

# *E-Democracy and E-Participation in Slovenian Local Self-Government*

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The paper analyses the usage of e-participation tools in Slovenian municipalities. The paper originates from the theory of e-democracy in connection with information and communication technology (ICT). ICT allows citizen participation and inclusiveness in the processes of decision-making by use of various e-participation tools (e-contact, e-forum, e-survey, e-petition, etc.). An emphasis is placed on local democracy and its various forms, i.e. representative, market, network and (most importantly for this paper) participatory democracy, one of the increasing elements of which is also e-participation. We analysed the official web pages of all 211 Slovenian municipalities and

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found that while all municipalities offer e-access and various forms of e-consultations to its citizens, other e-participation tools can rarely be found. In addition, a comparative analysis of survey results from 2006 and 2009 shows that the number of municipalities which offer diverse tools of e-participation is slowly decreasing.

*Key words:* participatory democracy, ICT, e-democracy, e-participation, municipalities, Slovenia

## 1. Introduction: the Role of E-Participation in E-Democracy

In the last decade there has been much talk of apathy, a democratic deficit, people turning away from politics, declining voter turnout and decreasing membership of political parties. However, there is also real evidence that people can be mobilised to participate even in this 'apathetic' age by using new information communication technologies (ICT). ICT can be used to provide input, bring political processes closer to the citizens and serve as a tool to actively follow events and issues. The inevitable interaction between society and technology is known as e-democracy. At least the following three aspects of e-democracy should be examined: 1) the importance of an active civil society for democratic action, 2) the development of information-communication capabilities that support this kind of action in the operational civil sphere, and 3) the knowledge of the role of ICT as a key driving force of the new information society era (Pičman Štefančič, 2008: 19). A clear correlation of these factors is crucial when we consider the future of e-democracy, in order to offer the civil society new opportunities for communication, information and participation, and for social organizations to contribute to the development of new processes, relationships and attitudes. The introduction of new technologies in democratic processes has a minimum of four effects: improving the condition of being informed about society; providing transparent functioning of the authorities; expanding citizens' participatory performance and increasing the deliberative performances in the civil sphere (Pičman Štefančič, 2008: 24).

Before we delve deeper into the analysis of one of these four effects – i.e. the expansion of participatory performance for citizens – we must first

explain the concept of e-democracy. Oblak (2003: 135) claims that there is no clear and unambiguous answer to the question what e-democracy is. Furthermore, this term cannot be described by a single unanimous and undisputed definition. Clift (2006) observes that in an e-democracy, the Internet can enhance the existing democratic processes and increase possibilities for interaction between groups and individuals with decision-makers. Furthermore, the Internet enables the decision-makers to obtain more information and data about the requirements and preferences of the citizens. Therefore, Clift sees the Internet as a tool in the context of e-democracy that offers new opportunities for both communication and participation between citizens and the state (Clift, in Riley, Riley, 2003: 11). According to Clift, e-democracy represents the use of ICT and strategies within the political and governmental processes at the international, national and local levels by democratic agents, such as citizens and voters, political organizations, elected officials, the government and the media. E-democracy allows greater active participation of citizens in direct forms of involvement (Clift, 2004). Hacker and van Dijk (2000) define e-democracy as the implementation of democratic practices without time and space restrictions or any other physical limitations through ICT and computer communication. These new democratic practices are thus an addition or an upgrade to existing democratic practices. Oblak (2003: 135) notes that e-democracy is not a project that would compete with existing democratic systems, but rather that it is compatible with a variety of existing institutions; in practice, however, e-democracy is often portrayed as a project trying to correct the deficiencies of institutions. Therefore, e-democracy is not a new type or form of democracy, but simply an adaptation of existing forms to new circumstances.

However, e-democracy is not only access to public information on the websites of government and public institutions, nor is it merely the ability of citizens to communicate with their political representatives via e-mail. E-democracy is a set of electronic tools that affords citizens the possibility of shaping opinions – in other words, citizens become co-designers of the opinions published on the websites of political decision-makers and are, therefore, public. E-democracy's ability to enable a greater democratisation of political life rests upon a minimum of three assumptions (Oblak, 2003: 28–31):

1. *Simplicity, accessibility and interactivity of the technology*: this is primarily a phenomenon of modern society, which presents a problem of spatial, temporal and physical barriers that become irrelevant when using ICT. Information technology is simple and universally accessible.

2. *Revitalisation of the role of a citizen*: the principle refers to the need to redefine the role of a citizen. It is necessary to find new ways in which we could encourage citizens to perform public actions, for which ICT offers a simple solution.

3. *Entry of citizens in decision-making processes*: the active involvement of citizens, where political institutions also play an important role, which enables citizen participation.

