NEW FORMS OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AT LOCAL LEVEL: eCITIZENS?

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The rapid development and diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICT) provides various political and administrative institutions with new opportunities for civil political action. There are new tools, channels and methods, which can be utilised both in order to transform closed representative democracy systems into more open and communicative ones and to facilitate new forms of authentic civil political action - participatory democracy. The theoretical concepts of paper are participatory democracy and eParticipation, which are placed in the eGovernance framework. Based on empirical data, author wants to answer the research questions whether there are adequate tools for eParticipation available to Slovenian citizens at local level of government and if the concept of »eCitizens« can also be applied in Slovenian case. In context of Slovenians' familiarity and qualification of ICT on one hand and with further information, dissemination and especially establishment of e-tools for active participation on the other hand, author concludes that the concept of eCitizens has good future opportunities to develop in Slovenia.

Key words: eGovernance; participatory democracy; eParticipation; eCitizens; Slovenia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Our world has been in a process of structural transformation for over two decades. This process is multidimensional, but it is associated with the emergence of a new technological paradigm, based on information and communication technologies (ICT), that took shape in the 1970s and diffused unevenly around the world. Svete conceptualized ICT as a general term that describes any technology that helps produce, manipulate, store, communicate and/or disseminate information (Svete 2008, 79). Society shapes technology according to the needs, values, and interests of people who use the technology. It can be argued that nowadays wealth, power, and knowledge generation are largely dependent on the ability to organize society to reap the benefits of the

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new technological system, rooted in microelectronics, computing, and digital communication, with its growing connection to the biological revolution and its derivative, genetic engineering. Castells conceptualized as "network society" the social structure resulting from the interaction between the new technological paradigm and social organization at large (Castells 2005, 3).

Active penetration of ICT into all spheres of social life is a prominent feature of (post)modern information society (Keskinen 1999). In this new age, communication technologies are more than ever playing a central role (Ramonet 1997, 483). The rapid development and diffusion of ICT provides various political and administrative institutions with new opportunities for civil political action, so the public sector is at present undoubtedly the decisive actor to develop and shape the network society. There are new tools, channels and methods which can be utilised both in order to transform closed representative democracy systems into more open and communicative ones and to facilitate new forms of authentic civil political action - participatory democracy (Malina 2003; Hoff et al. 2000). But - as Barber (1984) argues - strong participatory democracy will not develop through civil education and knowledge, strong democracy will arise when people are given political power and channels of influence. Therefore ICT is defined as a tool that both already had, but is gaining an even more important role in the process of the reformulation and redefinition of the modern liberal democracies and it is often (in conjunction with eParticipation) offered as a solution for the democratic deficit. Participation has become a highly political issue over the last few years, and eParticipation (via ICT) is seen as a major factor in this development. In general, the e-democracy discourse is marked by two grand promises: free access for citizens to public information and open discursive deliberation on the Internet. Furthermore, a few years ago the new concept of eCitizen emerged. eCitizen is a term used to describe a person who has knowledge of computer technology and especially the Internet. Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal (2008) define digital citizens as those who use the Internet regularly and effectively. In other words, eCitizen refers to a person utilizing ICT in order to engage in society, politics and government participation.

The paper puts a special emphasis upon institutionally organised citizen participation via Internet and the role of information and knowledge in political action. In the paper we analyse how the practices of inclusive governance are based on the ideas given by participatory democracy theory and how easily accessible information influences citizens' political deliberation. Methodologically the paper assesses the Slovenian municipalities' website's interactive democracy practices. Democratic theory that contains views about political participation of citizens is combined with research data acquired from the official websites of Slovenian municipalities and from a survey of local level leaders of the Slovenian executive. Firstly, the official websites of all Slovenian municipalities were analysed, to ascertain whether and to what extent Slovenian municipalities offer various tools of eParticipation to their citizens. Secondly, we analyse opinions of Slovenian mayors about the most useful instruments of communicating with local inhabitants; to find out if the decision-makers see online communication as a useful tool to stimulate citizen participation. Using a theoretical-empirical approach, the consequences of the Internet in relation to participatory democracy were studied. Our key theoretical concepts are participatory democracy and eParticipation, which are placed in the eGovernance framework. Based on the findings of the study, the paper provides insights into tools for eParticipation available to Slovenian citizens at the local level of government and the degree to which the concept of "eCitizens" can be applied in Slovenian case.

