

Limitations of the e-Participation

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Abstract

e-Participation was considered to be proper solution for the long term decline of political participation at different levels. However, recent events show that there is very limited space for the political participation, which is considered to be functional. The paper explores the changes in citizens' participation after the introduction of different e-Participation/ e-Democracy tools. Based on the results we want to justify the need to redefine the idea of ICT-supported participation and critically assess it, since no systematic change is visible in the patterns as well as in the actions of individuals. The basic observation can be formulated in the sense, that the ICT tools predominantly facilitate the participation of those who would actively participate in the first place, but they do not increase activation of those people, who are refusing to participate.

Key words: *e-Democracy, e-Participation, digital divide, political divide.*

1. Introduction

e-Participation was considered for a long period of time one of the main advancements in the political participation of citizens in decision-making processes at different levels and in different forms [e.g. 1, 18]. Political participation, supported by the use of information and communication technologies, is often limited in abilities and effects. On one hand, there are legal limitations, which are defining what types of activities are considered to be allowed [cf. 6, p.528-535]. On the other hand, there are technological limitations, which can start with digital divide [e.g. 2, 11,18] exclusions of certain specific populations and at the same time, the designed solutions are often partial and strongly directed in a certain way or towards certain process entry points.

All in all, different limitations are reducing the potential of participation as well as they are diminishing the impact of such participation within the classical political processes. In the paper, we are trying to indicate different reasons of relatively limited participation in relation to the possibilities that are offered and were indicated by different researches.

The paper is predominantly concentrated on the information, which is available for Slovenia, as a post-transition country, where the democratic processes were intensified over the last historical period.

As it was indicating by different scholars new ICT tools shall accelerate the political participation and thus promote the more effective and less discriminatory decision-making [cf. 20, p.228, cf. 21, p.1786]. The positive results are to some extent achieved in individual countries, such as Estonia or even Slovenia [23], but many cases show the main problem, that the political participation is predominantly limited to the activities which are benefitting the government and much less the citizens [cf.12, p.178, 22, cf. 25, p. 238-239].

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Such attitude in the case of Slovenia was analysed already in the past [e.g. 22, 23, 24], when it was established that the e-services, designed for the citizens in many cases do not provide any specific benefits for the majority of population who would potentially use them. Not only that the digital divide was only partially addressed, but even when it was addressed it was done in repressive manner, when the government or the governing authorities opted out all other possibilities of the provision of services, forcing the subjects to adapt (by learning, digitalization or by increasing the costs, if they decided to outsource the necessary activities to those who had/have capacities to provide proper services) [22].

2. Methodology

The paper is based on combination of literature review, providing the understanding of the context, collected data from the research on smart cities, which was conducted in order to assess the human limitations on acceptance the smart cities in Slovenia and Slovakia and which indicated somewhat confirmed the weak preparedness of the citizens to get involved in different political processes.

3. e-Tools in the political processes

The information and communication technologies have different forms of penetrating the classical political processes. Primary they are seen as tools to reintroduce direct democracy (in one form or another) and to overcome representative democracy which is connected to the issue that the number of citizens willing and able to participate exceeds the possibility for the effective decision-making as well as it jeopardize the daily work of the people with the right to participate [e.g. cf.17, p.30, 18, 19]. Despite there are different approaches to classify democratic functionalities as well as tools of e-participation [13, cf. 14, p.1-2.], we can argue that the tools of participation can be listed as those of political and of policy participation (it is possible also to indicate the administrative participation as specific category). As for the nature of the use of the e-Participation tools, we can separate the tools which are supporting the existing power relations and those, which are reshaping the power relation (partially or in whole). In all cases the main point is not the technological viability but predominantly the probability of the acceptance by different groups (this part will be additionally examined in the next part of the paper.

