



politika.lv
the public policy site

e-democracy in Latvia: balancing the bottom-up and top- down approaches

experience of **politika.lv**, the Latvian public policy site

by Krista Baumann, publisher of **politika.lv**

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plan of the presentation

- introduction of **politika.lv**
- interactive projects and on-line consultation experience
- challenges and conclusions
- questions&answers

Krista Baumann, publisher of **politika.lv**

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background and institutional home

- **established** in 2001 by the Soros Foundation-Latvia
- **as of 2003**, part of Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS

PROVIDUS – a leading policy think-tank in Latvia, aiming to be a source of expertise and a change agent in these priority areas:

- anti-corruption policy
- good governance
- criminal justice policy
- education policy



politika.lv goals

vision (next 3 years):

the policy process in Latvia has become more open, participatory and knowledge-based

mission:

to improve the quality of public policy decisions in Latvia by promoting analyses based decision-making and public participation

objectives:

- making publicly available policy resources;
- offering tools for public participation in the policy process;
- providing environment for interactive exchange of ideas between the public policy community and general public.

politika.lv users

Target audience:

- the public policy community of Latvia (politicians, civil servants, NGOs, policy analysts and experts);
- media and the general public.

User base:

- 30,000 unique users/month;
- 10-fold increase during the first year and a half;
- 3000 subscribers to the weekly mailing list;
- 23% of Latvia's Internet users visited **politika.lv** during last 6 months;
- 600 000 Internet users in Latvia, or 1/3 of economically active population.

the contents “package”

Issues

- policy process
- corruption and rule of law
- human rights
- social integration
- civil society
- education and employment
- European issues
- media critique
- special sections: municipal elections, elections to the EP, referendum on EU accession, Saeima Elections

Contents items

- policy studies, research
- reviews
- opinion articles
- interviews
- select legislation and drafts
- select policy documents and drafts
- speeches/presentations at select conferences and public events
- relevant newspaper commentaries/opinion articles

special contents items

interactive:

- opinion polls
- interactive questionnaires
- possibility to comment publications
- on-line consultations

other:

- mailing-list/newsletter;
- search engine (simple & advanced search);
- pictures/photographs ☺

future:

- blogs!!!



"Judge won't harm another judge"
illustration for an article on the drawbacks
of judges' internal quality control system

interactive questionnaire *Try on a Party!* *before elections to the European Parliament (2004) and Saeima elections (2002)*



- on-line tool enabling users to compare their views with the leading candidates of political parties;
- politicians were made to respond to what people think;
- results compare individual responses on a scale/map with those of political parties, **not** tell who to vote for.



on-line consultations: example I

- ⌘ **issue:** government declaration is a political document which sets priorities and provides guidelines for the particular Cabinet of Ministers. It is prepared prior to the confidence vote in the Parliament and usually drafted in a narrow, closed circle of politicians.
- ⌘ **aim:** to discuss the draft and influence the final version of government declaration;
- ⌘ **actors:** NGOs, government coalition parties, general public;
- ⌘ **method:** on-line communications, round-table discussion;
- ⌘ **time-frame:** about 3 weeks, in 2002.



example I

implementation:

- ⌘ contacting the politicians, obtaining the draft declaration
- ⌘ publishing draft declaration;
- ⌘ promoting the declaration through placement of links;
- ⌘ asking NGOs to submit their proposals;
- ⌘ gathering proposals, publishing them on-line;
- ⌘ sending out links to NGO proposals to PM candidate and politicians;
- ⌘ organising a round-table discussion with coalition partners and NGOs to discuss the proposals.



example I

direct results:

- several NGO proposals were included in the final text of the government declaration;
- a whole new chapter on Civil Society was included in the declaration and the government began work on civil society strengthening policy.

indirect results (from bottom-up to top-down):

- since 2002, NGOs have participated in drafting every government declaration (in 2003 and 2004), a national programme for strengthening civil society was adopted by the Cabinet and “civil society participation in policy process” has become integral part of politicians’ agenda



on-line consultations: example II

- **issue:** the Ministry of Integration is tasked with drafting a National programme to promote tolerance (new policy initiative), it is important to include views of NGOs especially on politically sensitive issues;
- **aim:** to involve the public and NGOs in identifying issues and drafting the National programme;
- **actors:** Ministry for Integration, government working group charged with elaborating the programme, NGOs, the public;
- **method:** interactive questionnaire, on-line communications, real-time debate;
- **funding:** UNDP;
- **time-frame:** 9 months;

example II

implementation:

- ⌘ publishing an on-line questionnaire to gather the public opinion on groups suffering most from intolerance in Latvia;
- ⌘ sending the results to the government WG;
- ⌘ publishing articles on tolerance issues and stimulating public debate;
- ⌘ publishing the draft programme, along with introductory article by the Chair of the WG;
- ⌘ commissioning and publishing a review on the draft;
- ⌘ sending link to relevant NGOs asking to submit their proposals;
- ⌘ gathering proposals, publishing them on-line;
- ⌘ sending out links to NGO proposals to the Ministry and the WG.

example II

direct results:

- ⌘ few of the suggestions were taken into consideration;
- ⌘ some were not included because not supported by the particular political party (e.g. recognising equal rights of homosexual couples);
- ⌘ **politika.lv** organised real-time discussion with the Minister on Integration, NGOs and experts to debate the results of the consultations, and published this discussion.

indirect result:

- ⌘ **politika.lv** has been approached by the Ministry for Integration to participate in implementation of the programme

challenges along the way

- ⌘ the digital divide;
- ⌘ the costs: Internet is a cost-effective medium but it still costs money;
- ⌘ initial scepticism and Internet-ignorance;
- ⌘ the challenge of top-down: getting the Parliament/government to initiate and practise public consultations, on- and off-line.

on-line consultations: conclusions

- ⌘ the need for bottom-up proactive civil society initiative;
- ⌘ important to start participating at an early, draft stage to influence the outcome;
- ⌘ combination of on- and off-line tools and methods to bridge the digital divide;
- ⌘ the “positive quality” effect of having something publicly on-line;
- ⌘ the snow-ball effect of positive example to combat scepticism and ignorance.



the impact of Internet on public participation: great expectations

Internet doesn't change the nature of basic civil acts, like voting. In 30 or 40 years you could certainly think that civic activism has somewhat decelerated and cause activism has increased and the Internet is going to facilitate although not cause that kind of shift.

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