Puzzled by Policy: Providing New Hope for eParticipation at the EU Level

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Abstract: Governments today recognise that to deliver effective public policy they need to enhance citizen and community involvement in the policy making process, particularly amongst the socially disadvantaged and hard to reach. For the average EU citizen let alone a newly arrived immigrant, locating, accessing and using up-to-date information and tools can often be very difficult. Puzzled by Policy (PBP) aims to correct this worrying situation in a manner that fights the perceived democratic deficit by providing all citizens – regardless of their socio-economic background, subject matter knowledge, IT or literacy skills – an engaging and easy-to-use eParticipation platform to learn about and discuss topical policy issues, like immigration - an area that directly impacts often hard-to-reach and socially exclude groups within society, and yet rarely incorporates their voices.

'Migration is a hot topic and a top priority on the political agendas of the EU Member States. It is growing in scope and complexity and is having a serious impact – positively and negatively – on the European Union and its Member States.'
-- European Institute of Public Administration, Maastricht.

1 Introduction

Many Governments today recognise that to deliver effective public policy they need to enhance citizen and community involvement in the policy making process, particularly amongst the socially disadvantaged and hard to reach. Unfortunately, policy making, particularly at the EU level, is seen by many as an elitist process, taking place only amongst high level decision makers and the more influential members of society. For the average EU citizen let alone a newly arrived immigrant, locating, accessing and using up-to-date information, resources and tools can often be very difficult – leaving many citizens unsure about the key policymaking issues facing Europe or even how to begin to understand them.

Through the years, the European Commission has attempted to tackle a perceived democratic deficit in Europe by funding a wide-ranging series of eParticipation projects [CR10]. Until very recently, however, technical limitations have tended to prevent pan-

European projects from reaching significant numbers of citizens. For the most part, citizens have needed direct access to a computer to locate and use eParticipation tools *as well as* significant IT and literacy skills to navigate complex policy debates [D4.1.1]. Given these restrictions, it is hardly surprisingly that most European eParticipation projects have only been able to target specific groups such as the young or environmentally conscious.

This paper aims to present and assess a case study of Puzzled by Policy (PbP) – a three year EU project that launched in 2010 and is funded under the CIP-PSP Call. Drawing heavily upon the lessons learned from the EU's eParticipation Preparatory Action[1], PbP has been intentionally designed to tackle head on the ongoing challenge of engaging all stakeholders, regardless of their backgrounds or skills. [CKK09].

PBP initiallly chose to focus on immigration policy debates because it is an area that directly impacts often hard-to-reach and socially exclude groups within society, and yet rarely incorporates their voices [D.3.1]. It is hoped, however, that the Puzzled platform will ultimately be adopted and adapted for wider policy issues.

2 Puzzled by Policy Case Study

The EU is challenged on a daily basis to deal with immigration and migration within the overall socioeconomic context of Europe: a challenge that is increasingly being characterised by skill and labour shortages, competition for highly skilled workers, and the need to integrate migrants into host societies while managing the pressure of illegal migrants trying to make their way into Europe.

The idea of a common European policy on immigration dates back to the Amsterdam Treaty of May 1, 1999 which gave Union Institutions new powers to develop legislation on immigration matters. Over 13 years later, however, Europe still lacks a harmonised approach to the treatment of legal migration and illegal immigration. [D3.1]. During the last European Parliament elections the issue of immigration raised fears of far-right gains in a number of Member States and led to widespread calls for a more educated and informed debate throughout Europe. The debate surrounding forthcoming EU immigration proposals is likely to be lively and contentious, if not divisive.

By focusing on this difficult issue, PbP aims to help ensure that discussions surrounding immigration in Europe are as balanced, informed and inclusive as possible.

2.1 PbP Platform

To help achieve this goal, the PbP platform [D2.4] combines fully researched and tested eParticipation concepts and tools with new Web 2.0 and mobile technologies to make it easier for all citizens to understand, discuss, and share their views on issues surrounding immigration:

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[1] For further background on the project and to test the tools, see: http://www.puzzledbypolicy.eu

(1) **Understand**: A POLICY PROFILER tool (in the form of a fun, quick and easy –to-take quiz) enables users to visually see where their views stand on a policy spectrum chart and to access information from NGOs and political parties that align with varying views across the spectrum. The tool allows people with no prior knowledge about immigration policy, or even the new political environment to which they have migrated, to quickly and easily understand how and where their views relate to the wider legislative context

(2) **Discuss**: A U-DEBATE forum enables citizens to exchange views. Argument Visualisation tools simplifies inter-related debates and break down arguments into easy to follow strands. Linguistic Translation tools make the content accessible to those who can read.