	Politics	Policy	Administration
Status quo	e-Voting	e-Deliberation	e-Forms
change	e-Legislative process	e-Policy definition	e-Procedure

Table 1: Forms of e-Participation by change of the power and field of influence

The table 1 above shows different forms of e-Participation in different fields of state activities with different levels of the effect [7, 9]. For the e-Optimists, it might be rather unconvinced, but in the next lines, we are trying to provide arguments, why only certain forms of participation provide actual change of the political participation [6, 7]. The status-quo activities are rather unproblematic from the perspective of the authorities, since they do not represent the direct power shift towards the citizens [2, 3]. On the other hand, activities marked as "change" represent the need for the power shift from the established political (or elitist in general) structures towards the public [5]. The known practices in the most democratic states avoiding the changes which could reduce power of the elites over the course of the society [cf. 22, p. 39, 47]. If we take into the account the European political power (composed of governments and parliaments, we can argue that the normal size of

the government is about 15-20 ministers, while the normal size of the parliament varies between over 800 and 24²). Based on the number of representatives and size of the population, we can assume that in any country number of those entitled to political participation and interested in particular matters will exceed the number of representatives. This assumption includes the idea that any decision accepted by greater majority than one, which could be reached by given number in representative body, consequently providing greater legitimacy (especially in unicameral political systems). The main obstacles are connected to the inevitable need to take decisions on day to day basis, which would create automatised voting or poorly elaborated decisions. This automatically leads to the conclusion that e-Participation is not the tool for day to day involvement of the citizens in the political and policy decision-making [5, 13]. And this is one of the core pillars of elitist defense of existing representative democracy, with limited inclusion of the population in the governing processes³.

Taking into the account aforementioned arguments and the table 1 we can provide following explanation of the later. e-Voting does not provide any actual change in the system of voting, but only enables population to change the voting method or the initial model of the representation, which would jeopardize existing representative model. The practice in the countries with introduction of e-Voting did not realize significantly different levels of voting participation which would dramatically change the electoral result.

e-Deliberation as policy related method is rather well accepted among democratic governments. However, it is simultaneously also easily ignored by the citizens (who do not recognize the need to participation in the public debates), as well as by the governments who have very limited interest to include the public suggestion (dismissing them as uneducated or illegitimate) [9, 13, 16].

e-Forms as initialization or even finalization of the administrative procedures are rather well accepted by the public as well as by the administration, due to reduced bureaucratic burden on both sides. However, they are simplifying the initial communication, while in most cases they do not provide any deeper added value than time relaxation [e.g. 20, 21].

On the other hand there is set of different forms of participation which could potentially change the politico-administrative procedures as such. In the political dimension this would be e-Legislation where citizens, based on the pre-prepared legislative draft discuss in online forums, reach certain compromise and vote on the propositions which became afterwards laws. Less demanding version is the general popular e-Vote on prepared draft laws. Such model would make the parliaments as decision-making bodies redundant. The legislative preparatory step can be done also without the governing authorities as a combination as expert knowledge and people participation, which shall be included at least in the manner of clear indication how individual ideas/contributions were included into the preparatory process. Somewhat similar procedure we can find in the European legislative procedure, which however strongly minimizes the actual effect of different ideas on the final result.

The e-Procedures can be understood as administrative procedures, where the classical administration could be removed or reduced to the minimum, with the most of the activities transferred to the logical code which would be able to resolve most common requests with high level of reliability [20, 21].

² If we include House of Lords in UK and Monaco

³ Including introduction of police state methods [8] in order to maintain the existing structure of the world [10].

Providing these short descriptions of how to navigate the ideas we can start to think the possibilities given to the people by the states and what are the options that citizens usually choose. The basic characteristic between change and status quo e-Tools (activities) is that those activities, which are considered to be change, mean different approach in the processes themselves. In this manner the nature of the processes change, e.g. provides more involvement of the citizens (primarily), improves the legal predictability of the outcomes, reduces the process time frame, or increases the efficiency of the services. On the other hand, status quo activates are only digitalized basic activities with no other change in the process or outputs. In this perspective e- Voting can be considered simple possibility of electronic vote, without the change in the voting regulation/rights (the most common case is the work of modern parliaments, where raising the hand/card was replaced by pressing the appropriate button, without any actual change of the legislative process as such). On the other hand E-Legislative process changes the nature of the legislative process as such (up to the point that there is no need for political representation). However, in most cases it can be considered the legally provided opportunity to the citizens to way in with their suggestions, comments, which shall be taken into the consideration by the legislative body or even direct public vote on the legislation. Only ICT made such ideas (on deliberative and/or direct democracy) possible. In this manner, it is possible to say that exclusion of the citizens from the legislative processes cannot be considered the question of management, but it became question of political power relations.