An essential element of e-democracy is the construction of new contemporary participatory channels. Over the last few years, participation has become a highly political issue, and e-participation is seen as a major factor in this development. Some see e-participation as a solution to many democratic challenges, while others see it as a threat, particularly because of digital divide challenges. There are also some who see it as largely irrelevant (European E-Participation Summary Report, 2009: 5). The reality is probably a mixture of all three, so the task is to steer a careful path to ensure that the benefits realised outweigh all else.

E-participation is the central core of e-democracy because in this sphere the democratic contribution of ICT is most direct – new technologies bring to the decision-making processes opportunities for collaboration, participation and co-decision-making of citizens. E-participation 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). E-participation is seen by so many political agents as a solution to the increasingly significant issue of the democratic deficit at all levels of the political system. Nevertheless, the reality of e-participation is somewhat different, because it is not a definitive solution to the low political participation of citizens. Participation possibilities are also dependent on the willingness of citizens to use the opportunities that ICT offers for their active participation and to become more informed voters and actors in social life. Certainly, e-participation 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 (see Oblak, 2000: 121).

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has developed a three-stage model of e-participation or involvement of citizens in political decision-making (Coleman, Gütze, 2001: 13):

1. *Information*: a one-way relationship between the state and its citizens, in which they actively and passively acquire information, which is a basis

and a prerequisite for political participation (for example, the official website).

2. *Consultation*: a two-way relationship between the state and its citizens, in which the state obtains feedback in the form of citizen opinions. The state defines the problem and wants people's opinions (e.g. online consultations on legislative proposals).

3. *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 recognised as a major player in the field of initiating, designing and making decisions about public policies (e.g. a referendum).

The foundation of democracy is the active participation of citizens in public life at both the national and local level. Local authorities are, in fact, one of the main pillars of any democratic regime (Haček, 2010: 43); furthermore, the right of citizens to participate in public affairs is one of the fundamental principles of democracy. A low level of participation in the democratic process is both a concern and an obstacle to the functioning of local democracy. More important forms of direct participation of citizens in local democracy exist in democratically elected local government bodies. It is therefore necessary to create systems of local democracy in which citizens have the greatest opportunity to participate. The use of e-participation is an important step in this direction.

In this paper we analyse the usage of e-democracy and tools of e-participation in Slovenian municipalities in a comparative perspective to previous comparable research studies, and identify which types of local communities are most open to e-participation. We also analyse the views of Slovenian mayors with respect to e-participation and the involvement of citizens in local issues in order to explain the results of the primary analysis. At the same time, based on the theoretical assumptions, we will verify if opportunities for citizen e-participation are indeed increasing in terms of the diversity of e-participation tools, and the number of municipalities that offer their citizens such tools.

## 2. Different Concepts of Local Democracy: Participatory Democracy and E-Participation

New opportunities for civic political action have emerged in the contemporary societal transformation process that is often considered to lead towards a post-modern information society (Keskinen, 1999). The rapid development and diffusion of new ICT provides various political agencies with new tools, channels and methods which can be utilised in order to transform closed representative democracy systems into more open and communicative ones, and to facilitate new forms of authentic civic political action (Malina, 2003; Hoff et al., 2000). Therefore ICT has an important role in the process of redefining and reformulating modern liberal democracies (Hoff et al., 2000: 1; Bellamy, 2000: 33; Häyhtiö, Keskinen, 2005). ICT means that whole new sets of concepts and practical solutions can be articulated when different types of e-participation are manifested in modernised societies (Coleman, Gütze, 2001). The common notion for inclusive political governance is that citizens must be connected to the political regime (OECD, 2008).

E-participation has a considerable potential to change 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 more direct forms. The discussion about democratic local governance has its roots in early theories about participatory democracy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Consideration of the literature, which is both conceptual and reflects on actual attempts to give local government/governance an institutional shape, should help to identify the different concepts of local democracy. In an international comparative perspective, Naschold (1996: 298–300) suggested a distinction of four types: representative, industrial, user and direct. These four types stand for different dimensions of participation, which according to his empirical observations, serve as guiding principles in current local government reforms – most often in specific combinations. A broader view has been proposed by Stoker (1991: 261–268), who took the well-known distinctions between hierarchy, market and network as guiding principles for institutional transformation. Haus and Sweeting (2006) have combined both typologies and redefined the respective categories in a broader and more open way. They proposed the following four categories of local democracy: representative, user, network and participatory democracy.

