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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cvetanova, G., Pachovski, V., & Bojadzievska, I. (2018). Strengthening Democracy through Citizen e-Participation on Local Level in the Republic of Macedonia. *European Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities*, 7(2), 1-16. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-57097-0>

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Strengthening Democracy through Citizen e-Participation on Local Level in the Republic of Macedonia

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Date of submission: April 10th, 2018

Date of acceptance: April 23rd, 2018

Abstract

The paper evaluates the types of e-democracy initiatives on local level in the Republic of Macedonia. E-democracy initiatives were classified by the elements of the democratic process, which they work to enhance: transparency, accountability and active participation. For the purpose of our research we analyzed websites of the units of local self-government in the Republic of Macedonia in the period of 2017, with special emphasis on e-democracy initiatives in order to provide a framework for classification. The research discovered many outstanding local e-democracy initiatives. However, there is a little evidence that these initiatives have done much to ameliorate the problems on local level that Republic of Macedonia is facing, such as: weak democratic institutions and low level of citizen participation in democratic processes using ICT as intermediary. The paper also provides some recommendations for improving e-democracy initiatives on local level and their performance in general.

Keywords: local governance, citizen e-participation, e-democracy initiatives, levels of citizen involvement.



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European Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities - EQPAM, Volume 7, No.2, April 2018, pp. 1-16.

ISSN 2285 – 4916

ISSN-L 2285 – 4916

1. Introduction

Although the concept of local governance is as old as the history of humanity, only recently has it entered the broad discourse in the academic and practice literature. Local governance is defined as the formulation and execution of collective action at the local level. Thus, it encompasses the direct and indirect roles of formal institutions of local government and government hierarchies, as well as the roles of informal norms, networks, community organizations, and neighborhood associations in pursuing collective action by defining the framework for citizen-citizen and citizen-state interactions, collective decision-making, and delivery of local public services (Shah and Shah, 2006).

Unlike the central government, that is strategically and globally conceptualizing, regulating, coordinating and aligning the entire development of the country and is taking care of the institutions of national importance (such as higher education institutions, health care institutes, scientific institutions, the cultural national institutions etc.), the local self-government is focused on meeting the citizens' needs that are of local importance.

Good local governance is not just about providing a range of local services but also about preserving the life and liberty of residents, creating space for democratic participation and civic dialogue, supporting market-led and environmentally sustainable local development, and facilitating outcomes that enrich the quality of life of residents (Shah and Shah, 2006). Hence, citizen participation in the process of policy-making on local level is of significant importance for improving the quality of life within the local communities. Therefore, a key precondition for the citizen participation - through their own initiatives or proposals - is to have open access to data and information thus having the opportunity to share them with other citizens.

Held (1996) distinguishes nine different models of democracy. His participatory model reflects the need to engage both citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) in the policy process. However, in order to engage citizens in policy-making, he and others recognize **the need for informed and active citizens**.

The European Charter of local Self-Government¹, adopted by the Committee of Ministers in the Council of Europe in 1985, establishes openness and participation as basic principles of democratic governance on local level. This document insists on public access to all information that is not classified. The term 'openness' refers to accessibility of the public to all information regarding the decisions, the implementation of the policies as well as the results derived, for the purpose of enabling the citizens to perform oversight on the work of the local government, on one hand, and to enable the citizens to actively participate and contribute in the process of policy making on local level, on the other hand. At the same time, this Charter outlines the necessity of innovative approach and the use of new technologies.

...."Globalization and the information revolution are forcing a reexamination of citizen-state relations and roles and the relationships of various orders of government with entities beyond government and thereby an enhanced focus on local governance."

(Shah and Shah, 2006)

Therefore, perceiving the importance of the citizens participation in the process of creating, decision-making and enforcement of the policies and politics of local importance, it should be taken into consideration the fact that we live in the age of digital technologies which in many respects affect our

¹The European Charter of local Self-Government was ratified by the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia in 1997.

everyday lives: the way we communicate to each other, the way we conduct our professional engagements, the way we transmit and get the information and, the way we practice democracy (Cvetanova and Pachovski, 2014). The use of digital technology among citizens, civil society organizations and public institutions offer new possibilities within democratic processes.

...“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: 2).

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.

