



Case Study of Parlameter

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WAVESTONE

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Case Study of Parlameter

1. Abstract

The following is a longer version of a case study included in a comprehensive report titled 'Open Source Software Adoption and Reuse in European Local Governments: A Multiple-Case Study,' available on the OSOR website.

The case study was developed through a combination of secondary research and 4-6 original interviews with individuals representing the local government, community and supplier perspectives on the open source project/collaboration. The insights in the case study were validated through workshops, and specific findings have been reviewed by people originally interviewed for the case study. Insights have been pseudonymised in the case study narrative, but the full list of organisations and individuals participating in the case study can be found in Annex C of the main report.

2. Introduction

Parlamer, an open source platform for parliaments, began nearly a decade ago in Slovenia by the non-profit Danes je nov dan (DJND)¹ (translating to 'Today is a New Day'). DJND began with a simple premise: to provide a more meaningful way of tracking and comparing the work of parliamentarians. They built Parlamer to move beyond traditional political measures, which mainly gauge voting intentions and are more useful to political parties than to voters, and instead found innovative ways to evaluate parliamentary performance in a way that directly benefits the public.

Parlamer can be likened to the 'Google Analytics for the Parliament'². The project digitalises transcripts and voting records for parliaments and has, over the years, evolved into a comprehensive analytics platform for tracking parliamentary performance. It provides details of parliamentary activities, such as how members vote, their meetings, and so on. Furthermore, it handles transcripts and voting records from their collection to visualisation and publishing, providing a complete solution for any organisation aiming for full transparency and digitalisation of sessions³.

Parlamer is composed of four open source components: Parlacards, Parladata, Parlaseite, and Parlasetts⁴. Parlacards provide embeddable cards for Parlamer, while Parladata serves as the core data system. Parlaseite includes EJS templates and a server for hosting the Parlamer website, and Parlasetts consists of static assets for the frontend. Notably, Parlaseite and Parlasetts are licensed under 'The Unlicense',⁵ a template that disclaims copyright interests and dedicates the software to the public domain. This licence combines a copyright waiver inspired by the public domain SQLite project with a no-warranty statement from the MIT/X11 licence.

Parlamer initially started as a volunteer-driven initiative focused on monitoring the Slovenian parliament, and the first integration happened in 2016⁶. It eventually expanded to other countries as well, including Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. With venture funding, the project transitioned to full-time work under the non-profit organisation DJND, which is a non-profit and independent private organisation established in 2013⁷. By utilising digital technologies and developing campaigns, it promotes participation in democratic processes and civic action, fostering a more just, open, and inclusive society⁸. As Parlamer was initially developed by volunteers, their first major funding for the

¹ Interview with Danes je nov dan

² Ibid.

³ Parlamer. (n.d.). *Parlamer – Making politics transparent*. Available: <https://parlamer.org>

⁴ Danes je nov dan. (n.d.). Parlamer – parlanode component renders cards and makes them shareable and embeddable. Available: <https://github.com/danesjenovdan/parlamer>

⁵ Unlicense.org. (n.d.). Unlicense Yourself: Set Your Code Free. Available: <https://unlicense.org>

⁶ Danes je nov dan. (n.d.). *Parlamer – Projects*. Available: <https://danesjenovdan.si/en/projects/?projects=parlamer>

⁷ Interview with Danes je nov dan

⁸ Danes je nov dan. (n.d.). About – Danes je nov dan. Available: <https://danesjenovdan.si/en/about/>

organisation itself came from the Google Digital News Initiative⁹. This funding enabled some team members to leave their jobs and work full-time on Parlameter and other projects in DJND¹⁰.

Having successfully expanded from Slovenia to other countries, driven in part by the need to secure funding, Parlameter is a successful example of cross-border sharing of open source, mediated by a civil society organisation and across multiple levels of government. Despite some setbacks in Poland and Ukraine, the project works in a number of countries, relying heavily on local partners, particularly civil society organisations who track the activities of these parliaments and can ensure the access, accuracy and relevance of data¹¹. For the local councils, such work is often considered both too expensive or not possible due to the expertise required¹². It's clear that for a Parlameter to succeed in any country, local expertise and oversight are essential.