2 FRAMEWORK OF eGOVERNANCE: ePARTICIPATION – A DEMAND OF MODERN LOCAL POLITICS?

eGovernance is a broader concept than eGovernment because it includes citizen participation and political decision-making. It is approached as an integrative and rhetorical concept for several e-oriented methods for communicative governing and among the main foundations of eGovernance is the ensuring of universal access to data, information and knowledge for citizens (Coleman and Gøtze 2001). The eGovernance approach with its interactive decision-making approach strives and argues for new practices and models that are expected to complement and reform the representative democracy to better suit the modern needs of rapidly moving and changing societies (Coleman and Gøtze 2001; Häyhtiö and Keskinen 2005).

During recent decades, ideas and practices of political mobilisation, participation and the various modes of political involvement and activity have constantly occurred. Political governance rhetoric has to be understood as a response to the constantly and steadily declining turnouts in various elections, the citizen's widespread displacement and alienation from partisan politics and also their decreasing participation in the activities of institutional political parties. From governance view, democracy is not a stable phenomenon, but rather a dynamic process. In practice, governance in political systems has to be based on complex communicative and interactive practices. Furthermore, in the democracy paradigm, taking people "in" and the generation of new modes of governance, emphases more equal, lateral and interactive relationships like mediation, recognition of interdependencies, and networking in democratic practices (Häyhtiö and Keskinen 2005). eGovernance modes deal with the impact of newly formed computer-mediated communication devices in respect of democracy and democratic governance and from this perspective ICT introduces communicative tools for the rearrangement of the party and administration dominated participation. In addition, the eGovernance addresses several promises relating to customer orientation, citizens' empowerment, opening up participation channels and the creation of multiple partnership relations.

eParticipation is the central core of eGovernance because in this sphere, the democratic contribution of ICT is most obvious – new technologies bring to the decision-making processes tremendous opportunities for collaboration, participation and co-decision-making of citizens. eParticipation refers to all forms of active civic involvement and technology-based communications, whether it be just giving views and opinions, interactive participation in the preparation of proposals or even equal (co)deciding (Pičman Štefančič 2008, 43). eParticipation is seen by so many political agents as a saviour of the increasingly larger issue of the democratic deficit at all levels of the political system. Nevertheless, the reality of eParticipation is somewhat different, because it is not a definitive solution for the low political participation of citizens. Participation possibilities are also dependent on the willingness of citizens to use the possibilities ICT offers for their active participation and to become better-informed voters and actors in social life. Certainly, eParticipation as one of the (most) important aspects of e-democracy can help in tackling some of the key problems of the democratic deficit in representative democracies. eParticipation involves collaboration and co-decision-making of citizens in the process of making policies in political parties and civil society organizations, in the oversight of elected representatives, in the process of

accepting policy and in the legislative process (E-Envoy 2002, 23). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has developed a three-stage model of eParticipation or involvement of citizens in political decision-making. First stage is *information* - a one-way relationship between the state and its citizens, in which they actively and passively acquire information, which is a base and a prerequisite for political participation (for example, the official website). Second stage is *consultation* - a two-way relationship between the state and its citizens, in which the state obtains feedback regarding citizens' opinions. The state defines the problem and wants people's opinions (e.g. online consultations on legislative proposals). And the third stage is *active participation* - a partnership between the state and its citizens, where citizens are actively involved in shaping public policy and decision-making about such policies. Although the final decision is always taken by the state, a citizen in this relationship is recognized as a major player in the field of initiating, designing and making decisions about public policies (e.g. referendum) (Coleman and Gøtze 2001, 13). Similar division can be found in the description of eParticipation tools, where the most often used classification based on the direct input of the participants. With the aim of creating a legitimate and rational categorization, an alternative systematization of eParticipation tools is proposed that considers both the nature of the activities of co-participants as well as their contribution to openness and democratic decision-making structures. In this view, Organization for Economic Integration and Development highlights three groups of eParticipation tools, i.e. information, consultation and active participatory tools (OECD 2003 and 2008).

