicly express their political thoughts and ideas. A media content analysis including a study of reader's comments via online news sites, published in 2015, found that at the beginning of the period of research in 2009 social media were not very well integrated in online news sites. Meanwhile all news sites have incorporated social media "sharing" functions and that in the EU *"... readers' participation through Web 2.0 functions has thus dramatically increased"*. This was found to apply particularly *"... in Southern Member States where internet availability and use was previously lagging behind the North-Western countries"* (Michailidou 2015: 331).

Social media nowadays also function as news source for mass media. Facebook and Twitter posts trigger mass media reports. Especially online portals of mass media not only have their own Twitter or Facebook accounts and allow readers to forward news from online news portals. Mass media also regularly include social media posts in their news and reports about political issues. In this respect there are channels that allow content from segmented and issue or community specific publics organised via social media to find its way into the general political public sphere.

Social media are increasingly used by interest groups and play an important role in political campaigning and organization and coordination of political activities, since they are supportive to build communities around certain issues and interests by direct communication with supporters. There is no doubt about the growing importance of social media for political communication (Chalmers and Sutton 2013, Obar et al. 2012). Social media or formats like political blogs have changed the public sphere, but rather in a way of adding to old forms of mass media public spheres than substituting them. Expectations from ten years ago that political blogging would substitute traditional Journalism appear to be pointless today, but this applies also for notions predicting that web communication would not afflict mass media journalism at all. Today new mixed models of journalism are observed where leading newspapers incorporate “*blogs, columns and news stories and where writers may be bloggers one day and reporters the next*” (Zuckerman 2014: 158 for an analysis of digital journalism, see also Peters and Witschge 2015). The enormous popularity of comment sections has recently attracted intense interest among communication scholars (for an overview see Toepfl and Piwoni 2015). Surveys show an increased spread of offering comment sections on online news sites and research indicates that user generated content on comment sites influence readers perception of public opinion and can change the reader’s personal opinion.

Internet activism as a new form of protest is gaining influence in the public sphere. There is little doubt among researchers that it will become “*the norm, not the exception, for political and activist campaigns to rely on social media, crowdfunding and other digital techniques as well as advertising, lobbying and conventional fundraising*” (Zuckerman 2014: 158). Online communication is used by political actors and activists in many ways: for spreading information and news online, for e-mobilization (using online tools to facilitate offline protest), for online participation (e.g., online petitions), and by using online tools to organize movement efforts online, so that there are discussions whether pure online activism might reduce the relevance of (off line) NGO’s (Earl 2015). Thus social media and online debates are regarded to have the potential to function as “counter-publics” to the established and published discourse (originally Fraser 1992, see Dahlberg 2011).

Especially in developing countries with often lacking media channels for underprivileged groups, social media is seen as a means to empower the poor and increase the possibilities for them to influence or petition the government (e.g. Hoskins 2013). Not the least, impressive social movements and uprisings in recent years have shown that the internet and especially communication via social media has been widely supportive for networking and public campaigning of social movements. The attention to completely new forms of bottom up spontaneous political activism fostered by the political use of social media has been especially triggered by the revolutionary movements in North-African countries (the so called Arab spring) that led (albeit mostly temporary) – to fostering of democratic structures of public debate and governance in previously autocratic regimes (see contributions in Svensson and Kumar 2015, Özcan 2014). This perspective not only has been sobering by the meanwhile observable autocratic or oligarchical backlash in most of the spring-countries but also by analysis that shows that years of off-line planning, negotiation and organisations had made the Arab spring possible, suggesting that social media was nothing but a supportive tool that has been used for campaigning and to organize counter-publics (Lim 2012, Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

When following the public sphere concept of John Dewey (2012: 1927) that publics emerge as soon as knowledge about a public problem evolves, it appears to be plausible that such knowledge is more easily spread and thus potentially combining formerly not interconnected individuals to concerned publics (see Farrell 2014) by organizing all kind of internet fora, social media etc. on any political question. It is,



however, evident that new modes of political internet communication not only have the capacity to support the emergence of counter-publics and empowerment of civil society groups but are also effective tools for campaigning by established political actors, institutions and groups. The use of social media in electoral campaigning in western democracies often referred to as improving the options for civil society to connect to political representatives is - as has been shown by analysis of the use of social media in US electoral campaigns (Kreiss 2012, also Towner and Dulio 2012)) - far from self-organised bottom up support for candidates but is *“meticulously planned, tested, and crafted by highly bureaucratic, hierarchical institutions”* (Wells 2014). It is also noteworthy that the option for organised as well as individual actors to induce their political thoughts or preferences into the public sphere and establish counter publics is not bound to anti-establishment or grass-root world views. A recent study (Toepfl and Piwoni 2015) of journalistic articles as well as user comments to these on the new German Anti-Euro party “AfD” (published in the aftermath of national elections in 2013 on opinion leading online news site of leading German newspapers) found clear indications that while the news section of the sites (Journalist’s content) painted unanimously a dismissive picture of the new party, the comment section mainly was used to challenge this mainstream consensus. The authors conclude that in the comment section *“... a powerful counter (sub) public sphere had emerged. Remarkably, approximately 75% of comments supported a new party that just days before only 4.7% of the electorate had voted for. In essence, these findings thus showcased how an emergent collective of counter public-minded individuals were exploiting the comment sections of Germany’s opinion-leading news websites in order to create a highly visible - and therefore enormously powerful - counter-public sphere.”* (Toepfl and Piwoni 2015: 482)

All in all the landscape of political communication has changed and has empowered civil society in many ways to get access to the public sphere, however, this may not challenge existing structures and hierarchies as much as expected by e-democracy enthusiasts. As was referred to above, Koopmanns and Statham (2010, see also Koopmanns 2015) found claims of civil society organisations being underrepresented in media reporting on European political issues compared to institutional actors, based on a sample of quality journals in six EU Member States. This was especially the case for media reports on European issues. Interestingly, an analysis of websites conducted within the framework of the same study did not find a more balanced representation of institutional and civil societal actors (Koopmanns and Zimmermann 2010), leading to the conclusion that the internet replicated power hierarchies that affected actors’ abilities to reach audiences. Without overstating this (and other) single findings, since the overall state of research on the empowering force of the internet is still insufficiently developed, it can be summarised that there is an online space for political communication with many new features and options that go beyond or bypass mass media channels. It is, however, subject of debate to what extend these features indicate or have the potential to democratise political communication and public discourse.

#### **3.3.4.3. Deliberative quality of online political communication**

The virtual public sphere has the potential to foster the deliberative quality of public discourse, as compared to mass media publics, due to its interactive quality. Deliberative quality implies an open exchange among a broad spectrum of perspectives and views without restrictions as regards access to the discourse, right to speak and willingness to listen and rationally react to opposing perspectives. With regard to this mainly political social media sites and political blogs come into perspective. In a review of research on online deliberation Freelon (2015) sees two perspectives being dominant in research. One research thread is studying the deliberative content of online political communication, asking to what extent online political communication meets normative criteria such as civility, reciprocity, and reason giving. The other thread focuses on “selective exposure”, based on the assumption that *“exposure to a diverse array of information sources is good for democracy, while the exclusive consumption of opinion reinforcing content is problematic”* (Freelon 2015: 774). There is a great amount of single studies available focussing on specific cases, as our literature review also revealed. According to Freelon there is consensus that online political discussions mostly do not meet the quality criteria of deliberative content. As regards to the “selective exposure” perspective, Freelon sees mixed results. There are studies that support the notion that online debates reinforce the exclusive consumption of opinion reinforcing content and other studies



that cannot support the selective exposure thesis (Freelon 2015: 773 ff.). Liu and Weber (2014) come to similar conclusions for research on social media. Due to the enormous amount of literature it is impossible to undertake a systematic tour d'horizon through available research at this point. In the following a few examples from recent studies are given to illustrate the quality of content as well as the selective exposure perspective.

Generally, the political “blogo-sphere” starting from the late 2000s gave rise to far reaching expectations of positive effects on democracy in terms of bringing about a new space for open and rational exchange across political affiliations. Seen from the perspective of established politics, the blogosphere should bring about a new space to learn about public worries, expectations and needs, thus supporting the functionality of the public sphere for responsiveness of the political system. However, blogs often show features of political exchange among elites and/or well educated publics and rather than opening up spaces for deliberation across political communities or perspectives appear to often foster communication only among like-minded communities. As regards the quality of content, new social media and the so called “blogosphere” have been diagnosed to show strong discrepancies along the lines of established politics and more informal use by citizens. While online media by politicians are often used in a vertical manner of communication and “replicate the worst aspects of the established political communication system, with politicians running blogs that look like old-fashioned newsletters”, citizens’ initiatives use blogs and social media more as a means of horizontal communication among peers (Coleman and Blumler 2012: 146).

Empirical studies, mainly based on an analysis of hyperlinks between different political blogs, bring contradictory results: There are indications that blogs have a potential to foster deliberation in terms of exchange on political issues across political affiliations as well as examples of blogs that function as spaces for in-group self-assurance (see research overview in Silva 2014). A study of leading political blogs in Romania (2013/2014), e.g., found that other than the mass media commitment to neutrality, users of political blogs clearly tend to choose blogs that support their political thinking and position (Munteanu and Staiculescu 2015). A network analysis of 20 most popular political blogs in Portugal (Silva 2014: 200) during national election campaigns could not find support for the thesis that blogs tend to polarize political positions “... blogs managed by citizens interested in politics do engage in conversations and debates regardless of the ideology. We find right and left wing blogs linking to each other, thus indicating that they share issues and themes of debate, interests, and arguments”. Negative reactions among participants “... that intend to mock or show contempt, insult and hamper dissident voices” were found to be of minor relevance.

The example of the Norwegian Labour Party’s (MyLabourParty) websites with blog-like articles and comments shows that it depends on the design and purpose of online blogs or social media sites to what extent they allow for open debates and political communication. For inner party communication blogs are used to distributing news among party members and supporters, others are meant to reach out to a wider public. Analysing different online offers of the Norwegian Labour Party (Johannessen and Folstad 2014) it was found that blogs with mainly or only party members contributing tend to be restricted in triggering debates compared to sites that are open also to opposing political opinions. It has been shown by a broad network analysis of the online discussion forum of the Italian Five Star movement that online discussion platforms provided by political parties and groups are not necessarily platforms for mutual self-assurance. The Five Star movement actually owes its foundation to the exceptional success of a political blog run by its founder Beppe Grillo in 2009. The widely used online forum of the movement, according to Bailo (2015), did not show significant tendencies of fragmentation of the online community using the forum. Many users engaged in discussions on different topics, thus the debate was not structured alongside specific interests or values held. The author concludes that people “are more interested in engaging rather than convincing each other” and they come to the forum “mainly to socialise their ideas and be exposed to other’s thoughts on issues they are interested in” (Bailo 2015: 564).

As regards the quality of communication, the anonymity that is allowed for in internet chats, fora or social media is often held to be conducive to allow for a situation that comes close to the ideal of deliberative exchange of arguments implied in Habermasian discourse theory, because anonymity allows

to disregard hierarchical factors such as social status. It is, however, mainly the anonymity of communication that often gives way to idiosyncratic unserious talk, to bullying or erratic dismissal of arguments of other users. While anonymity can strengthen the focus of participants on the argument rather than the person, and thus increases deliberative quality, it at the same time implies a lack of social control that leads to emotional and erratic behaviour, as has been found e.g. by analysis of twitter discussion on new abortion legislation in the U.K. by Jackson and Valentine (2014).

The deliberative quality was also found to be dependent on factors of political culture. A study using 15.000 comments from five national newspaper online sites conducted by Ruiz et al. (2011), found two models of audience participation in online fora of newspapers: in the first “communities of debate” are formed based on mostly respectful discussions between diverse points of view. This model - more in line with deliberative norms - was found in Anglo-American newspapers (The Guardian and The New York Times). The second model of “homogenous communities” is characterised by expressing feelings about current events, has less features of an argumentative debate, less respect between participants and less pluralism, and was found in European newspapers (El País, LeMonde, and La Republica). The authors regard this difference to be an effect of different cultures of journalism based in political cultures of the respective countries. While a culture of “internal pluralism” is dominant in the Anglo-American case with newspapers not aligned with a particular political position, a culture of “polarized pluralism” is dominant in the European case where “participants are mostly aligned with the ideological perspective of the newsroom: Citizens participate in the spaces provided by their news website of choice, mostly finding similar positions to theirs and editorial content that fosters political polarization.” (Ruiz et al. 2011: 483)

Freelon (2015) has conducted a comparison across two technical platforms: Twitter hashtags and online newspapers comment sections. One of his central conclusions is that issue hashtags on Twitter made it more likely that discussions were more of a “communitarian” – meaning in-group and self-assurance - character, whereas comment sections on online news (which are more open to and are accessible by broader mass publics) were more likely to generate discourse with deliberative features such as openness to and exchange among a diverse and contradicting scope of arguments and statements. Research regarding the question of to what extent blogs, internet fora and political social network sites can contribute to foster features of an ideal public sphere (in terms of equality, inclusiveness and rationality of discourse) generally show mixed results.

It is well known that new populist movements rely very much on social media to organize and mobilise its members and followers (e.g. Januschek and Reisigl 2014). There are indications that social media might rather foster a “closed shop” in which only those who are convinced mutually reconfirm their ideology and their prejudices, than providing for a democratic and open rational exchange of arguments. Generally this thesis is connected to the notion that whilst mass media normally provide for a mix or balanced view on differing standpoints to political issues, the internet (due to its ability to organize certain communities) is suspicious “*that recruitment, radicalization, and incitement are facilitated*” via a tendency “*to foster echo chambers where people are denied feedback contrary to their own views, which are therefore reinforced*” (O’Hara and Stevens 2015). While O’Hara and Stevens reject this thesis as portraying a general feature of political internet communication, there are indications that it holds true for the use of social media and website communication by extremist and populist movements (Warner and Neville-Shepherd 2014).

In a broad review on research and scholarly discussion on the change of news supply and consumption on the internet, Tewksbury and Rittenberg (2012) found some evidence for fragmentation and polarisation of audiences alongside political predispositions due to the given multitude of specialized news sites. However, they argue that the fact that there is a multitude of specialized news sites and that some people restrict their information consumption to a certain set of news sites does not necessarily imply that they do not share common public knowledge as well as public agendas: “*Fragmentation and polarization are ideas, still, more than observable realities. There is ample evidence that many people are specialising their news consumptions in ways that might lead to either or both outcomes. There is less evidence that knowledge*

*and opinion are fragmenting and/or polarizing. Most of the uncertainty about the operation of these phenomena stems from a lack of research; it rarely lies with disconfirming studies”* (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012: 143). On the other hand they found evidence that the internet offers more user control with regard to choice of contents as well as with regard to contribution to news production which can be regarded as “information democratization”. But also in this regard it is not clear yet to what extent the potential will become reality. Counter tendencies of fragmentation and the dominance of strong media companies on the web, as well as regulation on content of the internet are regarded as interfering with the democratic empowerment of the audience (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012: 144 ff.).

Political communication via social media extends the opportunities for individuals to post their own thoughts about any kind of public event and share it with friends or peer-groups. In a more optimistic view this is regarded as being in line with a general change of civic identities that has been observed for decades now, a shift away from materialist to post materialist and individualist values. More individualistic expression of self and weakening ties to formal organizations (parties, unions) and collectives (class) is regarded to be expressed as well as pushed by the use of social media. Individual choice made possible by the internet allows to connect to all kinds of cultures, social groups and preferences and this comes at the costs of adherence to widely shared ideologies or bigger (public) formal organizations such as political parties. (see e.g. Wells 2014, Bennet and Segerberg 2012).

On the other hand a clear danger when restricting yourself to these formats of political information and communication is the segmentation into peer groups or issue related publics. Even more you run the danger of the complete loss of connection to any broader sphere of exchange among competing perspectives on contested issues of public (in the meaning of national or transnational) interest – which in the worst case would lead to idiosyncratic discussions and worldviews. As Zuckerman (2013: 165) puts it: *“Social media allows the friends you follow online to participate in setting your political agenda, adding dots to the canvas that are in your immediate line of sight. We likely need a new class of tools and practices too help us step back and see our interests and perspectives in a broader context.”*

#### **3.3.4.4. The internet and the European public sphere**

The visibility of European issues in mass media has always been in the focus of empirical research on the European public sphere. Research on the relevance of political communication on the internet for building up a European public sphere or supporting the Europeanisation of national public spheres is scarce. What comes into focus in the first line is the use of web based communication by the European Commission. It is only recently that “issue publics” organised via the web by civil society actors come into focus of research with regard to their potential to “Europeanise” the public sphere.

Following a first programmatic turn to new and open forms of governance laid out in the White Paper on Governance (CEC 2001), after the Irish “no” to the treaty of Nice (2001), the EC started to actively fund and set up citizen participation and public consultation activities with its “Plan D for Democracy Dialogue and Debate” (CEC 2005) in 2005 as an answer to the rejection of the constitutional treaty in French and Dutch referenda. This was explicitly meant to strengthen the development of the European public sphere, also via means of e-participation (see Yang 2013, see also STOA 2011). Part of this strategy was on the one hand to connect the process of EU policy formulation and legislation to the European constituency by inviting civil society actors and interest groups to online consultations on issues under EU-regulation via the EC’s web portal “Your voice in Europe”. Another outcome was the setup of citizen consultations and online fora. In the following a brief overview of new research available on the citizen consultations and the online consultations of the EC is given (for more information on the EU’s online activities see STOA 2011 as well as the chapter 3.4.5 of this report. For the “European Citizen Consultations”, the “Futurium platform”, and the web portal “Your voice in Europe” see the case-studies carried out as part of this study in chapter 5).

Summarizing research on the European commission’s online consultations “Your voice in Europe” Dieker and Galan (2014) conclude that although many consultations are “open” consultations allowing

any group to participate, the consultations - in terms of its effects at the European public sphere - at best contribute to establish segmented and mainly expert public spheres. The consultations normally do not attract the interest of groups beyond those interest groups represented in Brussels. Due to the fact that participation in online consultations is resource consuming, mostly well and professionally organised groups participate. According to a study from 2011, business associations make up 39% of all participants in online consultations (Quittkat 2011, acc. to Dieker and Galan 2014). As regards the potential to contribute to a more inclusive mode of policy making and to a European will-formation in the sense of (segmented) public spheres, the consultations are perceived to suffer from shortcomings. The consultation process is lacking transparency with regard to clear information about the criteria for weighting contributions and deciding on whether they are taken into consideration or not. Contributions are not made accessible to participants and no exchange among participants about contributions is possible. The purpose of the consultations is searching for input to the policy making process and not public deliberation with or among the groups contributing. However, also the function of transmission of demands and interests from civil society to the European institutions is regarded to be restricted since agenda setting lays solely with the European Commission which decides about issues that are made open for online consultation. Since online consultations take place in highly segmented public spheres with mainly expert and stakeholder communities participating, consultations are regarded to have a highly professional character which does not allow them to take up an Europeanising function in terms of active European citizenship (Dieker and Galan, 245).

