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E-DEMOCRACY AND LEVELS OF CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Abstract

The paper evaluates three different levels of citizen involvement in the e-democracy process in the Republic of Macedonia, such as: informative public participation, consultative public participation and cooperative public participation level. The questionnaire used in EPACE project *(Exchanging good practices for the promotion of an active citizenship in the EU)* served as a basis for our research.

The questionnaire was distributed to all the ministries within the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, focusing on e-democracy tools that provide different levels of citizen involvement. Relevant officials/experts from the Ministries in the Government of

the Republic of Macedonia were contacted for more detailed information.

As the findings suggest, in the Republic of Macedonia only information and consultation level exists, meaning there is still no usage of e-voting.

Further research on this topic should be undertaken in order to investigate to which extent the applied e-tools in the Republic of Macedonia provide communication and feedback in both directions.

Key words: e-democracy, e-tools, levels of citizen involvement, Republic of Macedonia.

INTRODUCTION

According to Webster democracy is defined 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*. Electronic democracy or e-democracy is nothing more then the use of digital tools in order to increase and enhance the tree pillars that underpin democracy, such as: *transparency*, *accountability* and *participation* (citizen engagement in democratic process).

E-democracy is anything that governments do to facilitate greater participation in government using digital or electronic means. These initiatives can include e-forums, e-town hall meetings, e-consultations, e-referenda, e-voting, e-rule making, and other forms of e-participation. We can also term it as any form of 'digital engagement' (Coleman and Norris, 2005:7).

E-democracy, as stated in *Recommendation on e-democracy*, adopted by the Council of Europe (CoE Recommendations in text) in February 2009, 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 underlines 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.

It seems that more and more governments are offering web-forums as a means of replacing the town meeting or the public *agora*. Moreover, it is increasingly common to be able to offer feedback to your elected officials via email, web forms, and 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 and Diaz, 2007).

Reinsalu (2010) points out that the 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 administration, policy making, decision making, service delivery, information provision, consultation, deliberation, etc.

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 the members of the 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, webcast, etc. Different e-democracy tools provide different levels of citizen involvement. According to Reinsalu (2010) the levels of citizen involvement can be categorized as: *information* (informative public participation)[1], *consultation* (consultative public participation)[2] and *cooperation* (cooperative public participation)[3].

The study evaluates three different levels of citizen involvement the Republic of Macedonia, provided on the official websites of the Ministries within the Government of the Republic of Macedonia.

Methodological approach used in EPACE project *(Exchanging good practices for the promotion of an active citizenship in the EU)*[4]served as a basis for our research, which means that the research relies on tripartite typology of e-democracy initiatives in order to provide a framework for classification of the levels of citizens' involvement in the e-democracy practices in the Republic of Macedonia.

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[1] The active provision of comprehensive, balanced and objective information designed to help the public understanding of problems, alternatives, opportunities, and solutions to democratic issues. Participants receive information about the planning or the decision. They do not have any influence on it, however. Communication is only one-way, namely from the planning or decision- making bodies to the public.

[2] 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.

[3] Involvement of citizens and groups of citizens, such as interest groups, corporations, associations, and non-profit organizations, in public affairs, so that they can exert influence and improve the quality and accessibility of the results of democratic processes. 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.

[4] EPACE project *(Exchanging good practices for the promotion of an active citizenship in the EU)* was produced with the financial support of the **European Commission's** Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Programme (2007–2013). 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 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 questionnaire[5] 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; e-participation tools and projects for the future. For the purposes of this study, we asked the following information:

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

- Objectives;
- Information about e-participation tools;
- Information about projects or guidelines for the future.

Relevant officials/experts from the Ministries in the Government of the Republic of Macedonia were contacted for more detailed information about some cases and future activities. Additional check up of every reported e-tool by the respondents was performed.[6]

E-DEMOCRACY IN THE REPUBLIC OF 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 precondition to the global development of society, represent an integral part of the current political and academic debates in the Republic of Macedonia. Although the 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 and Pachovski, 2013).