4. State opportunities for the participation

Within the definitions, set up in the previous part we can try to assess any state in its performance while delivering the e-Participation opportunities to the citizens. In the case of Slovenia, we can rather easily establish that in the field of the politics, Slovenia is leaving the citizens out of its scope, since there was not done much next to the debate to introduce e-Voting as secondary electoral method. The debate was blocked between fears from no control over the possible electoral fraud (open code approach) and too much control (where the owner of the code could set the result without anybody else noticing) [cf. 22, p. 61-62, 23]. The idea on abolishing the parliament and to switch to public decision-making is far-fetched and contextually dismissed by the political elite that citizens have no proper knowledge to run the political debate and decisions (which systematically denies the fact that there is general passive and active voting right of all citizens of age).

Similarly negative approach Slovenia shows in the field of the e-Policy definition, where citizens are predominantly excluded from shaping the public policies. They are allowed only in two major cases, of activities; "asking the government", where citizens have the option to address the question to the public authorities regarding certain broader situation or to propose certain solution. In this setting most of the solutions are dismissed as in conflict with broader legislation or other policies. Second option is so called public debate on the legislation, which shall be taking place in the procedure of reaching broader consensus on draft law before starting the parliamentary procedure. The major criticism is connected to the negative attitude towards opinions which are not in line with the presented text, which means that the public debate is pro forma debate, with practically no influence on the draft law before entering the procedure. Additional criticism is connected to the situations when the draft law might draw on broader attention, when the announcement of the public debate is hidden in order to exclude broader public as much as possible. This, rather predictable approach to the public contribution towards improvement of the legal solutions is highly discouraging and demonstrates the power of political elitism in ignorance of the public opinion.

e-Forms as non-problematic form of the administrative e-participation are widely supported and used in all possible forms since they reduce the administrative burden of civil servants [23]. In this

manner sometimes the administrative institutions go even step too far, by immediately offering the online solution, also in the cases when it is assumed that the customer has a problem with internet and legal navigation. The solution "information is available on the Internet" is usually not the proper first response to the customers who came personally in the office in their matter. The administrative procedures transformation in the e-Procedures is, on the other hand, rather unappreciated, since it would cause erosion of the administrative power. One of most effective cases that could take place in Slovenia would be construction permit electronic procedure, where e-Plans would be entered to the system by the architect, decision would be processed based on the predestined values of the parameters and automatically issues. State is collecting all necessary information today in the electronic form and the process would shorten for the clients from (now often more than six months to the same day decree. Civil servants would deal only with the more demanding cases, where construction is planed out of allowed proportions, and with possible complaints, where non-algorithmic decision-making is needed [20, 21]. However, this would reduce their bureaucratic power to prolong the procedure, to reject the project which is within the predefined norms or, on the other hand, to blindly confirm the project which shall not pass, but is of political interest.

5. Citizens' reaction to the e-Participation possibilities

From the situation described above, it seems that the state is the sole responsible for the almost non-existing e-Participation of the citizens in different processes. Within the comparative research between two central and eastern European cities we tried to understand the peoples' perception of different elements connected to the use of the information and communication technologies in the communication with the authorities [cf. 15, p.86-87]. The Slovenian sample was acquired in the second largest city (in order to avoid the effect of the capital city and to assure predominantly urban structure of the population), where 150 random people were stopped to fill in the questionnaire. The basic purpose of the research was to understand the citizens' ability/preparedness to use ICT in order to make smart cities reasonable investment in the future. The background assumption is that any e-Tool should have proper support in the society or it will be non-functional⁴.

General picture is that people are technologically well equipped and in general, they have access to the internet. Based on the research data, the Internet as well as email is daily used in over 50% of the cases. On the other hand more than 37% of respondents never used e-Banking while many respondents do not even know what the e-Government is. This indicates the distance between citizens and state in the virtual environment.

