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## AICEI PROCEEDINGS

# E-democracy Strategy in the Republic of Macedonia in the Context of E-democracy Strategies in EU Member States

*Ganka Cvetanova, Veno Pachovski*

## Abstract

*E-democracy refers to using new Information and Communication Technologies in order to increase and enhance citizen engagement in democratic processes. Different e-democracy tools provide different levels of citizen involvement, such as: informative, consultative and cooperative public participation. This paper will evaluate the e-democracy strategy and levels of citizen involvement in the Republic of Macedonia while attempting to compare the Macedonian case with e-democracy strategies and citizen involvement that may be found in EU Member States today. The questionnaire used in the EPACE project (Exchanging good practices for the promotion of an active citizenship in the EU) served as a basis for our research and it was distributed to all the ministries within the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, focusing on the following issues: strategies related to e-democracy and their main objectives; and, e-participation tools and projects for the future. Relevant officials from the Macedonian Ministry of Information Society and Administration were contacted for more detailed information about strategy and cases. In order to gain an insight into e-democracy at a local level, we analyzed the web portals of local governments, with a special emphasis on the e-tools used. As the findings suggest, both EU Member States and the Republic of Macedonia have a document which can be considered as part of a National Strategy which refers to the development of an Information Society as a whole whilst paying only modest attention to e-democracy.*

*In contrast to the EU Member States, where more or less all three levels of citizen involvement are present, the findings in the Republic of Macedonia suggest that only citizen involvement at an information and consultation level is currently in existence. Further research on this topic should be undertaken in order to investigate the extent to which the applied e-tools in the Republic of Macedonia provide communication and feedback in both directions.*

*Keywords: e-democracy, e-tools, e-democracy strategy, levels of citizen involvement, Republic of Macedonia, EU Member States.*

## Introduction

Democracy is a form of government in which power is held directly or indirectly by citizens under a free electoral system. Yet, in political theory, democracy is described both as a form of government and a political philosophy.  Even though there is no universally accepted definition of 'democracy', there are two principles that any definition of democracy must include. The first principle is that all members of society (citizens) have an equal access to power and the second that all members (citizens) enjoy universally recognized freedoms and liberties. In some countries, democracy is based on the philosophical principle of equal rights. The term "democracy" is also used as a shorthand for liberal democracy, which may include additional elements such as political pluralism, equality before the law, the right to petition elected officials for redress of grievances, civil liberties, human rights, and elements of civil society outside the government. However, political theory highlights three pillars that underpin democracy: transparency, accountability and the right to participate.

E-democracy, as stated in the Recommendation on e-democracy, adopted by the Council of Europe (CoE Recommendations in text) in February 2009, is nothing more than the support and enhancement of democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes by means of technology. This document presents a set of principles and guidelines on e-democracy. According to this document, e-democracy

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concerns all sectors of democracy, all democratic institutions, and all levels of government. Hence, e-democracy cannot be isolated from traditional democratic processes. It is additional, complementary to, and interlinked with traditional democratic processes, so as to widen the choices available to the public for taking part in political processes. The CoE Recommendations underline the main goals of e-democracy which are similar to those of good governance, such as: transparency, accountability, responsiveness, engagement, deliberation, inclusiveness, accessibility, participation, subsidiarity, trust in democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes, and social cohesion.

According to Caldow (2004: 1) e-democracy has both a tactical side and a strategic side:

> On the tactical side, information technology has advanced communication and the access to information arguably better than any known medium.  But, the underlying core principle of democracy is an informed and engaged citizenry. Most governments get passing marks for "informing" citizens via digital communication. But the vast majority has a long way to go to "actively engage" citizens or to effectively exert global influence using digital media. These elements comprise the most overlooked dimension of e-democracy – the strategic side.

Reinsalu (2010) points out that e-participation is a necessary component or even, more precisely, a prerequisite of e-democracy. It refers to the means of ICT-supported participation in processes concerning a raft of areas such as: administration, policy making, decision making, service delivery, information provision, consultation, and deliberation.

According to Mahrer and Krimmer (2005) e-democracy is not only about technology (and involves both so-called e-participation and e-voting) but also impacts every aspect of an organization involved. In addition, it captures the behavior of members of society (citizens, lobbies and opinion leaders), the media (media, agencies and market researchers) when interacting with, and attitudes towards, government agencies and representatives.

