



eParticipation with eDialogos Solution

White Paper



How to implement a successful eParticipation initiative

Framework, Methodology, Platform and Supporting Tools

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1. Preface

eParticipation is one the most important ways for stimulating citizen involvement in the public sphere today, while providing the opportunity for a more open, democratic and transparent governance.

The abstention of citizens from the political processes and the growing indifference to public affairs and politics, even to the point of renouncing the most basic democratic right -voting in national elections- is considered by the European Union and OECD as the greatest threat to democracy today. EU Council, in the Green Paper, predicts that rates of abstention in Western Europe will reach 65% by 2020. Indifference and lack of trust in institutions reveals a "democratic deficit" which should be managed by political governance of all levels. New technologies and eParticipation particularly present an opportunity to face this issue.

The main goal of eParticipation is to re-connect citizens and all other stakeholders (e.g. NGOs) to decision-making and governance, central or local, by means of policy and legislation formulation and evaluation using Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The ultimate goal however is to strengthen and empower democratic governance at all levels of society and to promote individual citizen evolution as part of the collective process.

This brochure aims at describing the eParticipation domain and depicting how it can help government authorities improve their interaction with the public through public consultation and democratic processes. Furthermore, IMC Technologies' holistic approach to eParticipation, eDialogos, is presented. eDialogos covers all aspects of implementing eParticipation in practice. This approach enables all stakeholders to achieve citizen active participation in public affairs, decision-making and policy and legislation shaping in a safe, reliable, user-friendly and efficient way.

2. eParticipation – Present and future

While democracy is the most widely applied governance system worldwide and the progress of society democratization over the last two decades is generally considered to be a fact, democracy as a governance system and the democratic way of life are threatened by internal erosion, which endangers the established democracy in Western European countries.

It is not the principle of democracy but especially the practice of democracy that is facing a crisis: people are increasingly skeptical about the ability of democratic governments to solve the ever-increasing, complex problems of modern society and they are also skeptical as to whether their voices are actually heard. At the same time, they recognize that the influence of (international) organizations such as NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations), pressure groups, initiatives and alliances is growing.

This leads to a situation in which first-class democracy is compromised by second-class democracy. We term first-class democracy to be a competitive agora (a 'market', but also an exchange point for ideas and arguments) where political parties are competing for the votes of citizens, while second-class democracy is the situation in which the resulting policy and the procedure for implementing this policy, as manifested by voter choices in the electoral process, are characterized voter abstinance and non-transparent influence of non-democratic alliances (known as "asymmetric influence"). Citizens, at least those who are willing to participate, are frustrated and enraged, stressing the problem of reduced participation in democratic process at all levels and public disengagement from formal political processes, such as voting, participation in political parties and keeping up to date with the political agenda.

To achieve the empowerment of democracy as a whole, second-class democracy should spread through increased participation at all levels so as to strengthen the influence of non-organized citizens in policy implementation (see Figure 1). Additionally, central and local government is becoming increasingly interested in consolidating their position against vested interests by involving the general population, also known as the 'unorganized majority'. From this perspective, strengthening citizen participation is not simply the implementation of direct democracy, but also direct negotiation with the people, who now have the chance to take part a process that until recently was only accessible to vested interests or collective initiatives.

