

Challenges and prospects of e-participation in Bulgaria

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Abstract. A lot of research has recently been done in the field of e-participation but little attention has been paid to transitional democracies. As a country in transition Bulgaria is an interesting case which needs to be further investigated. The aim of the paper is to give an overview of the current attitudes towards political participation in Bulgaria and the possible influence of ICT on it. Thus the two research questions examined are: *What opinions do young Bulgarians have regarding political participation offline and online?* and *How can ICT be used to promote political participation among them?* To answer this, a web-survey was conducted the results of which showed that: 1) Young people in Bulgaria are not very politically active aside from the voting which is viewed as a way to give voice to one's opinion. The lack of motivation is ascribed to the perceived level of corruption. 2) Skepticism and mistrust in the governing authorities can be fought with them actively encouraging and participating in deliberations with citizens. An online approach to this seems to be favored. 3) It can be said that online political activity will mirror the offline one and will focus on voting.

1 Introduction: Why e-participation in Bulgaria?

In the last years some have claimed that representative democracy is in a crisis or perhaps in transformation (for example Putnam, 2000 and Dalton, 2002). Many believe technology has the potential to solve this crisis while others hold the opposite view. That is why a lot of research has been done in the recent years in the field of e-participation with more and more attention being paid on the social,

rather than on the technical, aspect of the Internet-enabled citizens' participation (for example see articles in Gehring, 2004).

After searching through a number of search engines and databases for academic journals and publications we noted that the focus of these research has been either on Western countries with stable democracies or on the developing countries of Asia and Africa which has lead to the ex-Soviet countries in transition being somewhat left out. Bulgaria is a perfect example of that group of countries, for which enough knowledge on the challenges and prospects of e-participation is lacking. With the country joining the European Union (EU) last year, the need for that knowledge has become even more pressing.

Some assessments on the country's e-readiness have been made and some research have been done but it all concerns the provision of e-services and is made predominantly from an administrative point of view. The citizens' point of view and the social perspective is lacking and this paper makes a step towards filling this knowledge gap.

The series of reports released by the ARC Fund¹ in association with Vitosha Research shows a lasting and clear tendency towards increased use of the Internet by those who have access to PCs (51% in 2003 and 54% in 2005) (ARC fund, 2004, 2005 and 2006). In the past few years the number of people declaring they have access to Internet and have been using it ever more frequently has increased several-fold. Main reasons for using the Internet are information gathering, entertainment, accessing alternative resources of world news and personal communication. The total volume of web sites of public institutions and organizations is growing steadily (ARC Fund, 2002).

In the year 2001 the first Bulgarian blog was created. Nowadays most of the major Bulgarian portals offer free options for creating blogs. For now the creation of blogs is done solely by private citizens (ARC fund, 2006: 28).

For the period January 2004-April 2005, 24 online campaigns on subjects concerning the entire nation were started. The majority of the campaigns had a concrete country policy as an aim – 42%, while 13 % were political and 17 % on environmental matters. The most preferred way for carrying out the campaigns was online petition by name – 55%. Of all the campaigns 13 were initiated by NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations) and one was started by a specific online community (ARC fund, 2006: 29, fig.21).

All these facts give hope that employing Internet tools for participation can be expected to have a positive effect on fighting the political apathy which is witnessed in the country and which is easily explained by the distrust in the political system created by the high corruption levels. In their 2007 report

¹ "Applied Research and Communications (ARC) Fund (www.arc.online.bg) is a leading Bulgarian NGO working in the areas of information society and innovation. Vitosha Research (www.online.bg/vr) specializes in social and opinion research. Vitosha Research regularly monitors Internet usage in Bulgaria since 1998." (ARC Fund, 2002:4)

Freedom House³ gives the corruption a score of 3.75. This is viewed as posing rather big problems for the democracy in the country and is the main aspect that brings the overall democracy rating higher – to 2.89 – for which reason Bulgaria is considered to be a “nation in transit” (Freedom House, 2007: 185).

The above mentioned reports show that the websites of non-governmental organizations, online computer distributors, and government institutions are the least popular, none of the online campaigns were initiated by governmental organizations and no governmental institutions use the blogs as means of communicating ideas. At the same time, the percentage of people whose most frequent online activity and interest was politics drops from 12 % in the year 2001 to 5% in the year 2003 (ARC Fund, 2004: 27, table 6).

Everything that was said so far raises the question why the steadily increasing levels of Internet usage and ICT penetration, as low as they may be compared to other EU countries, are not used for engaging citizens, especially the young ones, in political participation and for boosting democracy. And while the government strategies in the field for now try to deal with the legal framework, the survey presented in this article focuses on the attitudes of the young people towards the use of Internet tools for policy making and their impact on democracy. Thus the two research questions are:

- 1) What opinions do young Bulgarians have regarding political participation offline and online?
- 2) How can ICT be used to promote political participation among young people in Bulgaria?

