

Ganka Cvetanova, Veno Pachovski:

E-democracy Initiatives at the Local Level in the Republic of Macedonia, Estonia and Hungary

E-democracy Initiatives at the Local Level in the Republic of Macedonia, Estonia and Hungary

Ganka Cvetanova, Veno Pachovski

Abstract

This chapter evaluates three different types of e-democracy initiatives at the local level in the Republic of Macedonia, classified by the elements of the democratic process which they work to enhance: transparency, participation, and deliberation. This chapter also attempts to compare e-democracy initiatives at the local level in the Republic of Macedonia with e-democracy initiatives in Estonia and Hungary, which are both EU Member States. For the purposes of our research we have chosen Estonia and Hungary as EU Member States on the one hand and the Republic of Macedonia on the other, as an EU candidate country for the following reasons: all three countries recently left their communist past, with weak democratic institutions and a low level of trust in government and a strong commitment to e-democracy. The methodological approach used in the Comparative Project on Local e-democracy Initiatives in Europe and North America, served as the basis for our research, which means that this research relies on a tripartite typology of e-democracy initiatives in order to provide a framework for classification as well as comparative analysis of e-democracy practices in the Republic for Macedonia, Estonia and Hungary. In the first stage of our research we analyzed the web portals of the units of local-self government in the Republic of Macedonia in the period of 2013-2014, with a special emphasis on e-democracy initiatives. The second stage of our research was a comparative analysis of the existing types of e-democracy initiatives at the local level in the Republic of Macedonia and e-democracy initiatives in Estonia and Hungary. Our investigation discovered that there are many outstanding local e-democracy initiatives in all of the three countries mentioned. However, there is a little evidence that these initiatives have done much to ameliorate any of the aforementioned problems that all three countries are still facing. The paper also provides some recommendations for improving e-democracy initiatives at a local level and their performance in general.

Keywords: e-democracy initiatives, local level, local government, transparency, participation, deliberation, e-tools.

Introduction

We live in the age of new technologies which, in many respects, affect our everyday lives, such as: the way we communicate with each other, the way we transmit and access our information, and the way we conduct our professional engagements, even the way we practice democracy. New technologies or Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) enable new ways of participation in democratic and political processes, thereby affecting political society and democracy at a global, national and local level.

Webster defines democracy as: “a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation”. Putting an “e” in front of democracy means nothing more than using the tools of information technology to facilitate, improve and ultimately extend the exercise of democracy (Caldow, 2004, p. 1). As Caldow (2004) states, engaging your “own” citizens or constituents through digital media includes enhancing active participation in law-making, policy-making, and legislative processes, all of which are influenced by a variety of forces, such as: public opinion, debate, lobbying, special interest groups, consultations with constituents, committee hearings, and expert testimonies.

It seems that more and more governments are offering web-forums as a means of replacing the council meeting or the public *agora*. Moreover, it is increasingly common to be able to offer feedback to your elected officials via email, web forms, or even SMS. In order to be heard, citizens need only a minimal level of technology and can raise their voice in their spare time at home instead of having to meet their politicians face to face (Peart & Diaz, 2007, p. 2). Many local authorities worldwide also adopted the use of ICT to supplement their traditional activities and to improve the involvement of citizen in the democratic process.

Policy and research on e-democracy is still at an early stage of development. The focus of this chapter is on e-democracy at the local level, evaluating three different types of e-democracy initiatives in the Republic of Macedonia, as classified by those elements of the democratic process which they work to enhance, namely: transparency, participation, and deliberation. The study also attempts to compare e-democracy initiatives at a local level in the Republic of Macedonia with e-democracy initiatives in Estonia and Hungary as EU Member States, presented in the *Comparative Project on Local e-democracy Initiatives in Europe and North America*.¹

As Peart and Diaz - the authors of the *Comparative Project on Local e-democracy Initiatives in Europe and North America* - state, despite the widespread take-up of e-government across the world, and the studies dedicated to this topic, surprisingly little cross-national comparative research has been undertaken on the connected issue of e-democracy. The investigation in this project addresses that gap by analyzing e-democracy developments across one North American and six European countries. Specifically, the investigation targets practices of local citizen e-democracy in Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The focus is upon developments, especially at a sub national level and, most particularly (but not exclusively), upon local government-sponsored initiatives (Peart & Diaz, 2007, p. 2).

This project served as the basis for our study. The research methodology in the *Comparative Project on Local e-democracy Initiatives in Europe and North America* relies on a tripartite typology of e-democracy initiatives in order to provide a framework not only for classification, which is necessary for any investigation of new phenomena, but also to provide qualitatively distinct subdivisions of an emerging research agenda and maintain a consistent methodological approach in this endeavor (Peart & Diaz, 2007, p. 5).

The same methodological approach – the tripartite typology of e-democracy initiatives - was used in our research, not just to provide a framework for classification but also as a basis for our comparative analysis of e-democracy initiatives in the Republic of Macedonia, Estonia and Hungary.

Despite the fact that the investigation in *Comparative Project on Local e-democracy Initiatives in Europe and North America* was focused on one North American and six European countries, for the purposes of our research, that is, in order to make a comparative analysis of e-democracy initiatives in the Republic of Macedonia with other EU Member States, we have chosen Estonia and Hungary for the following reasons:

- Whilst Estonia and Hungary are EU Member States, the Republic of Macedonia is an EU candidate country.
- All three countries share a recent Communist past.
- Both Estonia and Macedonia are newly independent states.
- All three countries have weak democratic institutions.
- The trust in government in all three countries is generally low.
- All three countries endure centralized governmental arrangements.