A concrete example of the governance is found in the civic eParticipation practices constructed by the Slovenian municipalities, particularly by the tools of eParticipation placed on the official websites of Slovenian municipalities. The analysis of the official websites of Slovenian municipalities[2] showed that all Slovenian municipalities, i.e. 211 (100 percent), have an official website which provides e-access to various official publications, such as local regulations, tenders, contests, events, strategies, forecasts, various reports, convocation of meetings of municipal councils (sometimes even records of meetings), applications, forms and more. If this finding is compared with the results of previously conducted research studies,[3] we can see that the percentage of Slovenian municipalities with an official website is increasing, from 86.8 percent in 2006 to 99.1 percent in 2009, and to the present 100 percent. The same trend can be seen with e-access; it was offered by 174 municipalities in 2006, which represents 84.9 percent, while in 2009, there were 184 municipalities (87.6 percent) offering e-mail access. When analysing the official websites of municipalities, we found that the vast majority of municipalities regularly updated their website with the publication of news and (upcoming) events. We also noticed that quite a few municipalities offer subscription to an e-newsletter, which already registered users receive in their inbox. Based on those findings we can conclude that the first stage of eParticipation ("information") is clearly present on official websites of Slovenian municipalities.

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[2] The Research Project 'E-demokracija in e-participacija v slovenskih občinah' (E-democracy and eParticipation in Slovenian municipalities) was performed at the Centre for the Analysis of Administrative-Political Processes and Institutions in the second half of March and in the beginning of April 2013. The data show the current state of e-tools for Slovenian municipalities, and thus their accuracy and relevance are of limited duration.

[3] The source of data for the year 2006 (see Kvas 2006) and for the year 2009 (see Maček et al. 2009).

We were also interested in how municipalities provide opportunities for citizens to contact or consult with the mayor and the municipal administration. With other words, we analysed to what extend the second stage of eParticipation, i.e. "consultation" is present. We found that all Slovenian municipalities have a published e-mail address (either general, by sections or even by individual civil servants). As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of municipalities publish news and upcoming or past events on their website, but the interesting part is that only three (1.4 percent) of the 211 municipalities enable commenting on posts. Although the methods and applications of e-consultations vary between municipalities,[4] we can say that all of the Slovenian municipalities allow citizens the opportunity to establish electronic communication.

Finally, we analysed the third stage of eParticipation – "active participation" – a partnership between the state and its citizens, where citizens are actively involved in shaping public policy and decision-making about such policies. Only 38 Slovenian municipalities out of 211 (18 percent) have published an e-survey on their official websites. In addition, only eight municipalities also offer an e-forum to its citizens. If we have seen an increase of the percentage of e-access compared to the previous research studies, we detect the opposite trend for these e-tools. In 2006, 31.2 percent of the municipalities used the e-survey as a tool for eParticipation; in 2009, the number fell to 19.5 percent of the municipalities. Even when using an e-forum, we found a reduction of the number of municipalities that allow this type of eParticipation tool. In 2006, 12.7 percent of the municipalities offered an e-forum to its citizens; data from 2009 already indicate a reduction in the use of e-forums (6.7 percent of municipalities); currently, the proportion is 3.8 percent. Furthermore, we asked administrative officers, who are responsible for official municipal websites about usage of other active eParticipation tools (for example petitions, referendums, voting). They answered that occasionally they have spotted some e-petitions about particular local issue(s), but there is no normative framework established for the usage of e-voting and e-referendum, neither on the national or local levels of government. Based on that, we were not surprised, that only one municipality tried participatory budgeting as new form of citizens' participation.