The *National Strategy for Development of Information Society* was the first strategic document addressing the issues of 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 information society as a whole, for creating and drafting policy papers, and for the coordination of activities related to

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[5] The questionnaire used in EPACE project *(Exchanging good practices for the promotion of an active citizenship in the EU)* served as a basis for our research.
[6] Last check up of the official websites of the Ministries was performed on 15.01.2016.

digital skills and e-services(Cvetanova and Pachovski, 2014).

The concept of e-democracy in Republic of Macedonia was introduced throughout several strategic documents. In 2007 the Parliament adopted the *National Strategy for Electronic Communications with Information Technologies* (2007-2009) that focused both on technological aspects as well as development of e-services.

Democratic and transparent governance through e-democracy is impossible to be implemented unless the institutions are ready for such changes. Putting e-democracy in practice requires fundamental transformation of the public systems. This is a globally unique challenge, taking into consideration the fact that the final conclusion of many analyses implies the following gradation: when introducing a novelty, individuals adjust most easily, next in line are the businesses and the last one to adjust is the public sector (Bojadzievska, 2015). In this respect, the *National Strategy for e-government* (2010-2012) was adopted, as a sector specific and project strategic document. Another important strategic document ensuring citizen's engagement was the *National Strategy for e-inclusiveness* (2011-2014).

Yet, the success of implementation is dependent on the human capacities and knowledge of the employees in the public sector i.e. the civil service. Thereby, ICT aspects were always included in the strategic documents for administration, such as the *Strategy for Public Administration Reform* (2010-2015) with the *Revised Action Plan* (2010-2015). Human capacity and knowledge is not left behind even in the latest-to-date strategic documents such as *National Short-term ICT strategy* (2016-2017) and the *Action Plan*.


RESEARCH

For the purpose of our research a questionnaire was distributed to all the Ministries within the Government of the Republic of Macedonia. The questionnaire served as basis to elucidate whether the institutions in Republic of Macedonia are resistant to such changes or they managed to adjust to the challenges of e-democracy.

The questionnaire contained a list of 13 e-tools. The officials in the Ministries mark each implemented e-tool, as well as any other additional webpages for some particular information or service posted on the official webpages on the Ministry where they work. In the interest of common understanding, a short definition for each e-tool was presented below the list. Also, relevant officials from the Ministries were contacted for more detailed information about e-democracy strategy, some particular cases, projects or guidelines for the future.