Participatory democracy can be defined abstractly as a regime in which adult citizens assemble to deliberate and 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. 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. Furthermore, according to Pateman (1970: 42–43), public participation in community 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 act of participation which follows. 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 competently. 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 the circumstances. And ICT, with its various tools, definitely has the potential to make (local) government more democratic and participatory through new channels for democratic involvement.

### 3. E-Participation Tools

The introduction of ICT in democratic processes opens up new opportunities for civic participation. ICT enables e-democracy to offer a range of different models of e-tools that allow either more or less active citizen involvement in the democratic functioning of the government. According to their own interests, citizens can freely choose the desired form of cooperation, whether it relates to the use of new technologies to easily communicate initiatives, complaints and complements; convey criticism and comments; express opinions, interests and points of view; gain online access to earlier suggestions and the course of proceedings in connection with those suggestions; launch petitions and collect signatures; file requests for information on topics in an open forum or just communicate with decision-makers. The potential of e-tools is limited only by technological capabilities and the creativity of their creators; the final success of e-tools depends primarily on the activities and the willingness of citizens to use them.

The most frequently used tool is a classification based on the direct input of the participants.<sup>2</sup> With the aim of creating a legitimate and rational categorisation, an alternative systematization of e-tools is proposed, which considers both the nature of the activities of co-participants as well as their contribution to openness and democratic decision-making structures:

1. *Information e-tools*: refer to both the dissemination and consummation of information, whether the authors of such tools are citizens, civic groups or rulers. Conceptually, such behaviour defines a rule in which one portion of the participants remain inactive. This group therefore comprises various forms of e-access (e-mail alerts, e-browsers).
2. *Communication e-tools*: active participation of both the government as well as civil society is present, while the latter is not an equal participant in the decision-making processes. This category of e-tools refers to the group of activities that require participant activation, but it does not predict a direct correlation between this operation and the final decision. This

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<sup>2</sup> See also the classification of the Organization for Economic Integration and Development (OECD, 2003), which highlights three groups of e-tools, i.e. information, consultation and active participatory; similar classification of the features and content of power sites can be found in Norris (2004: 21), who divides e-tools into information, communication and action tools, as well as at the United Nations (United Nations, 2005: 20), which divide participatory e-tools into e-information, e-consultation and e-decision making.



category comprises e-forums (both those which connect with the level of civil society and those engaging citizens and government representatives), e-surveys and e-petitions.

3. *Participative e-tools*: this category represents a cluster of all those interactions between civil society and the state or decision-makers, which require active involvement of the participants and expect a response from the authorities. Furthermore, the latter can escalate from mere compulsory treatment of results of communication in decision-making structures and the definition of given opinions to unconditional commitment to the will expressed. According to written criteria, this group comprises formally regulated forms of e-consultation, e-election or e-referendum (Pičman Štefančič, 2008: 57).

There is no doubt that e-participation tools are one of the most prominent attributes of e-democracy – whether it be applications that allow citizens to passively extract relevant information or (inter) active applications. E-participation can thus be implemented through a variety of tools:

1. *E-access* is a fundamental and inevitable point of continuing e-democratic functioning; it represents the basis of transmission and acquisition of relevant information to enable citizens to have equal and informed access to the public sphere, participation in deliberative processes and active participation in the democratic functioning of modern societies. The aim of this tool is to increase and improve citizen opportunities to access, review and monitor all public information available online as well as the results of their representatives' actions and decisions in various bodies and institutions at the national and local level. E-access is a strictly passive tool, but nevertheless it is, in practice, the dominant e-tool (Trechsel et al., 2003: 5).

2. *E-surveys* enable citizens to express their opinions on public affairs that are pre-determined by the government. E-surveys can be checked for opinions and possible public reactions to decisions made by the authorities. The aim of this tool is to determine the public pulse; with this tool, a citizen can actively express his views, but to a limited extent (for example, pre-modelled possible answers).

3. *E-petitions* allow citizens to become catalysts of political action – firstly, to initiate a petition in response to a public issue, and secondly, to support this initiative by signing it.

4. An *e-forum* is a tool that allows citizens to exchange views and opinions about a public matter. The aim of this tool is to strengthen the process

of creating civic views through a deliberative confrontation, which can take place before, after or independently of the political decision-making process. On their websites, institutions of public authority can utilise this tool to provide the opportunity for the exchange of interested citizens' opinions and views.

5. *E-consultation* is an interactive technique that involves reverse communication between citizens and public authorities. This tool is used for integrating members of the public, experts and/or stakeholders, NGOs and other public and political agents who have the option of commenting on individual topics about which decisions are made in certain policy areas. The aim of this tool is to cultivate a participatory/collaborative culture by encouraging the general public, stakeholders and experts to participate in the decision-making process.