- They share powerful digital divides; and,
- All of the three countries have a big commitment to e-democracy.

In the first stage of our research we analyzed the web portals of the units of local-self government in the Republic of Macedonia in the period of 2013 -2014, with special emphasis on the e-tools used. The second stage of the research was a comparative analysis of the existing types of e-democracy initiatives on a local level in the Republic of Macedonia and e-democracy initiatives in Estonia and Hungary.

Typology of E-democracy Initiatives

Throughout the *Comparative Project on Local e-democracy Initiatives in Europe and North America* (2004, p. 5), e-democracy initiatives were classified by the elements of the democratic process which they work to enhance: transparency, participation, and deliberation.

A Transparency e-democracy initiative refers to those e-democracy projects that work to increase the transparency of the political and democratic processes that take advantage of ICTs to bring information to citizens that would not otherwise be available. There are two major types of transparency initiative. The first type provides a central source for information about the government and its activities. The second type of e-democracy initiative that works to increase transparency is that which uses ICTs and especially Web2.0 technology to make massive text-based, audio, and even visual records of government activity available on citizens' computer screens (Peart & Diaz, 2007, p. 5).

Participation in an e-democracy initiative consists of those uses of ICTs that promote citizen participation in the governing process. There are three major subtypes to this initiative. The first type allows citizens to vote online. The second, and by far most common, subtype is that of "citizen feedback" or "e-consultation." This type of e-democracy initiative can be as simple as offering a form for citizens to fill in online or as well-organized as question and answer chat sessions with mayors or a governor, or it could even include a system that allows citizens to offer advice via SMS. The third type offers citizens the option of participating in traditional political processes online. For instance, a system that allows citizens to give online feedback on budget allocation or to launch a ballot initiative online to transform the means by which citizens can participate in political processes, making it much easier

thanks to mediation by ICTs. While the latter two subtypes offer citizens the chance to communicate with and give feedback to their representatives in new and potentially simpler ways, the former offers a new way to participate in selecting those representatives in the first place (Peart & Diaz, 2007, p. 6).

The third type of e-democracy initiative – deliberation, attempts to recreate a sense of the public sphere online. In general, these initiatives offer citizens of the local region or municipality the option of participating in a discussion forum that is intended to be a space to raise issues of local importance. In other instances, however, these discussion forums serve as the ingredients with which legislation is formed as the discussion threads are often officially monitored by legislators and administrators to gain ideas (Peart & Diaz, 2007, p. 7).

Case Studies

Estonia

The Republic of Estonia is a small unitary state on the Baltic Sea with a total population of around 1.3 million residents. It relies upon a system of constitutional democracy with a President elected by a unicameral parliament. The President appoints the Prime Minister to head the executive branch with the help of up to 14 Ministers. Elections are held every 4 years. The country is divided into 15 counties for the sake of administering the national government. Within these counties, there are essentially two types of municipality of importance here. “Towns” tend to be larger municipalities. “Rural municipalities” are conglomerations of smaller villages that are clustered in the same area. Just under a third of the population (roughly 400,000) is located in the biggest city and capital, Tallinn, on the country’s north coast.

Attitudes Toward E-Democracy. As noted in the report, the top three problems that Estonian democracy faces today are: 1) the fragility of civil society structures, 2) low voter turnout especially for local elections (47.4% turnout in 2005), and 3) the low reputation of political parties. In order to overcome these obstacles, the Estonian Parliament created the Estonian Civil Society Development Concept (known as EKAK) with the intention of outlining a strategy by which the public sector can cooperate with private organizations to help reinforce Estonian civil society. One of the goals of the EKAK was to promote citizen involvement in the political decision-making process through the use of ICTs. Also, as an attempt to raise the rate of

participation, specifically voter turnout, the Estonian government introduced binding internet voting, beginning in the 2005 elections.

An Overview of Initiatives. The survey uncovered that, despite the low levels of general trust in government, there were no outstanding examples of e-democracy that aimed at enhancing transparency. Most of the Estonian e-democracy projects were focused on opening up new spaces for public deliberation. However, it is worth mentioning one exceptional example that offered citizens a new way to participate in the governmental process - internet voting or e-voting. The project was conducted on a national level. The first step in realizing the e-voting project was to institute a national ID card system that enabled citizens to verify citizen identity online. By the end of 2001, the Public Key Infrastructure was developed and operational. After four years of issuing ID cards, by 2006 about 900,000 had been issued, accounting for about 85% of registered voters in Estonia. During the 2006 elections, e-voting² was offered four to six days before the national polls opened. In the end, only 9,287 e-votes were cast, or 1.85% of all votes cast in those elections. Despite a relatively low turnout for the e-voting portion of the elections, it is significant to note that almost all the registered voters have the option of doing so, given the existence of the national ID card system (Peart and Diaz, 2007, p. 12). As a follow-up, it should be noted that, in 2009, about a third of the electorate voted in the European elections – of whom 15% used e-voting (5% of total voters), and in March 2011, during the parliamentary elections, 61% of the total electorate voted; and just under a quarter of the votes cast came through e-voting (15% of the total number of votes). But, researchers who replicated the system in a laboratory environment say that the software could be hacked to cast fake votes or that the servers could be attacked to alter totals, and the benefits are considered to be not worth the risk (Arthur, 2014, May 12).

