

PREFACE

A decade and a half ago Pippa Norris¹ defined Digital Divide as the “divide between Internet-haves and have-nots”. At that time, Internet access was indeed limited to a minority both for financial and technical reasons. The age of deregulation and free market competition as well as the mass introduction of internet-capable smart phones has done away with this divide. In industrialised nations, phone-based internet access neither requires technical expertise nor a deep pocket – it is available on every smartphone for a EUR 9.99 (or so) monthly rate plan. Hence, within these nations, the classical divide has been almost nullified. Ludwig Erhard postulated that free-market competition would lead to a “socialisation of progress”² – hardly any other industry has validated this tenet to such an extent.

The question remains, whether there is a Digital Divide among the countries in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. The evidence would point against it. In terms of internet penetration, the Czech Republic has caught up with Germany (both 88%), Hungary and Slovakia with Austria (all between 80 and 82.5%). Also the new Member States of the EU and the Candidate States are catching up fast (for example, Croatia 74%, Romania 58%, Moldova 48%, typically gaining a few percentage points per year).³ So are we – or at least soon will be – past the age of the Digital Divide?

Unfortunately, things are not that easy. Internet access, for instance on the mobile phone, does not mean that the internet is used for much more than reading the news (which however in itself is a huge service to democracy as compared to the age of evening news shows on state-run television). The true potential of the internet can only be harnessed by interactive and transactional services, whether in the social media, in consumer transactions, in business or in digital government services. In the public sphere, this concerns both transactional eGovernment services and any form of civic engagement, whether in the social media or in government-driven “eDemocracy” platforms.

As for transactional *eGovernment* services, there may be huge differences both within a population and among the counties of the CEE region. The uptake of such services and the infrastructure associated with them is one of the most important fields in this development. Not only to improve government efficiency and to provide better services to citizenry and businesses – which would be reason enough in themselves – but also to promote such services in general.

Another form of digital divide may originate in the way *social media and eDemocracy services* are used. To have such services at one’s disposal is one thing, to be able to work with them properly is something completely different. In the mid-1990-ies, Verba et al.⁴ pointed out how important “civic skills” were for the participation of individuals in processes of political participation beyond mere voting. Two decades later, these considerations are amplified in today’s social media. Via the digital media, everybody can talk to the world – at least in theory. Having access to the editor function of a social media or participation platform in a web browser via an internet connection at

¹ NORRIS, P.: *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide*. Cambridge University Press, 2001; download from <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/ Acrobat/DIGITAL1.PDF>

² ERHART, L.: *Wohlstand für Alle*, Econ Verlag, Düsseldorf, 1957, p. 8; download from http://www.ludwig-erhard.de/wp-content/uploads/wohlstand_fuer_alle1.pdf

³ All statistics from internetlivestats.com.

⁴ VERBA, S. SCHLOZMANN, K.L., BRADY, H.E.: *Voice and Equality – Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 304ff.

an affordable monthly flat rate does not by a long shot mean that one can also express one's opinions in a convincing (and hopefully legal!) way appealing to other readers on the platform and thereby leverage the digital media to influence opinions. The question has to be asked, whether the new digital divide is still about having or not having the internet, or rather it is about being able or not being able to express oneself in the internet media.

This year's "Central and Eastern European eGovernment & eDemocracy Days" (CEE eGov & eDem Days 2017) and the corresponding proceedings volume aim to explore to what extent and in what regard the Danube Region is digitally divided, what the driving forces of these divisions are and what factors determine them. Understanding the digital divide is pivotal to promote cohesion in the Danube Region and to design effective policies to enhance regional integration.

The organizers of the conference are Andrásy University Budapest, the Austrian Computer Society, the Austrian Institute for European Law and Policy, the Information Society Development Institute, Moldova, the National University of Public Service Budapest and the University of Public Administration and Finance Ludwigsburg. The editors who are representing these institutions are most grateful for the support of the sponsors of the conference and of this volume, especially the Baden-Württemberg-Stiftung, the Austrian Institute for European Law and Policy, the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation and the Austrian Cultural Forum, Budapest.

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