E-Governance - A Challenge for the Regional Sustainable Development in Romania

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Abstract. The paper addresses specific issues of the local governance in its transition to the knowledge society and the web based processes. The innovative e-Governance approach creates a new regional framework for changing the process of the sustainable strategy design and implementation, from a system-oriented to an actor-driven one, focusing on the development of two ways online channels for supporting the pro-active citizens' behavior and their involvement in the consultation and decisional processes. The solution, based on web 2.0 technologies, integrates e-Knowledge, e-Consultation and e-Voting tools in a regional portal, facilitating the bottom-up decision-making processes. The regional virtual portal provides simultaneously a quantitative approach represented by the information concerning the regional opportunities and possible evolution trends, based on advanced modeling tools and set of indicators, and, complementary, a qualitative approach using various tools for the direct expression of the specific actors' opinions, creating a holistic image on the regional development.

Keywords: regional e-Governance, e-Participation, e-Knowledge, regional strategy

1 Introduction

The paper emphasizes the role of the advanced interactive web services provided by a virtual platform, as a single point of access, for the regional governance and the regional actors, aiming at designing and implementing coherent regional sustainable strategies. This approach is in line with the actual public administration reform and its transition to the knowledge society and the e-Governance paradigm. The regional development is the main driver for increasing the competitiveness and attending the goals of the Lisbon Strategy. In order to be responsive to the European priorities, as part of the European Union, Romania intensifies its efforts for accelerating the decentralization in the public administration, which is a relative recent process. In addition, due to the actual complexity of the socio-economic context, to the challenges of the global knowledge economy and to the negative effects of the financial crisis, it is a real need of coagulating all the intellectual resources for finding appropriate solutions for the positive evolution of the region. Consequently, strengthening and enlarging the regional partnership, and integrating the regional knowledge and expertise resources, for creating a holistic approach related to the regional strategy design, become the

main priorities of the Romanian local governance. The paper presents the specific issues of the Romanian development region Bucharest-Ilfov and the solutions proposed by the research team for creating the framework of the regional actors' participation in the regional planning process and increasing the local administration factors' capacity to reach tangible and appropriate decisions.

This paper aims to present an innovative view related to the transition to e-Governance by consultative and decisional online processes (e-Participation), focused on the regional strategy design and implementation, as a solution for increasing the public engagement of the citizens around the issues that affect their lives. Moreover, the solution includes also e-Knowledge tools for the acquisition of data and knowledge related to the regional development and for the presentation of the analysis results in real-time, in order to create a realistic image of the opportunities and challenges at the regional level. Integrating the e-Knowledge and e-Participation tools in a virtual regional platform creates a single access point to the information and to the interactive dialogue between the regional actors and the regional public governance.

The new Web 2.0 technologies have a major contribution for the development of the two ways online channels, supporting the active dissemination and use of the information, and the citizens' involvement in the public administration decision-making processes. The paper presents the e-Knowledge and e-Participation tools integrated in a virtual regional platform, as major components of the regional e-Governance.

2 Regional strategy design as a participative and iterative process

The research contextualizes the challenges for Romania taking into consideration the specific situation of the transition from a centralized to a decentralized governmental system. The actual Romanian legislation creates the frame for the design of the regional development strategy, enabling wide participative processes, taking into consideration the European Cohesion Policy, as well as the main challenges of the decentralization and the new created Romanian territorial structures (the eight development regions). The Romanian legislative framework stipulates the procedures and the main workflows in designing the regional strategy. The institutional infrastructure for the new territorial structures (development regions) is represented by the eight regional development agencies, non-governmental entities providing public services and cooperating with the public local and central administration. This new institutional infrastructure and the challenges of becoming a member of the European Union lead to a wide re-engineering process for the public administration entities.