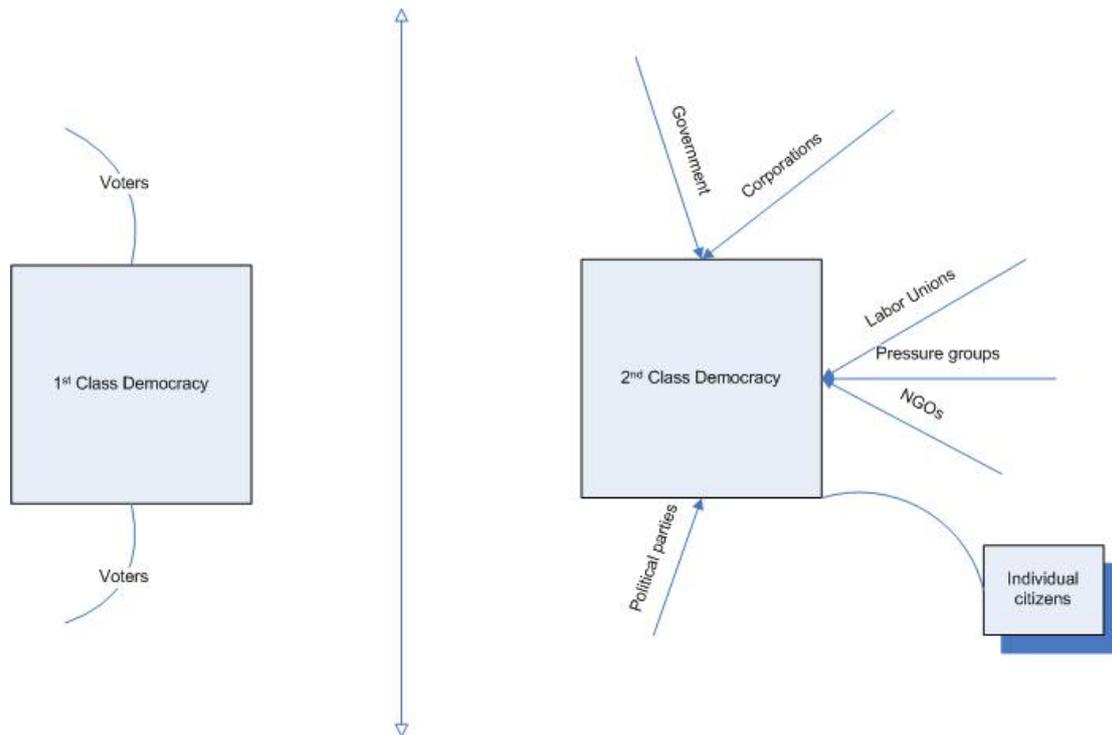


Figure 1: First-class and second-class democracy

eParticipation is meant to cater for this need for new forms of participation and active involvement of citizens in public affairs, so that democracy actually becomes everyday practice in between elections, instead of being reduced to merely being the act of casting a ballot in national elections.

New technologies and their dynamics in terms of interactivity constitute an important means to solve organizational problems of participation and dialogue at a large scale among geographically dispersed stakeholders of heterogeneous nature. They can create new channels of interactive communication in a way that traditional media could not. Furthermore, integration of knowledge management technologies enables management of heterogeneous information from multiple sources aiming at drawing useful conclusions, while participation methods and procedures required for optimal use of new ICT tools have been developed.

In 2001 OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) identified three different levels - types of electronic participation:

- **Information:** it is a one-way relationship, in which governmental organizations produce and distribute information to citizens. It covers “passive” access to information when requested by citizens and “active” distribution of information on behalf of the governance body.

- **Consultation:** it is a two-way relationship, in which people share their views with governmental organizations. The latter define consultation issues, provide relevant information, formulate the questions to be answered and manage the process, while citizens are invited to contribute their views and opinions.
- **Active participation:** it is a relationship based on cooperation with governmental organizations, in which citizens are actively involved in defining the process of policy shaping and decision-making. In active participation, the role of citizens in defining the issues, proposing policy options and shaping the dialogue is recognized, although the responsibility for the final decision or policy determination remains with the governmental organizations.

This differentiation is important, because it indicates clearly the degree of involvement - participation of citizens in the process. OECD also emphasized that efforts made at the third level are in pilot phase and are limited to a few countries. Most efforts are associated with the second level.

eDialogos solution covers all three categories of eParticipation by providing different methods and tools. Thus, governmental organizations are given the flexibility to select the category that covers their needs at each point in time.

It should be noted that eParticipation methods are not meant to replace the existing processes and ways of citizen engagement, but to complement and empower them. eParticipation is not a panacea, but it can promote the establishment of a closer relationship between Organizations and their stakeholders, achieving a significant impact level.