...“Engaging your “own” citizens or constituents through digital media includes enhancing active participation in law-making, policy-making, and legislative process, all of which are influenced by a variety of forces - public opinion, debate, lobbyists, special interest groups, consultation with constituents, committee hearings, and expert testimony.”

(Caldow, 2004)

Talking about strengthening democracy through e-democracy initiatives on local level refers to the fact that municipal websites must provide citizens with both channels of political influence and information about political matters, so that those who participate can educate themselves and formulate reasonable political arguments (Kukovic, Brezovsek, 2015).

The paper evaluates the concept of e-democracy introduced on local level in the Republic of Macedonia with special emphasis of the types of e-democracy initiatives used for the purpose of enhancing the pillars of democracy, such as: transparency, accountability and participation.

2. Method

For the purpose of our research we analyzed the websites of the units of local self-government (municipalities) in the Republic of Macedonia in the period of 2017, with special emphasis on e-democracy initiatives in order to provide a framework for their classification. E-democracy initiatives (e-tools) were classified by the levels of citizen involvement they provide: **information** (1st level), **consultation** (2nd level) and **active participation** (3rd level).

In order to determine what types of e-democracy initiatives are used for the purpose of enhancing transparency, accountability and participation on local level in the Republic of Macedonia, the following aspects were analyzed:

- E-tools available on the official municipal websites;
- Types of e-tools classified by the levels of citizen involvement they provide;
- Presence of the Municipalities on Social Networks and
- Use of languages on municipal websites in accordance with the Ohrid Framework Agreement as a prerequisite for citizens' accessibility

3. Classification of e-Democracy Initiatives According to the level of Citizen Involvement

Webster's defines democracy 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". Placing an "e" in front of the term "democracy" means nothing more than using information technology tools to facilitate, improve and ultimately extend the exercise of democracy (Caldow, 2004).

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 central or local 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, classifying them by the elements of the democratic process, which they work to enhance: transparency, accountability and participation. Despite the fact that different scholars define the levels of citizen involvement in different ways,² basically there are three levels: *information*, *consultation* and *active participation*.

Information. The communication on this level is one-way only i.e. from the planning or decision-making bodies to the public. The active provision of comprehensive, balanced and objective information is designed to help the public understanding of problems, alternatives, opportunities, and solutions to democratic issues. Participants do not have any influence on it (Reinsalu, 2010). They only receive information about the planning or the decisions made by the planning or decision-making bodies, thus increasing the transparency of the political and democratic processes by means of ICTs.

Consultation. 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. Namely, the state obtains feedback in the form of citizen opinions, in other words the state defines the problem and wants people's opinions (e.g. online consultations on legislative proposals) (Kukovic, Brezovsek, 2015). 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 (Reinsalu, 2010). Hence, the finale outcome i.e. whether the citizens' comments, complaints or proposals will be taken into consideration depends on the democratic awareness of the political elites and stakeholders.

Active participation³. Finally, the third level of involvement means that there is a partnership between the state and its citizens, where citizens are actively involved in shaping public policy and decision-making about such policies (Kukovic, Brezovsek, 2015). 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 of citizen involvement 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 (Reinsalu, 2010). Whether the citizens will influence the finale decision, depends on the democratic awareness of the political elites

²According to the classification of the Organization for Economic Integration and Development (OECD, 2003), there are three groups of e-tools: information, consultation and active participatory; United Nations (United Nations, 2005), for example, divide participatory e-tools into e-information, e-consultation and e-decision making; similar classification can be found in Norris (2004: 21), who divides e-tools into information, communication and action tools; according to Kukovic and Brezovsek (2015) classification there are information e-tools, communication e-tools and participatory e-tools,

³ "Active participation" does not refer only to citizens' voting on elections, but also to active citizens' involvement in the process of creating policies on national or local level and in the process of decision-making. Hence, beside e-voting and e-referendum, several other e-tools such as citizens' feedback, e-survey and e-petition are listed as *Participative e-tools*.

and stakeholders. There is another subtype of active participation initiatives that allows citizens to have a final say in the decisions – by voting online. In this case, participants use the following e-tools: e-elections, e-voting and e-referendum.