2.1 Main workflows of the regional strategy design

According to the actual legislation, the public administration is involved in and has the responsibility for the design of the regional strategy, as a participative and iterative process. The whole process of the design of the regional strategy for the 2007-2103 period and the main interactions among the actors involved are illustrated in the Fig. 1. The coordination of the regional strategy design represents the

responsibility of the Council for the Regional Development (CRD), the main decisional actor at the regional level, integrating representatives of various public administration entities. The Council also coordinates the activity of the regional development agencies (RDA) and validates the final version of the strategy. Creating the regional partnership represents the responsibility of the regional development agencies, which are also in charge with the design of the regional strategy, coordinating the activity of the Committee for the Design of the Regional Strategy (CDRS). The CDRS is responsible with the consultation process, creating the opportunities for the wide regional debate among the main regional stakeholders: representatives from the central and public administration, socio-economic entities, high education institutions, research centers etc.

A key role plays the National Institute for Statistics (NIS), providing the main information for a quantitative analysis. The regional strategy represents the basis for the elaboration of the Regional Development Plan (RDP), including concrete measures for the implementation of the strategy. The Ministry for the Regional Development and Tourism (MRDT) has the responsibility for the design of the RDP, integrating the regional strategic frames. The RDP represents the main input for the design of the National Development Plan (NDP), under the coordination of the Inter-institutional Committee for the National Plan (ICP), which acts under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Finance (MF).
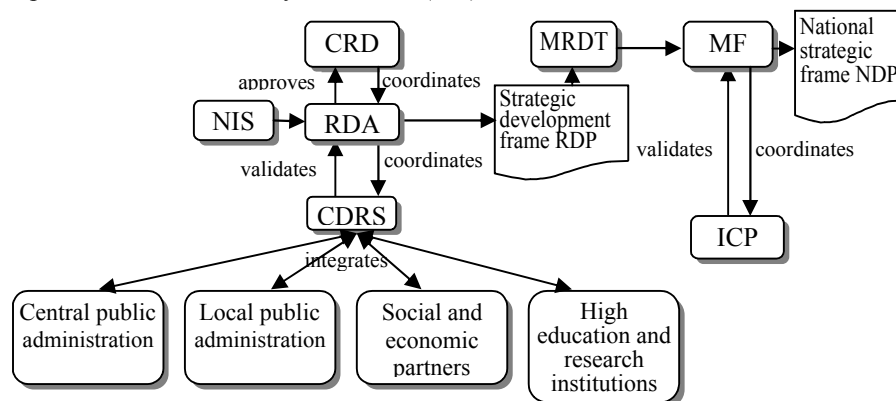

Fig. 1. Main workflows for the design of the regional strategy

The results of the desk research and of the direct observation of the process carried out in Bucharest-Ilfov (2005-2007) suggest that the process has integrated various activities focusing on information provision, design, deliberation, consultation and approval, but without a wide representativeness, which was limited to some reduced focus groups debates, not even focused on specific issues. Moreover, it has been observed the lack of the citizens' participation to these activities, the inhabitants of the region being not directly involved or well represented by the non-governmental organizations. In conclusion, the analysis of the real implementation of the legislative framework concerning the regional development strategy design in Romania revealed a gap between rhetoric (the legislation framework) and reality, such as the lack of a consistent dialogue between the local governance and the regional actors, including the inhabitants of the region.

2.2 Citizens' Interest related to the Regional Strategy Design in the Bucharest-Ilfov Region

In order to refine the results of the research, a survey was organized in the Bucharest-Ilfov region, aiming at identifying the citizens' perceptions and opinions related to the regional strategy design. The main objective of the pilot survey is represented by the identification of the citizens' interest and wiliness to participate to the regional strategy design process. The main hypothesis of the survey are: (1) the majority of the inhabitants of the Bucharest-Ilfov region have not informed about the process of the regional strategy design; (2) the majority of the inhabitants of the Bucharest-Ilfov region would like to be involved in the process of the regional strategy design.