Between 2001 and 2010 a number of 23 transnational citizen consultation projects (involving participants from minimum of three European countries) supported by the European Commission have been conducted. They included face to face meetings as well as online discussions on specific issues, such as the social and political implications of brain research as well as on more general issues such as the European constitution and the future of Europe (Yang 2013: 25f.). The six transnational “Deliberative Citizens Involvement Projects” (DCIP) covered by the Plan D programme involved approximately 40,000 people. The online project “Speak up Europe” alone involved 300,000 users in discussions on European politics (Yang 2013: 27). An evaluation of these DCIPs with regard to their deliberative quality as well as impact has been undertaken by contributions in Kies and Nanz (2013a). The case studies presented support the notion that DCIPs have a “...potential to ameliorate the legitimacy of the EU and to promote a more substantial EU citizenship” (Kies and Nanz 2013b: 10). The interactive aspect of deliberation is held to be a feature that can support the experience of European citizenship. However, this study also holds formats applied by the EU, such as “Your voice in Europe”, which allow citizens to send comments to policy makers to be sub-optimal, since they provide no space for deliberation and interaction among citizens on the issues dealt with, (Smith 2013: 209). In the EC’s approaches to citizen participation the study found a tendency - mainly due to the lack of common language - to reduce the role of citizens to just posting statements or commenting on statements by policy makers rather than engaging in a European citizens’ debate and jointly working out policy options to be forwarded to policy makers. Most disappointing, according to the authors, was the lack of any follow up activities and of visible impact of the deliberative experiments on policy making (Smith 2013: 215; Kies et al. 2013: 74f.). Friedrich (2013: 44ff.), discussing EU governance innovations, attests a strong bias to expert involvement. The approaches for dialogue with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) failed to realise their potential to strengthen the ties between EU authorities and the European civil society and to support the construction of a European demos due to a lack of commitment and its “discretionary” patterns of participation. It is concluded that as long as a regulated integration of DCIPs in EU policy making processes is not provided for and as long as DCIPs are mainly held on broad topics such as the social and economic future of Europe rather than on concrete challenges and problems of decision making, there is a danger that they are increasingly perceived as being rather a promotional instrument than serious attempts to engage the European citizenry in EU policy making (Kies and Nanz 2013b: 11f.). According to this analysis the potential of public consultations at the EU level to contribute to a lively European space of debate about EU policy, which could contribute to a European public sphere, appears to be restricted at this point.

The role of segmented publics emerging around European issues, be it via initiatives taken by the EU institutions or bottom up by interest groups across borders of Member States, are regarded to have the potential to serve as nodes for a European networked public sphere besides mass media publics (see STOA 2011). Kriesi et al. (2010, 225) argue that due to their often cross-national character interest groups, business and professional organisations (rather than political parties) can be regarded as a “Europeanized type of political actor”. But such organisations engaged in consultations with decision makers can hardly be regarded to function as nodes of a political public sphere. Issue publics that are exclusively *“based on the horizontal intermediation between bureaucrats, experts and organized interests fall way short of complying with democratic provisions of openness and equal access”* (Eriksen 2005, cit. Pfetsch and Heft 2015: 33, see also Erikson 2007 and STOA 2011), for which online consultations (see above) give an example. However, as far as such issue publics involve a broad range of actors, or are organised bottom up by civil society actors, they are held to be more inclusive (in terms of reaching the average European citizen) than mass media debates on European integration issues that are often driven mainly by elites with the general public in the position of an observer at the gallery (Pfetsch and Heft 2015).

A recent analysis of the capacities of internet based issue publics, created by networks of civil society active in Fair Trade and Climate Change campaigning (Bennett et al. 2015), however, found sobering results regarding the capacity of such networks to support the Europeanisation of publics. European-level networks for the issues of Climate Change and Fair Trade identified by the study have been found to be weak (as compared to the connectivity of nationally based networks). The study found a certain amount of “Europeanization” as far as nation based networks move into networks active at the European level. But national networks mainly remain separate from each other and from those networks organised around issue related EU-platforms. It was also found that EU-platform related issue networks of NGO’s were able to engage citizens with the issues at stake to a much lesser extent than their national counterparts. The authors regard their findings to support the notion that “...civil society organisations in the Brussels area often serve as substitutes for the voices of European citizens, creating a civil order without credible levels of public engagement, and thereby deepening the EU’s democratic deficit” (Bennett et al. 2015: 135). Thus it appears that the problem of segmentation in the sense of restriction of publics to “epistemic communities” and experts (as addressed with regard to European sub-publics as organised around European issues and particular EU regulatory activities, Eriksen 2007, see STOA 2011) is not easily ruled out by internet based networks organised by NGOs.

First results on the use of social media by interest groups active in EU lobbying are available from a large European funded project on the activity of EU lobbying groups ([www.intereuro.eu](http://www.intereuro.eu)). Van der Graaf et al. (2016) revealed, based on a data set of groups active in EU lobbying provided by this project, that when regarding the scope and volume of social media use there is little evidence that social media use was able to change inequalities in power and social representation on the EU level. The study comprised around 500 interest groups with reported activity on the EU level. “Range” was measured by the presence of interest groups on 11 selected social media platforms, “Volume” was measured by the activity of groups on Twitter and Facebook. As regards the volume of social media use, small interest groups (citizens, workers unions) prevail compared to internationally organized groups as well as big companies. However, when it comes to “range”, large organisations and firms with big resources prevail. Thus, at least with regard to interest groups on the EU level, social media appear to not provide for a level playing field for democratic will formation. The authors conclude with regard to the “democratic effects” of the “online world of interest representation”: *“Rather than representing a new playing field where pre-existing resource differences between groups play less of a role, our analysis underlines the importance of resources both when we consider the range and volume of social media use”* (van der Graaf et al. 2016: 122).

When analysing online comments of readers in political blogs, news platforms, and transnational websites in 12 European countries during the 2009 EP elections campaign, DeWilde et al. (2014) found patterns of communication similar to those in mass media communication in the blogosphere with regard to European issues. The study found that diffuse euro-sceptic evaluations dominate public debates across Member States. The majority of evaluations made, particularly those by citizens leaving comments

online, were euro-sceptic, thus constituting a gap between political elites who intervened with EU affirmative statements. More complex evaluations of EU politics on the side of citizens were missing. These diffuse negative statements however were mainly about actual politics (complaining about the democratic deficit) than against EU integration as such. All in all the authors conclude that there is “*little evidence of the potential for legitimization through politicization in online public spheres*” (DeWilde et al. 2014: 779). However, the study could not support the often purported notion of a fragmentation of audiences in online discourse: debates intensified with politicisation of the European integration issue but pro and con arguments were related to each other.

### 3.4. Experience with digital tools in different types of e-participation

#### 3.4.1. Three basic functions of e-participation

Understanding “e-participation” as the use of digital tools for political participation in the wider sense includes a wide variety of formally institutionalised mechanisms as well as informal expressions of civic engagement. One possibility to structure our literature review across this spectrum of different forms of political participation is to categorise them according to their predominant function in the policy cycle. Three basic functions of participation are (1) monitoring, (2) agenda setting, and (3) decision-making.

1. A basic category of e-participation mainly serves a **monitoring** and control function and comprises participatory activities which focus on politically relevant digital information, online deliberation and exchange (e-information, e-deliberation) with the potential to enhance transparency and control of political processes, actors and decisions.
2. A second category of participatory practices which are aided by digital tools and mainly contribute to **setting the political agenda** may also start with accessing politically relevant information (e-information) and discussing political issues (e-deliberation), but extend to activities such as mobilising support for political projects (e-campaigning), and submitting formal requests to government institutions (e-petitions).
3. Finally, e-participation which contributes to **decision-making** processes directly or indirectly comprises providing cognitive or evaluative input to political decisions (e-consultation), setting priorities for or determining budget expenditure (e-participative budgeting), and casting votes on political alternatives (e-voting).

We will start this section with overall assessments on the use and effects of digital tools for democratic processes before we focus on these three basic functional categories and relevant types of e-participative activities within each.

Despite the long history of e-democracy, the implementation of digital tools for political participation on a broader scale has come at a much slower pace than the expansion of e-government, i.e. electronic services in the public sector. Seeking to explore the reasons behind this, Mahrer and Krimmer (2005: 38 ff.) have identified the ‘middleman paradox’, pointing to latent as well as overt opposition among politicians in legislative government branches as inhibiting forces: “*Fear of change appears to be the politicians’ main driver for interfering with the further evolution of e-democracy. This leads to a special situation – the ‘middleman paradox’ – as the very same parliamentarians who would be responsible for introducing new forms of citizens’ participation for political decision-making are explicitly and implicitly opposing these reforms.*” Although the empirical evidence of this finding is based on a study of only a single country (Austria), indications of a certain reluctance of officials and politicians vis-à-vis more extended expectations of participation are frequently noted.

Various earlier assessments of experiences with e-democracy provide a reference for an update with the most recent evidence:

Striking a balance after 25 years of e-democracy, van Dijk (2012: 53 ff.) concluded that the primary achievement of digital democracy was a significant improvement in access to and exchange of politically



relevant information. However, evidence on the positive expectations regarding the support of public debate, deliberation and community building was mixed, and – most disappointing from the perspective of direct democracy – *“no perceivable effect of these debates on decision-making of institutional politics”* was detected. The general conclusion then was that e-participation is largely confined to the initial and the final stages of the policy cycle (agenda setting, policy preparation, policy evaluation), and that it rarely allows for entries into the core stages of decision-making and policy execution. It was also found that bottom-up initiated e-participation was more successful than top-down initiatives and that the required set of digital skills was one of the greatest barriers to an effective enhancement of participation. In addition, Lindner (2012) finds the balance of empirical research on the use of e-participation sobering and could determine no evidence of increased and more inclusive participation to date. Though he acknowledges increased information transparency, the internet’s function to support critical monitoring and control and the extension of communication of political institutions with citizens, he deems the e-petitioning, e-consultation and online discussion platforms offered as being rather marginal in terms of power.. Santos and Tonelli’s conclusions (2014) largely tend to echo the general thrust of these findings.

A longitudinal analysis of e-participation research was conducted by Medaglia in 2011, in which 123 articles from April 2006-March 2011 were covered. Medaglia (2011) determined that the field was very dynamic in those years, with one of the most noticeable developments being a shift from research on activities towards impacts and evaluations. No great attention was paid to the areas of e-activism, e-campaigning and e-petitioning during this time. E-voting, however, was experiencing increasing interest, though publications in this area tend to be about design proposals. Medaglia emphasizes a *“need to move beyond a technological perspective, encouraging the ongoing shift of research focus from government to citizens and other stakeholders, and the need to make e-participation research methods more participatory in nature.”* (Medaglia 2012: 346; see also Medaglia 2011: 99).

Panopoulou et al. (2014) attempted to determine what the success factors for e-participatory projects are. Having reviewed literature on e-government and e-participation success, Panopoulou and her colleagues went on to conduct a survey of practitioners across Europe. Success factors which were brought up by all three sources, namely the e-government and e-participation literature as well as the surveyed practitioners, were: management and planning, security and privacy, sustainability, addressing the digital divide and inclusivity, meeting user needs and expectations, government or management support, technological advances and good practice, a promotion plan and value for citizens as well as for the government or organizations (see Figure 3 or Panopoulou et al. 2014: 203). Panopoulou et al. (2014) used this information in order to propose an e-participation success factor model, which included various activities which were linked to the identified success factors according to the literature and practitioner survey. Table 4 shows a selection of success factors, taken from the table “Proposed success factors for designing eParticipation initiatives” of pages 204-205 from Panopoulou et al. 2014. Success factors not listed are “vision/strategy”, “scope and goals”, “policy and legal environment”, “funding”, “organisational structures, processes and data”, “integration and compliance”, “organisational culture and collaboration”, “employee training”, “participation process, policy making stage and roles”, “change management”, “leader/champion” and “monitoring and evaluation plan”. For the complete table please see Panopoulou et al. 2014, pages 204-205.

**Table 3. Selection of success factors from the table “Proposed success factors for designing eParticipation initiatives”**

Success factors	Activities associated with success factors
Management and planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appoint an experienced project management and business management expert</li> <li>• Employ standard methods for system analysis and design</li> <li>• Follow a performance measurement methodology and perform risk management</li> <li>• Ensure availability and adequacy of needed resources</li> </ul>
Security and privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build an absolutely secure system</li> <li>• Protect participants’ personal data (privacy)</li> <li>• Ensure confidentiality from third parties (e.g. hackers) but also from government</li> <li>• Convince citizens that the system is fully secure and private</li> </ul>
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make provisions for the initiative’s future maintenance and improvement or expansion</li> </ul>
Digital divide, disabled and desired target groups/ user training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure access for all citizens, e.g. through public access points</li> <li>• Ensure that the initiative’s target group is actually involved</li> <li>• Ensure that the disabled are offered equal chances to participate</li> <li>• Address the issue of digital divide</li> <li>• Educate and train users</li> <li>• Aim at representation and political equality</li> </ul>
User needs and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify all relevant stakeholders and involve them in the design process</li> <li>• Address user needs and expectations</li> <li>• Consult users continuously and get feedback through demonstrations and prototypes</li> <li>• Design a system that is appealing, yet simple and easy to use</li> <li>• Consider error handling, easy reversal of actions, and helpdesk</li> <li>• Ensure system’s appropriateness for the targeted participants</li> </ul>
Support from government/management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure political will and drive</li> <li>• Ensure strong, consistent and active commitment by top political persons and government executives</li> </ul>
Technology advances/constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep up with technological advances, modernization and globalization especially when such advances are used by citizens in other interactions (e.g. in e-commerce)</li> <li>• Consider infrastructure and information constraints</li> <li>• Ensure technical quality</li> </ul>
Good Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If available, exploit good practice ICT solutions</li> </ul>
Promotion plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up a comprehensive promotion plan, utilizing the most appropriate promotional activities for each stakeholder group</li> <li>• Create awareness from the beginning; advertise initiative’s value to citizens and other stakeholders</li> </ul>
Value for citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure transparency</li> <li>• Offer improved quality and efficiency to users</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer flexibility, e.g. combine online and offline channels for eParticipation</li> <li>• Ensure that government responsiveness and accountability is not lessened for online services</li> <li>• Consider citizens' convenience, e.g. one-stop solutions also for eParticipation</li> <li>• Ensure that the online content is clear and understandable by citizens, of appropriate quantity and quality</li> <li>• Ensure that feedback is provided to participants</li> <li>• Show how the initiative strengthens the decision-making process</li> <li>• Pursue quality and pluralism of contributions</li> <li>• Target improved citizen satisfaction and wellbeing</li> </ul>
Value for government/organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan for effectiveness, reduced time and cost for the organization</li> <li>• Use the initiative to actually strengthen the decision-making process</li> <li>• Target improved satisfaction of decision-makers and public servants</li> <li>• Pursue added-value for the government, e.g. by increasing country's competitive advantage and improving the image of administration</li> </ul>

**Source: Panopoulou et al. 2014: 204-205**

Font et al. (2016) decided to take a closer look at what proposals resulting from participatory processes in Spain ended up being implemented, by studying 611 proposals from 39 different processes. The results are rather positive regarding implementation, with the team categorizing a third of the proposals as having been fully implemented, another third partially implemented (e.g. with amendments) and a third not being implemented at all. Their assessment of accountability, however, concluded that in most cases there are no explanations given as to why certain amendments were made to the proposals or why proposals were not implemented, an area which could certainly use improvement. Font et al. (2016) determined that a participatory mechanism has a strong influence on the successful implementation of proposals, finding that "[...] the odds that a proposal emerging from a participatory budget or other permanent mechanisms (e.g. citizen councils) is fully implemented double those of proposals coming out from a case of strategic planning or other temporary processes." (Font et al. 2016: 18). The team also notes that the processes which were categorized as fully implemented had short proposal lists.

**Figure 3. Success factors for e-participation according to three different sources (Panopoulou et al., 2014: 203)**

Success factors according to literature review, practitioner survey and desktop research.

Success Factor	eGovernment literature	eParticipation literature	Practitioners research
Scope and goals	✓	✓	
Vision/strategy	✓		
Organisational structures, processes and data	✓	✓	
Integration and compliance	✓		✓ (2)
Management and planning	✓	✓	✓ (11)
Security and privacy	✓	✓	✓ (5)
Employee training	✓	✓	
Sustainability	✓	✓	✓ (2)
Organisational culture and collaboration	✓		✓ (1)
Digital divide, disabled and desired target groups / User training	✓	✓	✓ (10)
Change management	✓		
User needs and expectations	✓	✓	✓ (18)
Support from government/management	✓	✓	✓ (14)
Technology advances/constraints	✓	✓	✓ (6)
Good practice	✓	✓	✓ (3)
Funding	✓		✓ (4)
Value for citizens	✓	✓	✓ (25)
Value for government/organisation	✓	✓	✓ (6)
Leader/champion	✓		✓ (3)
Policy and legal environment	✓		
Promotion plan	✓	✓	✓ (15)
Participation process, policy making stage and roles		✓	✓ (9)
Monitoring and evaluation plan		✓	✓ (3)

Scherer and Wimmer (2014) conducted a literature review of trust in e-participation, referencing Im et al. (2014) as having found a negative relationship between general internet use and trust in government, but voicing hope in the possibility that e-government may mitigate these effects. Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2014) are quoted as saying they did not determine there to be a positive relationship between transparency and perceived trustworthiness. Within the literature review, Kim and Lee (2012) are noted as discovering an increase of trust in local government as a result of positive experiences regarding government responsiveness quality and e-participation application usefulness. Another interesting insight by Wang et al. (2007) is brought up within the review, namely stating that participation events resulting merely in consensus building will not increase public trust, but situations in which services the public wants can be achieved, public trust can be increased (Wang et al. 2007: 276 as quoted by Scherer and Wimmer 2014: 63). Services which are of specific interest to citizens and therefore enjoy much citizen involvement are zoning and planning, parks and recreation as well as policing and public safety (Wang et al. 2007: 273).

The next subchapters will present the main results and insights gathered from the literature, structured into the three basic categories of monitoring, agenda setting and decision-making as well related types of participatory activities (e-information, e-deliberation, e-petitions, e-campaigning, e-consultation, e-budgeting and e-voting), followed by a separate subchapter on experiences with the main participative instruments in use at EU level.

### 3.4.2. Monitoring

#### 3.4.2.1. E-information

Barber's seminal contribution to the idea of participatory democracy regarded "equalizing access to information" (1984: 276) as one of the greatest potentials of interactive technologies and proper information as a principal precondition for political judgement and active participation as responsible citizen. Indeed, according to van Dijk's (2012) assessment the greatest achievement was much better access to political and government information, meaning provision, retrieval and exchange between governments and citizens, but also public administrations, representatives, and political and community

organisations. Professional information brokers, journalists, and sufficiently educated citizens have profited most from the content available on numerous sites such as governmental and NGO websites and portals, public information systems, campaign sites of parties and candidates, weblogs, voter guides, online newspapers, journals and web-TV channels (van Dijk 2012: 53 ff.).