6. An *e-referendum* allows citizens to participate directly in the decision-making process; their majority decision is binding for the public authority. The aim of this tool is to give citizens the opportunity to be clear on specific procurement solutions that should be adopted.

7. *E-voting* is the digitalisation of the electoral process. It is intended to enable citizens to vote for officers or representatives of public authorities. This tool also includes additional mechanisms for online voter registration and other operations that are necessary for democratically elected representatives. The aim of this tool is to increase the participation of citizens in the electoral process.

8. *Blogs* contribute to strengthening political participation and expanding the space for political freedom through communication, solicitation and education (see Pičman Štefančič, 2008: 59–89; Kvas, 2005).

#### 4. E-Participation in Slovenian Municipalities

Slovenia has clearly entered the path of the information society, which provides an excellent basis for the introduction of technological developments in the democratic sphere at the state and local level. However, despite the defined strategic objectives and a clear commitment to e-democracy or the participation and co-decision-making of citizens in decision-making processes, the situation regarding the implementation of strategies and achieving the objectives of general civic/citizen participation in decision-making processes is rather poor. As Delakorda notes

(2008: 2), it is alarming that Slovenia is lagging behind in the global implementation of e-participation tools; in 2004 it was in 41<sup>st</sup> place among 192 countries in the world, but in 2005 it was in 46<sup>th</sup> place. It is worth noting that according to a common index of e-government in a UN study conducted in 2008, Slovenia is ranked relatively well, coming in at 26<sup>th</sup> place among 192 countries (which is the same place it was ranked in the study in 2005). Delakorda (2008: 4) attributes this discrepancy between the general level of development of e-government and the relative stagnation and backwardness of Slovenia in the field of e-democracy and e-participation to the relatively late classification of e-democracy at the strategic level of the development of e-government strategies in the Republic of Slovenia. From the UN report on the state of e-government, which among other measures includes an index of electronic participation, it is clear that the situation in Slovenia in 2011 deteriorated in terms of the quality and usability of government information, the services for citizen participation in the design of public policies and in promoting citizen consultation and participation in decision-making. In the UN report for the year 2009, the index had a value of 0.5143, and it ranked as the 20<sup>th</sup> place in the world. In the report for 2011, however, the ranking was significantly worse as the index value was 0.2105, ensuring that it fell to the 72<sup>nd</sup> place on the scale (along with Bolivia, China, Indonesia, Senegal, Grenada, Latvia, Georgia and the Philippines), or 24<sup>th</sup> place in the indexed value. On the other hand, Slovenia has been awarded the UN Excellence in Public Administration award (UNPSA 2012), *Information support for preparation of processing rules* (IPP), in the category of improving participation in the field of decision-making and using new mechanisms (Institute for Electronic Participation, 2012). Both pieces of news – even though they are conflicting – illuminate the current state of citizen participation in the democratic processes and regulation in the context of e-government, and they call for further reflection on the current challenges of e-participation in Slovenia. Based on these data, it can be said that Slovenia's e-government lacks a conceptual shift towards citizen-oriented e-participation rooted in civil society.

The Slovenian government adopted a strategy for the implementation of e-commerce in local communities (e-municipality) in 2003. The strategy defines the guidelines for the introduction of e-commerce in local communities, and addresses problems, vision, success factors, objectives, institutional aspects and plans for the development of e-commerce communities. E-democracy is examined in the fifth chapter of the strategy, and the e-services that municipalities have to provide to their citizens are also

listed (such as forums, chats, surveys, etc.). The strategy also proposes regular weekly communication between citizens and the municipal administration. Municipalities must provide their citizens with the opportunity to participate, which includes sending proposals, questions, ideas and opinions. According to the strategy, municipal employees must provide at least one (written) response to every question, opinion or initiative; they also have to argue whether or not the proposals, suggestions and opinions of citizens were taken into account. In addition, the strategy requires municipal employees to publish an online survey on their official website before any major decision to verify the responses of citizens and respond to the question regarding whether a particular decision or plan is supported by citizens or not (Ministry of Information Society, 2003).

As we were interested in the actual state of e-democracy and e-participation in Slovenian municipalities, we analysed the official websites of municipalities and conducted a review of the e-tools that individual municipalities offer to their citizens.<sup>3</sup> First, we checked whether the municipality has an official website or not and, if it does, whether it allows for the public to comment on published news. We then determined which e-participation tools are available to individuals. We were particularly attentive to whether the municipalities have one of the most widely used e-tools: i.e. e-access, e-survey, e-forum and e-mail.<sup>4</sup>

We found that all Slovenian municipalities, i.e. 211 (100 per cent), 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 (some-

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<sup>3</sup> The research project *E-democracy and E-Participation in Slovenian Municipalities* was carried out 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.