The findings based on collected answers show that from all the 15 Ministries, the Ministry of Information Society and Administration (MISA) and the Ministry of Health (MH) lead in implementation of e-tools (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: E-tools used per Ministry
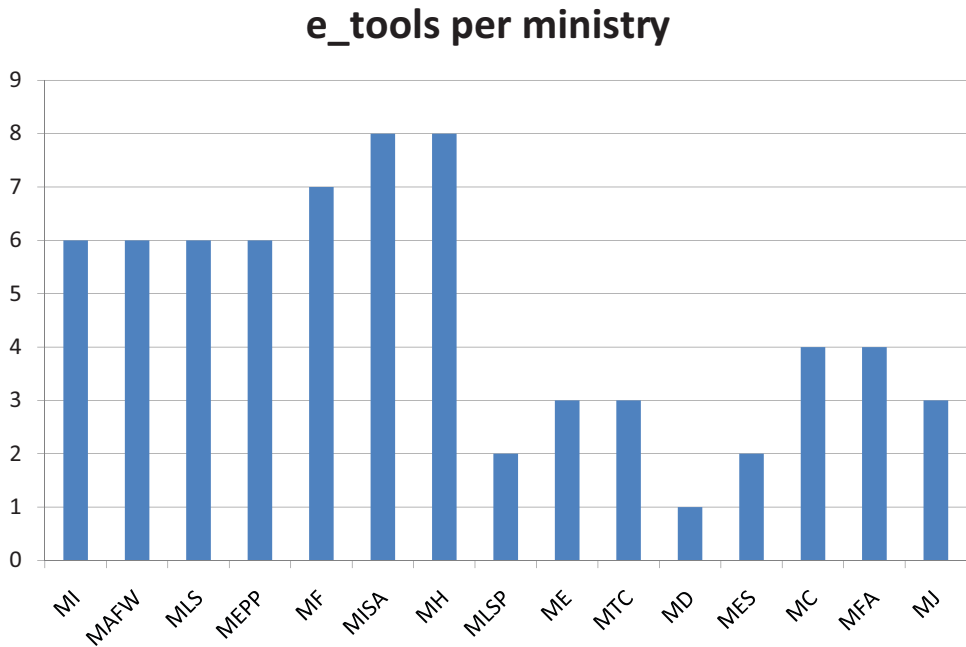
As shown in the Figure 1, the Ministry of Information Society (MISA) and the Ministry of Health (MH) implemented 8 from 13 e-tools listed in the questionaire, followed by Ministry of Finance (MF) and Ministry of Interior with 7 implemented e-tools. Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water-management (MAFW), Ministry of Local Self-Government (MLS) and Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning (MEPP) implemented 6 e-tools; Ministry of Culture (MC) and Ministry of Forign Afffairsimplemented 4 e-tools; Ministry of Economy (ME), Ministry of Transport and Communaciotns and Ministry of Justice (MJ) - 3 e-tools; Ministry of Labour and Social Politics (MLSP) and Ministry of Education and Science (MES) – 2 e-tools and Ministry of Defence (MD) implemented only 1 e-tool.

The findings suggest that the most commonly implemented e-tool is e-service with 87%, followed by e-campaign and e-forms with 73% (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Implemented e-tools on Ministries' official websites*
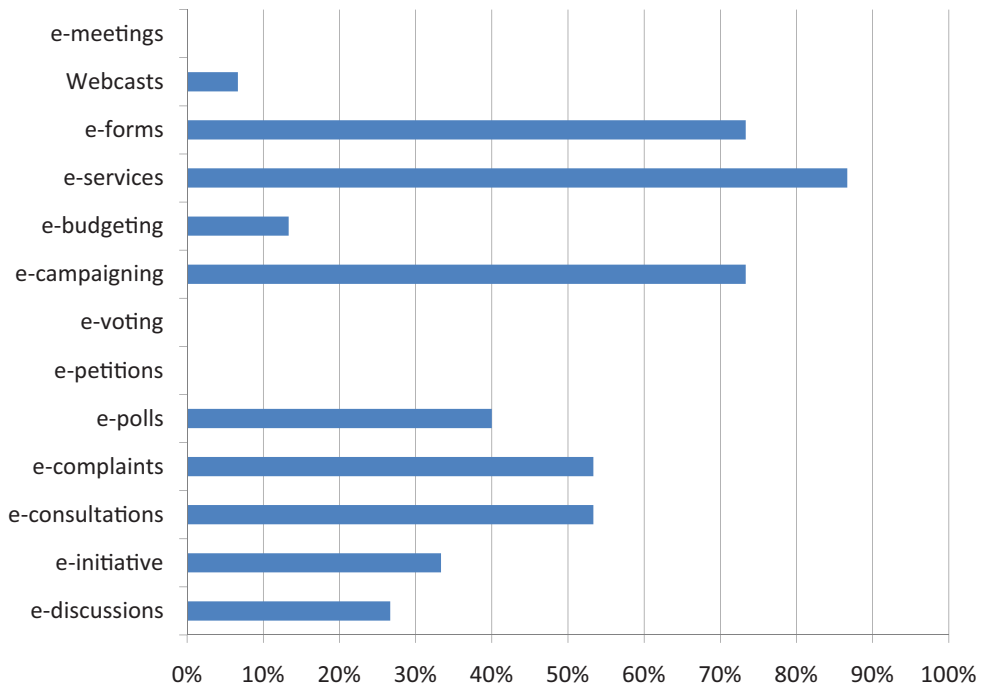
For example, at the Ministry of Interior there are possibilities for reporting a crime or abuse, than lost and found objects, reporting a place of temporary housing, scheduling a term for issuing personal document (ID or passport, as well as driving license).