The subject of e-information holds special relevance for the monitoring citizen. Monitoring by citizens is envisioned to be a way of ensuring state accountability, and is the prerequisite for citizens to contest or question political decisions made. TheyWorkForYou.com is an example of parliamentary monitoring employed in the UK, meant to provide access to neutral and nonpartisan information on activities of MPs (Escher 2011). According to Rumbul (2014), however, monitoring the amount of times MPs spoke in the chamber led to an increase of statements from MPs which contained little relevant content. Such cases reveal gaps in current monitoring tools, which may fail to capture the most relevant data in order to judge performance and instead display a skewed image.

However, the importance of a quantum leap in improved access to information cannot hide the deficit regarding opportunities for democratic participation in more influential forms at different levels of government. For example, at national level such as in Portugal where e-participation initiatives are sparse, with the function of most initiatives at the local level being to inform, as the government primarily supports e-informing rather than supporting existing e-consulting and e-collaborative efforts (Fedotova et al. 2012). This lack of effective e-participation is not restricted to Portugal, however, with Boussaguet (2016) making similar claims about participatory mechanisms at the EU level, criticizing the lack of use of participatory experiments or tools and the failure to include “ordinary” citizens.

#### 3.4.2.2. E-deliberation

Deliberation, understood as careful reflection and exchange of arguments on a specific issue to arrive at considered judgement, is a basic element behind the idea of deliberative democracy. A deliberative process thus involves both an individual and collective activity. Its democratic relevance is not only to improve the quality of public decisions but also to participate in coming to decisions about what to do. *“It orients toward understanding, thoughtful reflection, mutual respect, and much more, but it points toward a final decision-making stage.”* (Gastil 2013: 218). Before diving into the subject of e-deliberation, it is perhaps appropriate to repeat the words of Coleman and Moss (2012), that “[...] *there exists no scholarly consensus about what even the most basic characteristics of deliberation are, and scholars are leading players in the effort to construct a meaning that is sufficiently compelling to relate the notion of deliberative citizenship to the empirical world around them.*” (Coleman and Moss 2012: 5). This lack of consensus must be kept in mind when examining research results.

In order for deliberative civic engagement processes to be successful, one needs the engagement of public officials and politicians (Barrett et al. 2012). It is also important to ensure that the online communicative environment matches the deliberative task at hand and is engaging and rich in media (Davies and Chandler 2013). Structural components identified by Knobloch et al. (2013) as cultivating successful deliberation are deliberative skills training and a mix of discussion formats and extended question-answer sessions. Lampe et al. (2014) as well as Davies and Chandler (2013), Coleman and Moss (2012) and Weiksner et al. (2012) voice their support for a moderation system and structure to accompany online deliberations to ensure the quality of online discourse. Lampe et al. (2014) estimate that even the moderation of large scale online political discussion spaces is possible. Davies and Chandler (2013) find that voice deliberation in real-time is more effective than deliberations concluded through text, in particular regarding mutual understanding and opinion forming, despite the fact that text-based deliberation attracts broader participation and therefore more alternative views. They also find benefits of anonymity concerning the willingness to participate, but at the cost of satisfaction for the participants, while Strandberg (2015) finds anonymous conditions to increase positive individual-level outcomes. The following positive effects of deliberative discussions were determined by Strandberg (2015: 466-468):

*“[...] deliberative design positively affected participants’ opinions and values, coherence, efficacy, and trust for institutions, but not generalized trust or readiness for political action.”*

According to Weiksner et al. (2012: 3), successful deliberative civic engagement processes can lead to short, medium as well as long-term policy impacts.

Deliberative systems enjoy high citizen interest and can be cost-effective. There is also evidence that deliberative forums are superior to conventional processes concerning the inclusion of various viewpoints and coping with prejudices (Collingwood and Reedy 2012). Deliberative civic engagement can also prove helpful in situations where the citizenship is deeply divided, such as intercultural conflicts, though Siu and Stanisevski (2012) caution about its limitations and feasibility on a case-to-case basis. Contributions can also be made to community capacity (Kinney 2012; Weiksner et al. 2012). Lim and Oh (2016) analyzed the effectiveness of online and offline participatory systems on the basis of a participatory budgeting case in Gwangju Metropolitan City in Korea and determined that citizen opinions were ultimately incorporated in the resulting budget or policy decision-making, though they note offline systems to have been more successful due to higher deliberativeness and representativeness.

Common criticisms of deliberative systems are the prevalence of idealism, low motivation and aptitude as well as narrow-mindedness of citizens, the prioritizing of reason-based argumentation, lack of heterogeneous representation and a lack of impact on policy making (Collingwood and Reedy 2012; Weiskner et al. 2012). Deliberative civic engagement seems to be of a temporary nature, being employed for singular issues and spanning only a short amount of time, embeddedness in political decision-making and problem-solving routines being a rarity (Leighninger 2012). Technical problems are another cause for concern, with deliberation groups experiencing difficulties ranging from server crashes and problems with limited bandwidth to issues concerning the setup of webcams and headsets (Strandberg and Grönlund 2012). Kersting criticizes the quality of online deliberative instruments, which appear to be *“[...] more oriented towards the construction of identity and community building than towards political dialogue and deliberation.”* (Kersting 2013: 270). He also observes that web forums on the internet are low in deliberative quality, meaning that *“[...] they are not argumentatively-respectful and consensus-oriented, but are often pure monologues and frequently aggressive”* (Kersting 2005 as quoted in Kersting 2013: 277). Kersting concludes with a very critical view on online third spaces, mentioning lack of openness and exclusion as additional attributes next to self-affirmation and in-group bonding, but seeing a future in online participation as complementary to offline participation:

*“Cyber democracy in the form of a pure online participation is not the future, but a blended democracy combining online and offline instruments might be.”* (Kersting 2013: 278-279).

Baek et al. (2012) find several differences between face-to-face and online deliberations in the USA, with online deliberations having the tendency to over-represent young white males, though they are perceived as having higher political and racial diversity and represent more ideological moderates. Negative emotions are also more commonly provoked in the online setting with a lower likelihood of finding a consensus and resulting in political action being taken (Baek et al. 2012).

According to Barrett et al. (2012), citizens can participate directly in the health policy-making processes in Brazil and Canada, based on evidence of the deliberative civic engagement processes of the Local Health Council in Brazil, which focused on accountability and priority-setting, and the Consultations on Pandemic Influenza Planning in Canada, occupied with developing a national pandemic influence plan. The team states within their abstract:

*“Three features are identified as critical determinants of the degree and direction of policy change – the empowerment, embeddedness, and legitimacy of the deliberative mechanism.”* (Barrett et al. 2012: 1).

Black (2012: 1) finds that deliberators provide information, state opinions, voice emotional expressions, make arguments, tell stories, raise questions, identify options, weigh pros and cons and occasionally disagree during deliberation events. In general the observed deliberations were respectful and egalitarian, including many different viewpoints and communication is deemed to be productive,



deliberators reporting positive experiences with the process (Black 2012). Respectful conversations can be ensured through the employment of a moderator, as was shown in the case of the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review by Knobloch et al. (2013). Mechant et al. (2012) report idea-generation and -evaluation strategies successfully working for two case studies in Ghent (Belgium) regarding the area of smart city applications, applauding methods such as brainstorming sessions, online expert and end-user surveys and online crowdsourcing. Strandberg and Grönlund (2012) however note few noticeable changes from a pilot citizen deliberation experiment carried out in Finland, mentioning knowledge gains and opinion changes but few other effects in the areas of political efficacy or interpersonal trust. Based on an examination of the Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP), a cross-national data set of 29 postelection national surveys, Torcal and Maldonado (2014) conclude that an interest in politics is not necessarily encouraged by political deliberation, but that negative effects such as political disengagement can also be entailed. While plural media information has a positive impact on political interest and political engagement, it is the exposure to personal discussions which carries the potential of detrimental effects. Interest and engagement is lowered when individuals are confronted with differing opinions on political subjects (Torcal and Maldonado 2014; see also Lu et al. 2016 as well as Guidetti et al. 2016).

In regard to subjective experiences of individuals after deliberative events, Knobloch and Gastil (2015) examined short- and long-term survey data from the Australian Citizens' Parliament (from 2009) and the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review (from 2010), both of which can be classified as highly structured. They speak of civic transformation and increases in deliberative and internal efficacy as well as communicative and community-based engagement, with feelings of empowerment regarding politics and public life.

Democratic deliberation includes online exchanges in the sense of crowdsourcing, for which Aitamurto and Landemore (2016) introduce the term "crowdsourced deliberation", "[...] an open, asynchronous, depersonalized and distributed kind of online deliberation among self-selected participants in the context of an attempt by government or another organization to open up the policymaking or lawmaking process." (Aitamurto and Landemore 2016: 1). A case study from Finland investigates a crowdsourcing process during which input was collected from citizens on the topic of law reform. Arguments were exchanged among participants, giving the process the character of democratic deliberation and covering many varying viewpoints despite statistical representativeness not being given (Aitamurto and Landemore 2016).

*"Lack of statistical representativeness thus does not necessarily mean poverty of views, information and arguments and low quality deliberation."* (Aitamurto and Landemore 2016: 2)

Loveland and Popescu (2011) hoped to answer the question whether deliberations can be found in online forums, and chose to investigate the posts of five regional web forums hosted by a US newspaper. They remained unconvinced of the quality of debates, noting that discussions remained for a large part unfinished and were of an episodic nature. Davis (2005) makes similar observations in his publication "Politics Online", concluding that online political discussions do not reflect opinions of the public, due to several reasons. The main obstacles lie in the environment for participation and the lack of representativeness. The problems of the environment which was addressed are caused primarily by the lack of moderation and the lack of accountability. Social rules can be broken without consequences, oftentimes leading to chaos, hostile interactions and absence of rational argumentation. Another obstacle is audience fragmentation, typical for online environments due to specialized forums and groups. Davis explains that this leads to political talk being conducted within "own discussion ghettos". *"The individual poster seems less interested in engagement than in pronouncement. Opinions are set. The goal clearly is expression and reinforcement, not interaction and exchange."* (Davis 2005: 123). On the subject of unrepresentativeness, Davis observes the following: *"Online discussants vary significantly from the general public demographically and in terms of media usage, political interest, political attitudes, and behavior."* (Davis 2005: 124). It is due to this, that the public opinion is distorted in online spaces, though online discussions are often used to draw conclusions about public mood, with reactions to events trickling in minutes after occurring. Davis concludes that online spaces are perhaps even less suited for deliberation than offline spaces, due to the possibility of anonymity. According to the results of an analysis of three UK-based discussion forums from 2010-2014, Graham et al. (2016) claim that political actions can in some instances be cultivated in

third spaces, such as online lifestyle community spaces. In order for political action to follow up on online discussions, Graham et al. (2016) identify the following factors: A helpful and supportive culture or structure, framing topics in a personal manner or in connection to everyday life and communicating in an interactive and reciprocal community or platform. An investigation of online lifestyle community spaces highlights “[...] *the importance of political talk for triggering both manifest and latent political participation*” (Graham et al. 2016: 1383). On the matter of online forums, Dunne (2015) examined a total of 138 online forums dedicated to local politics, and concludes there to be no impact on direct democracy as none of these forums provided a voting mechanism of any kind, though content of the discussions was not examined.

Cho and Keum (2016) observe that political expression is more independent of socio-economic status on social networking sites than in offline political discussions, based on the findings of a national survey in the USA from 2012. Another observation is the fact that individuals who use social networking sites for political purposes are also less affected by their social economic status regarding their offline discussions (Cho and Keum, 2016). During an assessment of the democratic implications of social media in China, Lewis (2013) states: “[...] *connectivity expands political opportunity.*” (Lewis 2013: 678)

A very interesting exploratory case study was done by Chadwick (2011), through the means of in-depth semi-structured interviews and group discussions, on the failure of an online citizen engagement initiative in “TechCounty”. The case is particularly interesting because the conditions seemed ideal for a deliberative project, with the county being home to many individuals employed in technology fields and local political participation being relatively high judging by election turnouts. The idea was to create an online forum meant to offer advice and house discussions on the topic of fostering and adoption provision, a topic where the likelihood of controversy was judged to be very low. It was anticipated that an exchange of ideas and information would lead to higher awareness of child welfare and could entail improvements of the service. There was also the hope that ultimately applications could be increased by individuals willing to foster or adopt. As already mentioned, the project was a failure, running for not even a year before it was shut down. Very few people posted topics in the forum during this time, and the number of discussions held on the platform were low, while the costs of maintaining the forum were high seeing as it was outsourced to a private technology company. Needless to say, the desired outcomes could not be achieved in the short-run. Chadwick identifies the main reasons this project failed, despite the good starting conditions: “*They are, in descending order of importance: budget constraints and organizational instability; policy shifts inside the social service agency; political ambivalence among elected representatives; the perception of legal risks that led to a cautious depoliticized approach; and problems generated by the outsourcing of part of the initiative.*” (Chadwick 2011: 27).

### 3.4.3. Agenda setting

#### 3.4.3.1. E-petitions

E-petitions represent a category of participation opportunities for citizens that is formally institutionalised and fully operational at many government levels, from local communities to the European Parliament (Lindner and Riehm 2011). An e-petition system allows citizens to submit to a government institution a formal request on a specific political issue following a set of formal procedural rules whereby all steps can be carried out online. Petitions are a hybrid category of participatory practice, since formal procedures are organised top-down but petitions on specific subjects are initiated bottom-up by citizens. The instrument is mainly related to the phases of problem definition, articulation and agenda setting in policy making. It should be noted that the label “citizens’ initiative” is used for a participative mechanism that is more or less the same as or at least very similar to a petition. One of the most well-known examples is the European Citizens’ Initiative which will be treated separately in Chapter 3.4.5.4.

E-petitions can be an efficient tool to empower citizens and address common issues, given the process possesses a certain amount of transparency (Alathur et al. 2012). E-petition systems exist in various forms:

petitions that are merely electronically processed internally at the institution addressed; petitions submitted electronically (via email or web-interface); petitions that are publicly accessible on the Internet and provide more or less additional information; and publicly accessible e-petitions that include extended communicative and participative functionalities (Riehm et al. (2009, 40). E-petition tools, especially those implemented at national level in Scotland and Germany have been studied quite intensively. Most recent assessments (Bochel 2013; Riehm et al. 2014; Lindner/Riehm 2011) add to earlier evaluations, among others, by the Office of Technology Assessment at the German Bundestag, the German parliament (TAB). The latter were related to the introduction of "Public (electronic) Petitions" in Germany in 2005. This type of petition tool comprises the following components: submission via email attachment; examination by the petitions committee; publication on the Internet; possibilities for co-signing and discussing petitions online; processing, examination and replies to the petitioners; and publication of the decision on the Internet. The focus on the public character does not mean that all petitions are published, only those that pass the examination by the petitions committee; during the pilot stage they amounted to only 2% (Riehm et al. 2009, 27).

According to Riehm et al. (2014, 9-18 and 26-28) the system of public electronic petitions at the German Bundestag enjoys much popularity, and is deemed a success also for other reasons: between 2006 and 2011 the percentage of e-petitions among all petitions increased from 17% to 34%, and the percentage of public petitions from 5% to 24%. During this period more than 4 million persons signed 2,750 public electronic petitions and an accumulated total of more than 200,000 discussion contributions were recorded. The petitioners and the petitions committee are given the opportunity to discuss the issue jointly in a public committee meeting if over 50,000 persons sign a petition. This innovation is seen positively by both petitioners and members of parliament. The vast majority also welcomes the implementation of discussion fora and finds them informative and objective. The petitions committee considers that between one third and a half of the petitions are positively concluded. Petitioners themselves are a little more critical: only one third were satisfied with the treatment of their petition.

A common observation reflected in this case study is that e-petitions do not typically mobilize new citizens to participate via petitions, but they tend to substitute conventional petitions leading to no overall growth in petitioning activities. The average petitioner remains male and with a higher educational background than your average citizen, with e-petitioners being younger than conventional petitioners. The move to the Internet alone does not lead to procedural transparency and increased participation opportunities. This is more likely in a combination of technological and politico-institutional reform as was the case in Germany.

In England Panagiotopoulos et al. (2011) examined the effectiveness of e-petitioning tools in English Local Government and came to a less optimistic conclusion, claiming the efforts of institutional compliance to be minimal and the actual use of e-petitions to be low. The use of e-petitioning systems was dependent on population density and previous experience of local governments with e-participation; in most cases no promotion of e-petition services could be observed. Commonly cited issues with e-petitions involve the official responses, which tend to damage the perceived success of a petition rather than promoting it. Often governments fail to provide official replies to petitions which hit their quota, or they take far too long to issue these replies until the matter at hand is of no more relevance (Wright 2016; Wright 2012). Of those who did receive official responses, the majority of petitioners indicated being sorely disappointed, the responses being perceived as shallow and duplicated from previous interactions, giving the impression that the government is not listening or even willing to listen (Wright 2016).

The case of the Downing Street e-petitions (UK) was widely lauded as a success and led to a wider adoption of e-petitioning processes (Wright 2012). Upon closer examination, however, it is revealed that the Downing Street e-petitions suffered from highly unequal participation. This was in part due to the high presence of so-called "super-posters", who either create more than 10 accepted petitions or sign over 100 petitions. *"The regular petition creators were particularly harmful because they posted on new topics quickly, and Downing Street would block subsequent petitions on similar topics. Many thousands of people attempted to become active citizens only to find their petition (and often several) rejected. However, the rule that blocked repeat*

*petitions limited the chance for people to dominate the agenda [...] while still allowing people to set their own.*" (Wright 2012: 466). Wright (2012) further criticized the lack of a formal space to deliberate or counter-petition. El Noshokaty et al. (2016) examined what makes an e-petition successful and came to the conclusion that incorporating positive emotions into a petition will raise its chances of success. No changes in success rate could be observed in petitions whose authors put an emphasis on moral obligations. In fact, in petitions where moral and cognitive elements were very strong, El Noshokaty et al. (2016) even noted a decline in success rate. Petition quality also factors into success. Zhang et al. (2016) have determined that in the case of a government-initiated program in China, the most attention and comments are granted to petitions with high salience and low complexity. Despite its popularity among citizens, the Chinese case is criticized for the prevalence of so-called "participation chaos", stemming from low quality proposals with little or no relevance and organizational issues such as misplacements of proposal types. Organized participation needs a certain level of civic knowledge or skills, which didn't appear to be present in this case study (Zhang et al. 2016). Hale et al. (2013) used a big data approach in order to analyze the growth of the Downing Street e-petitions over a timespan of two years, encompassing a total of over 8.000 petitions. They discovered that while online mobilization for most petitions does not grow, there are a few successful petitions with rapid growth, the amount of signatures gathered on the first day being a good indicator for success. This type of mobilization appears independent of media attention, as the media is uninvolved until a high amount of signatures and support is reached (Hale et al. 2013).