<sup>4</sup> In reviewing and analysing e-participation tools in Slovenian municipalities, we found that they appear on portals, such as 'e-občina.si' or 'savinjska-informative social portal', where they have the option of publishing local news, as well as e-tools (for example, an e-survey). There is also a portal called 'MojaObcina.si' which was created by a private company and allows the associated municipalities (currently consisting of 31 municipalities; 12 of which are from the Central Slovenia statistical region) to publish local news and events that registered users can comment on. Since one of the goals of this paper is comparability with previous research on e-tools in Slovenian municipalities, we offer a similar methodology: we analysed only the official websites of the municipalities, and therefore we did not include e-tools that appear in other portals in the analysis.

times even minutes of meetings), applications, forms and more.<sup>5</sup> If this finding is compared with the results of previously conducted research studies,<sup>6</sup> we can see that the percentage of Slovenian municipalities with an official website has increased, from 86.8 per cent in 2006 to 99.1 per cent in 2009, and to the present 100 per cent. The same trend can be seen with e-access; it was offered by 174 municipalities in 2006, which represents 84.9 per cent, while in 2009, there were 184 municipalities offering e-mail access, or 87.6 per cent.

We were also interested in how municipalities provide opportunities for citizens to contact or consult with the mayor and the municipal administration. We found that all Slovenian municipalities have a publicly available e-mail address (either a general one, by sections or even by individual civil servants). Although the methods and applications of e-consultations vary amongst municipalities,<sup>7</sup> it can be said that all of the Slovenian municipalities allow citizens the opportunity to establish electronic communication.

The next e-tool is the e-survey.<sup>8</sup> We found that currently only 38 Slovenian municipalities (18 per cent) have published an e-survey on their official website.<sup>9</sup> If we have seen an increase in the percentage of e-access compared to the previous research studies, the opposite trend is detected for this e-tool. In 2006, 31.2 per cent of the municipalities used the e-survey as a tool for e-participation; in 2009, the number fell to 19.5 per cent of the municipalities. Even when using an e-forum, we found a reduction of the number of municipalities that allow this type of e-participation tool. In 2006, 12.7 per cent of the municipalities offered an e-forum to its cit-

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<sup>5</sup> We have detected that some municipalities have created a special application to access public content, namely 'e-commerce' or 'e-democracy'.

<sup>6</sup> The source of data for the year 2006 (see Kvas, 2006) and for the year 2009 (see Maček et al., 2009).

<sup>7</sup> For example, applications designed as forms whereby citizens submit 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 ask, the Mayor answers*, *E-initiatives* and others.

<sup>8</sup> Here we mention a few suggestions for designing surveys: the e-survey should concern the current events in the community and hot topics; the question should be clear; the answers should be multifaceted and there should always be the option of a neutral response. The time of survey questions varies depending on the topic or issue and relevance. The results are shown in figures, percentage and graphical form, and male and female responses should be presented separately, as the answers often vary significantly between the sexes.

<sup>9</sup> We took into account the presence of this e-tool on the official website of municipalities, even if at the time of measurement no survey was being carried out.

izens; data from 2009 already indicate a reduction in the use of e-forums (6.7 per cent of municipalities); currently, there are only eight municipalities with an e-forum, which is 3.8 per cent.

When analysing the official websites of municipalities, we found that the vast majority regularly updated their website with the publication of news and (upcoming) events. We also noticed that quite a few municipalities offer a subscription to an e-newsletter, which registered users receive in their inbox. The interesting part is that only three (1.4 per cent) of the 211 municipalities enable commenting on posts.<sup>10</sup>

Table 1: E-tools in Slovenian municipalities

municipalities	number of municipalities	website	e-tools				commenting on 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 e-participation in Slovenian municipalities, 2013)

If we analyse the urban municipalities separately, we see that six (56 per cent) out of a total of 11 urban municipalities in Slovenia are using e-surveys as a tool for e-participation; only two urban municipalities (18 per cent) have an active forum on its official website. Out of these two urban municipalities, only one (Municipality of Nova Gorica) offers an e-survey, and so it is the only municipality in Slovenia that offers its citizens four e-participation tools (e-access, e-survey or consultation, e-forum and e-mail). None of the urban municipalities allow commenting on public announcements and news.<sup>11</sup> Given the greater organisational and finan-

<sup>10</sup> Seen in comparison with the year 2009; none of the contemporary Slovenian municipalities offer the option of entering comments below the post.