4. Republic of Macedonia and Local Self-Government

The Republic of Macedonia relies upon parliamentary democracy with an executive government elected by a unicameral parliament. The state has a first degree local self-government based on the principle of subsidiarity, organized in 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje. 10 of the municipalities constitute the City of Skopje, a distinct unit of local self-government and the country's capital.⁴ Thirty-four municipalities have a seat in the city placing them in the category of urban municipalities, whereas the remaining forty-six are considered as rural.⁵

According to the estimations by the State Statistical Office from 2016⁶, the entire population in the country is 2.072.490 inhabitants. The demographic indicators show high disproportion in the territorial distribution of the population i.e. approximately 58% of the entire population lives in the municipalities with more than 50.000 inhabitants. The biggest concentration of population is in the capital Skopje, followed by 12 other cities, with above 50.000 inhabitants.

Macedonian municipalities are run in a similar way to most western cities, with a mayor and a city council. Under centralized governmental arrangement, most of the money is concentrated in the national/central government in Skopje. Yet, the units of local self-government are financed from their own sources of revenues, such as: real estate taxes; communal fee and services income; profit gained by public enterprises and public services established by the unit of local self-government; income through donations received from the Republic or from abroad (in goods or in currency).

In the Law on Local Self-Government adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia in 2002, the competencies of the local self-government units were established and defined as follows: the schools of primary and secondary education, primary and secondary health care, culture, social protection, sports development in the units of local self-government, urban planning, environmental protection, local economic development, communal activities, maintenance and reconstruction of local streets and other infrastructure facilities etc.

Pursuant to the Law on Local Self-Government, the principles of democratic governance are defined as follows: transparency, accountability and participation of citizens. Regarding transparency⁷, it is stated that the municipality is obliged to give citizens access to basic information about the services provided to them. Regarding accountability⁸, the municipality is obliged, with no compensation, to inform the citizens about its work, as well as the plans and programs that are of importance for the development of the municipality.

Article 25 of the Law provides for direct participation of citizens⁹ in deciding on issues of local significance in the following several forms: citizens' initiative, citizen gatherings and referendum.

⁴Law on territorial organization of the local self-government

⁵http://www.stat.gov.mk/OblastOpsto_en.aspx?id=1

⁶<http://www.stat.gov.mk/OblastOpsto.aspx?id=2>

⁷Article 8 of the Law on Local Self-Government

⁸Article 8 of the Law on Local Self-Government

⁹Pursuant to the Law on Local Self-Government, "Direct Participation of Citizens" is an individual or collective involvement of the residents of the municipality in decisions about matters of local importance at different levels of decision-making.

Also, according to the Law, when drafting the regulations of the municipality, the council of the municipality or the mayor can organize public debates in advance, conduct a survey, or ask for proposals from the citizens.

While at national level the Ministry of Information Society and Administration is responsible for the development of e-democracy initiatives, at local level, the department of public relations or a member of the administration, if anybody at all, is responsible for programs related to e-democracy.

5. Research

For the purpose of our research i.e. whether the e-initiatives strengthen the democratic process on local level in the Republic of Macedonia, firstly we had to determine how many of the municipalities have functional websites.

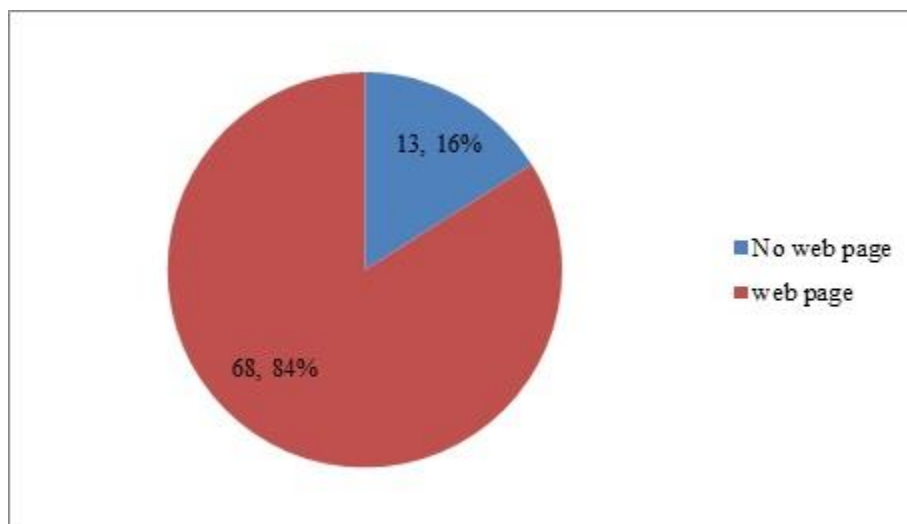


Figure 1. Municipalities with functional website

As shown in **Figure 1**, 68 or 84% of the municipalities in the Republic of Macedonia have functional websites while 13 or 16% of them do not have. It means that the citizens who live in these municipalities have no access to any public information or the opportunity to actively participate in the process of policy-making on local level.

