Chapter 9

E–Governance in Slovenia:
National Assembly and its Website as a Tool for Active Citizen Participation

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ABSTRACT

Modern communication technology in principle makes political participation feasible. Information, consultation, and participation of citizens in the working of their highest political body – a parliament – should be easier than ever. This chapter analyses if this is really so on the case of Slovenia and its parliament, the National Assembly. Parliamentary website of the Republic of Slovenia is studied in terms of usability, usefulness and utility those are the key criteria in discussion about website performance. The analysis of e-democracy takes into account citizen participation in the legislative procedure, enabling direct communication with the members of the parliament, possibilities for citizen initiatives, and procedure and content transparency at each stage of the decision-making process. The chapter reports on limits of the current website of the National Assembly of Slovenia and proposes guidelines for better use of new technologies in the political process and for improving user experience.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the existing web site of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia and to assess possible, reasonable and necessary upgrade with new web technologies, to make the page user friendly and more e-democratic. The starting point is that web pages of such important political bodies reflect country’s attitude towards civic engagement and public’s participation in decision making.

The study is based on qualitative methodological approach and it was executed in two phases. Each dealt with three thematic sets: web page of the new generation, usability of the web page and the web page as a source of e-democracy. The first phase was concentrated on theoretical analysis, analysis of similar studies in other countries and finally on the analysis of good examples of parliamentary web pages worldwide. Students of three major Slovenian universities took part in the second phase of the research. All together 122 students contributed. The research was based on their ‘daily expertise’ of internet knowledge and usage and their already gained academic knowledge to explore the three aspects mentioned above (e-democracy, usability and new generation web technologies) through the existing web page of Slovenian parliament.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN E-DEMOCRACY

The study was founded on guidelines on e-democracy and e-governance provided by various international organizations (e.g., Council of Europe 2009, the Council of Europe Recommendation 2009, CAHDE 2009, UN 2005, 2008, and OECD 2001, 2003, 2007). In its 2009 Recommendation on electronic democracy and the accompanying explanatory memorandum (hereafter Recommendation), the Council of Europe attempted to define in detail the notion of e-democracy and called on its member states to commit themselves to its active promotion and implementation in (their) local environments, while also including the guidelines for a successful inclusion of all participants in political processes with the help of ICTs.

E-democracy, states the Recommendation, is primarily democracy in which ICTs are employed as the (technological) support to enhance the operation of democratic institutions and democratic processes. Its fundamental objective is the electronic support of democracy. However, even if the efficiency of e-democracy depends on adequate use of ICTs, better and more technology cannot by itself ensure better and more democracy. While it creates a possibility, it is not a solution in itself.

E-democracy exacts comprehensive information, enables dialogue, communication and consultation, as well as continual creation and maintenance of an open public space that enables citizens to participate, co-decide and co-shape public policies. E-democracy does not exclude the media but presupposes their active involvement in public life. The task of the media is not only to exercise critical supervision over the operation of power centres, but also to provide a forum for public debate and to defend the interests of citizens in the public sphere. Social cohesion is closely connected with social capital possessed and created by individuals (Putnam, 2000, pp. 22-24). In this respect, it is participation (rather than representation) that helps citizens create social capital. The decline in the participation in civic (and consequently political) life is, according to Putnam, a consequence of the lack of social capital.

The Council of Europe Recommendation also includes a “guide” on generic tools and policies for electronic democracy (see Krimmer et al., 2009). To this we should add the control list for the introduction of e-democracy tools (Kozeluh, 2009) and the planned approach to e-democracy (Rössler, 2009). These make three of the five framework guidelines that accompany the 2009 Council of Europe Recommendation. On reviewing more than 100 e-democratic platforms, Krimmer and
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