⁹ Interview with Danes je nov dan

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid.

3. Key Stakeholders

Danes je nov dan: Danes je nov dan is a non-profit and independent private organisation, established in 2013, that uses digital technologies and develops innovative campaigns for participation in democratic processes and civic action. The goal of the non-profit is to make society more just, open, and inclusive.¹³. The organisation is the main service supplier behind Parlameter.

Zašto ne: Citizens' Association Zašto ne ('Why Not') is an organisation working to create a safe, healthy, active, efficient, and responsible society in Bosnia and Herzegovina for citizens, civil society and government representatives. It does so by promoting political accountability, strengthening civic activism, and using new media and technologies, in collaboration with civil society organisations, other groups, and individuals¹⁴. Zašto ne is partnering with DJND to integrate the Parlameter platform with Zašto ne's Javna Rasprava platform¹⁵. This platform leverages an established system to improve citizen engagement, streamline access to parliamentary data, and foster greater transparency and interaction between citizens and decision-makers¹⁶.

Ajdovščina Municipality: This Slovenian local government collaborated with DJND to integrate Parlameter as a tool for analysing decision-making data within the local government council, which is the highest governing organisation at the local level. Beyond examining council members' voting records, the system also provided insights into their meeting attendance, submitted questions, adopted legal acts, and other legislative activities¹⁷.

DJND Volunteer Community: Organised and coordinated by DJND, many operations of Parlameter rely on a volunteer-based approach, particularly involving a community of developers and individuals from diverse backgrounds who work in a 'democracy of action' manner. These developers are often professional programmers who are sympathetic to the cause of DJND and occasionally seek opportunities to contribute meaningfully to society. When they identify a long-standing feature that interests them, they request to work on it, and the task is then assigned to them while the team waits for the ticket to be completed¹⁸.

¹³ Danes je nov dan. (n.d.). *About – Danes je nov dan*. Available: <https://danesienovdan.si/en/about/>

¹⁴ Zašto ne. (n.d.). *About Us – Citizens' Association "Zašto ne (Why not)"*. Available: <https://zastone.ba/en/about-us/>

¹⁵ Interview with Zašto ne

¹⁶ Zašto ne. (n.d.). *About Us – Citizens' Association "Zašto ne (Why not)"*. Available: <https://zastone.ba/en/about-us/>

¹⁷ Interview with the Ajdovščina Municipality

¹⁸ Interview with Danes je nov dan; Interview with Volunteer Contributor

4. Detailed Findings

4.1. Adoption and use

Over time, Parlameter has expanded to several Slovenian local governments. For example, in Ljubljana, it was first adopted at the local government level on January 18, 2022, to monitor the activities of the Ljubljana City Council. It was also adopted in 2022 in Hrastnik, Lendava (in partnership with the local media outlet Lendavainfo)¹⁹, and in Ajdovščina. Over time, the platform expanded to include the parliaments of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as well, in September 2018 and April 2019, respectively. Efforts were also made to implement the system in Poland and Ukraine, but these were eventually discontinued due to challenges in adapting the platform to the local political contexts.

The use of Parlameter varies depending on the specific contexts, particularly regarding political perceptions and the level of involvement from the local government council, which typically centres around data exchange²⁰. For instance, while many local governments need local civil society organisations to provide essential data for the solution, this was not the case in Ljubljana. This means that DJND does a lot of work to adapt Parlameter to the needs of local contexts, particularly in consideration of political and cultural factors.

This also gives DJND a lot of control over what happens in each local government they work with, which can give them outsized control as a vendor and reinforce dependency. According to the interviewee from DJND: *'For other municipalities, we always work in cooperation with the municipality or a local organisation, because municipalities don't publish data in a way that would allow us to just absorb, transform and display it. [...] Ljubljana already has very good data. So we don't really need the municipality to participate with us in any way. We manage the parliamentary affairs for Ljubljana completely on our own.'*

²¹ However, he also pointed out that despite initial enthusiasm and support for the use of Parlameter, the political interest in the solution eventually shifted, with no clear explanation provided for the change in perspective.