The other examples presented are deliberate initiatives that took place on a municipal level. The first is an online forum³ run by the city of Tartu in 2005. The aim of this online forum was to solve one specific local problem. The forum was part of the municipal website but was a section specifically devoted to finding a unique solution to the problems presented by the estimated 10,000 unregistered residents of the city, mostly among the student population. The idea was to encourage people to register with the city, but with only 70 participants, the web forum was under-used.

The second e-democracy project that began in 2005 was a web forum.⁴ The aim of the project was to create an online political space in order to

encourage coalescence amongst the citizens of a newly amalgamated municipality, known as Tapa. Both projects were purely municipal-level projects and were funded as such. Together with the TOM portal, they demonstrate the heavy focus in Estonia on opening up new spaces for political discussion with the help of ICTs.

Generally-speaking, e-democracy initiatives in Estonia focus on either improving participation or fostering deliberation. As Peart and Diaz claimed, despite the fact that internet penetration is very high in Estonia, the implemented e-democracy initiatives are generally under-utilized and doing very little to reinforce the faltering public faith in the country's democratic institutions. However, it must be highlighted that Estonia has carried out binding elections that included the option of internet voting.

Hungary

Hungary is a small central European country with a population of roughly ten million people. The governmental structure is that of a unitary, democratic state. The government at a national level is organized in a parliamentary system. The municipal governments are constitutionally granted a certain level of sovereignty, but this level is interpreted by the Parliament, which can also change that level. The governmental system is relatively centralized. Regional and local governments enjoy a large amount of legal autonomy. It is this autonomy that sets the background for widespread, autonomous, municipal-level experimentation with e-democracy. Hungary's population is relatively unevenly distributed, as roughly 90% of its registered municipalities have less than 5,000 people. Many residents are concentrated in large urban areas, leaving few moderately sized cities.

Attitudes toward e-democracy. As noted in the report, Hungary is a country with a surprisingly strong track record of local e-democracy. The findings in the study showed that the most popular type of e-democracy initiative is deliberation. Online political forums can be found in municipalities as varied as small, rural, mostly farming towns to the largest cities in the country. However, some major problems were indicated in this area. According to the report, the first major problem is that the poor distribution of wealth has created a powerful digital divide. The second problem is the weakness of democratic institutions. Finally, as a third problem, the recent Communist past that has left a precedent for the corrupt management of public funds that persists to this day. In order to overcome these obstacles, the Hungarian government adopted plans to apply ICTs to traditional bureaucratic

administration, hoping that the introduction of e-government practices might end some of the corruption (Peart & Diaz, 2007, p. 16).

An Overview of Initiatives. As findings in the report suggest, in each of following cases funding was provided almost exclusively by the local administration. There were three major cases presented in the study whose focus was on increasing transparency. The first took place in the municipality of Papa with a population of 33,341 and falling. The website⁵ did not offer a forum but it merely provided information.

The second case took place in the municipality of Pilisvorosvar and was primarily a website aimed at including the blind. The website⁶ achieved this by avoiding frames and providing a non-graphics version that makes it suitable for reading software. This rests at the level of transparency because it brings information about the government to those who could not easily access it previously. It should be noted that this constitutes one of the few cases of e-democracy initiatives addressing the digital divide. The final example takes place in the city of Pécs, a metropolitan center of 157,000 in southern Hungary, which initiated a free WiFi hotspot⁷ in the center of the city in an attempt to encourage citizens to sign online and get information about the government.

The second type of initiative is the one that increases the participation of citizens by using ICTs as an intermediary. The first example presented in the report is a town called Siofok on Lake Balaton, which is a popular vacation spot with only 22,255 registered, year-round residents. The aim of the project⁸ was to provide a forum where citizens could raise concerns over local issues. The second presented example took place in a district of Budapest known as Pestszentlőrinc-Pestimre (Budapest District XVIII) and is a platform that allows users to send a question to local administrators via cell phone with an SMS. The questions are answered either via regular mail or by SMS. And finally, the third case in the participation category took place in the Dunaujvaros municipality, a city with 55,000 residents. The intention of this project was to establish an e-point⁹ where citizens can e-mail questions to their government officials. The questions are responded to by a committee and the reply is sent via email.

The third type of initiative promotes new spaces for political discussion. Research has shown a strong tendency toward the provision of these spaces in Hungary. There are three types of forums. The first case¹⁰ is that of an online forum where citizens can interact and discuss issues of local importance. The second type¹¹ provides a forum that is monitored by members

of the local government who either cull ideas from the discussion or participate and answer questions from time to time. The latter also relies on open-source technology. The final case actually manages to create a dialogue between citizens and the mayor. The initiative¹² provides an online live-chat forum between the mayor and citizen-users that have registered beforehand. The event takes place quarterly. In this way, a political space is created and sustained that could not have existed without ICTs. In other words, it is a genuine electronically-mediated agora (Peart & Diaz, 2007, p. 19).