<sup>11</sup> Seen in comparison with non-urban/ordinary municipalities; 32 (16 per cent) of a total of 200 municipalities provide an e-survey to their citizens, six (3 per cent) have an

cial capabilities of the urban municipalities in comparison with the vast majority of ordinary municipalities, a somewhat greater engagement and willingness to facilitate the e-participation of citizens would be expected, thereby strengthening e-democracy.

In the following analysis of e-tools in Slovenian municipalities, we merged the collected data in groups of municipalities according to their size in terms of population.<sup>12</sup> When comparing the groups of municipalities in terms of size of population (see Table 2), we find that in the group of municipalities with up to 3,000 inhabitants, only eight municipalities out of 58 (13.8 per cent) use e-surveys or e-consultation. Even in the group of municipalities with between 3,001 to 5,000 inhabitants, there are only eight (out of 53) that use e-surveys, which amounts to 15.1 per cent. In the next group (municipalities with between 5,001 and 10,000 inhabitants), nine of the 47 municipalities use e-surveys and e-consultation, which amounts to 19.1 per cent. In the group of municipalities with between 10,001 and 15,000 inhabitants, there are 19 municipalities, out of which six (31.6 per cent) use e-surveys and e-consultation. In the next group (municipalities with between 15,001 to 20,000 inhabitants), only two (11.8 per cent) of the 17 municipalities offer e-surveys or e-consultation; in the group of municipalities with between 20,001 and 30,000 inhabitants (eight municipalities), there is only one that uses such e-tools (12.5 per cent). In the last two groups – i.e. the largest municipalities in terms of population – there are nine municipalities. Out of seven municipalities in the group of between 30,001 and 100,000 inhabitants, three (42.9 per cent) offer this type of e-tool; just one (50 per cent) of the two largest Slovenian municipalities (over 100,000 inhabitants) uses e-surveys. If we analyse these figures with reference to the total number of Slovenian municipalities (38) that offer their citizens an e-survey, we find that 25 municipalities belong to the first three groups of municipalities (with up to 10,000 inhabitants, a total of 158 municipalities), with the relative proportion of municipalities with an e-survey at 15.8 per cent. There are 13 municipalities in the group of municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants

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e-forum and three municipalities (1.5 per cent) allow visitors to comment on public announcements and news.

<sup>12</sup> The municipalities were divided into the following eight groups: (1) municipalities up to 3,000 inhabitants; (2) municipalities of 3,001 to 5,000 inhabitants; (3) municipalities of 5,001 to 10,000 inhabitants; (4) municipalities of 10,001 to 15,000 inhabitants; (5) municipalities of 15,001 to 20,000 inhabitants; (6) municipalities of 20,001 to 30,000 inhabitants; (7) municipalities of 30,001 to 100,000 inhabitants and (8) municipalities of over 100,000 inhabitants (see Haček, 2011).

(a total of 53 municipalities) offering e-surveys, the relative proportion being 24.5 per cent. We find similar results regarding the use of e-forums. Out of the eight municipalities that use this e-tool, six of them are smaller municipalities of up to 10,000 inhabitants (a relative share of 3.8 per cent), and two are larger municipalities with a population over 10,000 (a relative share of 3.8 per cent). According to the collected data, it can be said that citizens in larger municipalities tend to use e-surveys and e-forums for e-participation (in addition to e-access and e-mail) more often than in smaller ones.

Table 2: E-tools in Slovenian municipalities – list of municipalities according to municipality size in terms of population

Group of municipalities	number of municipalities	website	e-tools			
			e-access	e-survey	e-forum	e-mail
Municipalities up to 3,000 inhabitants	58 (100 %)	58 (100 %)	58 (100 %)	8 (13.8 %)	3 (17.8 %)	58 (100 %)
Municipalities of 3,001 to 5,000 inhabitants	53 (100 %)	53 (100 %)	53 (100 %)	8 (15.1 %)	2 (3.8 %)	53 (100 %)
Municipalities of 5,001 to 10,000 inhabitants	47 (100 %)	47 (100 %)	47 (100 %)	9 (19.1 %)	1 (2.1 %)	47 (100 %)
Municipalities of 10,001 to 15,000 inhabitants	19 (100 %)	19 (100 %)	19 (100 %)	6 (31.6 %)	0 (0 %)	19 (100 %)
Municipalities of 15,001 to 20,000 inhabitants	17 (100 %)	17 (100 %)	17 (100 %)	2 (11.8 %)	0 (0 %)	17 (100 %)
Municipalities of 20,001 to 30,000 inhabitants	8 (100 %)	8 (100 %)	8 (100 %)	1 (12.5 %)	0 (0 %)	8 (100 %)
Municipalities of 30,001 to 100,000 inhabitants	7 (100 %)	7 (100 %)	7 (100 %)	3 (42.9 %)	2 (28.6 %)	7 (100 %)
Municipalities over 100,000 inhabitants	2 (100 %)	2 (100 %)	2 (100 %)	1 (50 %)	0 (0 %)	2 (100 %)

Source: Research project *E-demokracija in e-participacija v slovenskih občinah* (E-democracy and e-participation in Slovenian municipalities, 2013).