4.2. Development and maintenance

The Parlameter system's flexibility allows it to be tailored to local needs, though the quality of data across local governments varies, with some requiring substantial customisation. For example, in Ljubljana, the high-quality data enables DJND to maintain the local instance with minimal cost. However, local governments with lower-quality data require more manual processing, and local civil society organisations may step in when local governments show limited

¹⁹ Novak OnLine, Leon Novak s.p. (n.d.). *Lendavainfo – Lendavska informativna stran*. Available: <https://lendavainfo.com>

²⁰ Interview with Danes je nov dan

²¹ Ibid.

interest in developing the platform. These situations frequently require significant manual effort and, in some cases, financial support for data processing, depending on the local organisation. This combination of challenges complicates maintenance and monitoring, ultimately jeopardising the platform's long-term sustainability²².

Local governments and parliaments working with Parlameter frequently request new features from DJND to help streamline these processes, but it requires a lot of effort and depends heavily on the local context and requirements. Parlameter's new features are often developed by first customising the platform for individual local governments, with these improvements later shared more widely. Local governments request updates to their Parlameter after noticing useful features implemented in neighbouring areas. DJND takes the lead in coordinating these efforts, noting that: *'... we do communicate with municipalities that whatever development we're going to do for them is going to be useful for everyone else.'*²³ These features are then generalised and shared across all instances of the platform.

The features and the general technical viability of Parlameter rely solely on DJND as the main service supplier. The development process is collaborative, with contributions from a small but engaged community of developers. Communication primarily happens through Slack, and long-term development depends on the interest and commitment of contributors. Short-term development tasks are typically handled by paid employees at DJND. The local governments take the role of the user benefitting from the platform's continuous improvement, such as from regular updates and enhancements at no additional cost. Additionally, using the platform provides local governments with better-structured data and better transparency towards their citizens, which they are prepared to share with Parlameter. Says one interviewee: *'Municipalities are very happy for the developments, and they are also very happy that now they have this data in a structured way and they can use it in different places as well.'*²⁴

Most developers for the platform come from the tech industry, and they are volunteers. Local governments rarely employ developers themselves. While some IT staff at local governments may have the technical skills to deploy Parlameter with limited support, this is uncommon²⁵. The interviewee from DJND mentioned: *'When we talk about developers, we usually talk about people who have a job as a programmer somewhere. And now and then, they would like to do something useful for society. So they show up, and if they find a long-standing feature that is interesting to work on, they request to work on that. Then we just assign this to that person, and we wait for the ticket to be finished.'*

²⁶ However, this approach is designed for 'long-term, more complex

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Interview with Danes je nov dan; Interview with the Ajdovščina Municipality; Interview with Zašto ne

²⁶ Interview with Danes je nov dan

developments' rather than urgent tasks with tight deadlines and specific budgets allocated by a local government for immediate implementation.

4.3. Funding and sustainability

DJND operates as a non-profit organisation, following a model where no profits are distributed to members or owners, as such distributions would be heavily taxed. The organisation currently employs seven full-time staff members and three part-time contributors. Acting as the sole maintainer and de facto coordinator of the Parlameter community, DJND also facilitates a community of developers, mostly employed in larger tech companies, who contribute to the project in their spare time, motivated by the social good and societal impact of the project²⁷.

Funding for Parlameter – and the work DJND does on Parlameter – primarily comes from international sources, with around 3% coming from direct donations²⁸. For example, Zašto ne, the Bosnian and Herzegovinian NGO that is partnering with DJND, mentioned that they have a contractual relationship with DJND where they typically fund all the activities they are involved in. One interviewee from Zašto ne underlined that: *'We usually fund all the activities that we are doing, and we also have a part of the budget that is shared on the development of the website (...) We mostly provide the budget for those things, and the DJND covers the development and other costs of technical issues.'*²⁹