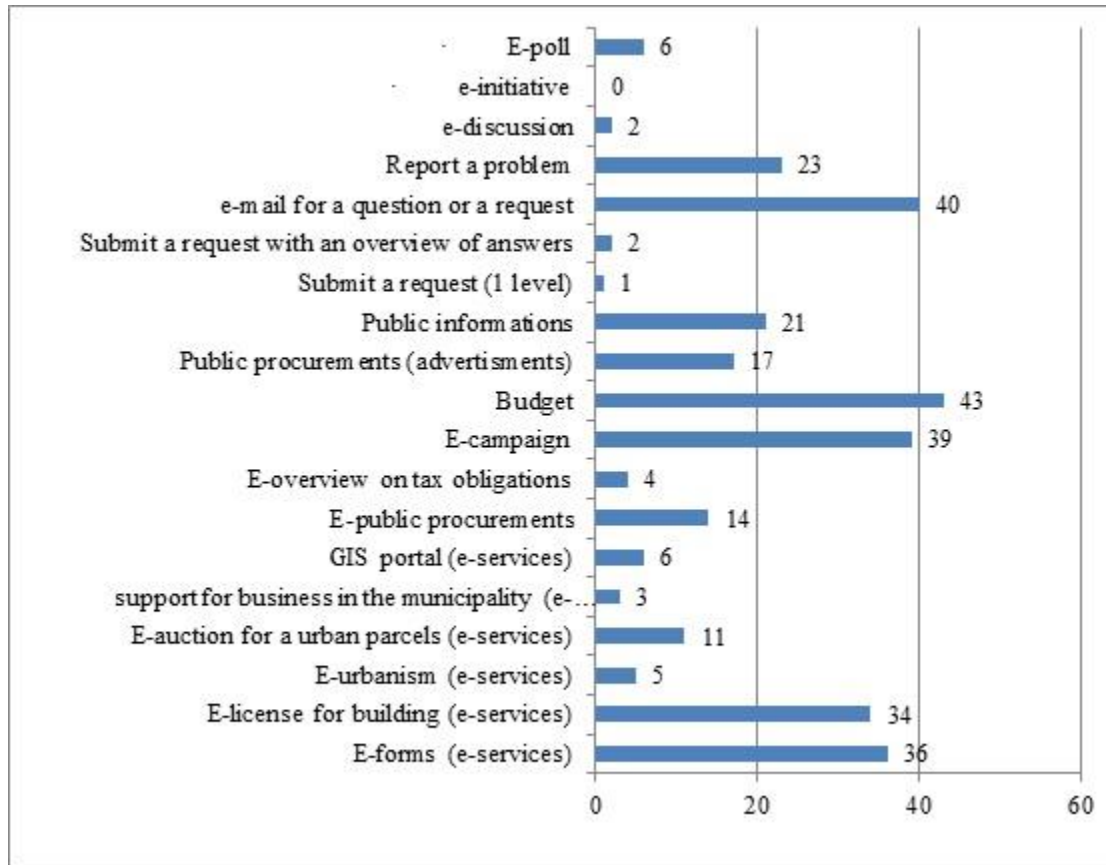


Figure 2: E-tools used on municipal websites

The results shown in **Figure 2**, suggest that the most used e-tools on municipal websites is the “budget” e-tool (43%). However, it is not an e-tool that enables the citizens actively to participate in creating the municipality budget, but an e-tool that only shows the budget items. This particular e-tool belongs to e-tools from the 1st or Information level. The second most used e-tool is “E-mail for a message or question” (40%), followed by “e-campaign” (39%) and “e-forms”(36%), e-toolc that belongs to the category of e-services. When it comes to the e-tool called “E-mail for a message or question” it means that the citizens have the opportunity to send a message or question to the Mayor or local administration. This e-tool, despite the fact that belongs to the 2nd or Consultation level, does not provide any insight whether the requests of the citizens have been taken into consideration and has been acted accordingly.