E-democracy can also be considered as a set of tools i.e. applications by means of which the goals of democracy can be achieved, in other words to improve the connectivity (information-communication) between government, stakeholders and citizens, raising engagement and participation in democratic processes. Some of the most commonly used e-democracy tools are the following: e-discussion, e-consultation, e-initiative, e-petition, e-polls, e-voting, and webcasts. Different e-democracy tools provide different levels of citizen involvement. The levels of involvement can be categorized as: information (informative public participation), consultation (consultative public participation) and cooperation (cooperative public participation).

In this study we evaluate the e-democracy strategy and levels of citizen involvement in the Republic of Macedonia while attempting to compare with the e-democracy strategies and levels of involvement in the EU Member States, presented in the publication *Handbook on E-democracy*. This Handbook was published within a framework of the EPACE project, which was produced with the financial support of the European Commission's Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Programme (2007–2013). The project partners include the Ministry of Justice in Finland (coordinator), the State Chancellery of the Republic of Estonia and the Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality in Sweden. The questionnaires were distributed to the central governments of all EU Member States, plus Norway and Switzerland, and the response rate was 63 %. These EPACE questionnaires served as a basis for our research, and for the purposes of this study, we have asked for the following information:

• Information about strategies related to e-democracy/e-participation and their main objectives

• Information about e-participation tools (The respondents were given a long list of e-tools where they could mark all e-tools used in our country. In the interest of common understanding, a short definition for each tool was presented below the list)

• Information about projects or guidelines for the future.

Relevant officials and experts from the Ministry of Information Society and the Administration in the Government of the Republic of Macedonia were contacted for more detailed information about strategy and cases. In order to gain an insight into e-democracy on a

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local level, we analyzed the web portals of local governments, placing a special emphasis on the e-tools used.


## The EPACE Project

The main objective of this project was to elaborate and exchange good citizen participation practices in order to increase and promote participatory opportunities within the European Union member states. The following aspects of e-democracy were the analysis of subject matter in this project referring to: strategic policy planning, the administration of e-democracy and e-participation.

**E-democracy Strategies.** As stated in the CoE Recommendations, when introducing, implementing and reviewing e-democracy, it is important to ensure that e-democracy 'is embedded in balanced, citizen-oriented rules and regulatory frameworks, including regulations adopted by public authorities, co-regulation and self-regulation.' For the purposes of the EPACE project the questionnaires were distributed to all EU member states, and based on the answers it was found that 71% of the respondent countries have a document which can be considered more or less as a National Strategy.

According to the collected answers from the questionnaires, strategic documents featuring e-democracy in EU Member States were divided as follows: a) E-democracy as part of the Information Society Strategy (Estonia); b) E-Government strategy with some elements of e-democracy and e-Inclusion Strategy (Hungary, Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia); c) Special policy document for e-democracy, Whitepapers (Austria); d) Regional or local strategies (Italy, Spain, Switzerland); e) Strategies based on the CoE Recommendations, still in process, envisaged for 2010 – (Denmark, Sweden).

The study showed that strategic planning practices vary considerably from state to state. That those strategies are primarily national e-Gov strategies and e-democracy is listed as just one component among many within these strategies (for example, in Switzerland one part of the national e-Gov strategy is dedicated to citizens-public communication). Mostly, the strategies are very general, being the Information Society as a whole, and pay only modest attention to

e-democracy. However, the Estonian Information Society strategy 2013 cites citizen participation as one of its long-term goals. Many member states note that they are planning to implement a special strategy based on the CoE Recommendations in the near future (such as Sweden and Denmark).

**Levels of involvement.** In the *Handbook on e-democracy* (2010), depending on the level of citizen involvement provided by different e-tools, three categories of levels were distinguished: Information (informative public participation) – Participants receive information about planning or decisions that have been taken. However, they do not have any influence on these matters. Communication is only one-way, namely from the planning or decision making bodies to the public. Consultation (consultative public participation) – Participants can give their comments on a question asked or a draft presented. They can thereby influence the decision, even though the extent of influence may differ considerably. Communication is in both directions, from the planning or decision-making body to the public and from the public back to the planning or decision-making body, as well as, under certain circumstances, once again back to the public; for example, if the comments received are answered. Cooperation (cooperative public participation) – Participants have a say in the decisions, for example at Round Table meetings, in mediation procedures or in stakeholder processes. The degree of influence is high and may include common decision-making with the political decision-making bodies. Planning or decision-making bodies and the public communicate intensively with each other. The cases at this level should demonstrate that the contribution from citizens, guaranteed through activities at two levels of involvement, has real consequences. Not only can citizens express their opinions, they can vote for them and the voice of the majority can constitute a real proposal for changes to a legislative act.