(3) **Share**: An easy to use WIDGET allows users to embed (or share) the PbP platform on popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as well as mobile phones, making it easier to reach people where they are already participating. A Policy-Maker Feedback button feeds easy-to-grasp snapshot reports of citizen views back to national and EU-level decision makers, making it easier to channel the views of often under-represented immigrants to decisiomakers by summarising user views and providing aggregated demographic information on who is participating.

Far from being brought together randomly, the above components were strategically chosen to address common shortcomings with previous EU eParticipation Projects. For example, rather than assume in-depth knowledge of and interest in the subject at hand, PbP seeks to draw users into the issue by helping them to better understand where their views stand in relation to others. Next, rather than feature a linear, text heavy debate, PbP uses argument visualisation to capture interest and make things easier for everyone to understand. Finally, rather than expect users to locate and access a stand alone platform, as most previous eParticipation projects did, PbP uses Widgets to bring the debates to where users already are.

Additional key innovative features of the PbP solution [D2.4] include:

A. Language Localisation: Traditionally, eParticipation projects had to implement separate debate forums to accommodate differing languages, and then consolidate the results. PbP overcomes this barrier through the deployment of LINGUISTIC TRANSLATION tools that translates the platform into the language of the country where PbP is accessed. These easy-to-use tools allows immigrants (who are often new to a country and do not speak the official 'political' language) and other hard to reach groups to participate in local debates.

B. Viral Marketing: In the past, citizens had to seek and find an often hard to navigate platform. PbP overcomes this barrier to access through the use of a WIDGET that can be embedded on any website and marketed virally on social media/network sites. The PROFILER increases the likelihood of viral marketing as most citizens are interested to learn more about their own views even if they are not concerned with the finer details of complex policy. Providing fun, personalised applications like the WIDGET and PROFILER enhances PbB ability to reach a wide and socially representative constituency of citizens.

C. Analytic Information: Traditional user surveys rely on users to provide feedback. PbP's use of an innovative WIDGET platform allows the Consortium to gain far richer and more detailed analytic information without the need to trouble users. Data includes demographics on who is doing what, how often, where, and when leading to a highly detailed understanding of who is using the tools and why.

D. Graphical Representation: PbP helps to reconnect citizens with politics and policymaking by presenting content and discussions in the form of highly visual and easy-to-follow graphical depictions such as DIAGRAMS and a COMPASS rather than text-heavy reports that are unlikely to be read. Use of such new web-based applications make it easier for migrants to a new country, regardless of educational or socio-economic background, to understand and follow complex debates.

Collectively, PbP's unique features combine to create a fun, easily accessible and transparent new eParticipation tool to stimulate discourse and exchange among all citizens – regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, language & IT skills and level of education.[2]

2.2 PbP Objectives and Strategy

As noted above, Puzzled by Policy is intentionally designed to combine new and existing social media tools in an innovative manner that helps overcome traditional barriers to eParticipation. This being the case, the central objective of the project is to enable as broad and diverse a cross-section of citizens as possible to form and express their opinions about EU Migration and Immigration Policy.   In so doing, the project ultimately aims to give voice to minority views and provide added value to policy-makers. [D4.2]

To establish a robust evaluation framework for comparative analysis as well as to ensure that the hard-to-reach – a key constituency in any project dealing with immigration – were appropriately represented, PbP strategically selected four specific European countries to act as trial sites: Hungary, Spain, Italy and Greece. These countries were selected as they represent two regions within Europe (Eastern and Southern) that have been largely favourable to the harmonisation of European immigration policy, albeit for widely varying historic and cultural reasons.