But how do the petitioners themselves define the success of a petition? According to Wright (2016) citizens can perceive petition success in a number of additional ways to policy impact, such as the following: increased publicity/awareness, increased membership, increased credibility, galvanized/focused support, sense of solidarity in local/national community, feeling of making a difference, show of acting, policy changes through government, government provided alternatives or partial changes, helped gain key support/links, helped gain access to ministers, got an official response, reached a set target of signatures, increased understanding in government and/or amongst general public, made a statement, outlet to express concerns, fulfilled sense of civic duty, proved others also care about the issue (Wright 2016: 850).

Åström et al. (2016) conducted research on survey data of 1,470 individuals who participated in Malmöinitiativet, an e-petitioning process in Sweden, in order to closer examine the relationship of e-petitions on trust in political institutions, seeing as e-petitions are considered one of the most commonly used variants of citizen participation (see Åström et al. 2016). The research team finds that citizens generally had very low expectations regarding the impact of e-petitions. Among their conclusions they state:

*"In general, experiences with e-petitioning have not rendered any overall gain in trust; and for citizens more distant from the political mainstream, distrust is often reinforced. However, the results show that more citizens with a negative predisposition toward government have changed their perception in a positive direction than vice versa (positive predisposition-negative change). So even if negative reinforcement is more common than positive reinforcement, change is more positive than negative."* (Åström et al. 2016: 3f.)

Largely positive experiences with another tool for e-petitions have also been reported from its application in the context of the New Citizens' Initiative Act in Finland (see Lironi 2016, 18 ff.). This instrument contributes to direct democracy by giving Finnish citizens the right to submit an initiative to the Parliament whereby an official dedicated online system facilitates the collection of the required number of statements of support. Since its institutionalisation in 2012 nine successful initiatives reached the Parliament, only one was turned into law so far. The main experiences as summarised by Lironi include: enhanced participation of citizens in policy-making, especially among the youth; mutual learning processes among citizens and decision-makers; policy-shaping new ideas brought in by citizens; and enhanced legitimacy of policy-making. However, the success was troubled by the predominance of a certain segment of the population leading to the conclusion that this instrument mobilises mainly already

privileged groups than a more representative section of the society. Although it raised the level of trust in policy-making, there were also signs of political disenchantment, especially among the supporters of failed initiatives.

When talking about e-petitions, the phenomenon of “slacktivism” is often brought up. The idea is that individuals engage in “activist” actions with minimal effort and no strong real world consequences, the act itself only serving to satisfy the individual’s sense of having accomplished something and decreasing the likelihood of engaging in further, perhaps more effective, political engagements. Schumann and Klein (2015) could show negative effects of slacktivism on willingness to participate in a demonstration or to partake in a panel discussion for example. They note the importance of individuals to feel part of a group and be invested in the group’s welfare and viability in order to mobilize for offline collective actions.

Parycek et al. (2014) evaluated OurSpace, an international project dedicated to improving the engagement of the youth of Europe with European decision makers through the combination of ICT use, information and motivation to participate. The experience was made that, other than the already politically motivated individuals, it is very difficult to mobilize young citizens. While the young participants felt sceptical regarding the potential to improve trust in politics, the value of OurSpace as a tool to contact politicians and present their opinions to decision-makers was recognized. The research team also discovered Europe’s youth to be “[...] *very capable to engage in face-to-face and anti-hierarchal discussions with both politicians and other users, and to engage in respectful and inclusive deliberation online.*” (Parycek et al. 2014: 138). According to Parycek and his colleagues, the engagement of decision makers was an important factor in the success of the project, and the implementation of social features such as chat or profile options are advised. Identified barriers for discourse were language, navigational difficulties on the internet platform and low interest in European-level matters (Parycek et al. 2014).

### 3.4.3.2. E-campaigning

Another form of influence in political agenda setting comes from digital tools used for e-campaigning. Campaigns can be seen as strategically coordinated collective activities that pursue specific political objectives or projects and seek the engagement of followers; they are usually carried out over a defined period of time. Two different agents of campaigning activities which are increasingly making use of support by digital tools should be distinguished: various civil society actors and political parties. The STOA (2011) study had focused on the first category, e-campaigning and e-activism as bottom-up activities by citizen initiatives and civil society organisations such as environmental protection groups. It had pointed out the advantages of digital networked environments and the wide variety of available tools (e.g. mailing lists, blogs, YouTube videos, discussion fora, wikis, social media) and how the internet extends the repertoire of collective action both regarding information and framing and as a tactical medium in political campaigning (STOA 2011, 78 ff.). In the present context the focus will be on the second category, e-campaigning by political parties, particularly including the role of social media.

Through empirically examining the relationship between “candidate salience” and a candidate’s online social media engagement, Hong and Nadler (2012) conclude that though methods of campaigning for elections have expanded with the use of social media, the impact on online public attention has been very low. Painter (2015), through the use of an experimental investigation, determined Facebook to be more effective than campaign websites during the 2012 US presidential campaign regarding the fostering of trust in government and the relationship between citizens and the campaign, suspecting the reasons to lie in the nature of two-way communication. Effing et al. (2011) conducted a literature review on the topic of social media and participation and assessed results from elections held in the Netherlands in 2010 as well as 2011. They point to examples of politicians, successfully using social media complementary to their offline campaigns, such as in the case of Obama’s election campaign and Ségolène Royal’s campaign in 2007 in France, as well as mass mobilizations in the Middle-East which were enabled by social media. For the case study in the Netherlands, however, no significant impact of social media on voting behavior could be found for the local elections in 2010 and 2011. While the authors do observe that the national

elections in 2010 did favor individuals with strong social media engagement, this could simply be due to these individuals having large social networks to begin with. Effing et al. (2011) conclude with the words that while social media can influence voters, it is down to the design whether it is used effectively within a political campaign. Koc-Michalska and Gibson (2014) also examined the 2007 French presidential campaign, along with the 2012 campaign on the basis of two surveys and a quantitative content analysis of candidate websites. They determined that in 2012 social networking platforms appeared as a new online public sphere in which younger less politically involved individuals who are unsatisfied with the democratic system partake. *“The importance of prior political attitudes such as interest and trust, however, remain strong.”* (Koc-Michalska and Gibson 2014: 220). Another observation they could make was that the personal homepages of minor and fringe parties have started to even outperform those of major candidates, despite the difference in resources. Towner and Muñoz (2016) analyzed data of a Baby Boomer survey panel from a general election in 2012 and observe that following campaign information on Facebook was linked to further online engagement for this group of individuals.

Narrowcasting and political marketing are campaign strategies which can have a big impact on representative democracy (Edwards and De Kool 2016). A combination of social and traditional media can effectively employed for political marketing, in which political parties disseminate news and reports themselves. Narrowcasting describes the formulation of specific messages which are tailored to a particular target group, this is again an area social media can be very helpful in. Through the use of social networks and targeted email campaigns a very specific group of individuals can be reached with specific information. The 2008 Obama campaign was a huge success precisely because it combined narrowcasting with centralised coordination (Towner and Dulio 2012). Political marketing and narrowcasting touch on the work of parliaments because they help define the context in which parliamentary democracy operates. They turn public opinion into a compass with which representatives align the exercise of their mandate. This means that the nature of political representation is changing from a contractual relationship between electorate and elected to a relationship in a permanent state of flux, with politicians constantly being challenged to determine their position vis-à-vis public opinion. The traditional and new media are reinforcing this tendency and facilitating the strategic behaviour among politicians to which it is giving rise (Coleman and Spiller 2003).

Circumstances in Europe appear to be less conducive to effective narrowcasting than in the United States. Party discipline is weaker in the United States than in Europe, leaving more scope for differentiated messages. It is riskier to disseminate isolated electoral messages in Europe than in the United States (Ward, Gibson and Nixon 2003; Cardenal 2011). Studies carried out in Norway, Germany and Austria show that political parties still make little use of online opportunities to connect with specific groups such as young people, the elderly, women and minorities. This is in part because party strategists are unsure about the effects of narrowcasting (Karlsen 2011; Russmann 2011).

What are the implications of political marketing and narrowcasting for the quality of parliament’s work? Because public opinion acts as a compass with which politicians align the exercise of their mandate, these two methods do little to encourage citizens and politicians to interact and confront each other’s opinions. Moreover, the interactive tools that can provide a platform for this are precisely the new media that politicians use only sparingly.

### **3.4.4. Decision-making**

#### **3.4.4.1. E-consultation**

E-consultations belong to the group of top-down e-participation instruments most widely practised at all tiers of government – from the local to supra-national levels. In practice the function of this instrument may be confined to contribute to agenda setting but in principle it also carries potential to substantially shape decisions to be taken. Main objectives are to enhance the legitimacy of political decisions and to raise the quality of decisions by improving inputs as regards the social range and/or the knowledge base.



The potential to rationalise political decision-making is typically activated in the phase of policy formulation (cf. Albrecht 2012: 13ff.). A variety of designs is being practised with e consultations. Besides open and closed consultations as basic categories the variants include simple question-and-answer discussion fora, e-polls or e-surveys, selected e-panels, and so-called editorial consultations (for example, participatory drafting of policy documents in the European Parliament's Citizens' Agora) (cf. Tomkova 2009).

Pammett and Goodman (2013) explored the consultation practices undertaken before the use of e-voting systems as well as the following evaluation practices in Canada and Europe. Consultations are deemed important in the context of e-voting, as Pammett and Goodman emphasize the need for openness and transparency in this area to foster trust in the electoral process. They concluded that consultations are limited in various respects. While in Europe consultations tend to involve parliamentary or government committees, political parties, expert committees and specific stakeholder groups, consultations in Canada appear to transpire between city councilors and government officials. In addition, these consultations often adopt the character of informing about decisions already made rather than consulting on a decision before the fact (Pammett and Goodman 2013). Regarding the organization of e-consultations, Loukis and Wimmer (2012) observed that one can achieve higher-quality focused debates by structuring the consultations. They warn, however, that introducing structure can also lead to reduced participation as well as the exclusion of specific groups, resulting in a quality-for-quantity trade-off. They propose that structured e-consultations should be introduced complementary to unstructured consultations already taking place on many government agency sites. An evaluation of the first e-consultation ever held by the Irish House of Parliament was made by Murray (2013). While Murray notes successes regarding the Parliamentary reform and the mobilization of citizens to participate in policy-making processes, he regards e-consultations to be *"appendages to existing, centralized decision-making power"* (Murray 2013: 1) rather than constituting a development in the direction of e-democracy. Similar to Loukis and Wimmer (2012), Murray also warns of the quality of participation, with a reference to lack of internet accessibility for many individuals. An analysis of the European Citizens' Consultations (ECC) by Karlsson (2011) shows that political representation hasn't been increased through the project as hoped. Members of the European parliament (MEPs) as well as participating citizens appeared to have been disappointed by the ECC, Karlsson finds the design of the ECC project, at least in part, responsible for the failure. In order for a participatory project such as the ECC to succeed, one must have clarity over what inputs are desired by the MEPs and which inputs are expected from the citizens. The form of communication between MEPs and citizens as well as its management must also be considered carefully (Karlsson 2011). Kies et al. (2013) also evaluated the ECC, coming to similar conclusions as Karlsson, finding there to be no impact of the deliberation results on decision-makers. They describe the ECC as *"a fascinating and valuable participative event"* (Kies et al. 2013: 2), but deem it *"a successful civic instrument but not a convincing policy instrument"* (Kies et al. 2013: 24), due to participants perceiving positive impacts such as higher confidence in the EU and informational gains, but politicians disregarding the propositions. A general problem with deliberative projects which is pointed out is the so-called *"loss of plurality"*, in which ideas and inputs of citizens are lost during the phase of condensing all the information into a few limited recommendations. While this is inevitable, one must take care not to lose too much information, as was the case for the ECC (Kies et al. 2013).

#### 3.4.4.2. E-participative budgeting

A new instrument which became labelled as *"participative budgeting"* has practically been invented in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where citizens have been participating in processes to determine the distribution and investment of municipal budgets since 1989. This participative arrangement, classified and much celebrated as a democratic innovation, has attracted special attention because of its special origin and the participation in decision-making. E-participative budgeting stands for the further development of this model using electronic communication tools. Over the past 25 years the practice of participatory budgeting first spread in Brazil and Latin America, then also all over Europe, with several hundred cities adopting the concept (Talpin 2012: 186). With the diffusion of the model, a differentiation process into a

number of took place. Today a number of different variants using traditional, online or hybrid communication channels are practised (cf. Mkude et al. 2014; Miori and Russo 2011), with varying degrees of success (Röcke 2014). In a study of projects in 20 European cities, Sintomer et al. (2008) identified six different models. Not all cases give citizens decision-making power; some are merely consultative or can have other impacts, for example contributing to the modernisation of public administration or bridging the gap between politicians and citizens. Unlike the original model in Porto Alegre, the European cases only deal with 1% to 20% of the municipal budget (Talpin 2012: 186). In Germany participative budgeting processes mostly consist of the following phases: general information, discussion of ideas, specification of selected proposals, and voting on selected suggestions. A combination of online and offline channels to achieve a maximum of inclusiveness is now state of the art. For all stakeholders involved, discussions on how to distribute public funds are challenging, the processes are time and resource consuming, and citizens have to deal with complicated budget issues. Proper process design and ICT support to save time and resource demands are therefore essential elements. “[T]he proper response to the relatively high cost of participation is not to minimize participation but to minimize cost through the best methods and technology available” (Heidelberger 2009: 1).

From the experience with participative budgeting in Europe Sintomer et al. (2008) identified the following impacts: support for the demand for increased transparency, improved public services, accelerated administrative operations, better cooperation among public administration units, and enhanced responsiveness. In general also positive contributions to the political culture and competences of participants can be expected. This can include extended participation opportunities, enhanced transparency of public policy, better quality of decision-making, increased legitimacy and a stronger identification with the local community. Cost reduction and major structural reforms are less likely achieved.

Participatory budgeting has been carried out in over 1.700 local governments from over 40 different countries, according to Cabannes (2015). It can be found that by implementing participatory budgeting, improvements can be achieved in the areas of basic service provision and management, due to the element of community oversight. However, typically existing power relations between the citizens and their local governments remain unchanged (Cabannes 2015). Gonçalves (2013) observes increased investments in sanitation and health services in Brazil as a result of the adoption of participatory budgeting, leading to a reduction of infant mortality rates. The conclusion is drawn that more direct interactions between local governments and citizens can indeed impact public expenditures with noticeable consequences (Goncalves 2013), and that participatory budgeting “[...] is an effective mechanism of local authorities influence on territorial development” (Volodin 2014: 378). Similar results were found by Pimentel Walker (2016) when examining the effects of co-managed slum upgrading in Porto Alegre. Effective distribution of housing as well as basic infrastructure could be observed, a result of the involvement of slum dwellers in the upgrading process through the means of participatory budgeting which allowed for appropriate solutions to be found concerning the diverse needs of the heterogeneous group of slum dwellers (Pimentel Walker 2016). However, as Gordon et al. (2016) point out concerning the use of social media platforms in context of the participatory budgeting process, local community leaders in the USA perceive a lack of adequate infrastructure and hindrances caused by restrictive policies as well as security concerns, which could be limiting success. As a result social media platforms remain underused in the area of participatory budgeting.

#### **3.4.4.3. E-voting**

E-voting is the form of e-participation which has the most direct influence on a decision, i.e. the outcome of a choice between alternative options. The chapters about “E-voting in Europe” in the e-democracy report of 2011 discussed selected country cases and legal and technical issues, the socio cultural context and socio political issues (STOA 2011). This composition of topics is still valid and reflected in the literature, therefore what will be covered in the following pages is an update of the topics just mentioned,

mainly based on empirical cases, as a strong literature strand studies internet voting in particular countries. These case analyses are considered as offering the most valuable knowledge for the purpose of this section. For instance, as Estonia was the first country to introduce internet voting for national and binding elections, it is an often cited and investigated case, especially for longer term analyses. Starting with trials in 2004, the first binding election where the internet option has been offered was carried out in 2005 on a local level and since then for all kinds of elections (local, national, European). Looking back to the comparatively large amount of internet elections in a row, Estonia is often analysed and rather dominant in the recent literature (e.g., Heiberg et al. 2012, Kitsing 2014, Sál 2015, Springall et al. 2014, Vassil and Weber 2011, Vinkel 2012). Interestingly, though Estonia takes a leading role in terms of internet voting, as Toots et al. (2011) show this does not imply success in e-democracy in a broader sense. In a qualitative case study, the authors investigate the perceived success of Estonia's e-voting experience and three other e-participation projects in comparison and eventually detect a remarkable discrepancy (Toots et al. 2011).

Another popular case, also due to its long history and well-embedded and long-term political strategy, is Switzerland (e.g., Beroggi et al. 2011, Driza-Maurer et al. 2012, Germann and Serdült 2014, Hill 2015, Serdült et al. 2015). In the case of Norway, the very high level of public trust in the government and the high degree of caution and professionalism that accompanied the introduction of internet voting in 2011 raised hopes that it would have a future there. Nevertheless, controversies over the sufficiency of security mechanisms led to a discontinuation of the internet voting project in 2014. Besides these prominent European cases, interesting insights can also be gained from experiences made with internet voting around the world, e.g. in Australia or the US.

Analyses of all of these empirical cases, focusing on a variety of topics, such as trust, security and transparency or impact on voter turnout, contribute to gain well-grounded knowledge about the current state of internet voting.

### **Legal theory and computer science**

Those who decide to introduce internet voting or to continue internet voting are confronted with the legal challenges that are posed with electronically supported voting channels. Elections, being a key element of democracy (Garrone 2005: 111), have to be protected carefully. While a legally binding constitution defines the procedural requirements for elections, computer science is in charge of developing the measures that ensure compliance with these requirements (Bräunlich et al. 2013). The main election principles, namely universal, equal, secret, direct and free suffrage, which are commonly referred to, find their manifestation in national legal frameworks as well as in international election standards, for instance the European Commission's Compendium of International Electoral Standards (EC 2007), the Venice Commission (2003) or the OSCE Election Observation Handbook (2010). In addition, the Council of Europe's recommendations on the legal, operational and technical standards for e-voting (2005) (Rec(2004)11) state that "e-voting shall respect all the principles of democratic elections and referendums" (Council of Europe 2005) and refer to those five principles of voting. In fact, the Rec(2004)11 has been a very influential international document with regards to e-voting and is still an important reference point for many national internet voting frameworks (Stein and Wenda 2014). Aspirations to update and renew Rec(2004)11 are discussed on a regular basis in review meetings or expert meetings of the Council of Europe, though until now, it is unclear with what kind of success.

