Chapter 55

Government Spending Transparency on the Internet:
An Assessment of Greek Bottom-Up Initiatives over the Diavgeia Project

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to present four civil society initiatives that attempt to scrutinize government spending using open data from the Greek government OpenGov initiative Diavgeia project ("diavgeia," in Greek, standing for lucidity). In a period of strong economic recession, Greece is facing one of the most intense social and political crisis of its history, with citizens characterized by substantial disenchantment with politics and a cynical stance about their government and representatives. The Diavgeia project was launched in 2010 by the Greek government with the objective to bring back transparency and trust in the political process, enabling online insights into government spending. By reviewing current bottom-up initiatives in Greece that are using data from Diavgeia in an effort to serve the principles of transparency, openness, and offering public data in a manner easy to understand, evaluate and re-use, we discuss the role of open government mechanisms in introducing a new relation between citizens and policy-makers, tackling contemporary political challenges of democratic societies and reconnecting ordinary people with politics and policy-making.

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Open Data (OD) policies is gradually maturing from a global trend to a key aspect of most national and regional information policies underlining a simple citizen demand: government agencies should put as much of their data online as possible, in a human- or machine-readable format, so that everyone can re-use them since they were paid for through taxation.

The United States[1] and the United Kingdom, that have been the first and most vocal supporters of OD policies, can be found among countries pioneering such efforts. Other countries that have established open data as an integral part of their information policy include the Netherlands, Spain, France, Germany, Italy in Europe as well as New Zealand and Australia.

In the European context, opening up government data to the public has been part of the European policy agenda since the introduction of the PSI directive in 2003 (European Commission, 2003). Open data also constitute a key policy objective of the Malmö Ministerial Declaration on e-government (European Commission, 2009), which has set the priorities of the EU in this area for the 2010-2015 period, as well as in the recently adopted European Digital Agenda that outlines Europe's information society policies until 2015 (European Commission 2010a, 2010b).

Open data implementations so far seem to lean towards a cautious approach of making data available to citizens. This is partly caused by conflicting legal frameworks[2], cultural norms, as well as concerns about recovering the costs of data production.

Apart from economic aspects[3], OD policies have the potential to bring substantial added value in the way governments interact with their constituencies, a potential which is not yet globally appreciated. Overall, the justification for OD policies at the regional, national and supranational level focuses more on the economic rather than the social benefits from the use of Open Data.

This OD policies social impact mainly refers to the increase in transparency in the operation of the public sector (Schellong, 2008), which allows citizens or citizen journalists to control in a more efficient way the operation of key public sector services and administrative actions. This greater degree of transparency may lead in greater participation to public life, further support civil society and increase the democratization of society as a whole. As also testified by international experience, citizens react positively to the efforts of non-governmental organizations and individuals worldwide who have not only been engaged in making government data more available to the public but also in shaping the open data discourse (Sunlight Foundation, 2010).

In a period of strong economic recession, Greece is currently facing one of the most intense social and political crisis of its history, with citizens characterized by substantial disenchantment with politics and a cynical stance about their government and representatives. In this context, the Greek government recognized in 2009 the critical importance of transparency, accountability and citizen engagement, in the effort to enable the transition to a new public administration model that is looking for new ways to continuously improve the services provided to citizens. The government has introduced a set of open government initiatives targeted at introducing significant levels of transparency, accountability and citizen engagement within all levels of the Greek public administration and at establishing a new "social contract" between the citizen and the state.

In this framework, the Diavgeia project was launched in 2010 by the Greek government with the objective to bring back transparency and trust in the political process, enabling online insights into government spending.

Since then academics, postgraduate students, doctoral researchers as well as IT experts these have developed a series of bottom-up open data initiatives trying to evaluate, re-use and present financial public data to the Greek citizens in an

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