E-DEMOCRACY AND ePARTICIPATION IN SLOVENIAN LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

Simona KUKOVIČ and Marjan BREZOVŠEK

ABSTRACT: Paper analyses the usage of e-democracy in Slovenian municipalities from the viewpoint of tools of eParticipation. Origin of the paper is the theory of e-democracy in connection with information and communication technology (ICT). ICT allows participation and inclusiveness to the citizens in the processes of decision making with the usage of various tools of e-participation (e-contact, e-forum, e-survey, e-petition, etc.). We put additional emphasis on the local democracy and its various form, i.e. representative, market, network and (for this paper the most important) participative democracy; one of the increasing element of the latter is also e-participation. We analysed official web pages of all 211 Slovenian municipalities and found out that all municipalities offer e-access and various forms of e-consultations to its citizens, but other e-tools can only be sparsely found. In addition, the 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. Furthermore, we found out that according to the opinions of Slovenian mayors, the new technologies are seen as good solution for informing citizens, but not as a useful form of political participation or for communication about the key local problems.


1 Simona Kukovič, PhD Candidate, Research and Teaching Assistant, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Kardeljeva pločcad 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: simona.kukovic@fdv.uni-lj.si. Marjan Brezovšek, PhD, Full Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Kardeljeva pločcad 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: marjan.brezovsek@fdv.uni-lj.si.
1 INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXT AND ROLE OF ePARTICIPATION IN E-DEMOCRACY

In the last decade there has been much talk of apathy, the 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. As least the following three aspects of E-democracy should be examined: 1) in terms of the importance of an active civil society for democratic action; 2) in terms of the development of information-communication capabilities that support this kind of action in the operational civil sphere and 3) in terms of knowledge on 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 thinking about the future of e-democracy in order to offer the civil society new possibilities of 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 at least the following 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 use of different names of e-democracy. Oblak (2003: 135) claims that there is not a clear and unambiguous answer to the question regarding what e-democracy is. Furthermore, this term cannot be described with 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 and 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, 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 restrictions of time and space or any other physical limitations through ICT and computer communication. These new democratic practices are thus an addition or upgrade to already existing democratic practices. Oblak (2003: 135) notes that e-democracy is not a project that would compete with the 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 the public information on the websites of government and public institutions, nor is it merely the ability of citizens to communicate with

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2 The use of modern information and communication (ICT) technologies in democratic practices of the political systems: the authors name it differently. In some authors’ research we can find the concept of e-democracy (e.g. Oblak, 2002), while others use the concept of virtual democracy (e.g. Hagen, 1996) or digital democracy (Hacker and van Dijk, 2000). Despite some differences, the authors’ baselines are very similar; among them, there are some differences in the focus on a particular aspect of e-democracy. In this paper, we use the term ‘e-democracy’, both because of the appropriateness in the context of the theme as well as the generality of the prefix ‘e-’, which represents technological and human progress in everyday social life.

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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. Political decision-makers seeking opinions of citizens and voters can later include such opinions in their decisions and plans. Citizens are therefore included in the communication and decision-making processes within the state and municipal institutions. In addition, e-democracy’s ability to enable a greater democratization of political life rests upon at least the following 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. *Revitalization 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 public actions, for which ICT offers a simple solution.

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

E-democracy thus opens the way for the utilization of ICT in online operation in the following areas: access to information; survey inquiries; political debates; political campaigning and fundraising; communication between citizens and decision-makers; delivering comments and suggestions on politic guidelines; forwarding opinions on draft laws and other general acts; wider social consultation on matters of common concern and petitions, voter registration and voting or turning in the vote (Pičman Štefančič, 2008: 36–37).

An essential element of e-democracy is the construction of participatory channels. Over the last few years, participation has become a highly political issue, and eParticipation is seen as a major factor in this development. Some see eParticipation as a saviour 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 eParticipation 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.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2008), participation must be seen within the wider context of both new demands on democratic systems and new forms of engagement by citizens in services as well as policy-making. ICT is opening up new opportunities, but also reveals new dangers and profound consequences for the way we understand what policy-making and participation can become (see Table 1).