As this study clearly demonstrated, the most commonly used e-tools (e-consultation – 94%, e-discussions – 88% and webcasts – 82%), are those that provide the consultation level of involvement (Figure 1). E-voting, as an e-tool that provides a level of cooperation, is represented by 47%, which can be considered a significant level of application. According to Reinsalu (2010), many countries state that in their strategic documents on e-elections (national or regional) e-elections will be one

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of the main future activities for extending e-democracy (examples include Norway – a pilot for e-voting is planned for the 2011 municipal and country elections – and Switzerland). This is inspite of the fact that e-elections cannot be considered as the pure practice of e-democracy, since there has been too little research into e-voting to draw definitive conclusions in terms of its actual influence. Many countries have stated in their strategic documents that e-elections (national or regional) will be one of the main future activities for extending e-democracy. For other sample cases – the level of citizen involvement, the tools used and institutional levels - see Table 1.

## E-democracy in the Republic of Macedonia

The Republic of Macedonia is a relatively young democratic country, gaining its independence in the so-called 'third wave of democracy', that is in the year 1991 following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The discussions concerning the relevance and significance of democracy, as a precondition for the global development of society, represent an integral part of the current political and academic debates 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.

**E-democracy Strategy.** The National Strategy for the Development of an Information Society was the first strategic document to address 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 an information society as a whole, with special emphasis on the following aspects: infrastructure, e-business, e-citizens, e-education, e-healthcare and legislation. In 2008 a Ministry of Information Society was established within the Government of the Republic of Macedonia. This ministry became responsible for the development of the information society as a whole, for creating and drafting policy papers, and for the coordination of the activities related to digital skills and services. Later on, the name of the ministry was changed to the Ministry of Information Society and Administration.

In the last few years several Strategies were drafted in the Republic of Macedonia: the National Strategy for Digital Communications and Digital Technologies; the National Strategy for Development of e-sectors (2010); the National Strategy for e-Government (2010-2012) and the National Strategy for e-inclusiveness (2011-2014). All of these strategies are very general, concerning the Information Society as a whole, such as: physical access to the Internet, 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 in 2011. As stated in the document drafted by this ministry, introducing the e-democracy web portal should be understood as a kind of continuity and modern method of public debate. This web portal solution should provide a simple and easily accessible way for citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, to give their opinion both about draft documents of the Government and adopted laws and be actively involved in decision making. In accordance with European standards, the portal solution has been designed in an open program code strengthening trust and transparency in institutions and the rule of law. The designing process of this portal solution was based on the CoE Recommendations, adopted in 2009 by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers.

The web portal covers various activities, documents and initiatives from the following sectors of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia: ICT, administrative reform, education and science, finance, economics the interior, foreign affairs, justice, defense, the Ohrid Framework Agreement, trade, tourism, healthcare, social welfare, environment, local-self-government, culture, and agriculture. Macedonian citizens can exercise their democratic rights to participate in the democratic processes in the country by using the implemented (at this portal) e-tools: e-forums, e-initiative, e-polls and blogs.

**Levels of Involvement.** In order to determine the level of citizen involvement in the Republic of Macedonia, the questionnaires were distributed to all the Macedonian ministries within the Government. The response rate was 50%. The findings, based on collected answers show that the most commonly used e-tools on their web portals are e-consultations (80%), feedback (70%), e-initiative (50%) and

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e-complaints (50%) (see Figure 2). Particular e-tools, such as e-petitions, e-budgeting, webcasts and e-voting, are not applied at all.

According to data from Figure 3, only two ministries' web portals use 50% of all listed e-tools in the questionaire and shown in Figure 2.

The overall results from the collected answers indicate that there is no cooperation level of citizen involvment at a central governmental level. Further on, according to the Ministry officials and experts, the application of e-polls, e-services and e-taxes were reported as one of the main future activities for extending e-democracy.

