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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

*National and Regional Internet
Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)*



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A special edition of GISWatch, "Internet governance from the edges: NRIs in their own words", is being published as a companion edition to the 2017 GISWatch annual report. It looks at the history, challenges and achievements of NRIs, as recounted by their organisers. It is available at <https://www.giswatch.org>

European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG)

THE NEED FOR EURODIG 3.0

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Introduction

The European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG) is the oldest and largest regional Internet Governance Forum (IGF). It was launched on 20-21 October 2008 in Strasbourg at the Palais de l'Europe, headquarters of the Council of Europe, and since then has been held in a different European country each year.

EuroDIG was created by a multistakeholder group of individual actors in order to discuss and elaborate regional strategies and policies regarding the internet. Its “messages”² are conveyed to European Union (EU) legislators and Council of Europe regulators for consideration, which helps to shape European policy and the implementation of policy.

In fact, it is unique in being actively supported by two European institutions – the European Commission and Council of Europe – which in certain areas can have supranational authority over the national laws and regulations and the judiciary of their member states respectively. In this regard, it is a model of how a multistakeholder discussion forum can be created, with its results channelled through decision-making bodies that have a mandate to listen to the views of actors in the regional internet community.

Political, economic and policy context

Europe has the second-highest internet penetration in the world, and is the second-largest digitised economy in the world after the EU. Two political entities make up Europe: the EU, which has 28 member countries,³ and is a supranational body to

which its members have delegated certain national competencies (such as, for instance, foreign trade agreements); and the Council of Europe, which includes 47 states, and whose competencies are the human rights framework. Both the EU and the Council of Europe have important and autonomous roles to play in global internet governance spaces, such as the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the global IGF, and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), in which the EU is recognised as a full member, while the Council of Europe has observer status.

The German, British, Italian and French economies are among the most important in the world (accounting for four members out of the G7 group) and this adds importance to what happens in this part of the world at the regional level.

Nevertheless, in terms of internet governance policy and strategy, the region, despite its relevance, lacks a common approach – sometimes resulting in disasters, such as the failure of the Safe Harbour⁴ and Privacy Shield⁵ legislations and the lack of common EU fiscal policies on internet companies. In both cases, the lack of EU coordination and common policies across the EU member states had heavy consequences on the EU economy and on the capacity of EU citizens to protect their individual rights.

Setting up EuroDIG

Starting from this consideration, EuroDIG tries to fulfil the needs of both the EU and Council of Europe to have a forum where public policies on the internet could be discussed openly, transparently and in a structured way with other relevant stakeholders. It was founded by a group of internet governance enthusiasts under the wing of the Council of Europe, which had brought experts of the various stakeholder groups together to discuss a common strategy regarding the internet. The proposal to set up EuroDIG was initially supported by Council

1 With contributions from Wolfgang Kleinwachter. The author is among the founders of EuroDIG, but this report has been written in his personal capacity and does not necessarily represent the views of the association. See also the self-presentation of EuroDIG in the GISWatch 2017 special edition on NRIs, available at: <https://www.giswatch.org>

2 At the end of every EuroDIG the conclusions from each panel are packaged into a series of “messages”. See: <https://www.eurodig.org/index.php?id=481>

3 Negotiations for the exit of the United Kingdom from the Union are currently ongoing.

4 Gibbs, S. (2015, 6 October). What is ‘safe harbour’ and why did the EUCJ just declare it invalid? *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/oct/06/safe-harbour-european-court-declare-invalid-data-protection>

5 <https://www.privacyshield.gov/welcome>

of Europe structures⁶ and became a concrete initiative open to all stakeholders. Initial resources for the EuroDIG secretariat provided by the Council of Europe and the Swiss Federal Office of Communications (OFCOM)⁷ were complemented over time by contributions from partners and stakeholders supporting it, until the secretariat became autonomous and funded by a plurality of stakeholders.

Since 2008, EuroDIG has travelled around Europe and has taken place in Geneva (2009), Madrid (2010), Belgrade (2011), Stockholm (2012), Lisbon (2013), Berlin (2014), Sofia (2015), Brussels (2016), and Tallinn (2017).