Initially, DJND's first major funding came from the Google Digital News Initiative, which allowed the organisation to create a payroll and have employees. Speaking to the significance of this funding, one of the volunteers DJND noted that: *'Part of the funding supported impactful community projects designed to address local issues and potentially go viral, while the rest sustained the organisation itself. (...) About ten years ago, the group sustained itself by taking on commercial Python projects during funding gaps to keep operations running. Members pooled resources, sharing projects to cover expenses and continue their unpaid, impactful local initiatives.'*³⁰

Moreover, the initial local government installations of Parlameter were funded through a public call financed by an international organisation. DJND opted for international funding³¹. For other local governments, costs are incurred for the labour involved in setting up and hosting the instance, but a significant amount of work is provided free of charge³². The costs for implementing Parlameter are generally low, often falling below the threshold for public tenders. This enables local governments to select DJND without the need for a competitive bidding process, and also allows for agile development and more direct collaboration with DJND³³.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Interview with Zašto ne

³⁰ Interview with Volunteer Contributor

³¹ Interview with Danes je nov dan; Interview with Volunteer Contributor

³² Interview with Danes je nov dan

³³ Ibid.

In Slovenia, while there is no collaboration or joint procurement between local governments, neighbouring municipalities often adopt the system after one takes the initiative³⁴. To that, the interviewee from DJND explained: *‘There is this chamber of commerce-like organisation of municipalities in Slovenia called the Society of City Municipalities... [I]t is effective in promoting knowledge sharing among municipalities. However, based on our conversations with them over time, they appear to face challenges in coordinating larger collaborative efforts, such as organising joint orders for multiple Parlameters or participatory budgets. This capability has not been evident in our experience.’*³⁵ The latter statement has also been confirmed by the interviewee from Ajdovščina Municipality, which proposed the implementation of inter-local government administrations³⁶ for handling such matters.

4.4. Governance and organisation

The community of Parlameter contributors consists of around 50 members, many of whom are motivated by the social good and societal impact of the project. DJND is there to coordinate the volunteers, accept their requests to work on certain aspects of the platform, and organise their communication. According to one of the volunteer contributors of DJND: *‘Danes fosters an environment where everyone matters and can contribute based on their skills, whether it’s building websites as a software engineer or writing short monthly updates as a volunteer. Every contribution counts if it aligns with the shared vision and makes a difference. It’s about creating something meaningful together.’*³⁷

Volunteers often take responsibility for deploying and operating the platform. They also collect and process data from local governments, as well as the system to fit the local context³⁸. The work of the volunteers, and especially the local ones, helps identify inconsistencies and data quality issues, which ideally should be addressed at the source. In the words of the interviewee from DJND: *‘These volunteers aren’t just programmers; they can be testers, designers, illustrators, or anyone contributing to the project. A significant effort goes into verifying data. Many people use Parliamentary resources in their daily lives, whether for research or simply out of interest in politics. When they spot errors in transcripts, they report them to us.’*³⁹

The governance of Parlameter is open, with decisions made collaboratively by the community, often referred to by the community as ‘Democracy of Action’. While new features can be freely implemented as long as they do not interfere with the core functionality of the platform, larger changes require broad community consensus. The community maintains a positive culture, with most

³⁴ Interview with Danes je nov dan; Interview with Ajdovščina Municipality

³⁵ Interview with Danes je nov dan

³⁶ Interview with Ajdovščina Municipality

³⁷ Interview with Volunteer Contributor

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Interview with Danes je nov dan

members being friends, fostering collaboration, and reducing conflicts⁴⁰. On the other hand, most of the topics are too technical and specific to allow for different opinions that can lead to a conflict. The high technical barrier to entry reduces the likelihood of general conflict and ensures that any disagreements are more likely to be limited to specific, niche cases. Additionally, some complex features may need to be postponed until the necessary resources or conditions are in place for their development⁴¹.