**Local e-democracy.** The development of democracy at a local level is of significant importance for the development of the overall democratic processes within society. In this sense and in order to facilitate, improve and ultimately extend the exercise of democracy as well as to provide accountability, transparency and participation at a local level, local democracy should be supported and enhanced by the means of the tools of digital information technology.

Furthermore, in accordance with the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the official language throughout Macedonia and in Macedonia's international relations 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. Subsequently, these principles should be applied accordingly on the municipalities' web portals.

In the Republic of Macedonia there are 83 local government units plus the City of Skopje. As shown in Pie chart 1, 29% of the local units do not have a web portal or they do not function.

The analysis of the portals (71%) demonstrates that there is a wide range of e-tools that are not listed in the questionaire. These tools, such as e-forms, e-applications for urban planning, or e-advertisment for tenders & public procurement, are categorized as e-services tools. Bearing in mind that one of the main tasks of local government is to meet the citizens' needs at a local level, then the significant level of their representation becomes quite clear and understandible (see Figure

4). On the other hand, many of the listed e-tools in the questionnaire (e-petitions, e-consultation, feedback etc) are not applied at all.

The study indicates that on both levels, central government and local, the applied e-tools provide only information and consultation level of citizen involvement. Particular e-tools, such as e-petitions, e-budgeting, webcasts and e-voting, are not used at all. In contrast to these findings the Epace project clearly demonstrated a significant level of application of the same e-tools: webcasts (82%), e-petitions (53%), e-voting (47%) and e-budgeting (29%).

**Study limitations.** To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study addressing the issue of e-democracy with a special emphasis on the level of citizen involvement in the Republic of Macedonia. In this sense, the study has some limitations. A major limitation is the fact that we only did mapping of the e-tools used on the official web portals of the ministries and local government units. We did not gain any insight into the functionality of those e-tools that are supposed to provide a consultation level of involvement. In other words, the extent of the communication and feedback provided in both directions, from the planning or decision-making body to the public and from the public back to the planning or decision-making body, was not measured. Also, we did not analyze the linguistic aspect of the web portals at a local level which should be in line with the Ohrid Framework Agreement regarding language issues.


## Conclusion

This study has evaluated the position of the Republic of Macedonia regarding e-democracy strategy and levels of citizen involvement in the context of strategies and levels of citizen involvement among the EU Member States.

As the findings of the EPACE project suggest, the vast majority of EU Member States possess a document that can be considered as a National Strategy. In the Republic of Macedonia there is also a document which can be considered as a National Strategy. In both cases, these strategies refer to the development of the Information Society as a whole, paying modest attention to e-democracy. In contrast to the EU

Member States, where more or less all three levels of citizen involvement are present, the findings in the Republic of Macedonia suggest that only the information and consultation levels exist.

The empirical findings in this study enhance our understanding of the importance of e-democracy as a precondition for the development of democratic processes and democratic institutions within society. Also, these findings provide a profound understanding of the relationship between different e-tools and levels of citizen involvement.

An issue that was not addressed in this study is whether e-tools used and listed in the answered questionnaires provide real communication and feedback in both directions, in other words- at the consultation level of citizen involvement in the Republic of Macedonia.

However, further research on this topic should be undertaken in order to investigate the functionality of the applied e-tools, in other words, the extent to which communication and feedback is provided in both directions, from the planning or decision-making bodies to the public and from the public back to the planning or decision-making bodies in the Republic of Macedonia.


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# Tables

Table 1.
Sample cases – level of citizen involvement, tools used and institutional level

| Levels of involvement | Case | e-tools used | institutional level |
|---|---|---|---|
| Information | Case 1: Austrian participation portal | e-information | national |
| | Case 2. Latvian Public policy website | e-information | national |
| Consultation | Case 1: Austrian Wahlkabinet.at | e-initiative, e-discussions, feedback, e-consultations, e-polls | national |
| | Case 2: Finnish Discussion Forum Otakantaa.fi | e-information, e-discussions, e-consultation | national |
| | Case 3: Danish Odder Nettet | e-information, e-discussions, e-consultation | local |
| Cooperation | Case 1: TOM in Estonia | e-consultation, e-initiative, e-voting | national |
| | Case 2: Estonian Portal osale.ee | e-participation, e-discussions, feedback, e-consultation | national |
| | Case 3: ROSTRA in Denmark | e-participation, e-discussions, e-voting, feedback, e-consultation | national |
| | Case 4: Interactive City Council (Issy-les-Moulinex) in France | e-participation, e-discussions, e-voting, feedback, e-consultation | local |
| | Case 5: Spanish Madrid Participa | e-participation, e-discussions, e-voting, feedback, e-consultation | local |