In the case of Hungary, the survey uncovered many outstanding local e-democracy initiatives. However, Peart and Diaz claim that there is little evidence that these initiatives have done much to ameliorate the problems mentioned at the beginning of the report on this country. They suggest that the question of the digital divide is not really being addressed, except the examples of building websites for sight-disabled individuals and the public provision of WiFi hotspots.

Macedonia

The Republic of Macedonia is a relatively young democratic country gaining its independence in 1991, in the so-called 'third wave of democracy', following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The discussions concerning the relevance and significance of democracy, as a precondition to the global development of society, represent an integral part of current political and academic debate in the Republic of Macedonia. Although Macedonian society is still regarded as a society in democratic transition, serious efforts have been made to develop and enhance the information society as a whole, striving to introduce a range of tools that can usefully be applied in democratic processes and institutions (Cvetanova & Pachovski, 2013). By far the most popular type of e-democracy initiative, as classified by the typology elaborated above, is transparency. At the moment, the Republic of Macedonia focuses on fostering deliberation and participation in e-democracy initiatives, with particular emphasis on the third subtype of participation initiative, the one that allows citizens to launch a ballot initiative online.

The Republic of Macedonia is a small country located in the central Balkan Peninsula in Southeast Europe, with a total population of around 2 million. It relies upon parliamentary democracy with an executive government elected by a unicameral parliament. The Assembly (parliament) is made up of 123 seats and members are elected every four years. The role of the President

of the Republic is mostly ceremonial whilst executive power rests in the hands of the Government which makes the prime minister the most politically powerful person in the country.

Regarding the organization of local-self government, there are 83 municipalities, plus the country's capital - the city of Skopje as a distinct local self- government unit in the Republic of Macedonia. A quarter of the population (approximately 500,000) is located in the biggest city and capital, Skopje. Most residents are concentrated in the urban areas, in other words in moderately sized cities with a population of more than 20,000.

There are two types of municipality in the Republic of Macedonia: rural and urban. All of them are run in a similar way to most western cities, with a mayor and a city council. Under centralized governmental arrangements, most of the money is concentrated in the national/central government in Skopje. Yet, the units of local self-government are financed from their own sources of revenues, such as: real estate taxes; communal fees and service incomes; profits gained by public enterprises and public services established by local self-government units; as well as income through donations received from the Republic or from abroad (in goods or in currency).

At the national level, the Ministry of Information Society and Administration is responsible for the development of e-democracy initiatives. Whilst on the local level, the department of public relations or a member of the administration, if anybody at all, is responsible for programs related to e-democracy.

Attitudes toward E-Democracy. The *National Strategy for Development of Information Society*¹⁴ was the first strategic document addressing the issues of the information society, drafted and published by the Government of the Republic of Macedonia in 2005. This document refers to the development of information society as a whole, with special emphasis on: infrastructure, e-business, e-citizens, e-education, e-healthcare and legislation. In 2008, the Ministry of Information Society was established. Since then, this Ministry is responsible for the development of the information society as a whole, for the creation and drafting of policy papers, and for the coordination of activities related to digital skills and e-services.

In the last few years several Strategies were drafted in the Republic of Macedonia.¹⁵ All of the strategies are very general and concern the Information Society as a whole, such as physical access to the Internet (Figure 1a&b), equipment and content or digital skills and services, and some particular e-sectors.

In order to support and facilitate democratic processes in the Republic of Macedonia, the Ministry of Information and Administration created a web portal called *e-democracy*¹⁶ in 2011. This web portal should provide a simple and easily accessible way for the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, to give their opinion on both the governmental draft documents and adopted laws, as well as being actively involved in the decision making process.

Regarding the development of ICT on the local level, 11% of local units do not have web portals or they are non-functional (see Pie chart 1). It should also be noted that there is a very large digital divide. The inequality of access to digital information is especially emphasized upon when comparing between rural and urban municipalities (See Figure 2). Many of the rural municipalities do not have ICT sector or adequate ICT infrastructure. The rapid development of ICT on the national level (in particular the concept of e-government and e-governance) and in the urban municipalities, could further deepen the digital divide thus causing isolation and marginalization of the rural and small municipalities.

In order to reduce this digital divide between rural and urban municipalities in 2010 the Association of Local Self-government Units published a *Strategy for the Development of ICT 2011-2015*.¹⁷ The aim of this strategy was to increase the capacity of the Association thus enabling municipalities to develop ICT sectors and adequate ICT infrastructure, to improve digital skills and services and to transform the units of local self-government into modern e-municipalities reaching the level of advanced European municipalities.

An Overview of Initiatives. Following the typology of e-democracy initiatives given in the *Comparative Project on Local e-democracy Initiatives in Europe and North America*, we begin with the initiatives that enhance transparency, move to participation initiatives, and finish with deliberation initiatives - those that create novel or online spaces for political discussion and dialogue.

Our research uncovered two subtypes of transparency initiatives. The first one provides a central source of information about local government, such as: published detailed budgets, details about public procurements, urban plans and other applications (See Figure 3).