Compliance with these central legal principles, poses indeed great technical challenges for the implementation of internet voting. Fundamental internet security problems need to be taken seriously and procedural issues such as guaranteeing both secrecy and transparency at the same time have to be considered. In addition, potential susceptibility to flaws accrue from the multiplicity of agents (computers, servers, networks) involved in the voting procedure and is an aspect that can seriously influence the legitimacy of voting. Opponents of e-voting claim that this is even impossible to achieve in

principle. McGaley and McCarthy (2004: 153) state for example that *“the nature of computers is that their inner workings are secret. Since transactions and calculations happen at an electronic level, it is not physically possible for humans to observe exactly what a computer is doing”*. Since ever, the technical aspects are a topic of discussion. It became obvious again quite recently, when, in 2015, Richard Hill reported his experience of the attempt to challenge the Geneva e-voting system in court. He filed court challenges against the use of internet voting in 2011, when e-voting was offered to all voters in Geneva. He wanted the courts to examine if e-voting was consistent with the cantonal law and the Federal Constitution (Hill 2015). According to the Federal Tribunal it is not sufficient if a weakness of a system is only claimed, and that *“an appeal can only be lodged if weaknesses have been actually exploited during a specific vote”* (Hill 2015). Regarding vulnerability tests of voting systems, in a recent case in the US, in Washington D.C., a unique approach was followed: a mock trial was held prior to an internet election in order to offer everyone who is interested the chance to test the voting system in place (Wolchok et al. 2012). In fact, a research group from Michigan University gained control of the election server, changed votes and revealed secret ballots. Their intrusion has not been detected by the officials for nearly two business days. According to the “attackers” this case illustrates the practical challenges of securing online voting today (Wolchok et al. 2012). Another incident in connection with internet voting in Australia was reported by Buell (2015), who refers to Halderman from the University of Michigan and Teague from the University of Melbourne, who detected a standard security flaw in a vendor software used for state wide elections. Buell (2015) calls the reaction of the responsible authority, the New South Wales Election Commission (NSWEC) *“both dismissive and frightening”*, because not only the NSWEC admitted that they had factored the possibility of corrupted votes, but also *“targeted Teague with a formal complaint to her university, accusing her of a breach of ethics and suggesting further that a DoS attack was coming from the University of Michigan”* (Buell 2015). Also worth mentioning is an incident that took place during elections in 2011 in Estonia: although obvious election fraud has never been detected, this possibility was much discussed after the parliamentary elections, when an Estonian student claimed that it would be easy to hack and manipulate the Estonian internet voting system (Rikken 2011). He handed in a claim and sought nullification of the election results, which was then rejected by the Constitutional Review Chamber by arguing that the sole possibility that a computer may have been affected without the voter’s knowledge is not reason enough to nullify the results (Sivonen 2011). As a consequence, shortly before the European elections in 2014, a debate about security issues of the Estonian system came up again (Arthur 2014).

Regarding Estonia in particular, the OSCE that accompanied the elections in 2011 recommends some changes and sees *“scope for further improvement of the legal framework, oversight and accountability, and some technical aspects of the internet voting system”* (OSCE/ODIHR 2011). Taking into account that Estonia had been a victim of a cyber-attack in 2007, when a denial of service attack created problems for many Estonian web sites (Jones/Simons 2012) potential vulnerabilities become obvious. Springall et al. (2014) observed the 2013 internet election in Estonia and evaluated the security of the system. They even recommend discontinuing internet voting in Estonia. Based on the experience they made in their investigation of procedural and technological control mechanisms, they conclude *“that a state-level attacker, sophisticated criminal, or dishonest insider could defeat both the technological and procedural controls in order to manipulate election outcomes”* (Springall et al. 2014)

Obviously, on a regular basis, similar challenges come up in various countries where internet voting is in place: critics of internet voting point to vulnerabilities of a system in place, sometimes even file court challenges. However, their voice remains unheard, because legally nothing can be done as long as a misuse cannot be proved. On the one hand the sole possibility of fraud is not reason enough to take action, on the other hand, demonstrating flaws would mean committing a crime. Nevertheless, the possibility of indirect effects, such as revisions of the e-voting system in place resulting from the mere fact that court challenges are filed or media and public attention has been attracted, does exist (see also Hill 2015).

On the subject of practical implementation, there are also several technical issues which remain to be resolved (Beroggi 2014; OSCE/ODIHR 2012; OSCE/ODIHR 2013). Beroggi (2014) reports that problems were occurring during the preparation, vote counting, login and connection as well as the vote casting phases during the test of the internet voting system in the Canton of Zurich in 2004. Among the problems was the fact that the website was not always online, and that difficulties arose in accessibility through the release of a web browser update.

### **Socio political issues**

Internet voting has the potential to increase voter turnout – this is one central argument brought forward by internet voting proponents since the beginning of debates about internet voting. Due to methodological issues, it is rather difficult to make profound claims about the relation between internet voting and turnout. There is no inevitable causal relationship between the amount of participating voters and online voting, variables such as the immediacy of the issues, positions at stake or persons to be elected must also be considered when looking at voter turnout. It is possible though to make some assumptions, based on a variety of studies dealing with this relation. Reports of the impacts of e-voting initiatives on voter turnout are in fact rather sobering, results are indicating that the move from paper to internet does not lead to the anticipated increase in total voter turnout. In Norway for instance, an election evaluation revealed that the turnout levels in the trial municipalities slightly increased, but as these are replicated in the whole country, internet voting cannot explain the numbers (MLGRD 2012). When examining survey data, individuals (primarily young, male, of higher income and education and engaging in frequent social media use) indicate that e-voting would mobilize them in situations where they would otherwise not participate (Spada et al. 2016) and that their interest in e-voting options is high (Carter and Campbell 2011). These survey results are, however, not reflected in data of actual e-voting experiments (Beroggi 2014; MLGRD 2012).

In 2004 a pilot program for testing an internet voting system was introduced in the Canton of Zurich, Switzerland, preceded by a survey on the expected benefits of e-voting, providing a very good example of how survey data and expectations on this issue can conflict strongly with findings (Beroggi 2014). Individuals indicated high interest in e-voting as opposed to traditional methods, while the findings showed predominant usage of postal voting. Overall, e-voting did not mobilize more young voters, as the overall age distribution stayed the same, but Beroggi (2014) notes that the average age of e-voters is lower than postal and ballot voters. In Norway young voters were optimistic concerning online-voting, but emphasized the symbolic and ceremonial importance of walking to the polling station to submit their vote manually (MLGRD 2012). Based on an analysis of Estonia's internet elections, Sál (2015) concludes that *"the sought correlating relation between internet voting and the total voter turnout can't be convincingly proven"*.

Vassil and Weber (2011) also contribute to the debate about the potential of e-voting to boost turnout. The authors investigate the 2011 election in Estonia and explain the influence of e-voting on voter turnout as follows: they distinct between usage and impact of e-voting and claim that *"usage of e-voting is mostly restricted to the politically engaged, but the impact of the technology on the propensity to turn out is highest among 'peripheral' citizens."* (Vassil and Weber 2011: 16). The authors use the term 'peripheral citizens' to describe rather disaffected and disengaged citizens, who are *"unlikely to use e-voting, but those few who happen to do so are exposed to strong mobilizing forces"* (Vassil and Weber 2011: 2). This group of citizens is described as less computer literate people who are fascinated by the e-voting application itself.

### **Socio cultural issues**

Another dimension of e-voting that is discussed regularly deals with the issue of trust in technology and how it might influence election turnout and election outcomes. In order to engage in e-voting, one must have a reasonable amount of trust in the process, which appears to be present in Estonian and Swiss voters and Norwegian election stakeholders, according to the OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Reports for the respective countries of 2011, 2012 and 2013. For Estonia a steady increase of voters

choosing to cast their ballot via the internet from 2005 onwards can be noted (OSCE/ODIHR 2011). Looking at a comparatively high number of internet elections, it seems that Estonians have gradually built up trust in the system as they actually were able to use the system. Concerning internet voting in Estonia, Vinkel (2012) states that “[...] the factor of trust has been of the utmost importance. Without a doubt, trust will stay the most important factor of choosing internet Voting also in the future and building and stabilizing this trust is the most important but also one of the most difficult tasks of the election administration.” As internet voting profoundly challenges the public staging of an election and engagement in the counting process, the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government Regional Development in 2011 and 2013 designed and run the so-called Decryption and Counting Ceremony at election day, which had the aim to sustain trust in internet voting by making the decryption and counting of electronic votes public (Markussen et al. 2014). It remains to be open though, to what extent the ceremony in Norway reached its aim. Although Markussen et al. (2014) note that the ceremony as such attests to the idea that IT is a socio-technical learning process, the authors also point to the challenge of making specialised cryptographic elements of internet voting comprehensible for anyone else than technical experts.

## Conclusions

It is rather obvious that even after more than a decade of conducting and experimenting with internet voting in various country specific contexts, several challenges exist. It can be said that the dimensions of internet voting that have been elaborated on in the STOA report of 2011 haven't lost any topicality. In fact, their relevance is regularly emphasised when online elections in a variety of countries are accompanied by evaluations focusing for instance on turnout rates, security aspects, user friendliness or trust. Particularly striking is the large amount of critics present in the literature. On a regular basis, system vulnerabilities are made public, sometimes even by filing a lawsuit. All in all further developments are still needed with regards to technical aspects, legal frameworks, security, transparency and verifiability, as well as oversight and accountability. The Swiss trial is lauded by the OSCE/ODIHR (2012) for being good practice, the introduction being careful and limited, ensuring integrity of the systems and building public trust.

At first sight, internet voting might be perceived as an opportunity to alleviate the so called democratic deficit of the EU – manifested in the continuously decreasing electoral participation in EU elections. However, as the analyses of various cases within Europe where internet voting has been introduced show, such hopes have not been fulfilled. It is not only the convenience aspect that influences the decision of whether a citizen votes or not, but rather political reasons such as political interest or satisfaction with the political system. And regarding these kinds of challenges, internet voting cannot be a technological quick fix.

## 3.4.5. Experiences with e-participation at EU-level

### 3.4.5.1. Introduction

Over the past two decades the EU has experienced significant changes of its governance regime which became labelled as a “participatory turn” (Saurugger 2010, see also chapter 3.1.5 of this study). These steps towards strengthening the connections with European citizens and civil society not only led to the implementation of participatory democracy as a norm in the EU political system but also brought about a series of democratic innovations in practice.

Meanwhile there are several contributions to an encompassing evaluation of the EU institutions' e-participation activities. One is the volume titled “Is Europe Listening to Us?” (Kies and Nanz 2013) which collects a multifaceted set of reviews on a number of ‘deliberative citizens involvement projects’ (DCIPs) initiated by EU institutions.

A recent study for the European Parliament (Lironi 2016) describes and provides an analysis of the existing main e-participation tools at EU level, distinguishing between four categories: 1) the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), 2) public e-consultations, 3) petitions to the European Parliament, and 4)



additional ways to foster EU e-participation (a heterogeneous group including EU co-funded projects, the online platform Futurium, and examples of e-participation offers and activities by MEPs). Among others the report offers an in depth analysis of strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities (SWOT analysis) on the ECI and online EU public consultations, based on a screening of relevant literature and a subsequent survey among experts to produce a shortlist of elements and ranking by priority.

Based on these and a number of other sources the following sections will review assessments of major e-participation instruments in use at EU level. The review will start with a group of deliberative citizens' involvement projects, followed by sections on e-consultation instruments, the European Citizens' Initiative, and the European Parliament's e-petitions system, before we note with some tentative conclusions.

#### 3.4.5.2. Deliberative citizens' involvement projects (DCIPs)

In one of the chapters, Yang (2013) identified a variety of 23 "transnational deliberative citizens' involvement projects" between 2001 and 2010 sponsored by EU programmes. His analysis comes to the following conclusions: it would go too far to see a paradigm shift in European communication policy, however, these exercises represent a unique case of experimentation with a diverse set of transnational deliberative citizens' involvement, with the reservation that most projects were of a temporary and preliminary nature.

On a subset of the afore mentioned plus one additional case, Smith (2013) undertook a comparative analysis of design choices and democratic qualities with the intention to assess whether citizen participation could be institutionalised at EU level and to what extent deliberation was realised, pointing out at least three novel challenges involved: large scale, language diversity and trans-nationality. The six cases analysed were the 'European Citizens Consultation (ECC09)', 'EuroPolis', 'Agora', 'Ideal-EU', 'Your Voice in Europe', plus 'Futurum'. They comprised three different participation designs: 'deliberative polling' (randomly selected mini publics), 'Twenty-first Century Town Meetings' (ICT-supported large-scale one-day events), and 'online discussion forums'. Assessing four aspects of democratic quality revealed the following results (Smith 2013: 202 ff.):

1. **Inclusiveness.** The two online examples 'Your Voice in Europe' and 'Futurum' showed uneven participation which damaged their legitimacy as perceived by policy makers. Overall the solution to cope with large scales was open access to online participation and randomized or targeted selection for face-to-face participation. An established pattern of EU level participation is a focus on civil society organisations (CSOs). 'Your Voice in Europe' and 'Agora' represent rare examples of institutionalised participation, however, both favor CSOs rather than individual citizens. Considerable efforts were undertaken to allow for multi- or trans-lingual engagement, however, in general people with English language skills had an advantage.
2. **Considered judgement.** Assessments of opportunities for reasoned interactions and reflections on the judgements of fellow-participants were mixed. Interaction and deliberative quality of 'Your voice in Europe' and 'Agora' were seen as negligible whereas 'ECC09' and 'Ideal-EU' allowed for some deliberation mainly within national communities. 'EuroPolis' and 'Futurum' even achieved some trans-national exchange. However, no design allowed for the trans-national development of recommendations.
3. **Publicity.** The question to what extent the broader public became aware of these experiments is answered rather skeptically. The observed silence of the media is especially problematic since publicity of democratic innovations is crucial for democratic legitimacy.
4. **Popular control.** Perhaps the most striking finding is the lack of any impact of these participation experiments on decision-making processes. Apart from empowering effects of engagement on the participants there is practically no evidence that outputs of the participation processes were made use of in any form. It is especially notable that this also holds for 'Your voice in Europe', "*the only consultation procedure that involves lay citizens to be institutionalized and to have a visible impact on decision-making*" (Kies and Nanz (2013: 7). Possible reasons have to be sought in the still experimental

character of these democratic innovations, sometimes far too broad topics chosen, too general outputs, and EU policy makers who had failed to clarify how outputs should be integrated into the policy process.

As concerns the costs of engaging citizens, Smith (2013: 212 ff.) reflects on the available options and strategies at work. He points out that deliberative designs, particularly at European scale, bear high costs for organisers (and some also for participants). However, compared to traditional information campaigns on political issues, the level of investments into these democratic experiments was rather small. E-participation designs may allow saving costs and therefore tend to get priority. For example, the implementation of ‘Your voice in Europe’ as an online platform is also said to have been motivated by the intention to save costs on an impact analysis. This can be misleading since inclusive and reasoned deliberation also requires substantial resources when carried out online.

The conclusions of Smith’s comparative assessment underlines the feasibility of large-scale deliberative engagement of citizens in a multi-lingual and multi-national environment of the EU and points out ‘Futurum’ and ‘EuroPolis’ as good practice examples, arguing that further experimentation and learning across designs would be recommendable. However, given the lack of commitment among decision-makers to formally tie the participation projects into the institutional policy-making process, he is rather pessimistic as regards a continuation of experimenting with deliberative and consultative democratic innovations at EU level. In his opinion a different model of democracy, a plebiscitary path as represented by the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) will be prevailing, in his eyes yet another tool benefitting organized interests rather than a participation instrument for fair interaction between the citizens of Europe.

Kies and Nanz (2013: 9 ff.), reflecting on future prospects of EU level citizens’ deliberation and the relationship between deliberative EU citizens’ involvement projects and the European Citizens’ Initiative, point out important differences of these two types of participative instruments: The ECI is primarily suitable for organised groups with sufficient organisational and financial capacities; it is not specifically designed to further pan-European deliberation; it does not provide higher legitimation for an influence on EU level political decisions; and finally, the ECI can also produce frustration when proposals are rejected as not admissible or if they do not lead to expected provisions in legal acts. Therefore the two instruments should be seen as complementary as regards promoting the participation of lay citizens and organised groups. Kies and Nanz agree with other assessments that sufficient evidence has been accumulated of the deliberative instruments’ positive democratic potential. They point out major challenges and solutions proposed to improve citizens’ EU deliberation activities:

1. To promote citizens’ inclusion, a combination of online and offline activities (an open online phase carefully connected with a phase of face-to-face consultations) and a topic of specific interest seem most appropriate.
2. To achieve a transnational debate, out of several attempted designs, the best model seems to be debates at national level with discussions on propositions from other countries and summarizing the national outcomes, followed by an optional pan-European debate.
3. A response to the absence of any external impact on the political process should include: formally integrating new participative instruments into the EU decision-making process; aiming for an input from citizens that is concrete and of real value for decision-makers as an expertise which is not substitutable; seeing the coupling of deliberation with formal decision-making in a more differentiated way, and focusing on insights from deliberation processes on why certain decisions should be reached rather than seeing outcomes as prescriptions for decision-makers.
4. To increase the credibility and legitimacy of participatory processes, implementation and evaluation should be carried out by different persons and institutions.

As regards the future prospects of deliberative democratic participation at EU level, Kies and Nanz (2013: 13) also share the negative assessments of other scholars. They expect a continuation of deliberative experiments mainly under specific programmes such as the action plan “Active Citizens for Europe”

where the funding restrictions would make large-scale trans-national projects very difficult and the focus seems to be shifted to projects functioning as EU promotional instruments. The basis of current project funding related to e-participation in the EU is the 'Europe for Citizens' programme for the period 2014-2020 (Council of the European Union 2014).

The issue of policy impact is treated in more depth by Gastil (2013) who develops a broader framework to assess the impacts of representative EU deliberation and consultation processes in a comparative view. He distinguishes three types of impact or influence: 1) shaping the views of the participants themselves; 2) informing the judgement of the wider public on an issue; and 3) various forms of coupling deliberative events with formal decision-making (Gastil 2013: 220 ff.). At the latter level, policy influence is understood to *"improve the deliberation that occurs in these bodies"* rather than to *"direct government bodies to mindlessly affirm or abandon their previous policy judgements"* (Gastil 2013: 221). The coupling between deliberation and decision-making can be differentiated into qualitatively different forms of influence in specific phases of policy-making, starting from 1) influence on bringing an issue on the public agenda (agenda setting), to 2) influence on defining the problem(s) to be addressed (problem analysis), 3) on naming the choices and alternatives (choice framing), and finally, 4) direct influence on the decisions taken (decision-making). With this conceptualisation of impact, Gastil compares five major EU public participation exercises with an important qualification, i.e. the aim *"to compare the principal intended paths of influence"* (Gastil 2013: 222). Distinguishing the four phases of the policy-making and three kinds of influence on different groups of actors (participants, general public and policy makers) explained above, he comes to the following results (Gastil 2013: 223 ff.): 'ECC' and 'EuroPolis' are mainly confined to an influence on the participants themselves and the wider public, the difference being that the citizens' consultation case was focused on educative and civic effects in the agenda setting phase, whereas 'EuroPolis' with an emphasis on public judgement and the aim to fix policy choices is attributed some potential for improving the understanding of decision-making issues among participants and the wider public. All three other cases are assessed as carrying potential for different degrees of influence on policy makers: The 'Agora' 2008 event on climate change had the explicit goal of influencing policy, and is seen as suitable for influencing policy makers in the form of yielding a broader understanding of the problems involved and of policy choices to be considered. Likewise 'Ideal-EU' had potential for advising public officials through framing available choices and could even reach into shaping the views of relevant alternatives. 'Your Voice in Europe' could have the most direct policy impact since the public is explicitly invited to deliberate on draft legislation. Although the proposals made are not legally binding, they can substantially inform decision-making.