Unlike their northern counterparts, Eastern European and Southern Mediterranean countries have both come to deal with immigration within a legislative context relatively recently. During the Cold War, immigration was hardly an issue for the Eastern European countries of the former Soviet bloc. Citizens were not allowed to immigrate and migrants were not allowed in. Meanwhile, until the economic prosperity of the 1980s, the central immigration issue facing Southern Mediterranean countries centred largely around the diaspora of citizens leaving to find better jobs abroad.

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[2] See for a complete set of project deliverables to date:
http://www.puzzledbypolicy.eu/Results/Deliverables.aspx - including D5.2.1 Evaluation Report a authored by GRNET whose findings feature within this paper

The situation is very different today. Currently, many Eastern European countries like Hungary are largely concerned with fellow ethnic populations just beyond their borders or the diaspora of their own citizens while many Southern Mediterranean countries like Italy and Greece are preoccupied with the pressures of illegal migration to their shores [D4.1.1]. Nevertheless, unlike many countries to the North, countries within both these regions tend to favour the harmonisation of European immigration policy – Eastern European countries to help bolster their own embryonic legislative frameworks and Southern Mediterranean countries to help deal with a problem they believe the whole of Europe should share.

By targeting these differing regions, PbP aims to help decision makers at the EU level better understand the varying reasons why citizens across Europe support and oppose policy surrounding a controversial topic like immigration. At the same time, PbP also aims to promote greater pan-European understanding of and sensitivity to diverging national concerns.

2.3 Impact, Feedback & Lessons Learned

Impact
Experience in the 2006-2008 eParticipation Preparatory Action taught PbP partners that engaging hard to reach groups needs hands-on bespoke outreach rather than traditional mass engagement [D5.2.1] To overcome this obstacle, at the outset of the project PbP engaged targeted users through the use of public entities with established credentials and contacts, to ensure the inclusion of hard-to-reach communities – including immigrants and ethnic minorities - within each country. At the same time, and as indicated above, past experience has shown that many eParticipation projects fail to attract users because they require citizens to find their sites rather than going to them via popularly used social media sites. PbP sought to overcome this obstacle by 1) pushing out the application via the PbP widget 2) mass dissemination by a pan-European News Agency.

As a result of these efforts, at the time of writing and based upon the projects first evaluation report [D5.2.1] , PbP has attracted more than 6,515 unique visitors from across Europe. Over 2,500 users have used the innovative Policy Profiler Quiz to quickly and easily find out how their views on immigration relate to existing policy, and over 50% of visitors have returned to the PbP site more than once. The PbP widget itself was installed on other sites and social media over 632 times and viewed 26,000 times. Meanwhile, 66% of users stated that they believe that PbP participation is performed in a clear, open and inclusive way. 63% of users positively rated the Policy Profiler in helping them to understand immigration policy. And, over 50% of users said would use the platform to learn more about other policy areas.

Feedback
PbP's special design features have enabled the project not only to achieve high impact but also to garner valuable feedback from key stakeholders across two central areas (1)

the participation of citizens, particularly the socially excluded and previously unheard and (2) the responsiveness of government.

Citizen Participation
NGOs (which act as key intermediary groups for immigrant communities) have found PbP an important new tool to engage immigrants and help them to channel their views to government institutions in a more effective, efficient and representative manner [D5.2.1]. 'PbP reflects real life problems on the streets of Greece – the violence and racist attacks, ' says Vasio Chioti from the Greek NGO Praksis. 'The fact that the PbP platform utilizes social media tools (profiling) is very important and actually motivating for user participation.' Maria Kouveli, President of the Local Council for Immigrants Integration in Greece, echoed this sentiment. 'There is a rich legal framework in Greece, but it is not enforced. Online discussions focused on this challenge help us to ensure that government institutions address this short coming.'

NGOs also believe that PbP's proactive use of state of the art technology has helped to establish a strong foundation for future outreach efforts. As Balint Josa from the Foundation for Subjective Values in Hungary recently put it, 'Five to ten years might pass before e-democracy tools such as PbP will have a chance to reach all citizens in Hungary. Web 2.0 tools are still not accessible for all. However, PbP offers promising trends and opportunities, including its strategy to involve tele-cottages.'