The questionnaire used was framed, with clearly formulated questions, so everybody could understand them, without any shadow of a doubt and with no ambiguities. The majority of the questions are closed, not leaving any room for personal subjective interpretation. The logical approach of the questions and the scale used to assess the answers aim to allow the ordering, centralizing and handling of data using statistical methods and IT programs. The sample was represented by 150 persons, all residents of the Bucharest-Ilfov region (126 persons from Bucharest – 84% and 24 from Ilfov – 16%). Aiming at conclusive results, a heterogeneous sample was random selected including a diversity of profiles, concerning the age, education, profession, occupation or socio-economic status. The respondents have been selected from a regional stakeholders' database, representing the main domains of the activity of the Bucharest-Ilfov region (47.3% in economic and financial area; 7.4 % in socio-political area; 13.3% in educational area; 6% in health area; 9.1% in public sector and 14.2 in other sectors). The distribution of the sample related to the age revealed that the majority of the respondents were under 45 years , i.e. 90% (30% in the group 18 – 25 years old; 25,3 in the group 26 – 35 years old and 30,7% in the group 36 - 45 years old) and only 10% were in the group of 46 to 60 years old. The analysis of the sample emphasizes also that the majority of the respondents were high qualified from the point of view of the education level and of the professional status. The majority of the persons participating in the survey were graduated (64,7%) and the rest of the people (35,3%) had attended the upper secondary education. This stands for an important asset concerning the capacity of the respondents to have a consistent contribution related to the sustainable regional strategy design.

Table 1. Summary of the answers to the main questions of the pilot survey

Questions	YES	NO
Participation to the RS design 2005-2007	6.7%	93.3%
Interest to know about the RS	84.7 %	15.3%
Knowledge about the RS design process	15.3 %	84.7 %
Knowledge about the actual RS	15.3 %	84.7 %
Interest to participate to the future RS design	64.0 %	36.0 %
Interest to have information about possible regional development scenarios	88.0 %	12.0 %

The process of the design of the regional strategy was conducted during 2005-2007, and the interviews have been organized in February-March 2008. The main

questions of the interview focused on the knowledge about the regional strategy, the design process and also about the interest to participate in the future to the similar processes and to be informed about the results, as illustrated in the table 1.

The analysis of the answers to the main questions confirmed the hypothesis of the survey, demonstrating that the majority of the citizens of the Bucharest-Ilfov region were not involved in the process of the strategy design (93.3%) and moreover, they had no information about the strategy itself and about its design process (84.7%).

In the same time, the respondents were interested to have information about the regional strategy (88%) and also to be involved in the design process (64%). The 10 persons involved in the regional strategy design (6.7%), acted as representatives of the public administration (7 persons – 4.7%) and NGOs (3 persons – 2%). Nobody declared the involvement as simple citizen, which confirmed the initial hypothesis (1). In addition, the respondents also confirmed the utility of the virtual platform for the information delivery and for the online processes of consultation and deliberation: 53% considered the virtual platform very useful, 39% useful and only 8% not so useful. The survey demonstrated the citizens' increasingly demand to be informed and to take part in decision-making processes (hypothesis 2).

Beyond these conclusions the survey revealed also the need of tools and mechanism to increase the accessibility to public information and to provide the opportunity of an effective public engagement. The development of the adequate framework for the e-Participation and the implementation of the appropriate principles for the public engagement will contribute to avoid the citizens' lack of trust in policymakers and policy and will build a real regional consensus, facilitating also the implementation of the regional strategy.

3 Regional e-Governance for the Strategy Design

In accordance with the European framework, the Romanian procedure for the strategy design needs the support and participation of the various actors in a formal or informal way, in order to support the decision-making for public policy purposes at any stage of the policy lifecycle [13]. As the conclusions of the direct observations, desk research and the results of the survey demonstrate, the regional stakeholders' involvement was very low. Therefore the involvement of the citizens in the strategy definition, with a consultative and decisional role, should be one of the major concerns of the Romanian local government for the future.