The day-to-day work is assured by a secretariat currently run by Sandra Hoferichter and Wolf Ludwig. Part of its job is to ensure continuity and relations with partners.

This is the current list of institutional partners supporting EuroDIG in different ways:⁸

- Council of Europe⁹
- European Commission¹⁰
- European Regional At-Large Organization (EURALO)¹¹
- European Broadcasting Union (EBU)¹²
- European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association (ETNO)¹³
- ICANN
- Internet Society (ISOC)¹⁴
- OFCOM
- Réseaux IP Européens Network Coordination Centre (RIPE NCC).¹⁵

In order to preserve the independence of EuroDIG efforts, a non-profit association under Swiss law, EuroDIG SA, was created in 2012. All the founding members of the initiative (around 30 people) sit in their personal capacity as members of this organisation. New members are accepted by co-optation and after having proved their commitment and having contributed to the organisation's activities.

Institutional partners are not members, but have their say on EuroDIG activities, especially on its annual

theme and agenda. Despite this influence, decision making is delegated to stakeholders, in the frame of a bottom-up process. Partners and members of EuroDIG gather at least three times a year at their own expense to discuss the organisation of the event.

Financing of the activities comes from the partners and also from sponsors, mainly global or regional companies and other entities involved in the internet.¹⁶

The EuroDIG “mix”

The composition of EuroDIG – the association's membership and the partnership – is a very interesting mix of institutions, mainly non-profit associations and individuals. Among the partners you find European institutions with a European mandate (such as the Council of Europe and European Commission), national institutions (OFCOM from Switzerland), trade associations (such as EBU, ETNO), non-profit corporations (such as ICANN), civil society organisations (such as EURALO) and technical community associations (such as RIPE-NCC and ISOC). Among the individuals (the 30 members of the association) you have fathers of the debate on internet governance in Europe such as Kleinwachter, Wolfgang Benedek, Bertrand La Chapelle and Yrjö Lansipuro; and representatives of national IGFs such as Thomas Schneider, Juuso Moisander, Michael Rotert, Vladimir Radunovic, Iliya Bazlyankov, Ana Neves and Sorina Teleanu, the coordinator of the subregional initiative South Eastern European Dialogue on Internet Governance (SEEDIG).¹⁷

No stakeholders are excluded. EuroDIG takes pride in being an open and inclusive process at all times. In fact, many of EuroDIG's solutions to ensure openness, transparency, multistakeholder engagement and a bottom-up approach were later adopted by the global IGF¹⁸.

However, while this is the case, as with any other forum, limited resources inhibit the participation of all stakeholders. In part this is why EuroDIG receives earmarked support to actively involve excluded stakeholders such as young internet users,

6 Thanks to a wise and forward-looking decision by Jan Malinowski and Lee Hibbard (executives at that time in charge of internet governance at Council of Europe).

7 <https://www.bakom.admin.ch/bakom/en/homepage.html>

8 <https://www.eurodig.org/index.php?id=74>

9 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/home>

10 <https://ec.europa.eu/>

11 <https://community.icann.org/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=2266155>

12 <https://www.ebu.ch/home>

13 <https://etno.eu>

14 <https://www.internetsociety.org>

15 <https://www.ripe.net/>

16 The list of the 2017 EuroDIG donors and sponsors and the budget for each year's event are published on the website: https://www.eurodig.org/fileadmin/user_upload/eurodig_Tallinn/EuroDIG_2017_donors_handout_20170211.pdf

17 seedig.net

18 It has also tried to produce outcomes that should have been negotiated in an intersessional process, like a “EuroDIG statement” on net neutrality. This has, however, proven to be more difficult than expected, but has been an interesting learning exercise about the challenges and limits of producing such outcomes on controversial topics in an open but relatively unstructured multistakeholder environment.

or South Eastern European countries. At the same time, specific attention is paid to gender, and a gender balance is sought in stakeholder participation and in representation on the discussion panels.

