

1. Introduction

With Europe's Digital Decade, the European Commission ('EC') clarified that engaging EU nationals in the digital public sphere is a key priority. In the digital target for 2030, the EC stated that digital rights and principles should be solidaristic and inclusive and that "technology should unite, not divide, people."¹ Raising citizens' awareness and motivation to participate in digital policy making should be undertaken as a cornerstone of democratic processes within the EU.

The EU's attempt to address e-participation resulted in the launch of the 'Have Your Say!' Platform ('HYS' or 'Platform') in 2016. HYS is a digital tool that aims to facilitate civic participation through public consultations. These consultations are undertaken on a variety of issues with relevance to the European population.

The Platform demonstrates high potential to raise engagement among EU nationals. However, at its current stage of implementation HYS poses several challenges. Many citizens do not engage with the Platform, are unaware of it, and/or face disadvantages in participating compared to businesses and advocacy groups. As the EC at present is evaluating the Platform, with a new umbrella page expected in September 2023, the current moment is an ideal opportunity to propose changes to HYS.

2. Policy Recommendations

To understand the main challenges of HYS, the Portal2EU team participated in the Call for Evidence phase for the 'European Disability Card'² public consultation and provided feedback in their capacity as citizens in December 2022. The team also conducted desk research on other digital platforms and interviews with key stakeholders including digital civil society representatives and relevant EC officials. On this basis, the team identified ways to improve the Platform by addressing specific challenges. We propose the following recommendations to improve overall accessibility, increase transparency, and strengthen outreach to the European public.

2.1 Accessibility

Challenges. The Platform presents several accessibility issues. The filters for searching among different types of consultation require in-depth knowledge of the HYS procedures. Once the desired consultation is found, users consider questionnaires and surveys from the Platform lengthy, unclear, and occasionally containing technical jargon. In addition, the layout of questionnaires differs per consultation. When engaging with feedback provided by other users, an eTranslation tool is not consistently available, and the accessibility requirements for people with disabilities are not consistently observed. Finally, the Platform lacks an explicit means of verification of compliance with accessibility requirements. Taken together, these factors decrease the appeal of HYS and reduce overall the willingness of participants to engage with it.

Actions Recommended. HYS should be simplified to respond to the needs of ordinary citizens, using generally accessible language and offering guidance for search filters. Further accessibility measures include creating readable overviews of documents that summarise the essence of the proposal in all official EU languages. To improve access for citizens with disabilities, an accessibility toolbar and combination of textual and visual formats should be introduced on HYS. The Platform should adopt a chatbot to assist citizens in navigating across the website and through policy initiatives. Translation tools, including AI-assisted translation, should be implemented to make the Platform more accessible across language boundaries. The EC should prepare an accessibility statement based on the evaluation of an independent certification body, publicly available to citizens.

1. EC, 'Europe's Digital Decade: Digital Targets for 2030,' available at https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en.

2. https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13517-European-disability-card_en.

2.2 Transparency

Challenges. The current level of transparency in HYS creates challenges for users to meaningfully participate in the Platform, and for the EC to engage in effective two-way communication. There are no clear guidelines on what HYS is, how to engage with it and how to submit appropriate feedback. There are multiple documents that address these matters in a complex manner, such as the Guidelines³, the Toolbox⁴, and the Feedback Rules⁵. For ordinary citizens, however, learning about the process means looking into extensive information written in a legalistic manner. These factors contribute to the perception that the Platform does not provide tangible outcomes. This risks creating the feeling that the payoff for participation is too low to justify the time and effort of learning how to navigate HYS. Unclear identification of responsible individuals and unexplained delays contribute to this impression.

Actions Recommended. Comprehensive guidelines about HYS public consultations should be created for users. They should include essential information from the Better Regulation Guidelines and Toolbox reproduced in simplified language comprehensible for an ordinary citizen. IT improvements should include the introduction of an AI content moderation tool, alternative bot-prevention tools; and the addition of points of contact on each initiative and information on the reason for delay. In addition, HYS should be equipped with a centralised dashboard to allow users to view and consult open data about public consultations in a simple and user-friendly manner.

2.3 Outreach

Challenges. The Platform is missing broad public awareness, as demonstrated by the low number of participants in public consultations. Roughly estimated, for the period between 1 January and 30 June 2023, 15 legislative initiatives were open for feedback. On average, 148 EU citizens and 2 non-EU citizens participated in these initiatives. The participation rate varies from 0 to 1,102 citizens per initiative.

Actions Recommended. Solving low participation rates requires broad outreach to society at large and targeted outreach to those age, economic, and social groups with historically low participation levels in digital formats. A general marketing strategy should be developed to guide outreach⁶, utilising a combination of increased collaboration with national institutions and civil society organisations to improve general awareness of the Platform. Social media advertising and the development of a mobile application will help expand the reach to users including those with varying access to technology. More female developers in the Platform's team will ultimately improve women's participation in public consultations.

3. Conclusion

Conceptual and technical improvements in accessibility, transparency, and outreach will create a Platform with a broader reach. This will enable greater civic involvement among European citizens and an ultimately more responsive EC capable of responding to public needs. In this way, HYS can be the core of a more democratically resilient and prosperous EU.

4. Change Implementers

For all business and outreach recommendations: Antonina Cipollone, Head of Evaluation & Impact Assessment, Scrutiny Board Secretariat, Directorate of Strategy, Better Regulation & Corporate Governance, Secretariat General.

For all IT recommendations: Robert Andrecs, Head of Digital Solutions & Process Efficiency, Directorate of Transparency, Efficiency & Resources, Secretariat General.

3. EC, Better Regulation Guidelines, Commission Staff Working Document, SWD(2021) 305, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/swd2021_305_en.pdf.

4. EC, Better Regulation Toolbox, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-02/br_toolbox-nov_2021_en.pdf.

5. EC, Providing Suitable Feedback, Rules for Feedback and Suggestions, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/rules-feedback-and-su>.

6. Following the example of OECD's "Engaging Young People in Open Government: A Communication Guide", available at <https://www.oecd.org/mena/governance/Young-people-in-OG.pdf>.