The second subtype of transparency initiatives provides massive text-based, audio, and even visual records of government activities available on citizens' computer screens by using ICTs and especially Web2.0 technology (46% of municipalities). For example in, the community of Demir Kapija¹⁸ the

official bulletins are published detailing the last four years of activity. The same applies to the community of Ilinden¹⁹, where the last six years are documented. In the case of the municipality of Bosilovo²⁰, the video recordings of press conferences of the mayor are posted on site. The best one is the case of the municipality of Veles, where documents are pre-categorized in two sections, one of them dedicated to current activities²¹ and the other to video recordings of council sessions (documented for the last three years).²²

In order to be more transparent, many municipalities or mayors²³ also created official fan-pages on Facebook (more than 35%). Other municipalities posted videos with community activities on YouTube. The Municipality of Gevgelija²⁴ provides an excellent example for this kind of activity, with 73 videos posted, ranging from press conferences to meetings with citizens. Finally, considering the role of social networks, it is worth mentioning that out of those 9 municipalities that do not have web-sites, 5 are present on Facebook, to somehow compensate for the lack of a portal.

First, we should take into consideration that Macedonian society is multiethnic and in accordance with the Ohrid Framework Agreement²⁵, many of the multiethnic municipalities are supposed to use both languages: the language of the dominant ethnic community and the official language. Consequently, these principles should be applied to the municipalities' web portals accordingly. However, our research has uncovered that some of the multiethnic municipalities (Tearce, Kicevo, Zelino, Debar, Vrapciste, Aracinovo, Cair) do not use the official language on their portals, which remains a serious obstacle for information access. On the other hand, Skopje, Bogovinje, Kumanovo should be highlighted as positive examples for information being provided in two languages, and Gostivar and Dolneni for their content being provided in three languages. The language in this context is not just a matter of interethnic relations, it could be seen as a cause for deepening the digital divide.

Regarding the second initiative, that of increasing participation, there are some outstanding examples at the local level. The Initiative *PrijaviProblem* (Report a Problem) has been implemented in various municipalities. Prilep²⁶ could be pointed out as a municipality with the best solution, closely followed by Veles and Shtip. Using this initiative, in 2012 the citizens in Prilep²⁷ reported 1,184 problems over local issues and 1,136 of them were successfully solved by local government.

Another good example is the Municipality of Vinica²⁸ which enables direct contact with a municipality representative by establishing a chat session (5% of municipalities have this option available).

However, the subtype of participation initiatives which revolutionizes the voting process - e-voting, is not as yet present.

The third type of e-democracy initiative is the one that attempts to recreate a sense of the public sphere online. Despite several attempts to create online forums, one of them as a project launched by the Ministry of local self-government²⁹, none is functioning. It means that the citizens in the Republic of Macedonia do not have an opportunity to participate in a discussion forum that is intended to be a space to raise issues of local importance.

Despite many outstanding examples of e-democracy initiatives at local level, most of these initiatives are generally under-utilized. Although internet penetration is very high, people are much more active on Social Networks than using the possibility to participate in the democratic processes via ICT. On the other hand, the question of a digital divide has not been adequately addressed and there haven't been any efforts to include marginalized groups in e-democracy processes. However, the high internet penetration and strong commitment to e-democracy represents a great opportunity to enhance democratic governance, to strengthen democratic institutions and to increase the democratic awareness of Macedonian citizens.

Study Limitations

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that has gained an insight into e-democracy initiatives at a local level in the Republic of Macedonia. In this sense, the study has some limitations. A major limitation is the fact that as a basis for our research, based on the comparative analysis we used a project that was published in 2007. We also did not investigate into exactly what types of pre-conditions correlate to success in some types of initiatives and to failure in others. Another limitation is the fact that we were not able to analyze those web portals of local units where the official language was not used.

Conclusion

The development of democracy at a local level is of significant importance for the development of the overall democratic processes within a society. In order to enhance transparency and participation, as well as to create a sense for the public sphere, local democracy should be supported and enhanced by the means of digital information technology tools. The study evaluated three different types of e-democracy initiatives at a local level in the Republic of Macedonia, while comparing this with local e-democracy initiatives in Estonia and Hungary as EU Member States. The initiatives were classified by the elements of democratic process which they work to enhance: transparency, participation, and deliberation. As findings in this study suggest, in each of the three countries the funding of e-democracy initiatives at a local level was provided almost exclusively by the local administration.

The investigation uncovered many outstanding local e-democracy initiatives in all of the three countries concerned. For example, the research on Hungary has shown that the most popular type of e-democracy initiative is deliberation. Also, most of the Estonian e-democracy projects were focused on opening new spaces for public deliberation. Unlike the cases with these two countries, the deliberation initiative in the Republic of Macedonia is not present as yet, which means that the citizens do not have the opportunity to participate in online forums and raise issues of local importance.

Despite the fact that the project was conducted at a national level, the study has shown one exceptional example in Estonia - internet voting or e-voting. However, e-voting - as a subtype of the e-participation initiative, is not present as yet in either Hungary or the Republic of Macedonia.

The research uncovered that the common trend in all three countries is the lack of attention paid to the digital divide, except the examples of building websites for sight-disabled individuals and the public provision of WiFi hotspots in Hungary. In the Republic of Macedonia the inequality of access to digital information is especially emphasized when one makes comparisons between rural and urban municipalities. Also, the study uncovered that most of the multiethnic municipalities in the Republic of Macedonia do not use the official language on their portals which creates an obstacle to information access and is a serious cause in the deepening of the digital divide.