Democratic processes

In terms of democratic and effective multistakeholder processes, EuroDIG can be considered one of the best existing models among IGF National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs) and truly reflective of a bottom-up process. Instead of being tied down by endless selection procedures for workshops and other events, EuroDIG looks for the most promising ideas. It does not examine hundreds of proposals for plenaries or workshops (as happens in the global IGF Multistakeholder Advisory Group), it does not conduct closed-door negotiations, and it does not have a small group of individuals who decide for everyone else.

Every year, there is a seven- to eight-month process for accepting and selecting proposals,¹⁹ followed by a community-driven process for selecting the best ideas and transforming them into various sessions. The organisation of these sessions is entrusted to each one of those who proposed the topic or idea in question, with the assistance of one of the founding members of EuroDIG.

This approach is bottom-up and is not based on the power of money, the biggest donors or sponsors' interests.

This approach only works because EuroDIG has a stable and efficient supervisory mechanism of founders who lend it credibility and help to overcome challenges. Of course, this unique EuroDIG mechanism also has its limits, and the progressive distance of some EuroDIG founders from their creation could endanger its credibility and make EuroDIG less effective in the long run.

EuroDIG's impact

EuroDIG's impact is partly due to its access to important decision makers in internet policy in Europe, including the Council of Europe, the European Commission (through DG-CONNECT),²⁰ ICANN, and members of the European Parliament (via a long-standing partnership with the European Internet Forum).²¹ That EuroDIG started as a "pan-European" internet governance dialogue platform means that its main interlocutors are the regional actors (the EU and Council of Europe) and – in the global sphere – ICANN, and not the national IGFs. Nevertheless,

as a consequence of them having hosted EuroDIG events, EuroDIG has privileged relations with certain local authorities and governments (such as those in Berlin or in Tallinn). Furthermore, EuroDIG has had representation in official hearings at the European Parliament and in various other European-wide bodies on internet governance issues.

However, EuroDIG's impact is not measured – and it would be very difficult to do so. It is generally left to the good will of individuals involved in the EuroDIG process and of the partners that promote outcomes among their constituencies.²²

EuroDIG also offers a service to its member NRIs by collecting and aggregating the key issues at the national and sub-regional level in Europe. But collating this information does not go beyond the simple collection of data, there is no attempt to streamline or structure the debate across the continent. Neither does EuroDIG appear to have the will and the means to seek such a role. Its role is to trigger and foster engagement in internet governance issues, especially when there is a lack of energy, goodwill and actors to facilitate dialogue at the national level.

Conclusion

Over the years, EuroDIG has moved from being a dialogue between institutions, civil society, academia and non-profit bodies, to a place where vested interests want to be present, and where sponsors have become indispensable. To host an event for 700 people would be almost impossible if it were funded via small sponsors and public funding. This shift has reduced the margins of freedom and courage of EuroDIG today, which now tends to fewer risks in order to stay more "politically correct" and, in doing so, risks becoming less innovative and provocative.

I have seen the EuroDIG community grow fast. It has been brave and innovative, especially when it was still a small event of a few hundred participants. The last annual EuroDIG events (such as the biggest ever in Brussels in 2016) have faced a lot of new difficulties and the event has become more costly and complicated. The debates tend to become less constructive, with more and more participants worried about illustrating their positions than building common ones.

Multistakeholder dialogue can be difficult when relevant national stakeholders are not included in the dialogue and when the issues go beyond their domestic authority to act, thereby necessitating the presence of other regional and international actors.

¹⁹ The call for the 2018 event: https://www.eurodig.org/index.php?id=110&no_cache=1

²⁰ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/dg-connect>

²¹ <https://www.eifonline.org/>

²² The messages from EuroDIG 2017 in Tallinn can be found here: https://www.eurodig.org/fileadmin/user_upload/eurodig_Tallinn/Messages_from_Tallinn_EuroDIG_2017.pdf

Because of this, governments need to be encouraged to use forums such as EuroDIG to bridge the divide between countries, and to meet the collective internet governance needs of the region. It is also important for actors such as the European Commission and the Council of Europe to intervene in internet governance at the regional level, emphasising that their mandates include the importance of active listening to the wishes and needs of regional stakeholders.²³ So now that there is an urgent need for greater strategic thinking and internal reflection on its processes, EuroDIG risks losing momentum and effectiveness. Already EuroDIG's weak points include sustainable funding, an understaffed secretariat, geographical imbalances in participation (in particular East-West imbalances), the low engagement of the private sector, and the constant risk of being captured by smaller interest groups (both government and business).