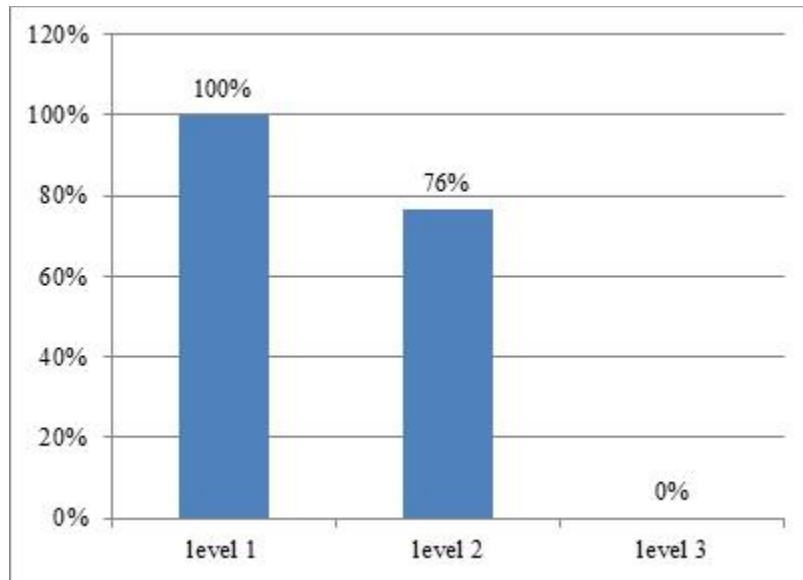


Figure 3: Presence of e-tools according to the level of citizen involvement

As the results from the analysis suggests (see **Figure 3**) on the municipal websites are used only e-tools from the 1st or Information level and 2nd or Consultation level. The e-tools such as e-voting or e-referendum – those that comprise the 3rd or Active participation level– are not available at all.

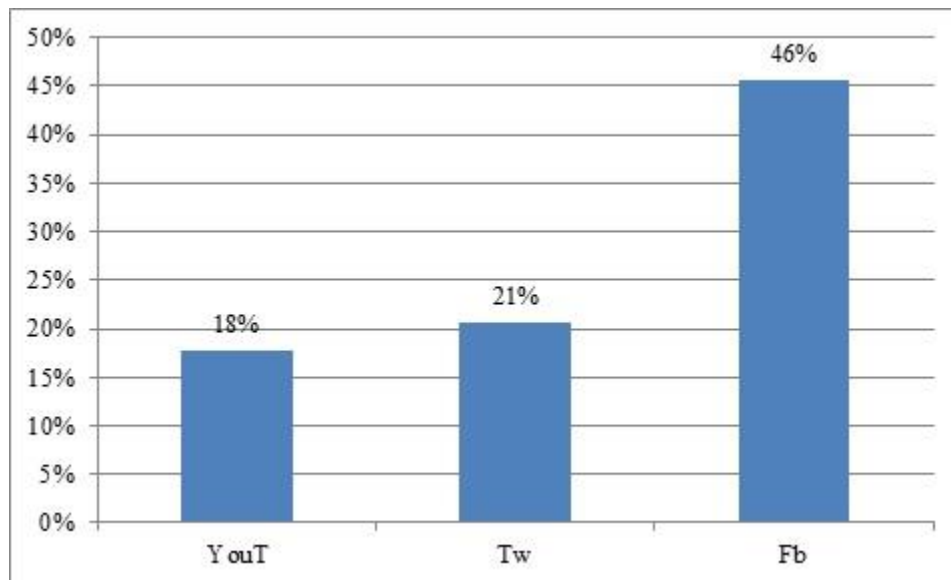


Figure 4. Presence of the Municipalities on social networks

Social Networks are very popular among the citizens so it is not surprising the fact that many of the municipalities are present with their official web profiles on YouTube (18%), Twitter (21%) and Facebook (46%). When it comes to YouTube, most of the posted videos are about the held press conferences, community activities and meetings of the Mayor with citizens and recorded sessions of the City Council. Despite the fact that Facebook offers greater interaction among its users (the citizens can give ideas, initiatives, comments or ask questions), this particular social network is mostly used as a medium for the promotion of the Mayor activities. In most of the cases, the ideas, initiatives, comments and questions from the citizens are totally ignored by the local authorities.