The solution proposed, i.e. a virtual regional platform supporting the participation of the citizens to the regional strategy design, offer a balanced approach for the decision–making process and the public engagement of the citizens. The openness of the public administration [10] and the extended use of the ICT tools, namely the Internet, increase the opportunities of creating interactive space between citizens and political actors [14]. This new approach, defined broadly as e-Democracy, generated wide debates among researchers and practitioners, concerning both conceptual and pragmatic sides of the e-Democracy and its place in the transition from e-Government to e-Governance.

3.1 e- Governance versus e- Government

There are various definitions for the e-Government concept adopted by the European Commission or the World Bank, such as: "The use of information and communication technologies in public administration combined with organizational change and new skills in order to improve public services and democratic processes and strengthen support to public policies" [7]; and also: "e-Government is the use of information technology to support government operations, engage citizens, and provide government services" [3].

The e-Governance concept introduces a wider perspective, being defined in terms of the interaction between the citizens and the representatives of the public authorities for defining, adopting and implementing policies. The fulfillment of this ambitious goal involves a complex process for translating the research results and advanced knowledge into practical applications, which enables transformational changes based on technology, as mentioned at the Ministerial Conference in Lisbon, 2007 [17]. Beyond the intensive knowledge use and technological approach, the e-Governance involves also, on one side, major structural changes for the public administration and the governance of the society [8], and on the other side, the citizens and various stakeholders' pro-active behavior in the framework of the policies design, approval and implementation. In this perspective, the concept of e-Democracy refers to "the possibility to develop the influence and participation of the public in the political sphere" [11], using advanced and efficient online interaction channels. As the pioneer researcher in the area, Jane E. Fountain, emphasized, this is "not only a question of improving efficiency" [8], by reducing the bureaucracy and enhancing the workflows, but mainly a change in mentality from both sides: government and citizens. As the European Commission outlines, "the pressure on public administration is so great that improving existing routines with the help of ICT alone is not enough; progress also requires more innovative approaches" [6]. In addition to the increased global competition, the democratic deficit and the ageing population, the actual financial crisis creates new challenges for the governmental entities consisting in the need of more efficient and effective strategic solutions. Thus, it is crucial to create a framework for an efficient cooperation within the governmental area and between the public authorities and the citizens, and all the entities which can support the decision-making processes, in order to integrate as many views and ideas as possible, aiming at addressing the actual challenges.

3.2 e-Participation - main support for the e-Governance

The e-Participation tools stimulate the democratic engagement, facilitating the online consultation (e-Consultation) and voting services (e-Voting). Despite the need of the public involvement in the policy design and implementation, the observers of the European e-Consultation processes noticed that the citizens' initiatives "have been poorly and arbitrarily integrated in the respective policies they intend to inform" [14]. The fact that the regional actors' initiatives are rarely included in the policies developed creates the regional actors' inertial behavior. Therefore, the stimulation of the regional actors' pro-active attitude represents one of the major challenges as a

success factor in the e-consultation process, relying on basic principles [16], consisting in: taking into consideration the real needs of the regional actors, promoting a culture of sustained engagement, increasing the inclusion and the demographic diversity, supporting and encouraging the wide participation, creating an open, and transparent environment based on trust, ensuring a real impact of the participatory efforts. In addition, the intensive use of the Internet at individual level, as well as the facilities of the web 2.0 technologies create new opportunities related to the attractiveness of the virtual environment and its flexibility. The use of a virtual regional platform, due to its synchronous and asynchronous interactions through two ways communication channels, provides the adequate solution for networking the governmental entities and implementing adequate tools (e-Knowledge, e-Practice, e-Consultation), for ensuring the efficient interactions within the governmental area, and also for promoting the community building and the dialogue with the citizens and other stakeholders.

