E-Democracy in E-Austria

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Abstract: Christian Rupp has been appointed Federal Executive Secretary of E-Government in May of 2003. At that point of time a new E-Government Platform was introduced. He reports on the current developments of E-Democracy in Austria.

A new-networked economy and a knowledge-based information society have emerged in our midst. The way people live, learn, work and relate to each other is being unalterably changed. The digital revolution is leading to the development of entirely new forms of social and economic interaction and new communities in a borderless cyberspace. Free flow of information and ideas has sparked an explosive growth of knowledge and its myriad new applications. As a result, economic and social structures and relations are being transformed.

In the private sector, citizens have become used to using the Internet for business transactions - they expect the same level of service from their government agencies. Hence, e-government has become one of the main concerns in the administration.

With the decision of the Council of Ministers of the Austrian Federal Government in May 2003 an E-Government Platform at political level has been set up in June 2003 which is chaired by the Chancellor in order to demonstrate the high priority of the implementation of E-Government. The platform is composed by the Vice-Chancellor, the Federal Minister of Finance, the Federal Minister of the Interior, the Federal Minister of Justice, the State Secretary in the Federal Chancellery, governors of the federal provinces , the president of the association of Austrian cities and towns, the president of the Austrian association of municipalities, the business sector (Presidents of the Federal Chamber of Commerce, of the Austrian Social Security Institutions and of the National Conference on Liberal Professions), the Federal Chief Information Officer, several external experts and the Federal Executive Secretary for E-Government.

This platform has to agree on an Austrian E-Government Roadmap (nearly 100 projects until 2005) and to ensure the overall coordination of its implementation.

An E-Cooperation Board under the head of the Federal Executive Secretary for E-Government is in charge of the preparation of the Roadmap and the monitoring of the ongoing activities. In this board each ministry, each federal province, experts from the associations of municipalities, cities and towns are represented as well as experts of chamber organisations. A separate business platform involves nearly 150 companies in the E-government field.

This construction of an E-Government Platform an E-Cooperation Board and a business platform guarantees the communication between all stakeholders and political parties as well as representations of interests.

E-Government enables citizens to have access to their government whenever they need it, whether it is after hours or from abroad. This service focus to the citizen is at least as important as cost savings, which are, of course, an essential driver in our e-government strategy as well. The maturity in e-government services, to businesses as well as to individual citizens, will also be an important factor to determine the attractiveness of a city or region within the European Union. It is therefore of particular interest that Austria took fourth place in the 2003 overall e-government ranking within the European Union and came in second in services offered completely online.

E-Democracy systems and also E-Voting require strict identification and authentication of the individual. In Austria the first Citizen Cards are already on the market. The concept of the Citizen's Card (Authentication and Identification – Digital Signature) is being rounded off with the new tool of the digital signature for public administrations. In accordance with the principle of technological neutrality, the electronic signature can also be made via mobile phone. With the application of the mobile phone signature, Austria puts itself in an internationally leading role. This technology enables also sensitive government services, such as E-Voting, to be delivered in a secure manner to identified and authenticated citizens.

In the past, E-Government has focused on access to administrative functions; however, the Internet can also be used to exercise one's democratic rights.

In administrative E-Government services, efforts have now been focusing on the transaction level, whereas in the area of E-Democracy, efforts are typically still on the level of information or communication. It should be noted that E-Democracy services may cover all stages of the political process from agenda setting over deliberation and decision to monitoring of decisions made.

Even though the distinction between deliberative processes ("E-Participation") and decision making ("E-Voting") can be found in the literature, it has to be noted that a voting process can be a part of any of the above stages.

	E-Government	E-Democracy
Information	Download of forms, guides and "who-is-who", law information system, like http://ris.bka.gv.at http://help.gv.at http://www.austria.gv.at http://www.e-government.gv.at	Download of political programmes or facts relevant to a political discussion, pages run by representatives, like http://www.parlinkom.gv.at http://www.konvent.gv.at http://www.oevp.at http://www.spoe.at http://www.gruene.at http://www.fpoe.at
Communication	Electronic Web forms to start an administrative process: http://www.kremsmuenster.at http://www.weikersdorf.at http://www.wien.at http://www.service.steiermark.at	E-mail communication with representatives, moderated discussion fora on specific political topics: http://www.klassezukunft.at http://dafne.twoday.net http://mariegoessmscam.twoday.net http://enzersdorf.twoday.net
Transaction	Tax declarations, registration of abode, e-procurement, public library system, eg.: https://finanzonline.bmf.gv.at http://www.lieferanzeiger.at http://www.zustellung.gv.at	Voting, initiative, petition, eg.: http://www.e-voting.at

Figure 1: E-Government and E-Democracy Austrian best practice

The Austrian E-Government roadmap encompasses E-Voting, in a first step for citizens abroad, where the first field trials are expected in 2005, two test elections among students have already taken place.

However, the challenges in deploying viable e-voting solutions are formidable: Some examples of E-Government and E-Democracy in E-Austria:

@ The protection of privacy and voter anonymity.
@ The unequivocal identification of the voter.
@ The implementation of the election committee in its functions to ensure verifiability and reproducibility of the election.
@ The protection from sabotage either by external attacks or by voters or candidates attempting to disturb the elections.

Even though organisational safeguards are of course important, an E-Voting system has to technically guarantee compliance with these principles. We should be aware that an election is certainly one of the most regulated processes in a modern democracy and that it is also one of the most sensitive because it touches the core of our society.

In a modern democracy we have also the duty to close the gap between the technology-empowered and the technology-excluded communities on our planet as well as to the lack of information transfers in and between these communities. The developing world and transition economies comprise the largest portion of the digital and knowledge divides.

This workshop "Electronic Voting in Europe" will provide an overview of current E-Voting activities in Europe, their legal and technical approach and will report experience from various field trials. May it help a better understanding of the issues in electronic voting and pave the way for reliable and secure e-democracy systems in the future.