Concerning the use of the mobile phone, almost all respondents use it for calling and texting. When it comes to the use of the mobile phone for other activities such as net browsing, email use, mobile banking or administrative purposes, surprisingly less than 30% of respondents are using mobile phone for such activities. About 30-40% of the respondents use the mobile phone for fun.

From this perspective, one can argue that citizens are not interested in using modern technologies for more demanding tasks, which would include also political or administrative participation.

⁴ There is also another option; legally binding decision that e-Services shall be used. Slovenia opted for this in the case of corporate taxes, demanding that any legal person (regardless of form or size) organizes tax reporting via system of e-Taxes. Legally this represents oppression in the sense of defining the way to "communicate" with the state. Economically, this decision increased the expenses for small legal entities with limited revenues and financial capacity, which were in the past able to run their accounting books on their own and were in many cases forced to hire accounting services due to the new regulations.

The use of the Internet and email is strongly and statistically significantly connected with age, education and work. Both e-Government and e-Banking are strongly and significantly connected with work (in all cases, the Pearson correlation coefficient is between 0.35 and 0.6 with the correlation significant at the 0.01 level). On the other hand, such significant correlations are achieved in the multi-tasking use of mobile phones only in the case of age. In other cases, although significant, the correlations are weaker. In general, we can say that younger, better educated and better employed people will use the Internet more diversely. In the case of the mobile phone, younger people will more likely use it for different purposes, while older people are using them predominantly for calling [cf.15, p. 87].

Over 60% of the respondents are simultaneously concerned how the personal data will be used by the authorities and at the same time about the same percentage of respondents have no problem providing personal data to practically anyone via mobile phone (usually to friends or banks). Alarming information is that 25% of the respondents admitted that they already sent personal information to the people who only claimed the right to access such information. This is not too surprising, based on the attitude of almost 60% of respondents that data shall be provided to the authorities upon request and that almost 15% of respondents believe that the authorities have right to the absolute control of the citizens and almost 50% of those who believe that authorities have right to control suspicious (without defining what this is) activities [cf. 15, p. 89-91].

The data show two major things. First, there is still the digital divide or gap, which is connected to the age, education and work, and indicates that the European efforts for reaching the level of information society are insufficient, at least in the case of Slovenia. As second, the mixed responses regarding the use of the information and communication technologies, e-Services and privacy/control concerns are indicating that the people are not interested in the use of the technologies in more complex manners and that they have also very limited understanding of the possibilities outside classical role of the first generation of advanced technologies (internet, mobile phones) [4, 14, 17].

In the perspective of the e-Participation, it seems that the access to the technology is not the limitation (different statistical data report over 70% coverage of Slovenian population with the internet access), but the e-Participation is limited by the lack of opportunities, lack of social/political engagement and possibly by refusal of given possibilities (such as online petitioning). In this manner, the reasons for the described situation are matter of (political) culture and not technological development/knowledge. In the supportive manner the solution can be provided as additional promotion of the technology, while in the realistic manner the changes shall be made in the political reality, which shall show openness for the participation, including the support to the citizens' suggestions (in opposition to quotation of rules, why something is not possible/allowed).

6. Conclusions

Despite it sounds rather pessimistic, the fact is that there is mutual ignorance of the e-Participation possibilities between politico-administrative structures and citizens. First are avoiding serious information of the processes in order to avoid the inevitable lose of position and power, while later are ignorant to the possibilities that they have, as well as to the political and administrative topics. In this manner one can say that the technology, at least in the case of Slovenia, can be hardly the tool of the modernization of the political system as such. The development of the services and people attitude towards them shows that in this manner Slovenia is traditional state and society,

with unexploited potential regarding the possibility for the transformation in the information society.

Further efforts shall be directed towards the education of the citizens regarding their political duties and rights in the way to improve their political consciousness/culture. On the other hand, as separated process more education regarding the information technologies functioning shall be provided. However, all these efforts will be in vain, unless the state provides actual opportunities for the participation of the citizens (regardless of the channel of the communication), which will potentially result in change of the social processes, including the shift of the political power from the ruling establishment towards citizens.

7. References

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