Finally, the global IGF's coordination of the national and regional IGFs around the world puts EuroDIG in a dilemma because it also coordinates some national IGFs across Europe with others not recognising its coordination role. EuroDIG could therefore lose representativeness and influence, unless it takes on the responsibility of playing a stronger and proactive role in European coordination.

Action points

A deep reflection on the future of EuroDIG needs to be engaged in now, seizing the opportunity offered by the transformation of the global IGF and its increased focus on NRIs.

There needs to be a will to take risks and to review its current formula. It is easier to become bigger each year, and obtain more sponsors and create an event bigger than the year before in a growing economy linked to the internet. It is more difficult to remain critical, to give space to the voices that have less opportunity to be heard, to ideas that are less fashionable, to accept and deal with dissenting voices, opinions and methods.

It is important not to be afraid to tackle political issues. What were seen as only technical problems

yesterday, today have to be framed in terms of political contest. And Europe – as the continent that gave birth to social, civil and human rights – should show itself to be well placed to do this.

A more proactive stance needs to be taken by EuroDIG towards those countries which do not have a national IGF initiative, by creating incentives for small organisations or individuals to grow and create a nation-wide dialogue. The credibility built through the backing of the European Union and the Council of Europe could help these fledgling initiatives, and could enable change across the whole region. Currently EuroDIG shows a fair representation of all stakeholders in its community (some are stronger, others are weaker, of course). However, this means that the next step is not how to engage other stakeholders, but how to make sure that at the national level, there is the effort to be inclusive.

Inclusiveness should be pushed by EuroDIG and its members. If a national or sub-regional initiative is unbalanced, its contribution to the regional debate will be unbalanced and risks creating a bias in the process.

At the same time, new blood is needed to join the founding members in the core organising team, introducing new and vital competencies to reflect the changes that have occurred in the internet world since 2008. It is important to start thinking now about a EuroDIG 3.0, with different roles, ambitions, and more risk taking, to avoid falling into the trap of an overtly “semi-institutionalised role”.²⁴

Finally, it is also important to ensure that there is structured follow-up of the discussions and resolutions produced by EuroDIG. What has their impact in the region or on national-level policy making been? Results of this monitoring should be fed back into the subsequent EuroDIG discussions, to help create continuity and momentum.

One way to do this is to develop some formal mechanism which can turn the “input” into national and regional policy-making recommendations by leveraging the relationship with the EU and Council of Europe. For example, an oversight mechanism could be developed that follows up on “messages” developed by the forum, and monitors their impact on policy – at the very least at the regional level. This could include a regular impact review, compiled with institutional backing and funding. An institutional mandate would be necessary to ensure that this report made its way into deliberations at the European Parliament or the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

23 For the EU see: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Internet Policy and Governance - Europe's role in shaping the future of Internet Governance: europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-142_en.htm; see also, on IGF 2014 Istanbul: europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-513_en.htm; on the IANA transition: europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-142_en.htm. For the Council of Europe see: (original document) https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805cado4 and <https://www.ip-watch.org/2012/03/15/council-of-europe-passes-internet-governance-strategy>

24 A meeting to discuss the future of EuroDIG will take place in Zurich in January 2018.

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs) are now widely recognised as a vital element of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) process. In fact, they are seen to be the key to the sustainability and ongoing evolution of collaborative, inclusive and multistakeholder approaches to internet policy development and implementation.

A total of 54 reports on NRIs are gathered in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch). These include 40 country reports from contexts as diverse as the United States, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Colombia.

The country reports are rich in approach and style and highlight several challenges faced by activists organising and participating in national IGFs, including broadening stakeholder participation, capacity building, the unsettled role of governments, and impact.

Seven regional reports analyse the impact of regional IGFs, their evolution and challenges, and the risks they still need to take to shift governance to the next level, while seven thematic reports offer critical perspectives on NRIs as well as mapping initiatives globally.

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