3.3 e-Consultation and e-Knowledge tools of the Regional Virtual Platform

Meanwhile the e-Consultation process becomes a popular approach in the European space, for the active civic engagement in policy-making, in Romania it is a real need for promoting these concepts and creating the adequate infrastructure and web tools. In the previous planning process for the period 2007-2013, the citizens have not been involved, and only partially experts and representatives of various organizations took part in the debates. Consequently, one of the main results of the research project consists in designing the virtual regional platform, including e-Knowledge and e-Participation tools, in order to enlarge the regional partnership and to increase the interactivity between the citizens and the local governance entities. It has been noticed that the effectiveness of this process depends on different major factors, such as: the determination of the regional actors to participate in the process, the capacity of the citizens to provide a consistent input for the decision makers, and the political will to integrate the outcomes of the e-consultations in the regional strategy design.

3.4 e-Knowledge tools of the Regional Virtual Platform

Another critical issue is represented by the capability of the stakeholders to be involved as contributors to the strategy design. For this purpose, a regional knowledge base is designed and implemented as a repository of valuable knowledge and information related to the regional development trends, models and scenarios. The accessibility to this information, the simulations, the benchmarking and the various scenarios offer a scientific frame for a better understanding of the possible evolution of the region and a holistic approach related to the sustainable regional development. The platform, through its specific e-knowledge tools, supports the quantitative approach and provides valuable information for all the regional actors. The main indexes and set of indicators implemented through the regional virtual platform are represented by the: Sustainable Development Indicators (10 Themes, 3 levels) – Eurostat, National Institute

for Statistics (Theme 1–8); Composite index for monitoring Lisbon strategy – European Commission; Sustainable Society Index (SSI) - Geurt van de Kerk; regional innovation performance index (RIPI) – European Commission; Environmental Performance Index (EPI) - Columbia University and Yale University; human development index (HDI) – United Nations Development Program. The research team has also proposed a composite index integrating the index for the personal development, the index for the quality of the environment, the index for the social environment and the index for the economic development. The quantitative analysis is based on these various indexes, facilitating the appropriate evaluation of the region results compared with other similar European regions and with other Romanian regions. The information provided integrating four axes: human development, environment protection, economic and social development illustrates the positioning of the region in the European and national space, identifying the future trends in the regional sustainable development (Fig. 2). The e-region platform, as a specific knowledge integrator and generator at the regional level, has as main functions: the acquisition of relevant knowledge and data; the analysis and data processing using various mechanism for specific benchmarking, trends identification, and foresight exercises.
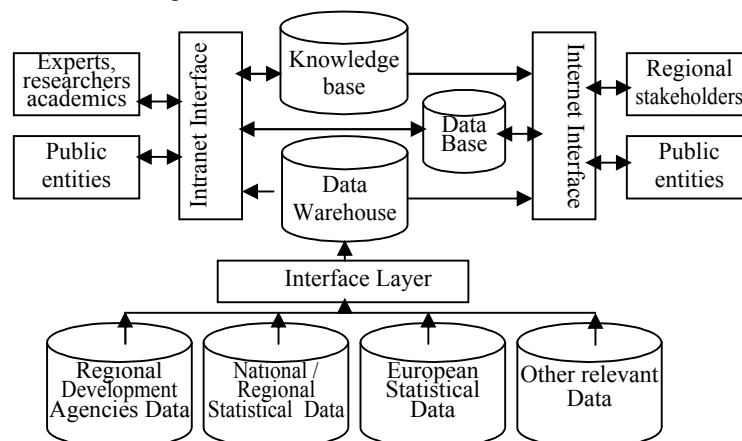

Fig. 2. Generic architecture for the e-Knowledge tool for the
sustainable regional strategy design

The sustainable models, the data analysis and the interpretation of the data contribute to the generation of various scenarios, as embedded knowledge, representing important tools for the decisional process of the identification of the objectives and priorities for the regional development on medium- and long term. The open access to the knowledge and information creates the premises for the regional actors to better understand the possible regional evolution. In this case, the regional stakeholders are well informed, have access to scientific analysis and their opinions could be more consistent and coherent. The decision makers could benefit from a holistic approach based on the effectiveness of the synergy between quantitative and qualitative perspectives of the analysis. The use of the e-Knowledge tools in conjunction with the e-Participation ones represents also the innovation introduced in the design of the regional virtual platform.