In order to enrich the repertoire of available instruments to improve participatory and deliberative democracy at the EU level, Gastil also reviews a wide range of participative and deliberative arrangements practiced around the world. He classifies them according to their suitability for different ways of influence on policy processes across all of its phases suggesting their adaptation and incorporation into the EU governance system (Gastil 2013:225 ff.).

#### 3.4.5.3. E-consultation instruments

Badouard (2010) provides a comparative analysis of two key EU e-consultation instruments: the online consultations of the European Commission via 'Your Voice in Europe' and the European Citizens' Consultation 2009. The focus is on institutional strategies in offering these tools, key actors mobilised and main effects. Badouard deplores the failure to develop a single and concerted strategy for EU-level e-participation offerings. The reasons are different political strategies and actors managing these mechanisms within the institutions, entailing a wide variety of projects.

The platform 'Your Voice in Europe' has been established in 2001 as the central site for all online consultations carried out by the various DGs. These e-consultations serve as a policy instrument with the aim to allow for the widest possible consultation of specific parts of the public on specific subjects. Since 2002 consultations are regulated by "General principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties by the Commission" (CEC 2002). From 2001 to 2008 there have been 156 consultations

via the platform. As stated by Badouard (2010: 101 ff.) the tool serves a three-part strategy: “*Your voice in Europe stages a democratization of the EU, regulates the relationship between the Commission and lobbies, and favours a more effective consultation process.*” Being regarded as both democratic and efficient the instrument reconciles the often assumed tension between openness and efficiency.

According to Badouard (2010: 102 ff.) the European Citizens’ Consultations (ECCs) held between 2007 and 2009 have quite a different mission, being a communication tool. Combining an online with an offline format, the aim was to initiate a pan-European debate leading to a European public opinion on the future of EU Europe. As such the ECCs experimented with a new political mediation mechanism which allowed for a ‘transformative’ type of participation by sensitizing participants of EU policy issues and contributing to developing a European identity and citizenship. By contrast, ‘Your Voice in Europe’ rather represents an ‘instrumental’ form of participation insofar as the engagement should contribute to specific public policies and is evaluated with regard to its results. Another difference is that “the general objectives of Your Voice in Europe are related to institutional transparency and openness, while the ECC general objectives are linked to the building of a European public sphere and the development of a culture of active citizenship. In the first case, the main outcomes are of benefit for the Commission, and in the second one, they are of benefit for the citizens.” (Badouard 2010: 103)

There are also clear differences as concerns the actors involved in the two consultation mechanisms (Badouard 2010: 104 ff.). ‘Your Voice in Europe’ addresses the public using a variety of expressions including “public”, “stakeholders”, “European citizens”, and “interested parties”. However, there are some important barriers for “ordinary” citizens: many themes require a highly specialised technical expertise and relevant documents are often only available in a few languages, mostly in English. Consequently, civil society organisations represent the largest group among the participants, also owed to the strategic role of the instrument to regulate the relationships between the Commission and interest groups. Lay citizens play a rather marginal role. The form of communication is one to one via email followed by aggregation, without an opportunity for deliberation.

The ECC instrument contrasts with a special focus on ‘ordinary’ citizens and practising both a deliberative and an aggregative element. However, this has contributed to the highly complex setup of the process, leading to complicated implementation and lowering the incentives for citizens to engage in deliberation (Karlsson 2010). Badouard’s analysis finds that Europe-wide mobilization of activist networks has been intensive and a further obstacle to the participation of individuals so that “organized citizens” clearly outweighed “ordinary citizens”. In this case web users have found means to change the strategically conceived use of the instrument, however, this does not preclude positive effects as regards the project objectives. On the contrary, in the ECC case the successful online mobilization of activist networks across national borders, although being predominant in the voting phase and not intended as such, contributed to an important goal of the project, producing a European dynamic and transnational public. This is an outcome which the nationally separated online debates could not have reached and points to the need for sufficient technical flexibility of e-participation sites to allow for such “spaces of creative action” (Badouard 2010: 107). Finally, a common result of the two consultation instruments regarding the actors called upon is that both fight with difficulties to reach “ordinary” citizens.

As regards the impact on decision-making, the officially assigned role of consultations is to intervene upstream of the legislative process so that participants rather contribute to preparing decisions than to directly taking part in decision processes. The conception of the ‘Your Voice in Europe’ mechanism suggests a stronger link between consultation results and decision, although the outcomes are not legally binding. Badouard argues that obligations to provide adequate feedback also create some pressure on the decisions to be taken and the recognition as a policy instrument together with institutional accountability brings the Commission to acknowledge the participants as legitimate political actors. Important conditions for the sustainability of these participative instruments are their official status and a legal framework on their position in the decision-making process.

Albrecht (2012) reviews the e-consultation practice at EU level with a focus on the 'Your Voice in Europe' platform, building on analyses of other scholars (cf. Quittkat/Finke 2008; Quittkat 2011; Tomkova 2009; Hüller 2008). His main points are: Online consultations have become a well-established instrument regularly used by practically all DGs. This has certainly increased existing participation opportunities and brought more frequent public participation, especially of diverse interest groups, resulting in broadening the input into EU policy-making and extending its knowledge base. However, serious flaws include intransparent and sometimes inadequate processing of contributions; a shift of focus on closed question formats; little evidence of mutual learning and lack of impact on policy outputs; lack of feedback to participants on the use of contributions entailing frustration; one-way format of communication and no opportunities to debate contributions; only limited use of technologies (general purpose instead of specific e-participation and web 2.0 tools); and lacking integration of new arenas for debate, e.g. the political blogosphere (Albrecht 2012: 15 ff.).

Three avenues to improve of e-consultation are suggested: 1) deliberation to enhance input quality; 2) technological advancement; and 3) moving towards popular spaces of online debate. Insisting on the double meaning of "deliberation" – an activity on an individual and a collective level – Albrecht advocates a model of deliberative e-consultations which not only consists of collecting comments on a policy proposal but also allows for discussions on these among the participants and with representatives of the EU institutions concerned. However, its implementation is confronted with a number of unresolved problems such as to adapt an adequate plan for small groups and face to face format to a large-scale setting, high costs, a minority of participants being willing to engage deeper, the need to facilitate the process and to inform and support the participants, and the reluctance of officials and policy-makers to participate. As regards improving technological support, natural language processing and argument visualization technologies are regarded as interesting candidates, although evaluation results to date are mixed. A third approach suggested is to integrate e consultations in new ways with "third places", i.e. social media platforms such as the blogosphere and popular social networking sites, in order to counter the dominating top-down flavour of existing EU channels. The assumption is that a good deal of exchange on these sites includes political talk and that the separation between political content and life world is being blurred more and more. Several EU projects have already experimented with linking e-consultations to social media (cf. Albrecht 2012: 19). Taken together the three strategies outlined show some promise to develop e-consultations further to a model which is more open and effective than the existing practice and which will also enhance the quality and legitimacy of policy decisions.

To exploit this potential, Albrecht suggests to see e-consultations mainly as a knowledge management process and to focus on the views considered rather than focusing on the participative aspect and who participates. This would include attributing higher value to deliberated opinions than to opinions which are provided without interactive assessment and to integrate social media not merely as an additional outlet or to inject political messages but to analyse online discourse and controversies as part of the public opinion with the purpose to inform the formulation of policies. This would mean a turn from "passive listening" in the form of taking up contributions from citizens to "active listening" to civic discourse. Of course this raises the issue of privacy protection which has to be guaranteed in such practice. At the same time in specific cases of e-consultation anonymity might lead to biased results so that strategies must be developed to reconcile the need for identification and negative effects of a forced use of real names (cf. Ruesch and Märker 2012).

The online EU public consultations SWOT analysis by Lironi (2016) led to the following results:

Specific **strengths** of EU e-consultations are seen in reducing participation thresholds, encouraging participation and active citizenship, increasing democratic legitimacy of EU decision-making, enhancing the quality and transparency of EU rules and decisions, providing a cost-effective way of participation in decision-making, influencing the political process in addition to elections and political parties, reducing the democratic deficit, educating citizens about the EU decision-making and increasing its accountability.

Again, the list of **weaknesses** is longer (Lironi 2016: 52 ff.): EU public e-consultations have low publicity, lack publication of clear feedback and results, are rarely representative for EU citizens, are not user-friendly; the platform ‘Your voice in Europe’ is unattractive, intransparent, not user-friendly and ineffective; EU public e-consultations lack meaningful impact on decision-making, can lead to frustration of citizens, and are rarely available in all 24 official EU languages; tool design lacks the specific expertise of consultation practitioners; assessments are difficult since evaluation criteria and key performance indicators are lacking; participants often lack the skills for effective participation; the instrument fails to empower individual citizens vis à vis organised interest groups; personal opinions rather than informed arguments predominate the contributions; and Commission DGs suffer from additional administrative burdens and diversion of resources.

Nonetheless, **opportunities** of EU e-consultation instruments are again working on the perceived democratic deficit in the EU, the rise of alternative forms of engagement and (young) people’s disengagement in ‘traditional’ politics, progress towards more representative consultations with advances in representative statistical sampling methodology, lack of grassroots support for European policy, weak notions of ‘European Citizenship’ and European demos, and technological advancements in ICTs.

**Threats** include the digital divide between countries (digital infrastructure and e-participation experience), lack of interest in EU politics, the perceived democratic deficit in the EU, and openness to e-participation offerings paired with resistance to fundamental change of decision-making structures.

Recommendations to improve online EU public consultations include:

- Upholding the use of this type of e-participation instrument and promoting it;
- Making EU e-consultations better known, accessible to citizens and less technical, and always publishing the results with meaningful feedback, on time and with accurate analysis results;
- Promoting EU e-consultations as an alternative engagement opportunity to attract those tired of ‘traditional’ forms of politics and to stimulate grassroots discussions and engagement in EU affairs;
- Considering a transformation from open consultations to a representative sample model;
- Making sure that no citizen is excluded due to the digital divide and offering complementary offline options for citizens’ participation in policy-making;
- Efforts to enhance citizens’ interest in EU politics and to facilitate their engagement.

The study points out the following key findings of the SWOT analysis on the two EU-level e-participation instruments (Lironi 2016: 45):

- *“The biggest challenges for EU e-participation tools are citizens’ disinterest in EU politics and that these tools are often unknown to people.*
- *The ECI has led to great disappointment; its cost-effectiveness, user-friendliness and rules must be improved.*
- *The EU should always provide quality results and feedback on time for online EU public consultations and overcome the digital divide by ensuring an offline component to this tool.*
- *E-participation mechanisms have the potential to encourage participation and active citizenship, reduce the perceived democratic deficit, foster grassroots support for the EU and be an alternative to ‘traditional’ policy-making.”*

#### 3.4.5.4. The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI)

The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) which formally entered into effect on April 1st 2012, is perhaps the first transnational instrument of participatory democracy worldwide. The ECI gives European citizens an opportunity under certain conditions to influence the legislative initiation process by submitting a proposal to the European Commission. It is now one of the main options among the formally institutionalised systems at EU level that provide for connecting bottom-up and top-down forms of participation, including the support by digital tools. Principal requirements for the launch of an ECI are that the organisers constitute a citizens’ committee with at least seven citizens from at least seven Member



States, registers the initiative on the ECI website, and collects at least one million support statements from citizens of at least seven out of the Member States. (For further details of the ECI process see: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:065:0001:0022:EN:PDF>).

The ECI can be seen as an agenda-setting and policy-shaping instrument which produced great expectations but also skepticism among the diverse interested observers, actors and stakeholder as to the advancement of participatory democracy (cf. Pichler and Kaufmann 2012). Implemented to empower citizens, the ECI is now rather portrayed as a successful example of civil society mobilisation, since civil society organisations (CSOs) have often been promoters of ECIs (Bouza García 2012: 338 ff.). Four different types of promoters of ECIs have been identified and more than half of the initiatives were promoted by two kinds of European-level organisations. These were either well-established organisations with the aim of promoting a very specific policy, or they were, the second type of promoters, European organisations promoting public participation in EU policy-making in general, such as the King Baudouin Foundation or environmental groups like Greenpeace. Companies and organisations representing business interests represent the third type with a specific focus on the health sector (see also Greenwood 2012: 333). The fourth group consists of EU officials and representatives that use the ECI for raising attention to issues already being discussed in the EU. Bouza García (2012: 339; 2015) sees two important effects: Firstly, the ECI may attract groups that are not highly institutionalised in Brussels, since CSOs that have been strongly active at the EU level may prefer a civil society dialogue. This could empower organisations that have been less able to attract the attention of EU institutions but are well able to mobilise citizens and thus more successful with ECIs. Secondly, with the emergence of new actors and issues, relations between EU institutions and civil society may change from “consensus-prone” to increased contention.

Empirical findings from an analysis of the first 16 initiatives suggest that the ECI had special potential to enable citizens of small Member States to participate in the EU (Conrad 2013: 301), but the sample is yet too small to draw definitive conclusions. Although, in the first 21 pilot ECIs, German, Austrian and French associations were particularly well represented within the group of national promoters, needless to say that within this small sample, European-level organisations played a major role, as they promoted more than half of these first initiatives (Bouza García 2012: 343). Hrbek (2012: 383) concludes that despite the fact political parties have not yet been organisers of an ECI, they may see potential in this instrument in the future and therefore may play an active role. However, whether the ECI will have the potential to realise a better integration of top-down and bottom-up approaches, given the existing social asymmetry among the promoters, remains yet uncertain.

### Criticism

As the procedural demands of the ECI require organisers to deploy extremely high levels of organisational capacities, digital tools, in particular the internet’s advantage in mobilising support for an initiative play an important role. Carrara (2012: 357) notes that “*the principle of encouraging the use of the internet in the framework of the ECIs was probably the most consensual point resulting from the Green Paper on the European Citizens’ Initiative.*” Duinkerken (2013: 30) even contends that collecting one million signatures without using modern ICTs would be almost impossible to achieve. Appropriate online tools could provide support at all stages of the process. However, the online collection software provided by the European Commission brought up some serious criticism, starting from shortcomings of its usability and the software itself (Głogowski and Maurer 2013). Berg and Głogowski (2014: 15) state that “[...] *the dysfunctional online signature collection system software [...] stopped many ECI campaigns for several months and led the Commission to extend official deadlines.*” Rustema (2014: 104) criticises that the EU cannot provide a user-friendly online collection system and proposes that “a true open-source, community-developed” system would better meet the existing challenges. Starskaya and Çağdas (2012) assessed the software from an initiative organisers’ perspective and summarised the following issues that provide challenges:

- an excessively complex installation process;
- inconclusive error messages without explanations;

- insufficient checks for duplicate signatories;
- exclusion of visually impaired people;
- inadmissible combinations of nationality and location are technically possible;
- incorrect minimum age for signatories (16), which should only be possible in Austria and Catalonia;
- absence of maintenance considerations such as patches and security updates.

A number of updates since its first release in December 2011, have been attempts to improve the Online Collection Software provided by the European Commission.

### **Digital support**

In addition to reducing campaign costs organisers expect at least three advantages from using the internet in an ECI process: spreading information about their campaign, disseminating arguments in support of it, and collecting sufficient signatures (Carrara 2012: 358). Sangsari (2013) also sees potential to facilitate the development of an ECI through prior deliberation in online forums as meeting places of organisers with like-minded people.

Digital tools also pose various challenges themselves such as barriers in getting email addresses and dependence of European organisations as initiators on affiliated national organisations to forward messages to local and individual members. Greenwood (2012: 332) notes that ECI initiators cannot just rely on their own networks but have to engage with legally qualified personnel, data protection specialists, fund-raisers and marketing specialists.

The main platforms to facilitate online signature collection for ECIs are their websites. Głogowski and Maurer (2013: 18) point out that ECIs *“with transparent and user-friendly web pages translated into the majority of European languages have better chances to successfully collect signatures online”* – a superficially simple but not easily realisable requirement. Some initiatives’ websites do not meet this standard. It is generally believed that the internet does include a variety of actors that otherwise would not be prone to public participation (Carrara 2012). However, internet literacy is an indispensable prerequisite and internet availability a decisive factor, both points which are affected by the existing digital divide. Carrara also points to the many facets of language barriers, e.g. due to cost reasons, most initiatives before 2012 refrained from opening multilingual online forums that could foster a debate. This poses another challenge to ECI organisers: in contrast to face-to-face collection, it is very resource-intensive to construct a deliberative space that allows for interaction, in many cases an insurmountable task. Therefore the online presence needs to exhibit the campaign’s central statement very clearly, and contain *“a strong, intelligible and universal argument register”* (Carrara 2012: 360). Meanwhile information on ECIs is distributed via social media which feeds into transnational discourse spaces, but particularly used by young (educated) elites (Knaut 2013; Greenwood 2012).

Overall, the online collection of signatures facilitates ECIs to a great extent, because it saves time and resources needed for face-to-face collection. However, organisers cannot rely on digital support declarations alone for an initiative to be successful. Moreover, face-to-face collection is likely to strengthen citizens' identification with the initiative (Głogowski and Maurer 2013: 18). The role of online collection varies between the Member States, with differences in current e-participation cultures and levels of internet access as possible reasons (Carrara 2012: 366). Thomson (2014: 74) states that until now every single campaign *“has suffered, often gravely, from a myriad of problems stemming from these data requirements”*, referring to the large amount of personal data, e.g. ID card numbers, signatories have to submit when stating their support for an initiative. Tenreiro (2014: 87) points to the paradox that national authorities have to certify the online collection system that the EU provides and hosts on its servers. He also proposes the idea of a collection system that does not need to be verified at all.

Appropriate online channels are indispensable for an efficient transnational participation process; two thirds of the registered initiatives (up to March 2015) have collected statements of support online (EC 2015: 9), in the case of the “Right2Water” initiative online collection even accounted for 80% (EC 2015: 7).

For future initiators of an ECI, a common online tool and platform at European level for carrying out an initiative, instead of burdening every organiser with this task individually, would be essential. This issue was even the topic of one initiative (“Central public online collection platform for the European Citizen Initiative”). Unfortunately it failed due to insufficient support.