3. Governmental organizations that benefit from eParticipation

There are many governmental organizations that can benefit from eParticipation. While organization goals may vary, the eDialogos solution for eParticipation can successfully cover their needs. The following government organizations can have direct benefits:

- **Central Government and Governmental Agencies.** The main objective is citizen involvement in national policy and legislation shaping, as well as formulation of the overall state policy. Additionally, public awareness, increased transparency and credibility of the political system can be strengthened.
- **Local Authorities.** The main objective is citizen participation in decision-making and in shaping the actions and policies of local authorities. Citizen participation is more direct in this case and the combination of eParticipation with traditional methods of participation becomes more feasible.
- **Non-governmental - Non-profit Organizations, Local Communities.** The main objectives are facilitating public argumentation and debate and achieving maximum citizen awareness and mobilization on issues promoted by NGOs and Local communities.
- **Media.** The role of the media to inform the public finds its ideal complement in e-Participation, where citizens can provide views and opinions on subjects of common interest by means of public debate, illustrating in fact the trends of public opinion.
- **Private Sector Corporations.** The main objective is communication with the customers to inform them and gather their views on the company's products and overall image. Participation methods in conjunction with market research methods can be used successfully in this case. Corporate Social Responsibility departments in particular can benefit greatly from eParticipation.
- **Political Parties.** The main objective is to streamline interaction with citizens on a regular basis, providing information to the public as well as receiving and processing proposals to be integrated into parties' political platform.

4. eDialogos Solution at a Glance

Aiming to “make democracy and dialogue an everyday practice” at all levels of government, from local to central government, the eDialogos approach provides a wide range of tools, processes and services that can lead to the successful implementation of eParticipation in practice.

1. EPARTICIPATION METHODOLOGY.

It consists of three basic techniques that are complementary to each other and are integrated in a single framework. Specifically, these techniques are:

- **Electronic Surveys.** This process is initiated by the organization and includes questionnaires that are posted on the organization’s website to investigate public attitudes towards its policies and actions.
- **Collection of e-signatures (e-Petition).** This process is initiated by citizens and is the electronic equivalent of the well-known procedure of petition signing, which enables citizens to raise issues they consider important.
- **Online Deliberation.** It is the most engaging and innovative process of all and requires close cooperation between citizens and organizations. Online deliberation is based on transparent and secure democratic processes, provision of high-quality accessible information on important issues to citizens and on the commitment of the organization to discuss openly with the public and take their opinion into serious consideration. The process of online deliberation is briefly depicted in Figure 2.

2. INTEGRATED ONLINE PLATFORM.

The platform integrates a selection of eParticipation tools in order to offer complete and automated support to the methodology and procedures listed above. These tools can be used either on their own or as part of integrated processes. The success of the platform lies in providing integrated services to citizens in a simple and comprehensible way, hiding the complexity of a multi-step eParticipation process.

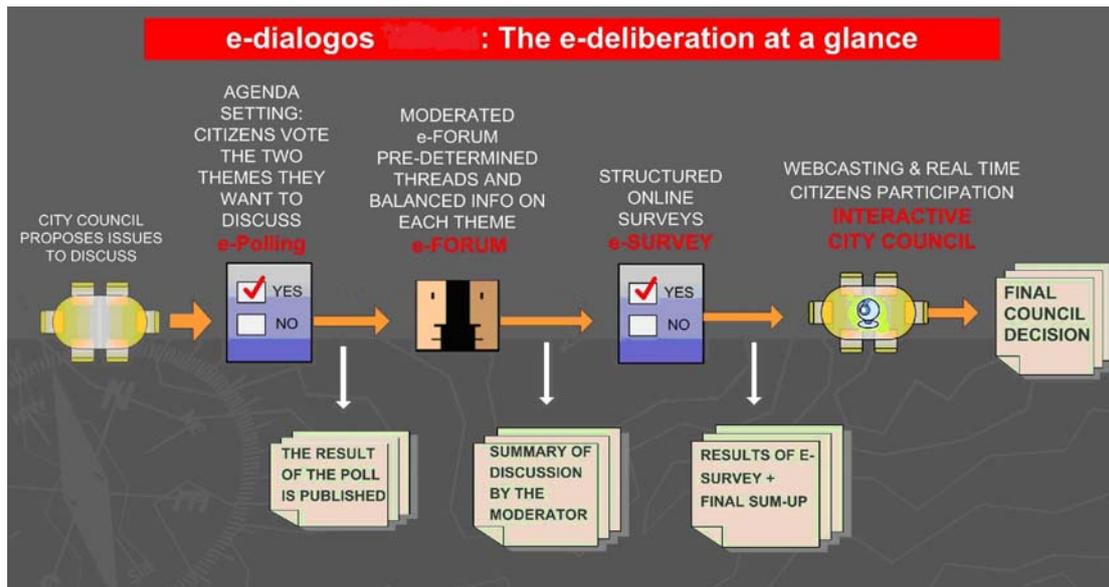


Figure 2: Online Deliberation at a Glance

The main services of the platform are the following:

- Participation Services. The platform provides user-friendly tools to support interaction and active participation of citizens in the processes.
- Information Services. The platform informs people on ongoing events: for example, when dialogue on an issue commences, it informs the public on the issues discussed using a knowledge bank. It also gives access to past dialogue archives.
- Training Services. The platform allows for citizens' education on eParticipation, general understanding of procedures and usage of the platform.
- Community Services: The platform allows users to organize themselves into communities of interest that arise from their own needs. Furthermore, the platform has the option to integrate with existing communities such as facebook, twitter, etc.

Additionally, there are administrative tools provided in the back-office for managing deliberations, user rights, as well as system and political memory management. The latter is an advanced tool that adds intelligent functionality to the approach.

The intelligent information management layer of the platform ('political memory') stores and manages semantic descriptions of the information and knowledge created and exchanged during eParticipation processes and allows for intelligent search in stored information, content visualization and navigation and automatic processing of information and citizen opinions.

3. SUPPORTING TOOLS.

To achieve the objectives of eParticipation, IMC Technologies offers a complete toolbox in order to ensure the efficiency of the overall process. More specifically, it provides supporting tools for the following actions:

- Information campaigns and stimulation of citizen interest in eParticipation activities, using a variety of media always tailored to the context at hand, in order to increase citizen participation and mobilization.
- Training for citizens, organization employees involved in the debate, moderators and organization employees in charge of supporting the system. The tools are tailored to each group needs.
- Actions to establish back-office structures and processes to effectively support eParticipation actions. These activities are adaptable to existing organizational characteristics of the institution.
- Material collection for getting the platform running. Specific forms and best practices are provided for efficient and quick launching of the platform.

5. eDialogos Platform Technology

When designing the technological infrastructure of eDialogos, our main objective was to align technology, philosophy and functionality. Facing technology as a tool that would allow us to deliver our innovative approach of eDialogos, offering high added value, we developed the technological infrastructure of the platform based on:

- A multi-tier architecture for online services
- Support for open standards
- Use of Free Software/ Open Source Software

This combined approach gives eDialogos the following advantages:

- Extensibility, achieved via open architecture, open standards and free software.
- Scalability, not only via high performing components of the platform, but also via clustering in different parts, such as the database and the application server.
- Security, via support for relevant standards (HTTPS and SSL) and service design.
- Transparency, via auditing of both (framework) source code and standards, both of which are open.
- Combined use of services at the interface layer, via support for portlet technology and drag-and-drop functionality.
- Maintainability ensured by the use of open technologies, multi-tier architecture and structured approach to the development of the platform.
- Rapid implementation, through the integration of all components into a coherent whole and the possibility of rapid application development where appropriate.
- Interoperability via support for open standards and semantic models.
- Adaptability to any application domain by developing (or adapting) semantic models accordingly.