### Table 1: Important opportunities and challenges of the application of ICT to participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Opportunities and challenges</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>decision and policy making initiated by government</td>
<td>ICT can exploit the vast reserves of data the public sector has available to develop, model, visualise and simulate decisions and policies. Also by involving constituents through political representatives or directly through processes of information, consultation, active participation and elections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>empowerment from the bottom</td>
<td>ICT can help to leverage the voices and expertise of huge numbers of individuals and groups, setting their own agendas and developing their own policies in new forms of ‘crowdsourcing’, mass collaboration and mass creativity. This can also result in short term single issue politics, and sometimes in instant street politics and forms of mob-rule, but can potentially also build to more permanent countervailing power bases possibly at odds with governments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>empowering communities and localities</td>
<td>ICT can support the extension of participation beyond formal politics and the ballot box, by promoting subsidiarity at local and neighbourhood level. This leverages local resources, know-how and skills for developing new forms of advocacy, support and social capital, which can both strengthen diverse cultures</td>
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</table>
and interests as well as bridge between them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transparency and openness</th>
<th>Can be supported by ICT through freedom of information and consultation, to reveal the purposes, processes and outcomes of government, also through real-time tracking and tracing. This will help place responsibility, reduce corruption and make decisions more responsive, although legitimate privacy and the space for risk taking should be safeguarded.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accountability, rights and responsibilities</td>
<td>ICT contributes to these becoming blurred as decision and policy-making are opened up and government shares the stage with other actors. Important questions are raised about whose voices are heard and who do they represent, with the ever present danger of trivialisation and short-termism unless the right to participate in policy making is balances with some responsibility for policy impacts.</td>
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The overview of digital age engagement methodologies compares the breadth and depth of participation with the types of benefits they could be associated with. There are four zones (idea, education, recommendation and decision zone), each of which is made up of a number of specific types of activities. Thus, ideas are more likely to be generated in smaller groups using a mix of online and offline techniques, whilst decisions at a societal level need to be more broadly based across mass populations; such participation could move towards mainly online methods in the future (European eParticipation Summary Report, 2009: 12).

Figure 1: Digital age engagement methodologies

Although there is likely to be a tendency for ICT to play a stronger role moving down and to the right hand side as seen in Figure 1, the specific application of ICT in practice will vary according to circumstances and objectives, as well as in relation to new applications and tools as they become available (Williams, 2008).

eParticipation is the central core of e-democracy because in this sphere, the democratic contribution of ICT is most obvious – new technologies bring to the decision-making processes tremendous opportunities for collaboration, participation and co-decision-making of citizens.
eParticipation refers to all forms of active civic involvement and technology-based communications, whether it be just giving views and opinions, interactive participation in the preparation of proposals or even equal (co)deciding (Pičman Štefančič, 2008: 43). eParticipation is seen by so many political agents as a saviour of the increasingly larger issue of the democratic deficit at all levels of the political system. Nevertheless, the reality of eParticipation is somewhat different, because it is not a definitive solution to the low political participation of citizens. Participation possibilities are also dependent on the willingness of citizens to use the possibilities that ICT offers for their active participation and to become better informed voters and actors in social life. Certainly, eParticipation as one of the (most) important aspects of e-democracy can help in tackling some of the key problems of the democratic deficit in representative democracies (for example, see Oblak, 2000: 121).

eParticipation involves collaboration and co-decision-making of citizens in the process of making policies in political parties and civil society organizations, in the oversight of elected representatives, in the process of accepting policy and in the legislative process (E-Envoy, 2002: 23). With respect to the synthesis between the potentials of ICT and the (co-)action or (co)participation of citizens in matters of public importance, Coleman and Gøtze (2001) point out the following five areas where the introduction of technological performance can contribute to civic participation: providing information, consultation and collection of views and visions, collective decision-making, forming decisions and decision-making (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Models of public participation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>providing information</th>
<th>consultation and gathering of opinions</th>
<th>design of visions</th>
<th>collective decision-making</th>
<th>design and accepting of decisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bulletin boards</td>
<td>surveys</td>
<td>consulting</td>
<td>deliberative polls</td>
<td>referendums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circulars</td>
<td>focus groups</td>
<td>workshops</td>
<td>civil juries</td>
<td>elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information about associations</td>
<td>public forums</td>
<td>visions</td>
<td>groups to deal with problems</td>
<td>councils of local government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the results of the surveys and consultations</td>
<td>expert groups</td>
<td>public presentations</td>
<td>consensus conference</td>
<td>citizens assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>annual reports</td>
<td>answers to frequently asked questions</td>
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Source: Coleman and Gøtze (2001).