The community, the users and the rest of the stakeholders of Parlameter can influence the project based on their needs. From both the point of view of the Ajdovščina Municipality and Zašto ne, the governance of the platform was largely managed by DJND. While the local government has limited influence on the platform's overall direction, it provided valuable feedback during the implementation process⁴². On the other hand, Zašto ne has a strong say in major decisions because they have their platform integrated with Parlameter, and thus they have significant influence specifically over the appearance and structure of the platform, as well as the overall direction of their local instance⁴³.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Interview with Ajdovščina Municipality

⁴³ Interview with Zašto ne

5. Lessons Learnt

- 1. Without effective capacity-building, those benefiting from a service supplier's services risk becoming passive users, disengaging entirely, or failing to utilise the solution, rather than becoming active contributors.**

The Parlameter study cases show that although the users, such as the local councils, find the platform particularly useful for searching and accessing their statements⁴⁴. There are no upstream contributions to the platform from their side⁴⁵. In Ajdovščina, the platform analyses local government council activities, including voting patterns, attendance records, questions raised by council members, and adopted legal acts. This adaptation allows the platform to enhance transparency by providing citizens, journalists, and researchers with detailed insights into decision-making processes. It enables comparisons between local governments, fostering interoperability, transparency, accountability and collaboration among local governments⁴⁶.

All the technical developments are managed by DJND through user feedback and requests⁴⁷, specifically national/local parliamentarians and their respective parliaments. This can turn beneficiaries into passive users and not contributors, which in turn limits the potential that open source collaboration can offer. Moreover, Parlameter's operations in the local government of Lendava came to a halt due to a lack of funding, which in turn led to insufficient resources to support the local contribution to a private cooperative of journalists responsible for upstream work⁴⁸.

In this way, local adoption of open source solutions should not be treated only as a tool, but as a chance for collaboration and for the development of cost-effective solutions that are customisable to local needs.

- 2. Adapting a solution for local-level use often requires close collaboration with local partners; otherwise, the solution can stop its operations. However, those same partners, depending solely on the initial development team for all technical aspects of integration and maintenance, create long-term sustainability challenges.**

In the case of Parlameter, the local collaborator's role focuses on voluntarily providing data and reviewing content, while DJND manages all technical and development aspects. While Parlameter also shows how open source can be adopted in low-capacity contexts (e.g. locations where the capacity to customise, implement, and maintain open source code and solutions), with civil society organisations serving as important bridge-builders, the flip side is that it creates a sort of dependency for development of new features and tailoring

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Interview with Danes je nov dan

⁴⁶ Interview with Ajdovščina Municipality

⁴⁷ Interview with Ajdovščina Municipality; Interview with Danes je nov dan

⁴⁸ Interview with Danes je nov dan

them to their needs and contexts. The expansion of Parlameter to Poland was cut short because there was no local contributor, and the work effort could not be handled by DJND⁴⁹.

Relying solely on the initial development team for all technical aspects of integration and maintenance poses a significant challenge. This approach often results in a lack of expertise on the user side, which can, in turn, lead to an increased workload for the developers/service suppliers. As a result, while the local collaborator bridges the gap in data collection and addresses the lack of proper documentation of parliamentary activities that is needed for Parlameter to operate, it is not empowered or well-equipped to contribute that knowledge back upstream, particularly in terms of technical development. Feedback from the general collaborators (Zašto ne, Ajdovščina) of DJND is incorporated into the platform⁵⁰.

However, both for the use case of Parlameter in Bosnia and Herzegovina and for its local use in Slovenia, the technical development of the platform relies only on DJND⁵¹. This can lead to overwork of both the volunteers and the developer team, and it also showcases the lack of IT expertise from the government side. Potential future sustainability challenges should something stop the operations of DJND as a service supplier. As a non-profit, their services are not extortionate, and thus, they could disappear over time, leading to the choice of a proprietary solution from the users.

3. Local governments struggle with both the capability to implement and the ability to adapt to the technological demands of open source software, and might benefit from a model that allows them to share resources.

The Parlameter case study shows that in Slovenia, smaller local governments often lack the resources to implement the system independently and rely on larger local governments for support, which limits the potential for collective innovation⁵². This also hinders the ability to tailor the system to their specific needs, as they must adhere to the customisations preferred by the larger local government. There is also a cultural mismatch, as local governments in general are not accustomed to prioritising long-term sustainability of the solution.