At this point, we will address the position of Slovenian mayors regarding the participation and involvement of citizens.<sup>13</sup> We asked mayors to indicate how important for local democracy they feel the listed requirements are (from 1, 'of little importance' to 5, 'very important'). As can be seen in Table 3, the mayors assessed all statements as relatively important (all ratings are above the average value, which is 2.50). It can be concluded that Slovenian mayors are in favour of citizens' active and direct participation in local issues; citizens must have the opportunity to express their views before important decisions are made by municipal councillors, and furthermore, citizens must be actively involved in policy-making processes.

Table 3: Importance of local democratic requirements

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Residents should participate actively and directly in making important local decisions.	3.65	1.091
Residents should have the opportunity to make their views known before important local decisions are made by elected representatives.	3.60	1.086
Council decisions should reflect a majority opinion among residents.	4.17	0.911
Political representatives should make what they think are the right decisions, independent of the current views of local people.	3.28	1.301
Urban leaders should try to generate consensus and shared values among local citizens/groups.	4.42	0.824
The results of local elections should be mostly decisive for determining municipal policies.	3.19	1.219

Source: Research project *Styles of local political leadership* (2014).

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 are useful and effective to gain insight into what citizens think (Table 4).

<sup>13</sup> 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. The survey response rates were very good, as 130 out of 211 mayors (62 per cent) of Slovenian municipalities responded to the survey.

Table 4: Methods of effective communication

Methods	Not effective	Only effective in special circumstances	Effective
Citizens' letters via the Internet	3.9	55.0	41.1
Citizens' letters in the local press	9.3	48.8	41.9
Formalised complaints or suggestions	2.3	33.3	64.3
Petitions	18.8	62.5	18.8
Information on citizens' position gathered by the councillors	5.4	50.0	44.6
Information on citizens' position gathered by people working in local administration	2.3	41.5	56.2
Information on citizens' position gathered by the local parties	33.1	56.2	10.8
Public debates and meetings	0.8	27.1	72.1
Satisfaction surveys	11.7	56.3	32.0
Neighbourhood panels or forums	6.2	57.7	36.2
Forums via the Internet	30.0	56.9	13.1
Focus groups	24.0	63.6	12.4
Self-organised citizen initiatives	7.7	57.7	34.6
Referenda	19.2	60.0	20.8
Personal meetings in the town-hall	0	4.6	95.4

Source: Research project *Styles of local political leadership* (2014).

As can be seen, 30 per cent of mayors assessed forums via the Internet as the most ineffective method of communication, 56.9 per cent assessed them as only effective in special circumstances and only 13.1 per cent assessed them as effective. This result can be connected with the fact that the proportion of municipalities that offer e-surveys and e-forums to their citizens has been decreasing since 2006. More than half of the mayors assessed citizens' letters via the Internet (55 per cent), petitions (62.5 per cent), satisfaction surveys (56.3 per cent), focus groups (63.6 per cent) and referenda (60 per cent) as only effective in special circumstances. Mayors viewed personal meetings in the town hall (95.4 per cent), public debates and meetings (72.1 per cent), and formalised complaints or suggestions (64.3 per cent) as the most effective methods. The results show that mayors are still in favour of personal meetings with citizens: on average, they spend 6.3 hours per week in meetings with citizens; 3.1 per cent of mayors communicate with citizens 1–3 times a month, 7.7 per cent of

mayors do so once a week, 14.6 per cent of mayors do so 2–4 times a week and 74.6 per cent of the mayors in the survey communicate daily with the citizens. We can conclude that Slovenian mayors support citizens' active inclusion in local public issues and processes, but they are still rather sceptical about the new technologies and tools of e-participation.

## 5. Conclusion

The expansion of e-democracy and e-participation tools along with it enhances the involvement of citizens in the decision-shaping processes to involve the widest possible audience. E-democracy is not only important at a national level, but also at a local level, underscoring the strategy of the introduction of e-commerce in local communities (e-municipalities) adopted in 2003. Although the strategy is intended to foresee exactly how to introduce e-democracy in the functioning of municipalities, our analysis shows that it remains only a faint approximation of reality.