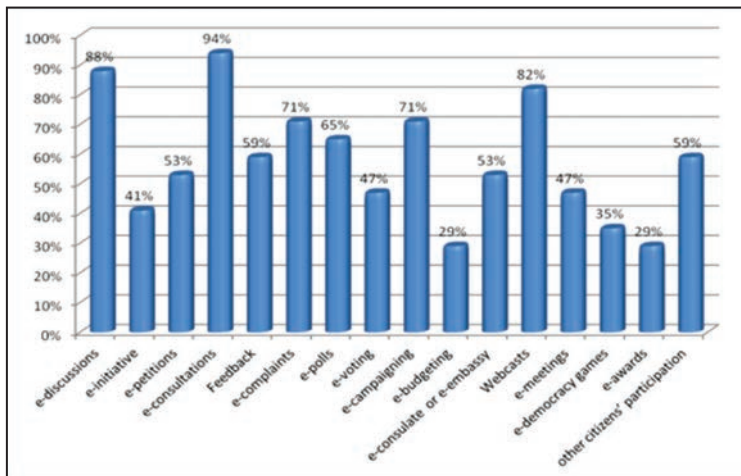Source: Handbook on e-democracy

# Figures



Figure 1: Use of different e-tools in EU Member States based on information collected from questionnaires (Source: Handbook on e-democracy, 2010)
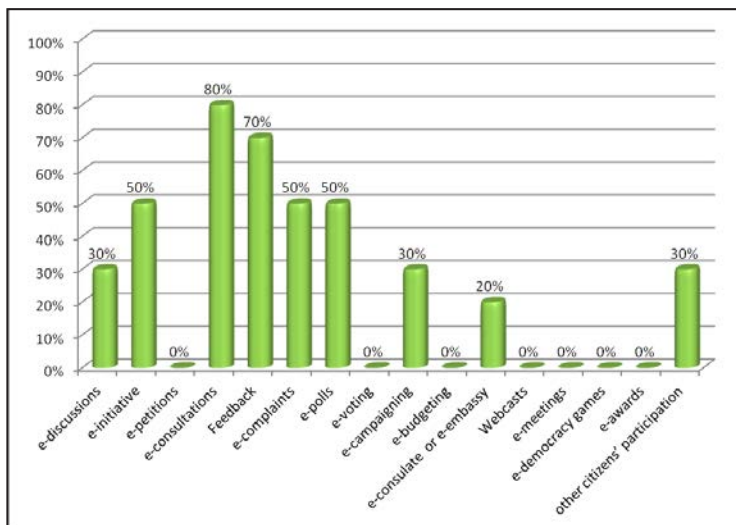