Instead, they tend to expect one-time purchases for services rather than committing to ongoing expenses such as hosting, domain registration, and other recurring costs⁵³. Additionally, political differences within local governments can limit the adoption of new technologies and disrupt the contribution to the stable governance of the solution. For example, in Ajdovščina, some council members questioned the platform's purpose and necessity, expressing scepticism, and in Ljubljana, the support for the solution stopped because of fear that it would be used as a tool against the current mayor⁵⁴.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Interview with Danes je nov dan

⁵¹ Interview with the Ajdovščina Municipality; Interview with Zašto ne Ne

⁵² Interview with the Ajdovščina Municipality

⁵³ Interview with Danes je nov dan

⁵⁴ Interview with Danes je nov dan; Interview with Ajdovščina Municipality

Another factor that can undermine the governance of the solution is the lack of coordinated action and maturity within the local government. One of the main challenges for Parlameter was shifting public and governmental mindsets toward transparency and collaboration, and persuading decision-makers – like mayors and councils – rather than solving purely technical problems⁵⁵. Moreover, despite the presence of local government associations, in Slovenia, there is no collective procurement model for services like Parlameter. As a result, each local government generally makes its own decision to adopt the platform independently, creating inefficiencies when scaling the system.

For example, the implementation process in Slovenia was marked by fragmented collaboration between the local governments. Ajdovščina moved forward independently, without engaging with other local governments, despite being aware of Parlameter's adoption in Ljubljana and Medvode. This isolated approach missed opportunities for knowledge sharing, resource pooling, and a more coordinated, cost-effective implementation⁵⁶. Some forms of local government cooperation were limited between neighbouring local governments or those of similar size, which can share resources and collaborate to overcome challenges.

These challenges show that local governments have an opportunity to improve by identifying common problems and seeking solutions that delegate implementation to inter-local government administrations. Such administrations can manage tasks for multiple local governments and receive co-funding from the state. Moreover, to further foster transparency and accountability in their joint efforts, local governments can work with national anti-corruption organisations. Transparency and accountability in these joint efforts can also create a trusting relationship between local governments.

4. Adopting open source solutions in local governments can sometimes be challenging due to users' unwillingness or inactivity in contributing effectively to the solution. However, the constant use of the solution can positively impact users' maturity.

The sustainable adoption of Parlameter depends on user contributions. To avoid extra workload for DJND or community volunteers, local governments should ensure that data is properly processed after each council meeting. This requires cultural and managerial changes, both technically and in internal processes. These changes can be costly and challenging, and often lead to resistance to change. Nevertheless, the interviewees from DJND and one of the volunteers confirmed that, through using the solution, local governments have become more mature in how they interact with Parlameter and manage their internal processes related to its adoption and use. For example, many local governments have, over recent years, improved their file organisation to better integrate with Parlameter.

⁵⁵ Interview with a volunteer contributor to Danes je nov dan

⁵⁶ Ibid.

A key challenge in implementing Parlameter is data collection, which is essential for the platform's functionality and for the development team at Danes. The lack of local responsiveness presents significant obstacles during implementation⁵⁷. For example, the council members of the Ajdovščina Municipality were slow to provide essential data, such as photos and personal details, which delayed the progress and development of Parlameter. From a personal experience point of view, it was also very difficult to come into contact with representatives of the local government and parliamentary users for this study. This slow response also highlights a broader issue: the lack of in-house IT expertise within parliaments and local governments, along with scepticism, limited enthusiasm, and a lack of understanding of the platform's benefits in government⁵⁸.

Additionally, for the use of Parlameter in Bosnia and Herzegovina, data collection and organisation are also common bottlenecks, often exacerbated by limited internal capacity. More specifically, one of the biggest challenges in using the Parlameter in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the absence of open data formats and the disorganised structure of the country's official parliamentary website⁵⁹. Nevertheless, as the government becomes more digitally savvy through the usage of technology, both the culture behind open source software and the collaboration between local governments and the Parlameter developers are improving⁶⁰.

⁵⁷ Interview with Danes je nov dan

⁵⁸ Interview with the Ajdovščina Municipality; Interview with Zašto Ne

⁵⁹ Interview with Danes je nov dan; Interview with Zašto Ne

⁶⁰ Interview with a volunteer contributor to Danes je nov dan