Furthermore, in the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Economy there are possibilities for e-auction. Public announcements are available on most of the Ministries' official websites. All of these possibilities can be categorized as e-services.

The only two cases where the e-tool Webcast is implemented is on the web sites of the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Interior whereby the webcast is used to provide for monitoring and transparency when taking certain exams (such as the bar exam, the driving license exam etc.).

Some of the listed e-tools on the questionnaire, such as e-meeting, e-voting and e-petitions are not implemented at all which means that there is no cooperation level of citizen involvment on central government level.

The overall results from the collected answers indicate that only informative and consultation level exists on the Ministries' official websites.

The officials in the ministries were asked to report any future activities for developing e-democracy processes. Application of e-polls, e-forums, as well as

establishing Facebook and Twitter profiles, were reported as one of the main future activities for extending e-democracy.

The officials also reported in the questionnaire that the citizens still prefer traditional way of communications with the administration, with the exception to the younger generation. They also noted that citizens use e-tools mostly to obtain information and less to participate in the processes.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The study has some limitations such as an issue that was not addressed i.e. whether e-tools used and listed in the answered questionnaire provide real communication and feedback in both directions (consultation level of citizen involvement) in the Republic of Macedonia. In other words, the extent of provided communication and feedback in both directions was not measured.

Another limitation in this study is the fact that we only did mapping of the e-tools used on the Ministries' official websites. We did not map the e-tools used on the additional websites.

CONCLUSIONS

This study evaluated the levels of citizen involvement on central governmental level in the Republic of Macedonia in terms of e-democracy process. To determine the levels of citizen involvement in the process of e-democracy, we used the typology presented in EPACE Project. According to this typology, there are three levels of citizen involvement: informative public participation, consultative public participation and cooperative public participation level.

For the purpose of our research, we analyzed the official websites of the Ministries in the Government of the Republic of Macedonia.

As the findings in this study suggest, the applied e-tools provide only information and consultation level of citizen involvement which means that particular e-tools, such as e-petitions and e-voting are not used at all.

The findings based on collected answers indicated that from all the 15 Ministries, the Ministry of Information Society and Administration (MISA) and the Ministry of Health (MH) lead in implementation of e-tools.

The research also revealed that the most commonly implemented e-tool on the official Ministries' websites is the e-tool called e-service, followed by e-campaign and e-forms.

The only two cases where the e-tool Webcast is implemented is on the websites of the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Interior.

According to the findings based on collected answers the citizens still prefer traditional way of communications with the administration. The officials reported that the citizens use e-tools mostly to obtain information and less to participate in the processes.

Applications of e-polls, e-forums as well as establishing Facebook and Twitter profiles were reported as one of the main future activities for extending e-democracy.

The empirical findings in this study enhance our understanding of the importance of e-democracy as a precondition for development of the democratic processes and democratic institutions within the 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 questionnaire provide real communication and feedback in both directions, in other word - consultation level of citizen involvement in the Republic of Macedonia.

However, there is a little evidence that these initiatives have done much to ameliorate aforementioned problems that the country is still facing, such as: weak democratic institutions, low level of trust in the governments and low level of citizens' participation in democratic processes using ICT as intermediary.

Further research on this topic should be undertaken in order to investigate the factors of insufficient usage of e-tools as means of e-participation, the uneven application of e-tools among the ministries, as well as the absence of e-democratic approach of some ministries.

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