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has developed a three-stage model of eParticipation or involvement of citizens in political decision-making (Coleman and Gøtze, 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 base 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 regarding citizens’ 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 recognized as a major player in the field of initiating, designing and making decisions about public policies (e.g. 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 the democratically elected local government bodies. It is therefore necessary to create systems of local democracy in which citizens have the greatest possibility of participation (Brezovšek and Nahtigal, 2011: 146–148). The use of eParticipation is an important step in this direction. In this contribution, we analyse the use of e-democracy and the tools of eParticipation in Slovenian municipalities and identify which communities (regarding their size in terms of population) offer the most tools. In addition, we present the state of eParticipation by municipalities compared to the previous comparable research studies. Furthermore, we also analyse the views of Slovenian mayors with respect to local democracy, participation and involvement of citizens in local issues in order to explain the current situation of e-participatory tools in Slovenian municipalities. At the same time, based on the theoretical assumptions, we will verify the assumption that with the expansion of ICT, the chances of the eParticipation of citizens are increasing in terms of the diversity of eParticipation tools and the number of municipalities that offer citizens such tools of eParticipation.

2 DIFFERENT CONCEPTS OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY: PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AND ePARTICIPATION

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 the redefinition and reformulation of the modern liberal democracies (Hoff et al., 2000: 1; Bellamy, 2000: 33; Häyhtö and Keskinen, 2005). ICT means that whole new sets of concepts and practical solutions can be articulated when different types of eParticipation are manifested in modernised societies (Coleman and Getze, 2001). The common notion for inclusive political governance is that citizens must be connected in the political regime (OECD, 2008).

eParticipation has the considerable potential to change the broader interactions between citizens and (local) government, and it can also improve the overall quality of engagement and decision-making whilst widening the involvement of all citizens. In recent years the existing concepts of local democracy and governance have been transformed (Frissen et al., 2007) and the pressures and expectations regarding modern methods of efficiency, effectiveness and involvement of citizens began to increase – i.e. local government should be more open to democratic accountability and broad participation. ICT could reengineer representative democracy and replace it with more direct forms. Discussion about democratic local governance has its roots in early theories about participatory democracy.3

3 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 particular mixes. A broader view has been proposed by Stoker (1991: 261–268), who picked up the well-known distinctions between hierarchy, market and network and took them 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 to vote on the most important political matters. Barber (1984: 117) states that participatory democracy becomes possible through policy-making institutions and a high level of education, which binds citizens to pursue the common good. However, Barber (1984: 234) specifies that strong participatory democracy will not develop through civic education and knowledge, but rather will arise when people are given political power and channels of influence. Having attained these, they will perceive that it is necessary to acquire knowledge in order to be able to make political decisions. The municipal websites must provide the citizens with both channels of political influence and information about political matters so that people who participate can educate themselves and formulate reasonable political arguments. Furthermore, according to Pateman (1970: 42–43), people's participation in the community's decision-making stabilises the community. A decision-making process that allows public participation develops from the very start as a process that perpetuates itself due to the effect of political participation. Participatory political processes have an impact upon the development of the social and political capacities of citizens, and this positively influences the next act of participation. Participation has an integrative effect especially upon those citizens who take part in political activity, and thus makes the acceptance of collective decisions easier.

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

The introduction of ICT in democratic processes opens up new opportunities and civic participation. ICT enables e-democracy to offer a range of different models of e-tools that allow more or less active involvement of citizens 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 for easily communicating initiatives, complaints and complements; transmitting criticism and comments; expressing opinions, interests and points of view; gaining online access to previous suggestions and the course of proceedings in connection with those suggestions; launching petitions and collecting signatures; filing requests for information on topics in an open forum or just communicating 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.
In the field of the e-democratic institutionalization of e-tools, the most often used tool is classification based on the direct input of the participants. With the aim of creating a legitimate and rational categorization, an alternative systematization of e-tools is proposed that considers both the nature of the activities of co-participants as well as their contribution to openness and democratic decision-making structures:

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 side of the participants remains inactive. This group therefore classifies 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 requires activation of participants, but it does not predict a direct correlation between this operation and the final decision. This category classifies 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 requires active involvement of the participants and expects a response from the authorities. Furthermore, the latter can escalate from mere compulsory treatment results of communication in decision-making structures and the definition of given opinions to unconditional commitment to the expressed will. According to written criteria, this group classifies formally regulated forms of e-consultation, e-election or e-referendum (Pičman Štefančič, 2008: 57).

There is no doubt that e-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. eParticipation can thus be implemented through a variety of tools. In the following section, we highlight those e-tools that embody the key mechanisms for ensuring the involvement and participation of citizens.