However, despite the strong commitment to e-democracy in all three countries, there is little evidence that these initiatives have done much to ameliorate the problems, such as: weak democratic institutions, the low level

of trust in governments and the low level of citizens' participation in democratic processes using ICT as relatively intermediary.

As all three countries only recently left their communist past, the problems they are facing are different from those of the western democracies. They have one problem in common, a weak sense of the institutionalization of democratic practices and a low level of general trust in government. In this sense E-democracy in all three countries could be seen as a chance to remedy the general mistrust of government, to enhance democratic governance and strengthen democratic institutions.

In order to reach these goals and to give an equal opportunity to all citizens to participate in democratic processes at a local level, the three countries should adequately address the issue of the digital divide. More attention should be paid to developing ICT sectors and adequate ICT infrastructure in the municipalities, as well as improving digital skills and services. Regarding the case of the Republic of Macedonia, emphasis should be laid on developing e-deliberation initiatives so that citizens - using online forums - could raise issues of local importance and thereby enhance e-democracy participation at the same time.

However, further research on this topic should be undertaken in order to investigate which pre-conditions correlate to success in some types of initiatives or failure in others.

Endnotes

¹ <http://www.edemocracycentre.ch/files/ESF%20-%20Local%20E-Democracy.pdf>

² See project website: <http://www.vvk.ee/engindex.html> and <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/may/12/estonian-e-voting-security-warning-european-elections-research>

³ See the Tartu Forum at: http://www.tartu.ee/?lang_id=1&menu_id=2&page_id=3125

⁴ See the Tapa Forum at: <http://www.tapa.ee>

⁵ http://www.papa.hu/letoltes/informatikai_strategia.pdf

⁶ <http://akadalymentes.pilisvorosvar.hu>

⁷ <http://www.egovernment.hu/digitalcity/news.jsp?dom=AAAAGCAI&prt=AAAAFZMK&fmn=AAAAFZMP&men=AAAAFZMU&hir=AAAARWFK>

⁸ http://www.siofok.hu/online_hu.php

⁹ <http://www.dunaujvaros.hu/index.php?p=kf>

¹⁰ <http://www.komlo.hu/index2.php?m=28>

¹¹ <http://www.szentesinfo.hu/mozaik/polghiv/vendegkonyv-v/guestbook.cgi>

<http://www.szentesinfo.hu/mozaik>

¹² http://www.obuda.hu/forumarch.php?athoz=20*0*1

¹³ http://www.mioa.gov.mk/files/pdf/dokumenti/Strategija_i_Akcionen_Plan.pdf

¹⁴ http://www.mio.gov.mk/files/pdf/dokumenti/Nacionalna_strategija_za_razvoj_na_elektronski_komunikacii_so_informaticki_tehnologii.pdf;

http://www.mioa.gov.mk/files/pdf/dokumenti/strategija_e-sodrzini_2.pdf;

http://www.mioa.gov.mk/files/pdf/dokumenti/Strategija_za_e-Vlada-05.03.2010.pdf;

http://www.mioa.gov.mk/files/pdf/dokumenti/Strategija_za_e-vklucuvanje.pdf

¹⁵ <http://e-demokratija.mk>

¹⁶ <http://www.zels.org.mk/Upload/Content/Documents/Izdaniya/Publikacii/MK/Strategija%20na%20ZELS%20IKT%202011-%202015.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://www.demirhisar.gov.mk/e-opstina/sluzben-glasnik.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.ilinden.gov.mk/e-opostina?doc=11>

²⁰ <http://www.opstinabosilovo.gov.mk/index.php/video>

²¹ <http://uslugi.veles.gov.mk/Shared%20Documents/Forms/AllItems.aspx>

²² <http://uslugi.veles.gov.mk/Lists/sednici/AllItems.aspx>

²³ <http://www.tetova.gov.mk/>

²⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/user/municofgyg>

²⁵ According to the Ohrid Framework Agreement the official language throughout Macedonia and in the international relations of Macedonia is the Macedonian language. But - as stated in the Agreement - with respect to local self-government, in municipalities where a community comprises at least 20 percent of the population of the municipality, the language of that community will be used as an official language in addition to Macedonian. With respect to languages spoken by less than 20 percent of the population of the municipality, the local authorities will decide democratically on their use in public bodies.

²⁶ <http://prijaviproblem.prilep.gov.mk/>

²⁷ <http://www.prilep.gov.mk/news/mk/proektot-prijavi-problem-ovaa-godina-uspeshno-se-spravi-so-1136-prijaveni-komunalni-problemi/>

²⁸ <http://www.opstinavinica.gov.mk/>

²⁹ <http://dajpredlog.mk/>

References

Arthur, Charles. (2014, May 12). Estonian e-voting shouldn't be used in European elections, say security experts. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/may/12/estonian-e-voting-security-warning-european-elections-research>

Caldow, J. (2004). *e-Democracy: Putting Down Global Roots*. Institute for Electronic Government, IBM.

Cvetanova, G. and Pachovski, V. (2013.). E-democracy Strategy in the Republic of Macedonia in the context of e-democracy strategies in EU Member States. In I. Dodovski et al. (Eds.), *Out of the Crisis: EU Economic and Social Policies Reconsidered* (pp. 119-134). Skopje: UACS.

Electronic democracy ("e-democracy"): Recommendations CM/Rec (2009)1 and explanatory memorandum. (2009). Council of Europe Publishing.