3.5 e-Participation tools of the Regional Virtual Platform

The collaborative environment provided by the virtual platform, such as forum and virtual debates, will support also the wide interactions among specialists, citizens and local government representatives on a realistic and scientific base, aiming at identifying the objectives and the priorities for the regional development. The new generation of user-friendly digital tools and various communication channels support the facile interactivity of the regional actors, contributing to strengthen the regional partnership and to increase the synergy between the quantitative and qualitative analysis. As the European Commission emphasizes, "the discussion forums need to be better run and followed-up" [5], and, in this way, the effectiveness of the two-ways communication with the citizens will be enhanced. The various surveys and e-consultations sessions ensure the synergy between the quantitative and the qualitative views related to the perspectives of the regional development, facilitating the identification of the major development directions. In this case, the importance of the citizens, as major contributors, will increase and it is obvious that the decision-makers will be more sensitive to the outcomes of the e-consultation process. This approach ensures a more accurate ex-ante evaluation of the regional strategy, increasing the quality of the process and of the outcomes provided. An important step after the e-consultation and virtual debates is represented by the e-voting phase for selecting the objectives and priorities identified and even validating the final version of the regional strategy. In this case, the citizens, with their opinions and views are integrated in the design process of the strategy and also in the final phase of its approval. The participative process ensures the accuracy of the analysis and the consensus building related to the future development of the region, and accordingly represents a guaranty for the further involvement of the regional stakeholders during the implementation process. The organizations and the citizens have the opportunity to participate in the ongoing processes and further to observe their implementation. This approach increases the transparency of the process of the regional strategy design and implementation, which stands for main goal of the European Union [15]. In this perspective, the platform provides the facilities of an e-barometer, as a democratic-centric regional driver, used for gathering and analyzing the local/regional actors' satisfaction, in order to improve the local/regional development strategy and its design and implementation processes.

The e-Participation "offers citizens a greater share in political discourse and the ability to contribute with their own ideas, suggestions, and requests" [12], creating the e-Governance framework. The citizens have the opportunity to become contributors to the regional strategy design, melting their expertise and perception into the regional intellectual capital. The local administration could take advantage of this important unexploited potential, enhancing the local governance act. "The usability of the applications, tools, channels and devices through which e-Participation will take place in virtual space, need to be designed properly to support the citizens in this regard" [12]. In the same time, it is important to mention that the effectiveness of the e-Participation process, as component of the e-Governance, represents not only the reflex of the technological approach, but also a major mentality change for both sides: governance and regional actors.

Analyzing the state of the art related to regional virtual platform and e-Governance, we identified various European initiatives such as digital business ecosystems [1] and regional internet community portals [9], which are business oriented portals networking the business entities and have not the goal to bridge the public administration with the regional actors, especially the citizens, in order to create a democratic process for the development of public policies. Another important contribution in the area is represented by the eDemocracy.org, founded by Steven Clift, an important and enthusiastic sustainer of the e-Governance doctrine. We took advantage of the positive experience of the Steven Clift, shared in a generous way: "To build e-participation momentum, citizens need to experience results they can see and touch. By investing in transferable local models and tools, more people will use the Internet as a tool to strength their communities, protect and enrich their families and neighborhoods, and be heard in a meaningful way." [2] The ten steps proposed by Steven Clift [2] for building the e-Democracy represent a valuable guide concerning the "web based systems for supporting the decision-making at governmental levels" [13].