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 citizens’ opportunities to access, review and monitor all public information available online as well as the results of their representatives’ actions and decisions in the various bodies and institutions at the national and local level. E-access is strictly a 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 independent of the political decision-making process. On their websites, institutions of public authority can utilize this tool to provide the opportunity for the exchange of interested citizens’ opinions and views.

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4 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 divides participatory e-tools into e-information, e-consultation and e-decision making.
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. **E-referendum** allows citizens to directly participate 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 digitalization 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 and Kvas, 2005).

Considerations of e-tools, in order to correctly and comprehensively summarize their potential in the democratic functioning of societies, should also include social factors, as they dictate the actual suitability of particular e-tools and also largely shape the success (or failure) of e-democracy. In addition to legal, technological and system placement e-tools, the realization of e-democracy always directly depends on the overall participatory tradition and civil state of mind. The latter is a key factor affecting the choice and appropriateness of e-tools and requires a careful consideration of the specific social conditions for the planning and selection of application-appropriate e-tools.

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 on a state and local level. However, despite the defined strategic objectives and a clear commitment to e-democracy or 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-democracy and eParticipation; in 2004 it was in 41st place among 192 countries in the world, but in 2005 it was in 46th 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 26th 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 as well as the relative stagnation and backwardness of Slovenia in the field of e-democracy and eParticipation to the relatively late classification of e-democracy at the strategic level of development of e-government strategies in the Republic of Slovenia. From the United Nations 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 United Nations report for the year 2009, the index had a value of 0.5143, and it ranked 20th 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 72nd place on the scale (along with Bolivia, China, Indonesia, Senegal, Grenada, Latvia, Georgia and the Philippines), or 24th place in the indexed value. On the other hand, Slovenia has been awarded the UN Excellence in Public Administration award (abbreviation 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 current challenges of eParticipation in Slovenia. Based on these data, we can say that Slovenia’s e-government lacks a conceptual shift towards citizen-oriented eParticipation rooted in civil society.

4 eParticipation in Slovenian Municipalities

As already stated, eParticipation is not an activity that takes place only at the national level; it is equally important for other levels of government, especially the local level. The Government of the Republic of Slovenia adopted the 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. Based on the strategy, municipal workers must provide at least one (written) response to every question, opinion or initiative; municipal workers 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).

Because we were interested in the actual state of e-democracy and eParticipation 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.\(^5\) 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 eParticipation 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.\(^6\)

We found that all Slovenian municipalities, i.e. 211 (100 %), have an official website which provides e-access to various official publications, such as local regulations, tenders, contests, events, strategies, forecasts, various reports, convocation of meetings of municipal councils (sometimes even records of meetings), applications, forms and more.\(^7\) If this finding is compared

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\(^5\) The Research Project 'E-demokracija v slovenskih občinah' (E-democracy and eParticipation in Slovenian municipalities) was performed at the Centre for the Analysis of Administrative-Political Processes and Institutions in the second half of March and in the beginning of April 2013. The data show the current state of e-tools for Slovenian municipalities, and thus their accuracy and relevance are of limited duration.

\(^6\) In reviewing and analyzing the tools of eParticipation in Slovenian municipalities, we found that they appear in portals, such as 'e-občina.si' or 'savinijska-informativne 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 'MojaObčina.si' which was created by a private company and allows the associated municipalities (currently consists 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 analyzed only the official websites of the municipalities, and therefore we did not include e-tools in the analysis that appear in other portals.

\(^7\) We have detected that some municipalities have formed a special application for access to public contents, namely ‘e-commerce’ or ‘e-democracy’. 

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with the results of previously conducted research studies,\(^8\) we can see that the percentage of Slovenian municipalities with an official website is increasing, from 86.8 % in 2006 to 99.1 % in 2009, and to the present 100 %. The same trend can be seen with e-mail access; it was offered by 174 municipalities in 2006, which represents 84.9 %, while in 2009, there were 184 municipalities offering e-mail access, or 87.6 %.

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 published e-mail address (either general, by sections or even by individual civil servants). Although the methods and applications of e-consultations vary between municipalities,\(^9\) we can say that all of the Slovenian municipalities allow citizens the opportunity to establish electronic communication.