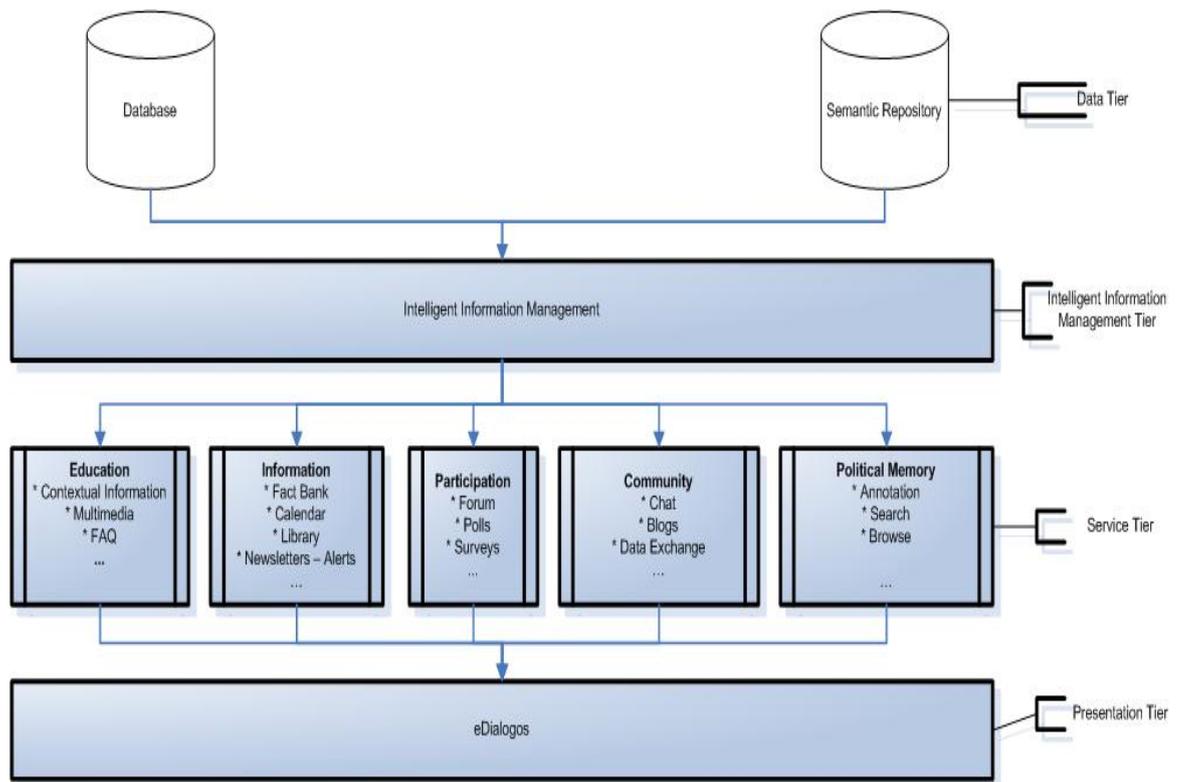


Figure 3: eDialogos Architecture

System architecture is characterized by multiple tiers of functionality (multi-tier) and loose coupling. The architecture is depicted in Figure 3, where we can distinguish the following tiers:

1. **Data Tier.** It consists of the Database and the Ontology Repository, where data and semantic models are stored respectively.
2. **Intelligent Information Management Tier.** It adds advanced functionalities for managing information stored in the data tier, such as semantic description of content, advanced search and relevance estimation and connection with external communities via Linked Data support.
3. **Service Tier.** It implements and delivers the services of the platform and operates in an Application Server environment.
4. **Integration/ Presentation Tier.** It integrates individual Service Tier services and makes them available to the users by presenting them through a graphical interface.

6. Benefits of the eDialogos Solution

The main benefits of the eDialogos holistic approach to eParticipation are:

- Integrated approach to eParticipation, ensuring active citizen involvement in the public sphere. This is the result of a multi-disciplinary approach combining political science, communications, promotion and marketing and state-of-the-art ICT, so as to best serve the goals of eParticipation and democracy.
- Adaptability to the needs of each organization. The approach allows either individual or integrated use of tools provided by the platform, so as to adapt to the changing needs of organizations that use it. The platform supports fully automated eParticipation processes.
- Full back-office support. eParticipation is a particularly demanding domain that requires a multidisciplinary approach in order to be effectively implemented. eDialogos offers technologies, tools, processes, structures, forms and best practices supporting all those working in the back-office for the efficient, reliable and safe implementation of eParticipation. Additionally, the platform provides a comprehensive and unified management environment.
- Technical excellence. The eParticipation platform constitutes a sound technological infrastructure at all levels, giving special emphasis on sensitive issues such as accessibility, safety and protection of personal data. Organizations can thus achieve widespread citizen participation and confidence in the credibility of the process.
- Intelligent Applications for effective management of information to obtain reliable analysis of citizen views. The political memory infrastructure that has been developed as part of the platform enables intelligent search in stored information, content visualization and navigation and automated processing of information and citizen opinions.

7. Why choose IMC Technologies for eParticipation?

IMC Technologies is a pioneer in the eParticipation domain – one of the first to develop integrated eParticipation solutions and successfully apply them in practice. The company's initiative started in late 2006, at a time when only a few research groups worldwide had an understanding of the domain.