In this paper we were interested in the prevalence of e-democracy in Slovenian municipalities in connection with the issue of the provision of e-participation tools for citizens. We analysed the usage of e-participation tools in Slovenian municipalities, and found that all municipalities (211) have basic e-tools, i.e. an official website, e-access and e-mail, or allow some form of e-consultations for citizens. However, as far as other e-tools are concerned, we find that e-surveys are provided by 38 municipalities out of 211 (18 per cent), whereas e-forums are only provided by eight municipalities out of 211 (3.8 per cent). If we compare the results with earlier surveys from 2006 and 2009, we see that the number of municipalities that have an official website and allow e-access and e-mail has increased, while the proportion of municipalities that offer e-surveys and e-forums to its citizens has decreased. We can also confirm that municipalities with 10,000 or more inhabitants are slightly more likely to choose (in addition to e-access and e-mail) e-surveys and e-forums to encourage the e-participation of citizens.

According to our analysis, we can say that our initial assumption – i.e. the increased number of municipalities that offer citizens e-participation tools, and that the diversity of e-participation tools increases with the expansion of ICT – is only partially true in the case of Slovenian municipalities. With the expansion of ICT, the number of municipalities that have their official website and e-access, e-mail or any other form of e-con-

sultation (the minimum requirement of the Strategy, 2003) increased. At the same time, the number of municipalities that offered e-surveys and e-forums in previous years decreased. It is also notable that the number of municipalities that offered its citizens a variety of e-tools decreased.

We were also interested in the opinions of mayors regarding local democracy; results show that mayors are in favour of citizen inclusion in local public issues and processes, but prefer personal meetings instead of e-participation tools. According to their opinions, new technologies are seen as a good solution for informing citizens, but not as a useful form of political participation or a useful tool for communication about key local problems and issues.

Given that e-democracy is certainly one way into the future, and has been hailed in many respects as the solution to the participation deficit problems faced by modern developed democracies, Slovenia still requires some work in this field. Slovenian e-government needs a conceptual shift towards citizen-oriented and established e-participation by civil society – the latter strengthens the capability of a democratic and legal state, ensuring a high degree of social cohesion and justice, when eliminating the causes of the financial and economic crisis. On the other hand, one must be aware that e-participation tools do not guarantee success. When setting up e-democracy and e-participation tools, the involvement of both sides is necessary – i.e. institutions that will want to enable e-participation and citizens who will want to participate.

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## E-DEMOCRACY AND E-PARTICIPATION IN SLOVENIAN LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

### Summary

*The paper analyses the usage of e-participation tools in Slovenian municipalities. The paper originates from the theory of e-democracy in connection with information and communication technology (ICT). ICT allows citizen participation and inclusiveness in the processes of decision-making by use of various e-participation tools (e-contact, e-forum, e-survey, e-petition, etc.). An emphasis was placed on local democracy and its various forms, i.e. representative, market, network and (most importantly for this paper) participative democracy, one of the increasing elements of which is also e-participation. We analysed official web pages of all 211 Slovenian municipalities and found that while all municipalities offer e-access and various forms of e-consultations to its citizens, other e-participation tools can only rarely be found. In addition, a comparative analysis of the survey results from 2006 and 2009 shows that the number of municipalities which offer diverse tools of e-participation is slowly decreasing.*

Key words: participatory democracy, ICT, e-democracy, e-participation, municipalities, Slovenia

## E-DEMOKRACIJA I E-PARTICIPACIJA U SLOVENSKOJ LOKALNOJ SAMOUPRAVI

### Sažetak

*Analizira se upotreba instrumenata e-participacije u slovenskim lokalnim samoupravnim jedinicama. Rad se temelji na teoriji e-demokracije u vezi sa spoznajama o informacijsko-komunikacijskoj tehnologiji (IKT). IKT omogućuje sudjelovanje i uključivanje građana u procese donošenja odluka upotrebom različitih instrumenata e-participacije (e-kontakt, e-forum, e-anкета, e-peticija, itd.). Naglasak je stavljen na lokalnu demokraciju i njezine različite oblike, tj. predstavničku, tržišnu, mrežnu i (najvažniju za ovaj rad) participativnu demokraciju, čiji je jedan od rastućih elemenata također e-participacija. Analizirali smo službene internetske stranice svih 211 slovenskih jedinica lokalne samouprave i našli da sve nude e-pristup i različite forme e-konzultacija, ali da ostali instrumenti e-participacije postoje samo u rijetkim slučajevima. Dodatno, usporedna analiza rezultata anketa iz 2006. i 2009. pokazuje da se broj jedinica lokalne samouprave koje nude raznovrsne instrumente e-participacije sporo smanjuje.*

*Ključne riječi: participativna demokracija, IKT, e-demokracija, e-participacija, jedinice lokalne samouprave, Slovenija*