Government of the Republic of Macedonia. (2005). *National Strategy for Development of Information Society*. Retrieved from http://www.mioa.gov.mk/files/pdf/dokumenti/Strategija_i_Akcionen_Plan.pdf

Law on Local Self-Government of the Republic of Macedonia (1995). *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia* No. 52/95. Retrieved from http://www.urban.org/PDF/mcd_locgov.pdf

Ministry of Information Society - Government of the Republic of Macedonia. (2010). *National Strategy for Development of e-sectors*. Retrieved from http://www.mioa.gov.mk/files/pdf/dokumenti/strategija_e-sodrzini_2.pdf

Ministry of Information Society - Government of the Republic of Macedonia. (2010). *National Strategy for e-Government (2010-2012)*. Retrieved from http://www.mioa.gov.mk/files/pdf/dokumenti/Strategija_za_e-Vlada-05.03.2010.pdf

Ministry of Information Society and Administration - Government of the Republic of Macedonia. (2011). *National Strategy for e-inclusiveness (2011-2014)*. Retrieved from http://www.mioa.gov.mk/files/pdf/dokumenti/Strategija_za_e-vklucvanje.pdf

Ministry of Information Society and Administration - Government of the Republic of Macedonia. (2011). *Report on the introduction of a modern method for public debate: web portal e-democracy*.

Ministry of Transportation – Government of the Republic of Macedonia. (2010). *National Strategy for Digital Communications and Digital Technologies*. Retrieved from http://www.mio.gov.mk/files/pdf/dokumenti/Nacionalna_strategija_za_razvoj_na_elektronski_komunikacii_so_informaticki_tehnologii.pdf

Peart, M. N and Diaz, R, M. (2007). *Comparative Project on Local e-Democracy Initiatives in Europe and North America*. University of Geneva.

Reinasalu, K. (2010). *Handbook on E-democracy*. Epace Theme Publication.

ЗЕЛС. (2010). *Стратегија за Развој на ИКТ 2011-2015*. Retrieved from <http://www.zels.org.mk/Upload/Content/Documents/Izdaniya/Publikacii/MK/Strategija%20na%20ZELS%20IKT%202011-%202015.pdf>

Figures

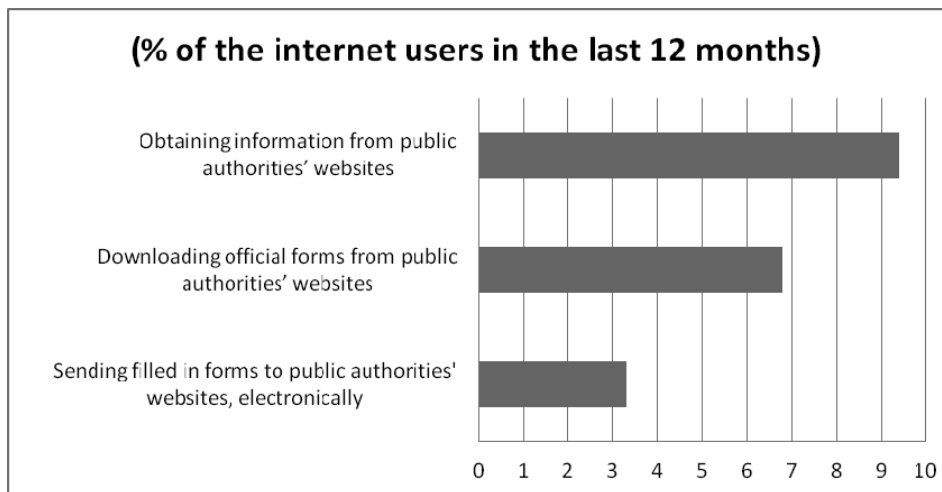


Figure 1a: Using the internet for interacting with the public authorities in the last 12 months (% of the internet users in the last 12 months) (Source: Drzaven zavod za statistika, 2013)

Ganka Cvetanova, Veno Pachovski:

E-democracy Initiatives at the Local Level in the Republic of Macedonia, Estonia and Hungary