Regarding to size of municipalities by population, there are two groups of municipalities in Slovenia, i.e. urban municipalities and ordinary municipalities.[5] If we analyse the urban municipalities separately (Table 1), we see that six (56 percent) out of the total of 11 urban municipalities in Slovenia are using e-surveys as an eParticipation tool; only two urban municipalities (18 percent) have an active forum on its official website. Out of the two urban municipalities, only one municipality (Nova Gorica) offers an e-survey; this way Municipality of Nova Gorica is the only municipality in Slovenia that offers its citizens four eParticipation tools (e-access, e-survey or e-consultation, e-forum and e-mail). None of the urban municipalities allow commenting on public announcements and news. Given the greater organizational and financial capabilities of the urban municipalities in comparison with the vast majority of

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[4] For example, applications designed as forms where citizens write proposals, opinions, questions, suggestions and others; municipalities have different names for such applications, e.g. '*service of citizens*', '*Kr.povej*', '*Citizens Initiative*', '*Review of citizens*', '*Ask the Mayor*', '*Contact Us*', '*Citizens' questions*', '*Ask us*', '*Questions, suggestions and criticisms of citizens*', '*You question, Mayor answers*', '*E-initiatives*' and others.
[5] Urban municipalities are larger municipalities with at least 20,000 inhabitants and 15,000 jobs, and they are economic, cultural and administrative centres of the wider area.

ordinary municipalities, a somewhat greater engagement and willingness to facilitate the eParticipation of citizens would be expected, thereby strengthening e-democracy.

TABLE 1: E-TOOLS IN SLOVENIAN MUNICIPALITIES

municipalities	number of municipalities	website	e-tools				commenting the news/posts
			e-access	e-survey	e-forum	e-mail	
ordinary	200 (100 %)	200 (100 %)	200 (100 %)	32 (16 %)	6 (3 %)	200 (100 %)	3 (1.5 %)
urban	11 (100 %)	11 (100 %)	11 (100 %)	6 (54.5 %)	2 (18.2 %)	11 (100 %)	0 (0 %)
total	211 (100 %)	211 (100 %)	211 (100 %)	38 (18 %)	8 (3.8 %)	211 (100 %)	3 (1.4 %)

Source: Research Project "E-demokracija in e-participacija v slovenskih občinah" (E-democracy and eParticipation in Slovenian municipalities) (2013).

To sum up, Slovenian municipalities still require some work in the field of local e-Governance, especially there is a need for conceptual shift towards citizen-oriented and established active eParticipation by civil society. As Castells argued, the reform of the public sector commands everything else in the process of productive shaping of the network society and these transformations require the diffusion of interactive, multi-layered networking as the organizational form of the public sector (Castells 2005, 17).

3 PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT INTO LOCAL POLITICS

eParticipation has the considerable potential to change the broader interactions between citizens and (local) government, and it can also improve the overall quality of engagement and decision-making whilst widening the involvement of all citizens. In recent years the existing concepts of local democracy and governance have been transformed (Frissen et al. 2007) and the pressures and expectations regarding modern methods of efficiency, effectiveness and involvement of citizens began to increase – i.e. local government should be more open to democratic accountability and broad participation. ICT could reengineer representative democracy and replace it with forms that are more direct.

Discussion about democratic local governance has its roots in early theories about participatory democracy, which can be defined abstractly as a regime in which adult citizens assemble to deliberate and to vote on the most important political matters. Barber (1984, 117) states that participatory democracy becomes possible through policy-making institutions and a high level of education, which binds citizens to pursue the common good. However, Barber (1984, 234) specifies that strong participatory democracy will not develop through civic education and knowledge, but rather will arise when people are given political power and channels of influence. Having attained these, they will perceive that it is necessary to acquire knowledge in order to be able to make political decisions. That is another reason why the municipal websites must provide the citizens with both channels of political influence and information about political matters so that people who participate can educate themselves and formulate reasonable political arguments.