On one side, the regional stakeholders are stimulated to have a pro-active behavior in a structured manner through the e-region platform, so that their opinions could influence the regional decision-makers. On the other side, the participants in the process will be stimulated to be contributors as well for the knowledge base (new models, indicators, specific detailed information, refined analysis and scenarios etc) and also for the qualitative approach, i.e. expressing their personal perception on the regional sustainable development. For this purpose, the participants are invited to interact online with the public governance representatives, through various instruments.
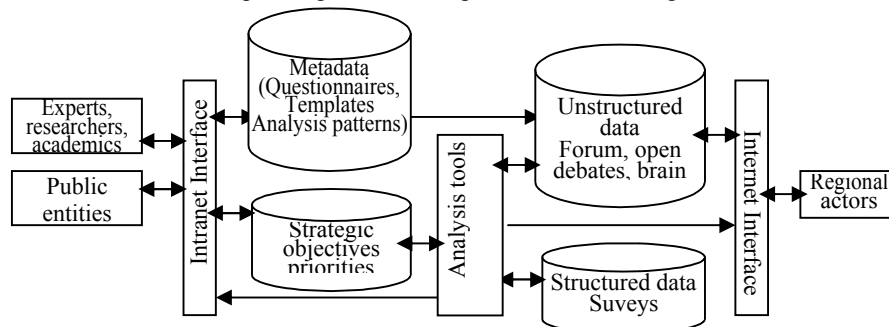

Fig. 3. Generic architecture for the e-Consultation

The e-Consultation process integrates different tools for collecting as much information as possible, in order to build a holistic view on the regional development opportunities, aiming at adopting the best policies for the positive evolution of the region. The e-Consultation process (Fig. 3) is structured in phases, from the identification of the ideas, design of the regional strategy, consensus building, until the final step of the approval of the designed strategy. The first phases are based on gathering the regional actors' opinions through open forum debates and online brainstorming sessions. The second phase consists in filling in various sets of questionnaires, aiming at gathering the information related to the regional stakeholders' perception and satisfaction regarding their own life, the regional environment, the social and economic context. The results of the surveys are automatically processed and the centralized data and their interpretation are available

for all the regional stakeholders, including public entities. Beside the formal interaction through various surveys, the citizens have the opportunity to participate also in an informal way, contributing with their suggestions to the debates and consultation processes. The e-region platform functionality supports also the iterative process of the identification of the objectives and priorities for the sustainable regional development, providing adequate tools for e-voting, in order to select the appropriate targets and to ensure a holistic and efficient approach for the future development. The platform facilitates the open interaction of the main regional actors, including the decision-makers during the successive refinement of the regional strategy. The final objectives and priorities will be selected by open online vote. This approach supports the community consensus building related to major issues of the region and its future development, according to the regional actors' interest.

4. Conclusions

According to the new citizen-oriented governance paradigm, the articulation of the e-Knowledge and e-Participation tools supports the binomial analysis of both quantitative approach, represented by the information concerning the regional opportunities and possible evolution trends, and qualitative approach, using various tools for the direct expression of the regional actors' opinions. The e-region platform creates the virtual environment and the specific tools supporting the scientific and realistic approach of the regional strategy design. The innovative solutions supporting the transition to the e-Governance at the regional level in Romania provides the adequate instruments to strengthen the regional partnership and to coagulate the regional intellectual capital in order to cope with the complexity of the actual development challenges. The main findings introduced by the research project are represented by the improvement of the scientific base of the regional strategy design and by the efficient interaction of the regional/local public entities with the stakeholders. This innovative approach represents a qualitative change for the regional governance, involving major changes in the policies design process. The decisions makers, represented by the various regional or central entities will have at their disposal accurate information, including the feedback obtained from the regional actors, in order to improve the regional policies. The acceptance and the implementation of such a platform is part of a wider process of the transition to the e-Governance. The platform articulates functions and components such as the regional knowledge repository and generator, and the e-Participation and e-Voting tools, creating the premises for bridging the gap between local governance and the regional actors. The platform offers also a solution for the decentralization process, which represents a real challenge for the Romanian local administration. This represents an efficient way to involve citizens and organizations in the regional development, as a knowledge based process. The design and the implementation of the regional/local strategy becomes an efficient and more realistic bottom-up process, integrating the best experiences and practices and better responding to the local needs. In this inclusive and democratic view, everybody, regardless of the socio-economic background, is given an equitable playing role in the design of the regional strategy, being part in the e-Governance process.

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