6. Discussion

A key precondition for citizens' participation is to have an open access to data and information. In this sense, comparing to the last research on the same topic conducted in 2014¹⁰, the analysis revealed progress and novelty that is based on the Freedom of Information Act¹¹. Namely, the analysis of the results (see **Figure 2**) shows the availability of an e-tool called "Request for public information" (21%). However, this e-tool does not provide any report regarding the feedback, i.e., whether the requests of the citizens have been taken into consideration and have been acted accordingly.

Likewise, the findings suggest progress in the implementation of the e-tool "Report a problem"¹². If, according to the analysis from 2014¹³, this e-tool was present only on the website of one municipality (Prilep), today 23% of municipalities have implemented this e-tool on their websites (See *Figure 2.*), despite the fact that not all of "Report a problem" e-tools provide a report for the final outcome of the reported problems i.e. whether the local authorities have acted accordingly. However, as a positive example in terms of "Report a problem" e-tool and accountability of the local authorities, a Municipality of Prilep should be pointed out¹⁴. Namely, this e-tool provides a comprehensive report about the final outcome of the reported problems i.e. whether and when the local authorities have acted accordingly.

A previously conducted research¹⁵ revealed the fact that 82% of the respondents of the study were aware of the possibility to report a problem or complaint using available e-tools on the official website of the municipality where they live. Yet, only 18,2% of the respondents used this possibility and reported some problem or complaint using available e-tools. When it comes to receiving an answer from the local authorities in the municipality where they live, the same study has shown that 48,3% of the respondents from those who reported a problem/complaint using e-tools available on the official websites received an answer.

¹⁰Cvetanova G and Pachovski V (2014), *E-democracy Initiatives at the Local Level in the Republic of Macedonia, Estonia and Hungary*, Proceedings from the 9th Annual International Conference on European Integration: The Europe of tomorrow: creative, digital, integrated, 15 May 2014 Skopje University American College Skopje and Skopje Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

¹¹Article 4 and article 12 from the Free access to public information Act ("Official gazette of Republic of Macedonia" no. 13 / 1.2.2006)

¹²The e-tool is supported by USAID project for the development of the local-self government.

¹³Cvetanova G and Pachovski V (2014), *E-democracy Initiatives at the Local Level in the Republic of Macedonia, Estonia and Hungary*, Proceedings from the 9th Annual International Conference on European Integration: The Europe of tomorrow: creative, digital, integrated, 15 May 2014 Skopje University American College Skopje and Skopje Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

¹⁴ <http://213.135.167.241:82/Main.aspx>

¹⁵The purpose of this study was to gain insight into citizen e-participation and the attitudes of the citizens towards e-democracy process in the Republic of Macedonia: <https://sites.google.com/a/fspub.unibuc.ro/european-quarterly-of-political-attitudes-and-mentalities/Home/eqpam-vol-5-no-4-october-2016-cvetanova-pachovski-bojadzievska>

When it comes to positive examples in terms of the accountability of the local authorities, the case of Municipality of Gevgelija and the e-tool “System 48” should be pointed out. Namely, the citizens can report their problem or any other request via e-mail or SMS. In the following 48 hours, the citizens get information (via SMS or e-mail) about the status of their problem and deadline about resolving the issue. The reporting of the problems to the official authorities (City council) is recorded and posted on YouTube channel, so the citizens can follow closely the overall procedure when it comes to their request or reported problem. On the municipal website is also presented an annual report about all the reported problems and requests, some details and the final outcome. This e-tool is one of the positive examples for enhancing the accountability of the local authorities¹⁶.

In order to enhance citizens’ participation on local level, “Give a proposal” website was created by the Ministry of local self-government and supported by UNDP¹⁷. The purpose of this website was to enable citizen’s greater participation when it comes to local issues and local politics by giving proposals, opening discussions on a particular topic, or answering surveys regarding the efficiency of the municipal services. The link was supposed to be available through all municipal websites. Regrettably, the website is not active since 2013.

The analysis indicate that 1/3 of the overall e-tools used on the municipal websites (6 from 19 e-tools) belong to the category of e-services. The most used e-service is “e-forms” (36%), followed by “building permit application form” (34%), “parcele-auction” (11%), GIs-portal (6%), “e-urbanism” (5%) and “support for business on municipal level” (3%). This data is in correlation with the data from the research study conducted in 2016¹⁸. The evidence from this study revealed that the most commonly used e-tool among respondents of the study is e-service tool. Namely, 53% of the respondents used some kind of e-service, 39% of them were aware of this possibility but never used it and only 8% of the respondents were not aware of the possibility to use some kind of e-service.