Furthermore, according to Pateman (1970, 42–43), people's participation in the community's decision-making stabilises the community. A decision-making process that allows public participation develops from the very start as a

process that perpetuates itself due to the effect of political participation. Participatory political processes have an impact upon the development of the social and political capacities of citizens, and this positively influences the next act of participation. Participation has an integrative effect especially upon those citizens who take part in political activity, and thus makes the acceptance of collective decisions easier.

According to the modern theory of participatory democracy, people's political participation and deliberation are characterised by an aim to acquire information and knowledge about political matters so that political opinions or decisions can be argued proficiently. Knowledge is not usually the starting point when opinions or decisions are formulated; information about political issues is, by nature, contingent on the situation. The citizens who participate in political deliberations are assumed to possess the ability to select relevant information, which they can use to support their arguments. Among the most basic principles of participatory democracy is the idea that people learn through an opportunity to participate and by utilising and judging the relevance of different types of information. Political information and knowledge are therefore given a certain utility value in political argumentation; administrative information and knowledge of societal matters are presented as having significant descriptive power regarding circumstances.

At this point, we will introduce the position of Slovenian mayors regarding the participation and involvement of citizens.[6] In order to assess mayors' opinions on general approaches to participation, they were asked to what extend they agreed or disagreed (from 1, 'of little importance' to 5, 'very important') with the following statements:
1. Residents should participate actively and directly in making important local decisions.
2. Residents should have the opportunity to make their views known before important local decisions are made by elected representatives.
3. Decentralisation of local government is necessary to involve citizens in public affairs.
4. Local referenda lead to high quality public debate.

As we can see in Table 2, the mayors assessed all statements as relatively important (all ratings are above average value). The highest ranked was the statement "Decentralisation of local government is necessary to involve citizens in public affairs" (mean value 4.22), followed by statement "Residents should have the opportunity to make their views known before important local decisions are made by elected representatives" (mean value 3.63). According to earlier mentioned answers about referendums, it is not surprising that mayors ranked statement "Local referenda lead to high quality debate" as the least important (mean value 2.95). Based on our findings, we can conclude that Slovenian mayors are in favour of citizens' active and direct participation in local issues; citizens should be actively involved in policy-making processes.

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[6] The research project 'Stili lokalnega političnega vodenja' (Styles of local political leadership) was conducted at the Centre for the Analysis of Administrative-Political Processes and Institutions in spring 2014.

	mean	std. deviation
Residents should participate actively and directly in making important local decisions.	3.60	1.110
Residents should have the opportunity to make their views known before important local decisions are made by elected representatives.	3.63	1.058
Decentralisation of local government is necessary to involve citizens in public affairs.	4.22	0.743
Local referenda lead to high quality debate.	2.95	0.909

Source: Research Project "Stili lokalnega političnega vodenja" (Styles of local political leadership) (2014).

The support of democracy and governance ideas can also be analysed by looking at what the mayors believe to be the most effective ways of communicating with citizens. There are many ways of communicating with local people and allowing people to let local politicians know what they think. We asked the mayors which of the listed sources, instruments and methods of communication[7] are useful and effective for becoming informed on what citizens think. 30 percent of mayors assessed forums via the Internet as the most non-effective method of communication, 56.9 percent assessed them as only effective in special circumstances and only 13.1 percent assessed them as effective. This result can be connected with the fact that only eight municipalities offer e-forums to its citizens.

Furthermore, more than half of the mayors assessed citizens' letters via the Internet (55 percent), petitions (62.5 percent), satisfaction surveys (56.3 percent), focus groups (63.6 percent) and referenda (60 percent) as only effective in special circumstances. Mayors viewed personal meetings in the town hall (95.4 percent), public debates and meetings (72.1 percent) and formalised complaints or suggestions (64.3 percent) as the most effective methods. The results show that mayors are still in favour of personal meetings with citizens: on average, they spent 6.3 hours per week in meetings with citizens; 3.1 percent of mayors communicate with citizens 1–3 times a month, 7.7 percent of mayors do so once a week, 14.6 percent of mayors do so 2–4 times a week and 74.6 percent of the mayors in the survey communicate daily with the citizens. We can conclude that Slovenian mayors support citizens being actively included in local public issues and processes, but they are still rather sceptical about the new technologies and tools of eParticipation.