Figure 2. Use of different e-tools from the Macedonian ministries' web portals based on information collected from questionnaires
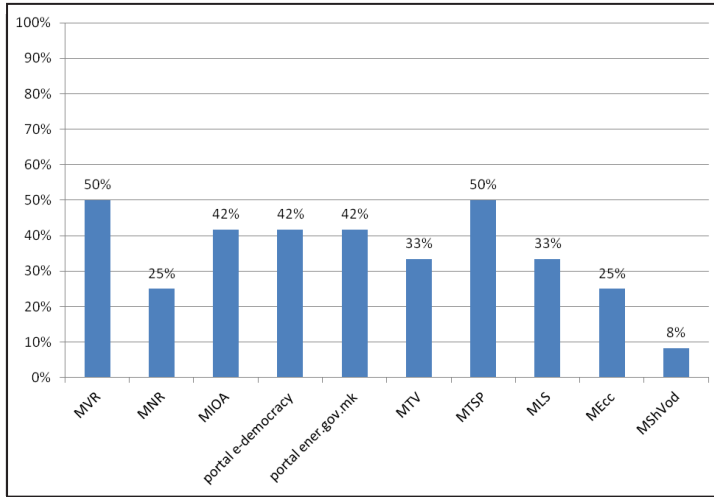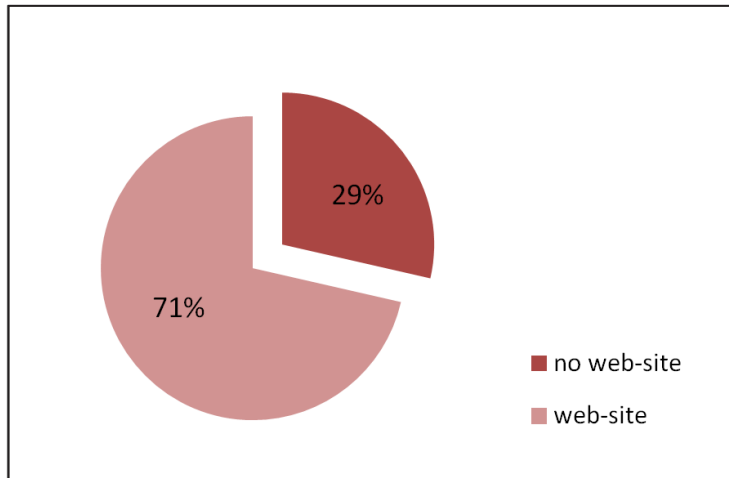
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Figure 3: Use of e-tools in the Macedonian ministries' portals listed in the questionnaire



Pie chart 1. Percentage of existing portals at local level in the Republic of Macedonia
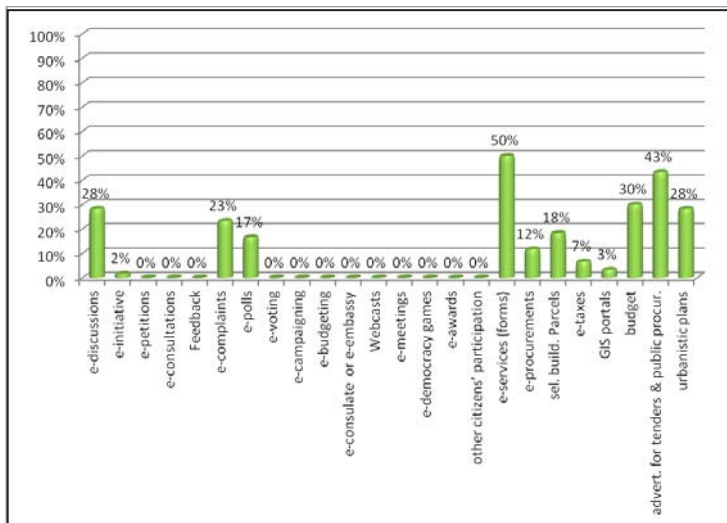
Figure 4: Use of different e-tools on the local units' portals in the Republic of Macedonia
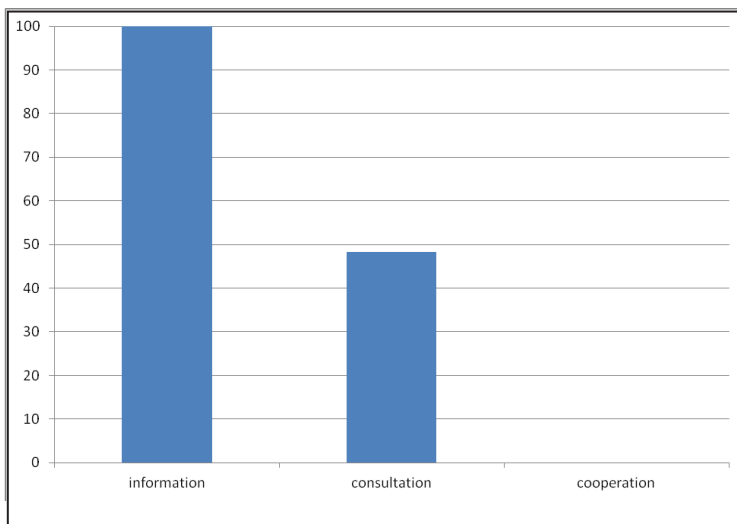


Figure 5: Levels of involvement at local level in the Republic of Macedonia