### Points for improvement

The current implementation of the concrete terms and rules of the ECI indeed demands significant improvements and modifications in design. Suggestions for major improvement of the online collection software and the entire process have been made (Kaufmann 2012: 240) and recognised to some extent. Additionally, calls were made to extend the period of signature collection to 18 months, to set up an independent help-desk and to increase access to the signing of an ECI. There are also proposals on multilingual training tools, the clarification of EU data protection law and uniform requirements for signature collection in all Member States (Karatzia 2013). Berg and Thomson (2014: 122) advocate for the following 12 goals:

- *“Reduce and harmonise personal data requirements across Member States;*
- *eliminate ID number requirements;*
- *ensure that all EU citizens can support an ECI – wherever they live;*
- *lower the age of ECI support to 16;*
- *redesign the online signature collection system;*
- *collect the e-mail address within the main ECI support form;*
- *lengthen the signature collection time to 18 months;*
- *give ECI campaigns time to prepare: let them choose their launch date;*
- *provide a support infrastructure for ECIs with legal advice, translation and funding;*
- *provide an EU legal status for ECI citizens’ committees;*
- *remove or modify the first legal admissibility check;*
- *increase public and media awareness of the ECI.”*

A study commissioned by the European Parliament (Ballesteros et al. 2014) identified obstacles for the ECI in six areas covering the entire ECI process: registration, certification of the online collection system, signature collection, verification and submission of statements and horizontal issues such as data protection or funding transparency. Here, measures to create a one-stop-shop for supporting ECI organizers as well as improving the signature collection software and support forms are seen as essential. The study concludes with recommendations to increase the ECI’s effectivity, with concrete suggestions for revising both Regulation 211/2011 as well as EU primary law, the TEU (EP 2014). Key points include amending the TEU to either revising the ECI as an agenda-setting tool – in this case the Commission would not be obliged to follow a successful initiative with legislation – or revising the ECI as a tool for legislative initiative, meaning that citizens could have real legislative power within a certain framework. More specifically the study suggests a two-step system where for instance half a million signatures would request the EC to propose legislation, whereas one million signatures would oblige the EC to do so.

The ECI as an institutional innovation for enhancing not only the citizens’ influence on EU level decision-making but also for contributing to the formation of a European public sphere has at best been of modest success to date. It would be too pessimistic to conclude that the instrument has a predominantly symbolic function. It is to some extent still an experiment with many open questions and it was therefore wise to include a clause for a possible revision every three years after a period of gathering experience with the new instrument. For now it seems that the ECI’s relevance is far greater on the discursive level than in terms of the concrete policy-shaping impact.

The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) was envisioned to increase direct participation in EU law-making, but seems to have failed in conveying its message to citizens as there appears to be no connection between knowing about the ECI and the image of the EU or being willing to use the tool (Gherghina and Groh 2016). In fact, Gherghina and Groh even determined a negative correlation between knowledge about the ECI and the image of the EU among Germans in the course of an empirical assessment. Monaghan (2012)

speculates that perhaps the output-based approach and the measurement of the ECI in Commission Green Papers or Proposals is not relevant to EU citizens, as they are more interested in changes in their political realities. The potentials of the ECI appear to remain untapped, which is unfortunate as Lironi (2016) refers to possible benefits such as strengthened participation of citizens in policy-making and consequently increased political legitimacy. Changes must be made in promotion, cost-effectiveness, user-friendliness and regulatory framework, and attention must be paid to the digital divide (Lironi 2016). As for now it would appear two-thirds (67%) of Europeans feel they have no say in EU politics, according to the Eurobarometer of March, 2013, with the number of presented initiatives in the ECI decreasing between 2012 and 2013 (Ballesteros et al. 2014). The main obstacles of the ECI were examined by Ballesteros et al. (2014), being identified as lying in the areas of information and support for ECI organisers, the free software for signature collection provided by the Commission, the requirements and forms within different Member States and there being various different interpretations of the fundamental ECI objectives. Sangsari (2013) points out the need for organizers to possess human and financial resources, networks, alliances, coalitions with civil society, media and NGOs in order to gather the promotion and awareness needed for success, with the European Citizen Action Service being quoted as estimating campaign costs to encompass around 1 million euros in order to garner 1 million signatures.

Badouard (2013) points out that the two consultation goals of being inclusive and the final decision having an impact may be incompatible, seeing as the demand for high levels of expertise or high complexity favor organized interest groups and experts, acting as a barrier of participation for “regular” citizens. In general, the legal framework of the ECI appears to favor existing civil society organizations above individual citizens (Organ 2014). As Organ explains: “[...] *the exclusion of Article 48(2) TEU as a legal base that can be used to invite the Commission to pass on a proposal from citizens for Treaty amendment is also significant in limiting the ability of citizens to critically influence not only current policy preferences, but also the framework of the EU itself, with fundamental issues, such as the increase or reduction of the competences of the EU, not able to be the subject of an initiative*” (Organ 2014: 440). Organ also points to the fact that even if no legal outcomes are achieved, the legitimacy of the policy agenda can be increased through the act of deliberation.

The ECI SWOT analysis by Lironi revealed the following results (Lironi 2016: 46 ff.):

**Strengths** of the ECI identified are to encourage participation and active citizenship, to be a non-partisan political tool, to give citizens agenda-setting power, to educate citizens about decision making and the political process of the EU, to reduce the democratic deficit, to facilitate access to information for citizens, and to provide non-binding results.

The list of **weaknesses** identified is much longer: frustration among citizens due to lack of impact; excessive identification and personal data requirements; low profile among citizens; lacking user-friendliness; inflexible and hindering rules regarding the time period for ECI support collection; low cost-effectiveness; complex coordination; lack of clear organiser feedback to supporting citizens due to the gap in existing OCS (online collection system); exclusion of expats; non-binding results; inefficient and ineffective OCS; lack of clear EC feedback to organisers about its decision on successful ECIs; unclear admissibility criteria and admissibility check procedure; intimidating and discouraging effects of unlimited personal liability of individual ECI organisers; unclear rules and procedures for ECI registration; exclusion of young people.

**Opportunities** are seen in the potential to stimulate alternative forms of engagement and to counter (young) people's disengagement in 'traditional' politics; to work on democratic ills, i.e. the perceived EU democratic deficit, the lack of grassroots support for EU policy, the weak shapes of 'European Citizenship' and a European demos; and the potential of technological advancements in ICTs.

Major **threats** named are citizens' disinterest in EU politics, the perceived democratic deficit in the EU, and the digital divide between countries as regards digital infrastructure and e-participation experience.

The study's recommendations for improving the ECI' potential can be summarized as follows (Lironi 2016: 51):

- to intensify promoting the ECI as a tool and encouraging citizens to use it, pointing out its importance as the official pan-European e-participation instrument;
- to reduce the efforts required in its use, clearly (re)define the outcomes of successful ECIs and start to fulfill them;
- to make the ECI more user-friendly by: reducing the excessive identification and personal data requirements, improving the OCS functionality to allow for ECI organiser feedback to supporters, and increasing the ECI's publicity e.g. through the EU's communication channels and national media;
- to improve the ECI's rules (more flexible and less complex), in particular: the Commission should allow ECI organisers to start signature collection in a more optimal timeframe, Member States should harmonise identification requirements, and expats should be allowed to sign ECIs in their country of residence.
- to promote the ECI as an alternative form of engagement to attract citizens frustrated by 'traditional' forms of politics;
- to make use of the ECI to cure the democratic deficit, to support the development of 'European citizenship' and a 'European demos', to enhance grassroots support for European politics, and to increase citizens' interest and trust in EU politics and their understanding of European affairs.

After five years of the ECI's existence most recent developments show some remarkable progress as regards the use and role of this instrument which underlines its democratic potential ([www.people2power.info](http://www.people2power.info)). The global platform for citizen-journalists cites evidence of stronger performance, smarter organizers, independent court (refusal of a Commission decision), a more supportive infrastructure, increased political momentum and the function of a transnational democratic umbrella. Whether the interpretation of these developments as "impressive signs of previously unseen institutional maturity and political energy" of the ECI will be sustained remains to be seen.

#### **3.4.5.5. E-petitions of the European Parliament**

The option to submit a petition to the European Parliament via the internet is another form of using digital tools within a participative instrument at EU level. The Committee on Petitions (PETI) is the body that is responsible for treating petitions and deciding on which kind of action to take.

Lidia Joanna Geringer de Oedenberg was rapporteur for the report on the activities of the Committee on Petitions in 2015, examining the Committee's activities (PETI 2015). Within the report a lot of data was presented concerning the petitions and petitioners. The main areas citizens petitioned about were identified as being the environment, fundamental rights, justice, the internal market and European policy development. Citizens also used the tool in order to contest or argue against decisions and rulings which were made. The number of petitions received in 2014 was 2.714, which constitutes a slight decrease from the previous year, the trend in the past few years having been rising. More than half (59.6%) of these petitions were closed at early stages due to three main reasons: the petition was deemed inadmissible, was closed after information on the relevant subject was communicated to the petitioner, or was closed due to being addressed to the wrong EP committee. A total of 1.168 petitions were admissible, of which 1.119 were passed on to the Commission for an opinion. English, German, Spanish and Italian are the languages most commonly used within the petitions (collectively accounting for 72%), with Germans, Spaniards and Italians being the most active petitioners with 551, 468 and 425 petitions being submitted respectively. Citizens from Estonia and Luxembourg are strongly underrepresented, together submitting total of 8 petitions (PETI 2015).

While back in 2009 63.2% of all petitions were sent via e-mail (PETI 2011), this percentage has increased to 80% in 2014 (PETI 2015), the internet being the preferred method for petitioning the Parliament. In 2014 the PETI report documents 80% of the admitted petitions being closed within a year. An important observation made annually in these PETI reports is the fact that citizens "[...] confuse the EU institutions

and those of the Council of Europe, in particular the European Court of Human Rights.” (PETI 2015: 24). In November 2014 a new Petitions web portal was introduced, possessing more feedback features on the status of petitions and more information on the Parliament’s areas of competence. The PETI (2015) report welcomes this development, though it points out that in order to reach the petitions page, a user must navigate through four pages from the Europarl homepage. Another criticism which raised concerns was the length of the whole petition process, particularly the long time needed by the PETI Committee to verify petitions (Lironi 2016, 37).

Tiburcio (2015) examined “The Right to Petition” in the European Parliament for the Committee on Petitions and made recommendations for the EU petition system. Tiburcio notes that recent studies on petitions tend to neglect the petitioning system of the European Parliament, referring to it as being a “well-embedded process to deal with petitions” (Tiburcio 2015: 12). In his study Tiburcio comes to the following conclusion:

*“[...] the petition system of the European Parliament compares well overall with the petition systems of Parliaments of Member States. In terms of conventional features, it scores well in all dimensions: ensures direct access (and not intermediate) by citizens; it’s highly inclusive and open to both national citizens of Member States as nationals from third countries, if they reside within the EU territory; it offers possibilities for greater involvement of citizens, including through frequent of hearings, followed by public debate in committee.” (Tiburcio 2015: 40).*

He does, however, identify several weaknesses which have yet to be resolved, such as an information gap. The following bullet points present a shortened version of Tiburcio’s recommendations for the European Parliament as can be found in his study (Tiburcio 2015: 40-42)::

- Clearer information;
- publication of more detailed information related to the petition process;
- publication of all documents related to the petition;
- a better and more focused communication strategy;
- getting to know who the petitioners are (sex, age, education, occupation, etc.);
- learning opinions and experiences of petitioners;
- conducting a public survey on citizen knowledge of the right to petition the European Parliament;
- investing in EU promotional material;
- collection of statistical data on the treatment of petitions on the PETI web portal.

#### 3.4.5.6. Summary

The democratic innovations introduced in the course of the EU’s “participatory turn” represent a variety of participative instruments, practically all of which make use of digital tools in one form or another. They embody types of e-participation mainly contributing to political agenda setting or to be considered in decision-making (e-deliberative designs, e-consultations, e-initiatives or e-petitions). Similar instruments are also practised at national and sub-national levels; however, the supra-national nature of the EU poses at least three novel challenges: large scale, language diversity and trans-nationality.

As was shown, the experiences from over a decade of experimentation with various participative designs, as well as in part regular use at EU level, have been mixed. The democratic potential of the existing participative instruments, in particular the support of digital tools to enhance direct and participative democracy, has been proved in many respects and to different degrees. However, a number of serious challenges, unsolved problems and unfulfilled expectations have also been encountered.

Assessments of various types of deliberative participative designs reveal many starting points to improve the democratic quality. The lack of any impact on decision-making is one of the most striking findings. The often experimental character is not the only reason; at times too broad topics, too general outputs and the lack of clear rules on how to integrate outputs into the policy process seem to be the biggest



barriers. Opportunities for deliberation allowing for considered judgement are rare and usually limited to national communities. The 'Europolis' and 'Futurum' designs represented positive exceptions and demonstrated the possibility of trans-national exchange. The focus on civil society organisations rather than ordinary citizens, and the fact that this is a frequent pattern, challenges the ideal of inclusiveness. The lack of publicity of these democratic innovations, the silence of the media on them and the difficulties to mobilise citizens for participation are special points of grievance.

A more differentiated view of the issue of policy impact acknowledges several types of influence: on the participants themselves, the wider public and formal decision-making. Rather than being understood as a one to one translation of suggestions into policy decisions, the latter type of impact can mean improved deliberation in governmental bodies and more indirect impact by shaping the preparation of decisions along the various phases from agenda setting and problem analysis to framing choices and finally taking decisions. Likely impacts also depend on institutional strategies in offering particular participative designs, for example, whether conceived as a policy instrument, such as e-consultations via the 'Your voice in Europe' platform, or a communication instrument with a transformative mission aimed at sensitizing participants of EU policy issues, such as the ECCs. Though e-consultations have become a well-established instrument in practically all DGs which has certainly broadened the input into EU policy-making and extended its knowledge base, serious flaws have been pointed out which need to be worked on, such as intransparent processing, lack of feedback and impact on policy outputs.

Finally, experiences with the ECI have shown that for the time being the potential to act as an effective bridge between bottom-up claims to participate in EU policy-making and formal institutions has not been realised as expected. Much acclaimed as the first formally institutionalised transnational instrument of participatory democracy, it has been more a tool for civil society mobilisation than citizen empowerment up to this point, since it requires enormous organisational capacities on the part of organisers of an ECI. However, most recently the signs of improved performance and increased use of this instrument look more promising. Digital support is indispensable and plays an even stronger role in most recent initiatives; still, it is all the more necessary to cure remaining deficits in support by the existing online collection system and other barriers identified among others by a study for the European Parliament. Its own e-petition system also requires some improvement by facilitating access and speeding up the whole petition procedure in order to raise its value as an instrument of participatory democracy.

### 3.5. Conclusions

E-democracy nowadays is a widely applied term and describes a broad scope of practices of online engagement of the public in political decision making and opinion forming. As regards theoretical concepts of democracy, e-democracy is mostly based on models of participatory and deliberative democracy. Far-reaching expectations of a fundamental reform of modern democracy, through the application of online tools for political participation and public discourse, are vanishing after two decades of e-democracy. There is, however, no doubt that e-democracy will add new modes of communication among citizens and between actors of representative democracy and their constituencies. These changes do not only add to the online political processes, but they also affect the modes and conditions of online political processes in many ways. They are dependent on the great variety of e-democracy tools applied, the nature of the political process these are embedded in, and the skills, demands and expectations of those involved in their application.

#### 3.5.1. Social Media and e-democracy

Research on the impact of social media on democracy is still inconclusive and only allows us to draw some very tentative conclusions on the political dimensions of social media. Research tends to agree that social media plays an increasingly important role in civic and political life, as these communication opportunities are taken up by social movements and activists. However, while numerous studies have attempted to provide evidence for tangible political effects of social media use, by and large the

transformative power often associated with social media still remains more a potential possibility than a firmly established reality. And even if finding evidence for these far-reaching expectations about the impact of Social Media on democracy remains a pressing topic for research, academics and experts in the field should also address the issue to what extent social media is able to fulfill core functions of public communication such as critique, legitimation and integration. In this regard, social media seems to challenge established understandings and models of the public sphere. Making sense of the allegedly increasing role of the private, the personal affective and emotional perspectives in politics, and thinking ahead about ways for democratic institutions to respond to this possible transformation seems expedient. Finally, in order to avoid the reproduction of old myths about the transformative potential of social media, future research in this dynamic field should also take the broader media ecology into consideration. More careful contextualisations, which reflect the dynamic interrelationships between traditional news media, digital media and the publics, will help to avoid the traps of technological determinism.

### **3.5.2. The EU democratic deficit in times of crisis**

It is quite clear that scholarly debate as well as research on the European public sphere and on European citizenship and identification with Europe as a political community has intensified over the last years, due to the symptoms of an actual crisis of the EU institutions and the idea of European integration. It is still believed by many that the perceived democratic deficit of the European Union indicates the need for fostering a European public sphere as a space of debate across public spheres which are established at (and restricted to) national Member States. Moreover, there is a consensus that the new modes of political communication via internet have to play a role in that respect. However, far-reaching expectations and optimism envisaging the internet as a panacea to political disenchantment and as a way to establish new transnational spaces of European bottom-up political communication are scarce compared to a decade ago.

As regards to the state of the European political system, it is argued on the one hand that exactly in times of crisis it is necessary to legitimize far-reaching decisions that will deeply influence living conditions in the European Member States. These decisions are to be reached through a vivid process of deliberation about pro and cons, about needs, demands and duties. On the other hand there is pessimism whether – in the actual crisis that leads to focusing on national interests – there is enough homogeneity in the Union and strong identification with the EU as a transnational political entity. It is the observation of weak European solidarity and predominance of national perspectives that actually feeds the so-called “No Demos” discussion among scholars of European politics. The point of dissent here is whether Europe is in need of the development of a transnational cultural identity (which is held by many to be exclusively bound to the national state), or whether a political identity – i.e. the European citizens’ commitment to the fundamentals of the European political constitution – is sufficient to establish a new form of “European citizenship” that would serve as a solidarity fundament for the European Union. Proponents of a further integration of the EU base their cautionary optimism with regard to the “Europeanisation of European citizens” in the further development of the discourse about Europe and thus in the further development of the European public sphere. In this respect the development of European identity and solidarity depends on the chances and opportunities to discuss and define what is in the common European interest via a common European political discourse. This would include fostering the role of the European Parliament and a European cross-national party system.

In this respect what has been coined the “politicisation of Europe” in the actual crisis is – despite of the undeniable symptoms of a renationalisation of political discourse and Euro-scepticism – regarded as offering the opportunity to strengthen European identity. Since citizenship evolves in a political process of debate and emerges precisely outside of debates and conflicts about the public good, the current conflicts about EU policies and democratic legitimization are regarded as a result of stronger engagement of citizens with the idea of Europe. On the other hand, it is evident that the crisis brings new forces and actors to the foreground that are not supportive of European integration and offer views that focus on

national interests and thus help to strengthen national identities. There is, however, consensus that the European public sphere has a strong bearing on the development of a European identity as a space of debate where collective identities are constructed and political communities are created.