4 CONCLUSION: ARE SLOVENIANS THE NETWORKED "eCITIZENS"?

Interesting starting point for discussion about citizens' involvement into local politics via the Internet is certainly the prevalence of Internet usage among different groups of generations. According to some researchers (for example Jones and Fox 2009; Svete 2014) we can divide generations in six groups: "*G.I. Generation*", which is the oldest generation (people born before 1936), following by "*Silent Generation*" (people born between 1937 and 1945), "*Older Boomers*" (born after II WW until 1954), "*Younger Boomers*" (born in 60's and

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[7] The listed methods were as follows: *citizens' letters via the Internet; citizens' letters in the local press; formalised complaints or suggestions; petitions; information on citizens' position gathered by the councillors; information on citizens' position gathered by people working in local administration; information on citizens' position gathered by the local parties; public debates and meetings; satisfaction surveys; neighbourhood panels of forums; forums via the Internet; focus groups; self-organised citizen initiatives; referenda* and *personal meetings in the town-hall.*

70's), "*Generation X*" (born in 80' and 90's), "*Generation Y*" (so-called Millennials) and finally "*Generation Z*" (born after year 2000). The Internet is definitely more popular among younger generations, but larger percentages of older generations are online now than in the past. Generations Y and Z, who grew up in the Information Age, have been dubbed the 'Net Generation.' They are online, connected 24/7, 365 days a year, and have been shaped by the ICT technological revolution. These generations predicted to be highly connected, living in an age of high-tech communication, technology driven lifestyles and prolific use of social media. But, while these "digital natives" may be savvier with their gadgets and keener on new uses of technology, their elders in Generation X, the Baby Boomers and older generations tend to dominate Internet use in other areas.

Based on data from Statistical office of Republic of Slovenia (2014), 14.6 percent of Slovenian population belong to Generation Z, 31.7 percent belong to Generation Y, 22.1 percent belong to Generation X, 14.1 percent of population belong to Younger Boomers and 17.5 percent of Slovenians population represent the rest three generations. To sum up, more than two-third of population belong to generations that are highly familiar with the Internet and modern ways of communication. Furthermore, in the first quarter of 2013, 76 percent of households in Slovenia had access to the Internet, which is two percentage points more than in the same period of 2012. In the first quarter of 2013, 74 percent of population aged 10 to 74 used the Internet and the majority (95 percent) used the Internet at least once a week, mostly for sending or receiving e-mails (64 percent) and for reading online news or newspapers (57 percent).

A citizen is an active member of a community or society provided with rights and duties conferred by that community. According to Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal (2008, 1), digital citizens as those, who use the Internet regularly and effectively – that is, on a daily basis. In the Information Technology and the World Wide Web context, the citizen becomes an *eCitizen*. This means that citizens must learn how to turn real citizens of an electronic community and how to use the Internet possibilities in order to become aware of what *eCitizenship* implies**.** In fact, the eCitizen is the one, who is able to use the information technology in performing his daily affairs, and can receive his required services from related houses, bureaus, and institutes using electronic tools and systems (Behzad et al. 2012, 75).

Empirical data show that Slovenian citizens have many opportunities for information and communication with their local governments, and they have ways for expressing opinions, give suggestions and recommendations. Furthermore, mayors strongly support the active participation and involvement of citizens into local politics and decision-making processes; municipalities appear to be taking steps toward more open government, with more interactive platforms. In context of Slovenians' familiarity and qualification of ICT on one hand and with further information, dissemination and especially establishment of e-tools for active participation on the other hand, we can conclude that the concept of eCitizens has good future opportunities to develop in Slovenia.

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