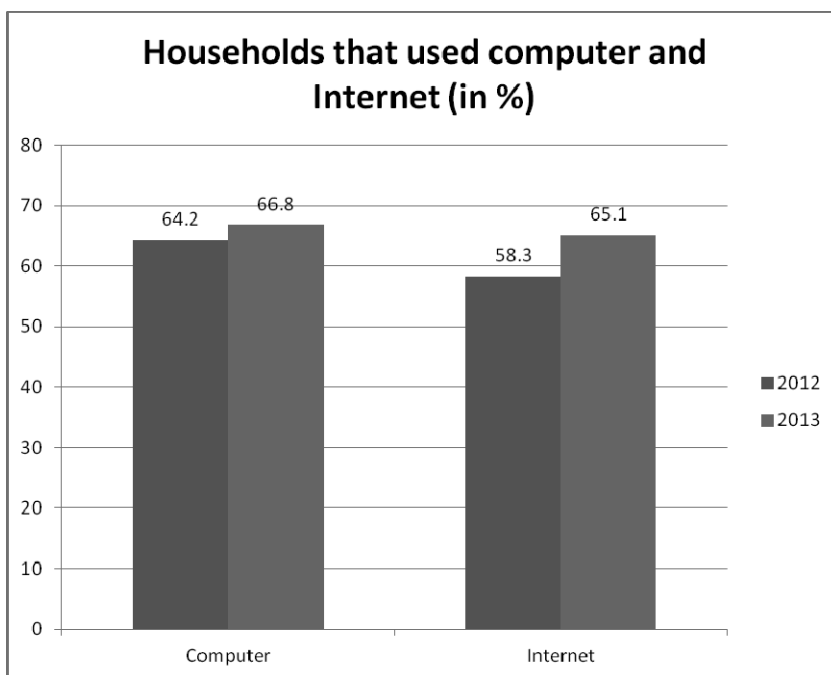
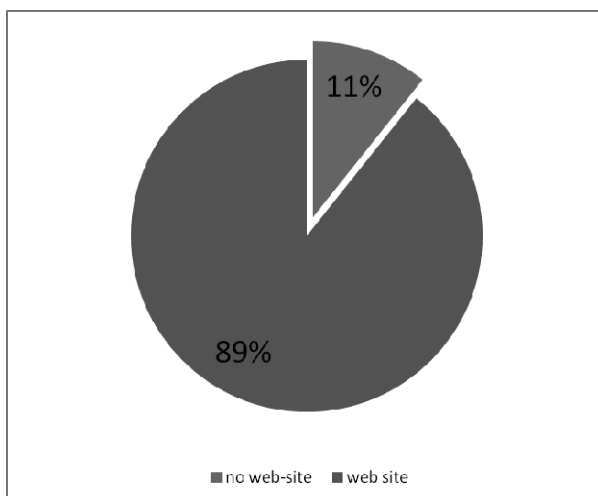


Figure 1b: Using computers and Internet in republic of Macedonia in 2012 and 2013 year (in %) (Source: Drzaven zavod za statistika, 2013)



Pie chart 1. Percentage of existing portals at local level in the Republic of Macedonia

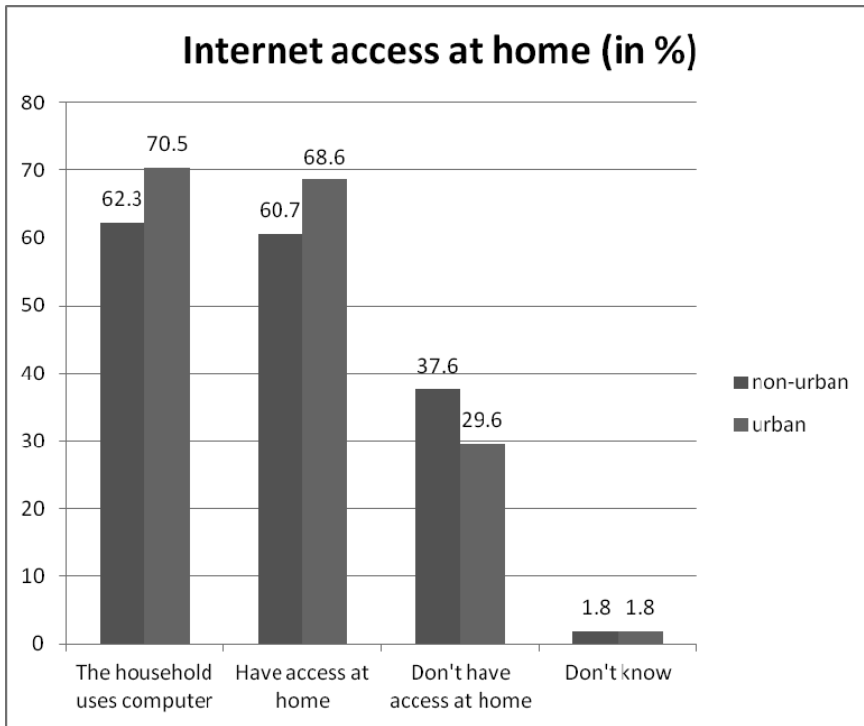


Figure 2: Digital divide between urban and rural areas in Republic of Macedonia (in %) (created using data from Drzaven zavod za statistika, 2013)

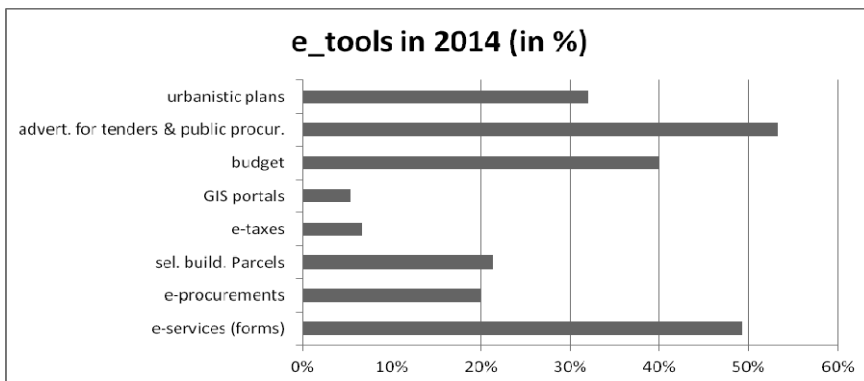


Figure 3: Degree of implementation of various e-tools in web-sites of municipalities in Republic of Macedonia (data last checked on March, 24, 2014) (in %)