When it comes to the use of e-services, as a positive example of business oriented website should be pointed out the one of Municipality of Gazi Baba with the following contents:

Listing of all the companies located in this municipality;

Business Info Centre;

Link to EU funds such as: COSME - Europe’s program for small and medium-sized enterprises, Horizon 2020, Erasmus, as well as

Link to Macedonian Bank for Development Promotion - Small and Medium Enterprises Financing program¹⁹.

On the other hand, the analysis revealed many e-democracy initiatives poor websites. In this sense, the website of Municipality of Butel could be indicated as negative example. Apart from the “building permit application form” there are no other e-tools at all, not even from the 1st / Information level.

On the website of the Municipality of Ohrid, there is only an email contact for questions, and no other e-tool from the 2nd / Consultation level, such as: “Report a problem”, e-initiative, e-discussion, or e-proposals. In other words, the website lacks e-tools that would enable and strengthen citizen participation in the process of policy-making on local level. On the other hand, the website is overloaded only with informative content (information about events, Mayor’s activities, etc.).

¹⁶<http://www.gevgelija.gov.mk/images/banners/sistem48-2016.pdf>

¹⁷<http://dajpredlog.mk/>

¹⁸https://sites.google.com/a/fspub.unibuc.ro/european-quarterly-of-political-attitudes-and-mentalities/Home/eqpam-vol-5-no-4-october-2016-cvetanova_pachovski_bojadznievska

¹⁹http://www.eib.org/attachments/efs/assessment_of_financing_needs_of_smes_fyrom_en.pdf

Taking into consideration that the Macedonian society is multiethnic and in accordance with the Ohrid Framework Agreement²⁰, many of the multiethnic municipalities are supposed to use both languages: the language of the dominant ethnic community and the official language. Subsequently, these principles should be applied on the municipalities' websites accordingly. However, our research uncovered that some of the multiethnic municipalities (Brvenica, Saraj, Cair, Bogovinje) do not use on their websites the official language (Macedonian language) that remains a serious obstacle for information access. On the other hand, Skopje, Struga, Debar, Tetovo, Tearce, Aracinovo, Dolneni, Jegunovce, Kichevo, should be pointed out as positive examples for information provided in two languages, and Gostivar for the content provided in three languages. The language in this context is not just a matter of interethnic relations. It could be seen as a cause to deepening the digital divide (Cvetanova and Pachovski, 2014).

It means that the citizens in the Republic of Macedonia do not have an opportunity to participate in a discussion forum that is intended to be a space to raise issues of local importance.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the question of whether the concept of e-democracy is introduced on local level in the Republic of Macedonia, with special emphasis of the types of e-democracy initiatives used.

For the purpose of our research we analyzed the websites of the units of local-self government (municipalities) in the Republic of Macedonia in the period of 2017, with special emphasis on e-democracy initiatives in order to provide a framework for their classification. The e-democracy initiatives (e-tools) were classified by the levels of citizens' involvement they provide: **information** (1st level), **consultation** (2nd level) and **active participation** (3th level).

In order to determine whether and to which extent the concept of e-democracy is introduced on local level in the Republic of Macedonia and what types of the e-democracy initiatives are used for the purpose of enhancing transparency, accountability and participation, the following aspects were analyzed:

- E-tools used (available) on the official municipal websites
- Types of e-tools classified by the levels of citizens' involvement they provide
- Presence of the Municipalities on Social Networks
- The use of languages on municipal websites in accordance with the Ohrid Framework Agreement as a prerequisite for citizens' accessibility.

Following are the conclusions, which have been drawn from this study and a brief discussion regarding each conclusion:

- 13 or 16% of the Municipalities in Macedonia do not have functional website. It means that the citizens who live in these municipalities have no access to any public information or the opportunity to actively participate in the process of policy-making on local level.

²⁰According to the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the official language throughout Macedonia and in the international relations of Macedonia 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.