The next e-tool is the e-survey.\(^10\) We found that currently only 38 Slovenian municipalities (18 %) have published an e-survey on their official website.\(^11\) If we have seen an increase of the percentage of e-access compared to the previous research studies, we detect the opposite trend for this e-tool. In 2006, 31.2 % of the municipalities used the e-survey as a tool for eParticipation; in 2009, the number fell to 19.5 % of the municipalities. Even when using an e-forum,\(^12\) we found a reduction of the number of municipalities that allow this type of eParticipation tool. In 2006, 12.7 % of the municipalities offered an e-forum to its citizens; data from 2009 already indicate a reduction in the use of e-forums (6.7 % of municipalities); currently, there are only eight municipalities with an e-forum, which is 3.8 %.

When analysing the official websites of municipalities, we found that the vast majority of municipalities regularly updated their website with the publication of news and (upcoming) events. We also noticed that quite a few municipalities offer subscription to an e-newsletter, which already registered users receive in their inbox. The interesting part is that only three (1.4 %) of the 211 municipalities enable commenting on posts.\(^13\)

### Table 3: E-tools in Slovenian municipalities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>municipalities</th>
<th>number of municipalities</th>
<th>website</th>
<th>e-tools</th>
<th>commenting the news/posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ordinary</td>
<td>200 (100 %)</td>
<td>200 (100 %)</td>
<td>200 (100 %)</td>
<td>32 (16 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urban</td>
<td>11 (100 %)</td>
<td>11 (100 %)</td>
<td>11 (100 %)</td>
<td>6 (54.5 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^8\)The source of data for the year 2006 (see Kvas, 2006) and for the year 2009 (see Maček et al., 2009).


\(^10\)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 possibility 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 should be separated by male and female responses, as the answers often vary significantly between the sexes.

\(^11\)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 carried out.

\(^12\)The forum should be divided into sections according to the current issues; discussion on a specific topic should be time-limited in relation to actuality and supervised by a moderator. The moderator should carefully control the debate in order to cultivate a civilized culture of dialogue; at certain intervals he should provide a brief analysis and summarize the comments, suggestions and opinions of the individuals participating in the debate.

\(^13\)Seen in comparison with the year 2009; none of the contemporary Slovenian municipalities offer the option of entering comments below the post.
If we analyse the urban municipalities separately, we see that six (56 %) out of the total of 11 urban municipalities in Slovenia are using e-surveys as a tool for eParticipation; only two urban municipalities (18 %) have an active forum on its official website. Out of the two urban municipalities, only one municipality (Municipality of Nova Gorica) offers an e-survey, and so it is the only municipality in Slovenia that offers its citizens four eParticipation tools (e-access, e-survey or consultation, e-forum and e-mail). None of the urban municipalities allows commenting on public announcements and news. Given the greater organizational and financial capabilities of the urban municipalities in comparison with the vast majority of ordinary municipalities, a somewhat greater engagement and willingness to facilitate the eParticipation of citizens would be expected, thereby strengthening e-democracy.

In the following analysis of e-tools in Slovenian municipalities, we merged collected data in groups of municipalities according to their size in terms of population. When comparing the groups of municipalities in terms of size of population (see Table 4), we find that in the group of municipalities with up to 3,000 inhabitants, only eight (13.8 %) municipalities out of 58 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), which amounts to 15.1 % that use e-surveys. 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 %. In the group of municipalities with between 10,001 and 15,000 inhabitants, there are 19 municipalities, out of which six (31.6 %) use e-surveys and e-consultation. In the next group (municipalities with between 15,001 to 20,000 inhabitants), only two (11.8 %) of the 17 municipalities offer e-consultation; in the group of municipalities with between 20,001 and 30,000 inhabitants (eight municipalities), there was only one that uses such e-tools (12.5 %). 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 %) offer this type of e-tool; just one (50 %) of the two largest Slovenian municipalities (over 100,000 inhabitants) uses e-surveys. If we analyse these figures according 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 %. There are 13 municipalities in the group of municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants (a total of 53 municipalities) offering e-surveys, the relative proportion being 24.5 %. We find similar results regarding the use of e-forums. Out of the eight municipalities that use this e-tool, six of them are the smaller municipalities of up to 10,000 inhabitants (the relative share of 3.8 %), and two in larger municipalities with a population over 10,000 (relative share of 3.8 %). According to the collected data, we can say that citizens in larger municipalities tend to use e-surveys and e-forums for eParticipation (in addition to e-access and e-mail) more often than in smaller ones.