The combination of the advanced research IMC Technologies conducts with the commitment to developing solutions that work in practice and a multidisciplinary approach led to the eDialogos solution - the most comprehensive and technically advanced eParticipation solution on the market today. Furthermore, our strong expertise in knowledge management gave eDialogos advanced information processing features that no other eParticipation platform has.

The innovation eDialogos approach to eParticipation has led to international recognition and has been presented at international conferences, European Union workshops and major European eParticipation portals.

The most important distinction for eDialogos came from the European Commission, since the implementation of eDialogos for the City of Trikala was chosen as a finalist in the European eGovernment Awards 2009, the most prestigious e-Government awards in Europe.



Indicatively, we could also refer to the following:

- **Best Practice**, which is referred to in all formal presentations of the instructors of the Institute for Local Government, as part of the education program "Digital City", during which elected local authorities representatives from all over Greece were trained in 2008.
- Recognized **best practice** by the project Digital Cities (Interreg IV) which deals with the exchange of good practices at local government level among European countries.

- Presentation at **international conferences**: “Broadband Cities 2008”, Trikala, Greece / ICT “Global Forum 2008”, Athens, Greece / “9th World e-Democracy Forum”, Issy-les-Moulineaux, Paris, France / 3rd National Congress of the Greek Society for Systemic Studies, Piraeus, Greece
- **Case Study** presentation at the cc: eGov 2007, EParticipation.net, Digital Communities Portal and ePractice.eu, the European Union portal for E-Governance and E-Democracy
- **Article** titled “An Innovative Methodological Approach to Local E-Democracy in Greece” in the book: “Beyond e-Government & e-Democracy: A Global Perspective”
- **Article** titled “eDialogos: a holistic approach for enhancing eParticipation in local governance”, in the issue “E-Gov 2.0: pave the way for eParticipation”.
- **Publication** titled “Facilitating Dialogue - Using Semantic Web Technology for eParticipation’ in Extended Semantic Web Conference, June 2010, Crete.

Testimonial – Od. Raptis, CEO of e-Trikala SA

“For the Municipality of Trikala and e-Trikala SA, which operates the solution eDialogos, the development of services in the area of eParticipation was a challenge, an innovation which by that time (October 2006) had not been applied in Greece before. With eDialogos by IMC Technologies we managed to enable citizens to participate actively and on an equal opportunities basis in first and second level local government decision-making and policy formulation.

Thanks to the eParticipation platform by IMC Technologies we became champions at European level and we provide extensive eParticipation services, which led to e-Trikala SA winning a significant number of European and national distinctions on e-government and e-democracy.

Finally the professionalism, excellent know-how and experience that IMC Technologies have on on eParticipation, Knowledge Management and issues related to the use of infrastructure and broadband networks, make us believe that we found not only an excellent technology provider, but also an excellent partner we can consult on how to harness the limitless possibilities offered by the new technologies of the Internet and broadband networks.”

About IMC Technologies

IMC Technologies is an innovative company that provides integrated solutions and services for Knowledge Management and eParticipation to organizations and enterprises, active in key economic sectors. The company was founded in 2004 by researchers and engineers from the National Technical University of Athens and is currently a leader in its domains of operation in the Greek market.

Our corporate philosophy is built around Knowledge and we deem our competitive advantage to be our corporate Knowledge. Our business practices and principles that sustain our entrepreneurial spirit and drive our evolution are the quest for excellent technology solutions, the pursuit of fresh and innovative ideas, the continuous investment in research and development and our commitment to the fulfillment of our customers' business goals. To achieve our objective, we have adopted a multidimensional approach that aims at providing holistic solutions in order to deliver best service to our customers and maximize their benefit. In addition, we implement a quality management system certified by EN ISO 9001:2000 and utilize PMI-certified project management.

Achievements

“New Entrepreneur Award” at the annual Athens Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) Awards 2008, in the presence of the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic. ACCI awards are the most recognized and important business awards in Greece.



Finalist for the Award of the Entrepreneurship Club “Stelios Chatziioannou” for Best New Company - New Entrepreneur. IMC Technologies was a contender in the final selection among three companies from across the country.



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