### 3.5.3. The state of research on the European public sphere

Empirical research - mainly mass media research - on the European public sphere confirms that a Europeanisation of national media publics is indeed observable:

- European issues, policies and actors are visible in the “national” public spheres, i.e. in mass media coverage of political issues,
- there is reference in national media not only to EU policy making actors (vertical) but also to actors from other European Member States (horizontal),
- the same issues are addressed in the different national public spheres and similar frames of reference or claims and arguments are put forward.

However, as regards the visibility of European actors, it is worth noting that it appears that the European Parliament lags behind other European institutions as being referred to in national mass media reporting, and that national actors gain in visibility due to the perception of a weak stance of European institutions in the context of the financial crisis. Recent research on media coverage of various aspects of a crisis of Europeanisation (financial crisis, refugee policy) show a growing dominance of national perspectives and interest in public discourse on the EU, but does not necessarily dismiss the notion of a European public sphere. It is held that the more there is dispute among elites and national parties about European issues, the more Europe becomes visible in the national media – which, however, implies a strong position of EU-critical perspectives. “Politicisation” of the European Union is an indicator of European issues coming to the foreground of national agendas, but this, of course, does not necessarily lead to issues being framed as questions of common European concern which require European solutions. It depends on discursive structures and dynamics whether politicised debates about Europe foster European common thinking and identities or renationalization. In this respect the legitimisation of European policies, also via means of e-participation, might be supportive.

### 3.5.4. The internet and the European public sphere

With regard to the state of research on the European public sphere it has been critically stressed that so far the focus of research has been on elite mass media communication and that research has neglected the relevance of new internet based communication networks mainly applied by civil society actors. In this respect some change can be observed, as there is a growing interest in internet-based political communication and its potential for establishing new public spheres. However, a decade ago optimism was widespread that while we find a decline of national public spheres with passive audiences and disenchantment with politics, the internet could support the emergence of a trans-national public sphere that is more inclusive, deliberative and is rooted in a transnational civil society. Such far-reaching expectations are scarcely put forward nowadays. Political communication via social media is currently in the focus of research, but it is difficult to draw clear conclusions with regard to their role in supporting the emergence of a vivid political public sphere.

- Internet-based political communication is not likely to develop into a supra-national public sphere, but rather establishes a network of a multitude of mediated and unmediated discursive processes aimed at opinion formation at various levels and on various issues.
- It is a matter of contestation whether this multitude is able to bring about a space of common (public) interests, or whether these dispersed spaces restrict political communication to issue related or ideologically closed communities.

- Indications and arguments for both can be found: that social media can empower underrepresented interests as well as that there are reasons to doubt that social media would help to reduce inequalities in the political sphere.
- Online political communication has a potential to increase responsiveness of, and exchange with, political representatives and their constituencies. However, so far this potential is set into practice insufficiently. Online media by political institutions are often used in a vertical and scarcely in horizontal or interactive manner of communication.

Since the overall state of research on the empowering force of the internet is still insufficiently developed, the actual potential for the internet to bring about a new “public sphere” is impossible to assess. It can be summarised that there is an online space for political communication with many new features and options that go beyond or bypass mass-media channels. It is, however, subject of debate to what extent these features have the potential to democratise political communication and public discourse.

So far research on the relevance of political communication via the internet for building up a European public sphere or supporting the Europeanisation of national public spheres is still scarce. It is held by many researchers that in principle the use of interactive tools of e-participation at the European level can contribute to fostering the legitimacy of the EU and to promote a more substantial EU citizenship. However, it is observed that the role of citizens is often reduced to just posting statements or commenting on statements by policy-makers rather than engaging in a European citizens’ debate and jointly working out policy options to be forwarded to policy-makers. Also the notion put forward in the STOA report from 2011, that public spaces established by consultation processes offered by European institutions are often restricted to expert communities and at best help to establish segmented issue related elite publics on the European level, is confirmed by recent research. Research on the use of social media and internet sites by civil society organisations active on the European level is just about to emerge. Scarce results available so far indicate that the restriction of publics at the European level to “epistemic communities” and experts is not easily ruled out by internet-based networks organised by NGOs.

### 3.5.5. Experience with digital tools in different types of e-participation

The assessment of the European Citizen Consultations by Kies et al. (2013) appears applicable for a great many e-participative instruments within various e-democracy sectors, when they say that the ECC “[...] was a successful civic instrument but not a convincing policy instrument.” (Kies et al. 2013: 24). It seems to be an ongoing theme that e-participative projects provide added personal value for participants and community capacity, but suffer from a lack of direct, or even indirect, political impact.

*“There exist more opportunities than ever before for citizens wishing to have their say, via the media or directly to local and national governments, but there is a more pervasive sense of disappointment than ever before that citizens are outside the citadels of power, and that those within do not know how to listen to them.” (Coleman and Moss 2012: 4)*

A differentiated offer of **e-consultations** has been developing over the years at all government levels in a variety of formats (from simple questionnaires to open formats and crowdsourcing). However, it appears that at times a project which at first glance appears to be participative will turn out to not have consultative or deliberative character, but have the objective to inform citizens about decisions already having been made. In the cases where citizen input is in fact the objective, there can be great uncertainty on what sorts of inputs are desired and how to best produce. Designs of e-consultation processes need to cope with a tension between the goals of quality of inputs and inclusivity. Often the issues at stake require highly specialized expertise which average citizens do not possess but which are only available from civil society organisations. Well-designed e-consultation processes with transparent processing and appreciation of inputs contribute to heightened legitimacy of policy agendas. E-consultation processes are of low value when topics are too broad, the outputs too general and the rules on how to integrate outputs into the policy process are lacking.

In the area of **e-petitions** successful examples of modernisation with the introduction of e-petition systems are observable. The increasing share of online petitions underlines high public acceptance but does not necessarily boost the overall amount of petition activity. Internet use does not automatically increase transparency and enhance opportunities for participation. There are indications that such effects require the cooperation of institutional and organisational reform and technological modernisation. A certain level of civic knowledge or skills on part of the petitioners was also stressed to be needed in order for petitions to be successful.

On concrete topics of life world relevance, **e-deliberation** systems enjoy high citizen interest and can be a cost-effective tool of engagement. A special advantage of e-deliberation can be that anonymity allows an exchange of ideas without regarding hierarchical factors such as social status. However, in order to cultivate successful deliberation and to ensure quality and a level of respect within the online discourse a moderation system and structure is important. A balance must be struck between structuring e-participative events, such as adding moderators which can have positive effects on the quality and therefore the impact of the deliberation, and the aspect of inclusivity, which appears incompatible with high expertise levels and complexity. It is obvious that the success of deliberative e-participation events depend on the deliberative skills of the participants. These are not equally distributed in society and require training. New formats of large-scale citizen deliberation (combining offline and online formats) such so-called citizen forums in Germany can have stimulating effects on a wider scale as regards civic discourse and awareness on public issues of relevance.

The area of **e-budgeting** may, at this point in time, have produced some of the strongest results when it comes to influencing decision-making, despite not necessarily leading to changed power relations between governments and citizens. Among the impacts identified are: support to demands for increased transparency, improved public services, accelerated administrative operations, better cooperation among public administration units, and enhanced responsiveness. Also positive contributions to the political culture and competences of participants can be expected. (e.g. extended participation opportunities, enhanced transparency of public policy, better quality of decision-making, increased legitimacy and a stronger identification with the local community). Cost reduction and major structural reforms are less likely achieved.

As regards **e-voting**, even after more than a decade of conducting and experimenting with internet voting in various country specific contexts, several challenges exist. It can be said that the dimensions of internet voting that have been elaborated on in the STOA report of 2011 haven't lost any topicality. In fact, their relevance is regularly emphasised when online elections in a variety of countries are accompanied by evaluations focusing for instance on turnout rates, security aspects, user friendliness or trust. Particularly striking is the large amount of critics present in the literature. On a regular basis, system vulnerabilities are made public, sometimes even by filing a lawsuit. All in all further developments are still needed with regards to technical aspects, legal frameworks, security, transparency and verifiability, as well as oversight and accountability. The Swiss trial is lauded by the OSCE/ODIHR (2012) for being good practice, the introduction being careful and limited, ensuring integrity of the systems and building public trust. At first sight, internet voting might be perceived as an opportunity to alleviate the so called democratic deficit of the EU – manifested in the continuously decreasing electoral participation in EU elections. However, as the analyses of various cases within Europe where internet voting has been introduced show, such hopes have not been fulfilled. It is not only the convenience aspect that influences the decision of whether a citizen votes or not, but rather political reasons such as political interest or satisfaction with the political system. And regarding these kinds of challenges, internet voting cannot be a technological quick fix.

An area to which much attention has been paid these last five years is **social media**. Opinions seem to differ greatly regarding the impact social media use (such as Facebook and Twitter) has on online and offline participation. Results range from Facebook use leading to decreased participation in all areas to online participation, and even offline protests, being promoted by the same site. In general it does appear,



however, that there is a tendency for mobilization to be medium-specific. While political websites tend to still mainly serve an informative purpose, more and more politicians become accessible through the use of social media platforms such as Twitter, allowing for a dialogue between elected officials and citizens. An interesting phenomenon which adds to the difficulty of mobilization is the fact, that being confronted with political opinions which differ from your own can lower political interest and engagement. Political deliberation and discussions on social media sites can therefore have negative effects on a person's willingness to engage in similar dialogues in the future. One must of course also not forget the various technical and privacy problems associated with e-democracy, as well as the fact that many countries still possess a significant digital divide.

A general problem that applies to all e-participatory procedures and tools is that a balance must be struck between structuring e-participative events and the aspect of inclusivity, which appears incompatible with high expertise levels and complexity. Currently among those making use of e-voting, e-deliberation and e-petitioning offers there is a noticeable overrepresentation of young white males with a high educational background, whereby these individuals tend to migrate from offline voting, deliberation and petitioning to online versions without an increase of overall participation being achieved.

*"[...]a vast amount of research shows that the costs and benefits of participation are generally skewed in favor of those with higher socio-economic status (SES) and education levels. While other factors, such as membership in civic and political organizations and various social networks, can mitigate the impacts of SES and education, it is clear that unless practitioners take corrective measures, participation of all varieties will be skewed."* (Ryfe and Stalsburg 2012: 1)

Naturally this problem has led to several mobilization attempts, since a lack of diversity and representativeness of participatory projects inevitably results in decreasing interest from policy- and decision-makers and therefore in lower impact. Mobilization has proven to be one of the great challenges of participatory projects in general, one of the explanations being that citizens have low confidence that their input in such projects will have any real weight in decision making processes. This scepticism appears to be well-founded, judging by the low significance of e-petitions and e-deliberative events for legally binding outcomes, even if heightened legitimacy of policy agendas can be achieved. Deliberative civic engagements tend not to be embedded in political decision-making, often making them short-lived, temporary and focused on single particular issues, characteristics which may contribute to the scepticism of citizens regarding their significance. Further barriers preventing mobilization are language problems and low interest in European-level matters. Furthermore promising projects such as the ECI are aimed at increasing participation on the side of civil society organizations rather than on the individual level. A factor for success which cannot be stressed enough for all of these civic engagement projects is the support and engagement of decision-makers.

### 3.5.6. Experiences with e-participation at EU-level

The democratic innovations introduced in the course of the EU's "participatory turn" represent a variety of participative instruments, practically all of which make use of digital tools in one or another form. They embody types of e-participation (mainly e-deliberative designs, e-consultations, e-initiatives or e-petitions) which are also practiced at national and sub-national levels; however, the supra-national nature of the EU poses at least three novel challenges to cope with: large scale, language diversity and trans-nationality.

As was shown, the experience from over a decade of experimentation with various participative designs as well as in part regular use at EU level has been mixed. The democratic potential of the existing participative instruments, in particular the support of digital tools to enhance direct and participative democracy, has been proved in many respects and to different degrees. However, a number of serious challenges, unsolved problems and unfulfilled expectations have also been encountered.



Assessments of various types of deliberative participative designs reveal many starting points to improve the democratic quality. The lack of any impact on decision-making is one the most striking findings. The often experimental character is not the only reason; at times too broad topics, too general outputs and the lack of clear rules how to integrate outputs into the policy process seem to be the biggest barriers. Opportunities for deliberation allowing for considered judgement are rare and usually limited to national communities. The 'Europolis' and 'Futurum' designs represented positive exceptions and demonstrated the possibility of trans-national exchange. The focus on civil society organisations rather than ordinary citizens being a frequent pattern questions the ideal of inclusiveness. The lack of publicity of these democratic innovations, the silence of the media on them and the difficulties to mobilise citizens for participation are special points of grievance.

A more differentiated view of the issue of policy impact acknowledges several types of influence: on the participants themselves, the wider public and formal decision-making. The latter type of impact rather than understood as a one to one translation of suggestions into policy decisions can mean improved deliberation in governmental bodies and more indirect impact by shaping the preparation of decisions along the various phases from agenda setting and problem analysis to framing choices and finally taking decisions. Expectable impacts also depend on institutional strategies in offering particular participative designs, for example, whether conceived as a policy instrument such as e-consultations via the 'Your voice in Europe' platform or a communication instrument with a transformative mission aimed at sensitizing participants of EU policy issues such as the ECCs. Though e-consultations have become a well-established instrument in practically all DGs which has certainly broadened the input into EU policy-making and extended its knowledge base, serious flaws have been pointed out which need to be worked upon, such as intransparent processing and lack of feedback.

Finally, experiences with the ECI have shown that the potential to act as an effective bridge between bottom-up claims to participate in EU policy-making and formal institutions has not been realised as expected. Much acclaimed as the first transnational instrument of participatory democracy which is formally institutionalised it is up to now rather a tool for civil society mobilisation than citizen empowerment since it requires enormous organisational capacities on the part of organisers of an ECI. Digital support is indispensable, still the more is it necessary to cure existing serious deficits in the support by the existing online collection system and other barriers identified among others by a study for the European Parliament. Also its own e-petition system requires some improvement by facilitating access and speeding up the whole petition procedure in order to raise its value as an instrument of participatory democracy.

What consequences to draw as regards the future of these democratic innovations is of course a political question. From the perspective of participative democracy the definite recommendation to the EU institutions is to focus on improving the existing e-participation tools at EU level along the lines suggested by the assessments and the results of the SWOT analyses in the relevant literature presented. The institutional singularity of the EU as a supra-national entity prevents a simple transposition of experiences to the EU level. Instead careful selection and adaptation of positive models is required. This would suggest starting initiatives to promote new forms of e-participation and to gather experience through experimentation, for example with crowdsourcing inspired by successful projects at national level. Another option worth thinking about could be how to strengthen the EU Parliament's representative character by building on MEPs as bridges to citizens with the support of digital platforms for facilitating citizens' participation in EU policy making. Finally, further experimentation with appropriate new designs to foster deliberative engagements of citizens and, last not least, a further exploration of possibilities to integrate e-participative designs with external "third places", i.e. social media platforms, seem worth to be considered.

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## 5. Annex

### Basic structure of the search terms used for the literature search in databases

Search terms for separate searches in the categories “participatory democracy”, “direct democracy”, “democratic participation”, “e-democracy”, “e-participation”, “e-consultation”, “e-petition”, “participatory budgeting”, “e-budgeting”, “e-deliberation”, “e-public”, “public sphere”, “ECI”, and “e-voting” are summarized for this depiction through OR operators. Analogue search terms were used for the German language search.

("Participatory democracy" AND (digital or online or electronic or internet or "electronic tool" or "new media" or "social media"))

OR

("Direct democracy" AND (digital or online or electronic or internet or "electronic tool" or "new media" or "social media"))

OR

((("democratic participation" or "public participation" or "public engagement" or "public involvement" or "citizen participation" or "citizen engagement" or "citizen involvement") AND (digital or online or electronic or internet or "electronic tool" or platform or "new media" or "social media")) OR (("Citizen summit" or "citizen panel") AND (digital or online or electronic or internet or "electronic tool" or "electronic platform" or "new media" or "social media"))) NOT (health or healthcare or "citizen science"))

OR

((("e-democracy" or edemocracy or "electronic democracy" or "digital democracy" or "cyber democracy" ) NOT "i.e., democracy")

OR

((("e-participation" or eparticipation or "electronic participation" or "digital participation" or "online participation" or "e-engagement" or "electronic engagement" or "online engagement") NOT ("i.e., participation" or "i.e., engagement" or "e-learning"))

OR

((("e-consultation" or econsultation or "electronic consultation" or "digital consultation") OR ("consultation" AND politic\* AND (online or electronic or digital or internet or "electronic tool" or "electronic platform" or "new media" or "social media"))) OR (Crowdsourcing AND politic\* AND (online or electronic or digital or internet or "electronic tool" or "electronic platform" or "new media" or "social media"))) NOT ("i.e., consultation" or \*health\* or patient or emergency or medical or cancer))

OR

((("e-petition" or epetition or "electronic petition" or "digital petition" or "online petition") OR ("Petition\*" AND (online or electronic or digital or internet or "electronic tool" or platform or "new media" or "social media"))) NOT (health or healthcare))

OR

("Participatory budgeting")

OR

((("e-budgeting" or ebudgeting or "electronic budgeting" or "digital budgeting" or "e-participatory budgeting" or "eparticipatory budgeting") NOT ("i.e., budgeting"))

OR

((("e-deliberation" or edeliberation or "electronic deliberation" or "online deliberation" or "digital deliberation") OR (deliberation AND politic\* AND ((online or electronic or digital or internet and (tool or platform or forum)) or "new media" or "social media" or "social network\*")) NOT ("i.e., deliberation"))

OR

((("e-public" or epublic\$ or "electronic public\$") AND NOT ("i.e., public\$" or health or patient or "e-commerce" or marketplace or entomology or "public service\$"))

OR

((("public sphere" and Europe\*) and ("democra\* deficit" or media or "democra\* ill"))

OR

"European Citizens' Initiative" OR ("Citizens' Initiative" and "Europe\*" and (digital or online or electronic or internet or "new media" or "social media"))

OR

((("e-voting" or evoting or "electronic voting" or "digital voting" or "internet voting" or "online voting" or "voting online" or "I-voting" or "remote Internet voting") OR (("digital election" or "online election" or "electronic election" or "online election") AND ("electronic tool" or "electronic platform" or "online platform" or "internet platform" or "digital platform" or "new media" or "social media" or "hyper connected"))))



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It is still believed by many that the perceived democratic deficit of the European Union indicates the need for fostering a European public sphere as a space for debate across national public spheres. Moreover, there is a consensus that new modes of political communication and participation via the internet can play a role in that respect. Far-reaching expectations of fundamental reform of modern democracy through the application of online participatory tools are vanishing after two decades of e-democracy. However, if properly designed and implemented, e-participation has the potential to contribute to accountability and transparency, trans-nationalisation and politicisation of public debates, and the improvement of exchanges and interactions between EU decision-making and European citizens.

A common critique on e-participation practices at EU level is that they are a successful civic instrument but not a convincing policy instrument. Many e-participative projects suffer from a lack of direct, or even indirect, political or policy impact, but seem to provide personal added value for participants and community building.

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