Table 4: E-tools in Slovenian municipalities – list of municipalities according to size of municipalities in terms of population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>group of municipalities</th>
<th>number of</th>
<th>website</th>
<th>e-tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

14 Seen in comparison with non-urban/ordinary municipalities; 32 (16 %) of a total of 200 municipalities provide an e-survey to its citizens, six (3 %) have an e-forum and three municipalities (1.5 %) allow visitors to comment on public announcements and news.
15 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 (to learn more, Haček, 2011).
At this point, we will include the position of Slovenian mayors regarding the participation and involvement of citizens.\(^\text{16}\) 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 we can see in Table 5, the mayors assessed all statements as relatively important (all ratings are above average value, which is 2.50). We can conclude 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 5: Importance of local democratic requirements**

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

Source: Research Project “Stili lokalnega političnega vodenja” (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,\(^\text{16}\) 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 (62 \%) mayors of Slovenian municipalities responded to the survey.
instruments and methods of communication are useful and effective for becoming informed on what citizens think (Table 6).

Table 6: Methods of effective communication

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

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

As we can see, 30 % of mayors assessed forums via the Internet as the most non-effective method of communication, 56.9 % assessed them as only effective in special circumstances and only 13.1 % assessed them as effective. This result can be connected with the fact that the proportion of municipalities that offers e-surveys and e-forums to its citizens has been decreasing since 2006. More than half of the mayors assessed citizens’ letters via the Internet (55 %), petitions (62.5 %), satisfaction surveys (56.3 %), focus groups (63.6 %) and referenda (60 %) as only effective in special circumstances. Mayors viewed personal meetings in the town hall (95.4 %), public debates and meetings (72.1 %) and formalised complaints or suggestions (64.3 %) as the most effective methods. The results show that mayors are still in favour of personal meetings with citizens: on average, they spent 6.3 hours per week in meetings with citizens; 3.1 % of mayors communicate with citizens 1–3 times a month, 7.7 % of mayors do so once a week, 14.6 % of mayors do so 2–4 times a week and 74.6 % of the mayors in the survey communicate daily with the citizens. We can conclude that Slovenian mayors support citizens being actively included in local public issues and processes, but they are still rather sceptical about the new technologies and tools of eParticipation.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The expansion of ICT enhances e-democracy, and with it eParticipation, which through various e-tools allows the participation and involvement of citizens in the decision-shaping processes to involve the widest possible audience. As previously noted, 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 – or e-municipalities – adopted in 2003. Although the strategy is intended to foresee exactly how to introduce e-democracy in the functioning of municipalities, we note that (according to the data collected) this strategy 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 eParticipation tools for citizens. Therefore, we analysed the tools of eParticipation in Slovenian municipalities, and we found that all municipalities (211) have an official website, e-access and e-mail, or allow some form of e-consultations for citizens. If we look at other e-tools, we find that e-surveys are provided by 38 municipalities out of 211 (18%), whereas e-forums are only provided by eight municipalities out of 211 (3.8%). If we compare the results with data 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 offers e-surveys and e-forums to its citizens has decreased. Based on the collected data, we can conclude that municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants are slightly more likely to choose (in addition to e-access and e-mail) e-surveys and e-forums to encourage the eParticipation of citizens.

According to our analysis, we can say that our assumption – i.e. the chances of eParticipation of citizens in terms of the number of municipalities that offer citizens a tool of eParticipation, and that the diversity of the tools of eParticipation increases with the expansion of ICT – in the case of Slovenian municipalities is only partially true. With the expansion of ICT, the number of municipalities that have their official website also increased, which offers e-access and e-mail or any other form of e-consultation (minimum requirement of 2003 The Strategy). By contrast, with respect to other e-tools, 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 would offer its citizens various e-tools is decreasing; only one (urban) municipality offers four e-tools. In addition, the opinions of mayors regarding local democracy show that mayors are in favour of the inclusion of citizens in local public issues and processes, but they prefer personal meetings with citizens instead of new ways of participation. According to the opinions of Slovenian mayors, the new technologies are seen as a good solution for informing citizens, but not as a useful form of political participation or for communication about the key local problems, issues, etc..

Given that e-democracy is certainly one way into the future and in many respects was cited as the saviour with respect 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 eParticipation 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, we must be aware that e-tools themselves do not guarantee success. When setting up e-democracy and eParticipation, the involvement of both sides is necessary – i.e. the institutions that will enable eParticipation tools and the citizens that will participate. That is why stronger and more frequent deliberation and facilitation of ICT and its available tools of eParticipation should be implemented, such as e-surveys, e-petitions or, in some countries, budgetary participation. People must be informed about possibilities in which they can be actively included in the local decision-making processes by giving suggestions, petitions, opinions, recommendations, etc. After all, citizens’ participation in the local government stabilises the community.

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