Finally, NGOs agreed that the PbP platform has helped them to facilitate the integration of local immigrants into a community. 'Our foundation provides mediation services for immigrant communities through projects such as the 'National Consultation for Social Cohesion and Roma Strategy,' said Eva Deak from the Partners Hungary Foundation. 'There is a real need for such services in society but they often suffer from the fact that they are not well known by the public and there is a lack of supporting IT applications. PbP endeavours to address these challenges in a manner that makes policies more transparent, which is important in terms of engaging people to use the tool.'

Government Responsiveness
Policymakers themselves have attested to PbP's ability to help to shape public policy that is much more closely aligned with citizen's demands and needs. The Executive Director of Athen's Mayor's Office has publicly stated that PbP 'is a project which can and will support our immigration mission as the Municipality of Athens.' At the same time, the Mayor's Office in Turin Italy has announced that it has adjusted the city's public services to reflect input from PbP's local uDebate on immigration. 'Puzzled by Policy gives us the opportunity to bring communities voice to our institution's work agenda,' says Ilda Curti, Turin's Integration Policy Deputy Mayor. 'This chance has to be taken. Our Administration will use the information and issues from online consultations when designing and implementing local policies related to immigration and integration - the economical context permitting of course.'

According to Ms. Eva Luz Cabrera from the Municipal Council for Citizen Participation in Tenerife Spain, PbP has been instrumental in bringing public authorities, civil society leaders and community representatives together to foster social cohesion and community

bonds in the culturally diverse neighbourhood of El Fraile. "It is essential,'' Ms Cabrera argued, 'to convey the message that each and every person living in the neighbourhood has a crucial role to play to enrich, build and design a place for living together in unity. We need to rely on citizen involvement and participation to build more cohesive and sustainable cities.' Within Tenerif, PbP quickly gained the interest of representatives from the local school, church and mosque as well as the associations of neighbours, mayors, women and immigrants and public authorities such as the Arona Municipal Council, the Department of External Affairs and the Immigration Observatory. In Ms Cabrera's view, PbP has the potential to be extended to all other neighbourhoods throughout the municipality.

In the words of the Municipal Council of Arona, Tenerife: 'PbP U-Debates have helped local municipalities define goals to be achieved, including strengthening partnerships between neighbours and social actors, promoting accessibility by removing language barriers and becoming a leader in diversity management. Moving forward, it will be important to do an analysis of the reasons causing co-existence problems and to create a mediation team as a channel for conflict resolution.'

Lessons Learned
Puzzled by Policy is entering its final six months, during which time it is certain to generate additional empirical feedback and findings. Nevertheless, PbP has already garnered a number of key lessons [D5.2.1] in terms of deploying successful eParticipation projects generally and bridging the digital divide more specifically:

(1) *Stand alone platforms are a thing of the past*: eParticipation iniatives must go to where people already are to have any chance of engaging significant users.
(2) *Intermediaries are key to overcoming the digital divide*: eParticipation initiatives must take special care to include NGOS and other organisations that work with the socially disadvanged and excluded to ensure genuinely representative participation.
(3) *Tools that simplify and visualise complex arguments are useful to citizens and decision makers alike*: eParticipation initiatives must make it easier for all users to quickly and easily grasp key arguments and findings.
(4) *Use of social media can make democratic engagement more appealing and fun*: eParticipation initiatives should make greater use of functionalities like profiling to appeal to users and help them locate their pre-existing views within a wider context.

3 Conclusions

In the current era of onging fiscal austerity and increasing social tensions across Europe, it would clearly be an exaggeration to say that Puzzled by Policy has dramatically altered the political landscape with regard to immigration. Nevertheless, in setting forth to overcome many of the obstacles that have traditionally hampered EU-funded eParticipation efforts, Puzzled by Policy has demonstrated that it is possible to use ICT to help give voice to the often unheard.

As testimonial after testimonial has shown, PbP has given NGOs and decison makers, alike, the hope that new ICT tools can be successfully used to overcome division and build a more cohesive community. At the same time, PbP has identified a number of important lessons learned with regard to future eParticipation initiatives at the EU level. In so doing, it is safe to say that PbP has paid a cautionary warning to those who would use the mis-steps of earlier eParticipation projects to halt further piloting. At the same time, the project provides clear inspiration to those who continue to believe that ICT will dramatically alter the course of democratic engagement - whether we like it or not.

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