- The most used e-tool on municipal websites is the “budget” e-tool (43%). However, it is not an e-tool that enables the citizens actively to participate in creating the municipality budget, but an e-tool that only shows the budget items
- On the municipal websites are used only e-tools from the 1st or Information level and 2nd or Consultation level. The e-tools such as e-voting or e-referendum – those that comprise the 3rd or Active participation level – are not available at all.
- The municipalities are present on social networks with their official web profiles on YouTube (18%), Twitter (21%) and Facebook (46%). However, Social networks are mostly used as a platform for the promotion of the Mayor activities.
- 1/3 of the overall e-tools used on the municipal websites (6 from 19 e-initiatives) belong to the category of e-services.

The study indicated progress and novelty that is based on the Freedom of Information Act i.e. the availability of an e-tool called “Request for public information”. However, this e-tool does not provide any report regarding the feedback, or in other words whether the requests of the citizens have been taken into consideration and have been acted accordingly.

The research discovered many outstanding local e-democracy initiatives. However, there is a little evidence that these initiatives have done much to ameliorate the democratic issues that Republic of Macedonia is facing in general and on local level, such as weak democratic institutions, low level of trust in the institutions and low level of citizens participation in democratic processes using ICT as intermediary.

Hence, the local authorities are not creating enough space for democratic participation and civic dialogue in general, thus not enabling the citizens to actively participate and contribute in the process of policy making on local level. They do not engage citizens through digital media i.e. e-democracy initiatives, which, on the other hand, would mean strengthening active participation in law-making, policy-making and legislative process.

The research indicated that the citizens in the Republic of Macedonia do not have any opportunity to participate in e-discussion forums that are intended to be a space to raise issues of local importance.

The paper also provides some recommendations for improving e-democracy initiatives on local level and their performance in general.

8. Recommendation Based on the Findings

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, here are several recommendations to be considered:

- It is important to make sure the civil servants who are appointed to implement the **Freedom of Information Act** have a sufficient training. They have to be knowledgeable of the responsibilities rising under the Freedom of Information Act.
- The answers or the information provided to a certain party/stakeholder requested under the **Freedom of Information Act** should be proactively published. This will ease the burden onto the administration to conduct the same work twice or more times.
- Responses to requests to the **Freedom of Information Act** and statistical data should be provided on the received requests and the published data on the basis of the requests.
- Concerning the **Freedom of Information Act** a registry of all the data the Municipality has at disposal should be made, so the citizens could know which information can be provided. Also, when providing replies to the requests, the language should be simplified so that is understood by the citizens. Overly expert vocabulary can make the information unusable.

- The proposal of the draft **budget**, the annual accounts/estimations, any amendments etc. should circulate as widely as possible, in particularly on the Internet. This has to be done prior to the adoption of the budget and give the possibility to the citizen to give proposals. The budget should be presented in an easy way, understandable for the wider public.
- Regarding the **e-services** of the municipalities – quality information is a must and also their usability 24/7. The information must be up to date so that the service is valid. The minimum accessibility standards should be ensured. Information has to be easily accessible and accessible also for the persons with impairments. The services need to be simplified and not too complicated for, so the citizens are encouraged to use them.
- The local authorities should use the ICT to be in touch with the citizens and to provide interactive communication with them.
- All the e- tools and recommendations can bring results only when used by the citizens and the civil society. Formal and informal consultations should be encouraged and they should be practiced during open or public debates.
- In order to give an equal opportunity to the citizens to participate in democratic and political processes on local level, the issue of digital divide should be addressed adequately.
- More attention should be paid on developing ICT sectors and adequate ICT infrastructure in the municipalities, as well as to improve digital skills and services.
- The focus should be paid on developing e-deliberation initiatives so the citizens - using online forums or e-discussion - could raise issues of local importance thus enhancing e-democracy participation at the same time.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research on this topic should be undertaken in order to investigate which pre-conditions correlate to success in some types of e-democracy initiatives or failure in others.

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Appendix

List of e-tools:

Level 1	<p>Services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-forms • E-license for building • E-urbanism • E-auction for a urban parcels • Application for supporting the business in the municipality • GIS portal • E-public procurements • E-overview on tax obligations <p>Initiatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-campaign • Budget • Public procurements (advertisements) • Request for public information • File a request
Level 2:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • File a request with a list of answers to previous requests • e-mail for a message or a question • Report a problem • E-discussions • e-initiative • E-poll
Level 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-referendum • e-voting

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