Online Transparency and Citizen Engagement
21st October 2016

Speakers: Andreas Pavlou (Right to Information Campaigner and Researcher at Access Info Europe, Spain), Fabian Fechner (Co-Founder of Politix EU, Belgium), Adam Nyman (Director of debatingeurope.eu, Belgium)

Moderator: Elisa Lironi (Digital Democracy and Campaigning Coordinator at European Citizens Action Service, Belgium)

Online citizen transparency and engagement platforms are increasingly sought out by citizens to provide the communication bridge between citizens and politicians/ administrations and fill in the gap in access to information in the public domain. How do these platforms work? What communication synergies can be attained with public communicators? This workshop presented several such platforms, explored their views on EU and local transparency, and offered recommendations for further stimulation of citizen engagement and enhancing transparency.

Fabian Fechner opened the session with a video introducing the concept and function of Politix EU, an online platform that allows users to track the EU legislative process in a transparent and interactive way. It offers a comprehensive overview of the process but also the chance to dig deeper if desired. A lack of interaction with policy-makers and access to information led the founders of Politix EU to make a tool to improve representative democracy by facilitating e-participation and closing the feedback loop while law is still in the making. In essence, it 'lowers the barrier to raise awareness'. Mr Fechner also emphasised the local element to the platform, as many local organizations are also represented on Politix EU.

Elisa Lironi suggested a brief Q&A session after each of the presentations. Mr Fechner was asked about financing; whether Politix EU also follows legislative initiatives before the Commission proposes them formally; and the makeup of Politix EU itself as an organisation. In response, **Mr Fechner** clarified that Politix EU receives no funding from lobbyist or special interest groups, sustaining itself instead with a grant from Stiftung Mercator. It only publishes legislative proposals once the Commission has adopted them. One legislative proposal per week is selected, based on the impact it will have on citizens. Politix EU is made up of part-time employees who manually collect data for the site. There are approximately 300 registered users thus far.

The second speaker was **Andreas Pavlou**, who presented the work of Access Info Europe. This is a civil society organisation which provides an online platform for access to documents of public interest to the EU citizen, via asktheEU.org. It maintains a database of previous requests and allows users to make new requests. Citizens, civil society, journalists and MEPs are among the users of this site, which aims to be a user friendly replacement for the Commission's often cumbersome and inefficient document request service. Mr Pavlou also noted that there is often an overuse of exceptions to requests for documents by the EU institutions, long timelines and poor secretariat

resources. He provided ample practical examples of how the asktheEU.org was used successfully in a wide array of legislative contexts.

In response to questions from the audience, Mr Pavlou explained that there is no specific data on user profiles but there are a large number of requests from investigative journalists and intermediaries such as NGOs. He also pointed out that although there is currently no formal support from the EU institutions, Access Info would be open to engaging with them in future.

Finally, **Adam Nyman** presented DebatingEurope.eu, which was set up to counter the myth that young people are not interested in European politics. The platform collects questions posted online and brings them to the attention of relevant policy-makers. It now has over 200,000 registered users and over 90,000 questions have been asked. Answers from Commissioners, MEPs and even the UN Secretary General have been provided. The key element and focus is that young people are not left out of political circles. The scope of the site is thus deliberately wide – anything that is current is appropriate. The site is, for the moment, only available in English, but there are plans to launch versions of the site in other European languages in the near future.

In answer to questions posed, Mr Nyman noted that there is a lack of trust between citizens and institutions, and that token gestures will not suffice to bridge that gap. With DebatingEurope.eu they take an approach of learning by doing, as there was previously no template for engaging people online in a similar manner. The general feeling is that policymakers are scared of online platforms but that there is a generational push towards them, evidenced by senior officials often hiring younger communication directors.

Ms Lironi then opened the floor to more general questions. To answer the question of whether 100% transparency was central, **Mr Pavlou** highlighted that citizens need information to be able to participate in democracy, and that transparency plays a very important role in this. In the wider ecosystem, transparency is not always helpful to questions of international relations, and individual integrity needs to be balanced against the public interest. **Mr Fechner** reflected that in politics the problem is that people are transparent but processes are not. There are also limits on the personal level, as if there is too much transparency it risks discouraging people from taking public office, although there is nevertheless always a place for transparency tools. **Ms Lironi** added that the issue of digital and media literacy is essential in terms of how people use social media and the transparency it allows. Finally, **Mr Nyman** added that it is essential to avoid the trap of being solely Brussels-based, and that Debating Europe seeks to circumvent this by building partnerships with youth organisations and schools around Europe.

Ms Lironi wrapped up the session by asking each of the participants to state briefly what one recommendation they would give the EU in terms of increasing online engagement and transparency. **Mr Pavlou** said that EU institutions have an obligation to streamline and record information, and apply exceptions only marginally. **Mr Fechner** pointed to the importance of improving the existing transparency register. Finally **Mr Nyman** suggested that before any of these suggestions could be taken up, the EU must first shape a narrative for Europe to get there.