The answers to these questions will give an overview of the attitudes of young people in Bulgaria towards political participation and how, if at all possible, Internet tools can be employed for promoting it. This in turn will hopefully stir the interest towards the country leading to further research. Assessing the issue from the young citizens’ point of view rather than from the administrative one gives an insight of the problem which, along with deeper research, can lead to the formation of very concrete recommendations for measures to be taken, especially at a local governmental level, in order to stir the political engagement of citizens and fight corruption practices by openness and transparency. The attitudes towards political participation are mapped according to the models of democracy and the concept of nodality (which are presented in the theory section). These concepts are used as tools to nuance the form of ICT facilitated participation desired by citizens.

3 Freedom House is a non-governmental organization that assesses the degree of democratic freedom in countries. Freedom House does annual reports on freedom in the world where countries are rated on several aspects with a score from 1 (most free/democratic) to 7 (least free/democratic). (Freedom House, 2008)

The survey which was carried out is explained and analyzed in the following sections of this article. The analysis first discusses separately the attitudes towards offline and online political participation. Then it assesses the influence ICT may have on stirring young people's interest in political participation.

2 Theory: democracy models and nodality

This section presents the main theoretical lenses through which the analysis of the survey results is reflected. It also gives our view on some main concepts whose single-valued definitions are still a subject of discussions.

2.1 Governmental nodality

According to Hood and Margetts (2007) one can view governments as a tool to extract information from the citizens as they interface with them. In this paper we will focus on nodality - the property of being in the middle of a social network (Hood & Margetts, 2007: 21). It is a major issue for governments today due to the fact that government websites are not necessarily the first place where citizens look for information (Hood & Margetts, 2007: 48). Issues such as visibility, accessibility and competitiveness are determining for whether or not a government website achieves nodality among the many different competing websites (Hood & Margetts, 2007: 141-142, 185). Because of this, general opinions or "requirements" from citizens are vital when developing options for online political participation. If it is the governments wish to provide a service that will give bottom-up involvement (by a top-down initiative) it is therefore vital that these options are nodal. The question is whether the civil society in a country is strong enough to bring forth forums for discussion and political information online or if this is something that is expected from the government (Hood & Margetts, 2007: 187-192). This will be discussed in the end of this paper as the opinions of Bulgarian citizens are presented.

2.2 E-democracy

Herein we use the democracy categories discussed by Åström (2001). Democracy is divided into three levels where the citizens have different roles. Thin democracy focuses on information acquisition and provision, quick democracy refers to direct participation in decision making and a strong democracy focuses on deliberation (Åström, 2001: 51). In the online context these categories are in line with the three levels of e-participation discussed below under *E-participation*. This model is later on used to define the present and the desired-by-citizens state of e-democracy in Bulgaria.

2.3 Political participation

With the existing discussions on what political participation is, we hold the opinion that political participation is not only limited to parliamentary politics such as voting in parliament and local elections as well as in referenda, campaigning in elections or being a member of a political party but also includes the following activities: discussing politics (either with politicians or with friends), active support of non-governmental organizations (NGO), protests, strikes as well as taking part in any form of community actions (Birch, 2001).

2.4 E-participation

The definition of e-participation herein focuses not only on the technological aspects but also on the social impact that this might have in regards to broadening and deepening the inclusion of citizens in the political process. This should be viewed not only as government to citizen (G2C) but also as citizen to citizen (C2C) communication, as discussed by Macintosh (2006).

The OECD framework differentiates between three levels of e-participation: information – a one way relation in which government produces and delivers information for use by citizens; consultation – a two way relation in which citizens provide feedback to government; participation – a relation based on partnership with government in which citizens actively engage in the policy making process (Medaglia, 2007).

3 Exploring e-participation in Bulgaria

3.1 Methodology

This article is based on a questionnaire survey and a literature study. The survey was in the form of online questionnaire which was sent in direct e-mail to 180 people, all students in the University of Economics in Varna. It was also distributed in a snowball manner among students in the St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia and was posted on a discussion board in facebook.com in the Bulgaria network. For a period of 2 weeks (5:th – 19:th of March, 2008) 113 responses were collected with 30 people skipping questions 5 to 8. Besides the standard demographic questions, the questionnaire included multiple choice questions on present offline and online political participation as well as some questions on attitudes and opinions on online politics. The questions were based on the categories listed in 2.3 (see above).

An online questionnaire was chosen as a method due to the aim of collecting as many responses as possible in order to draw general conclusions about young

educated Bulgarians' opinions and attitudes. It was also considered appropriate due to the anonymity it secures since the respondents were asked about their opinions on more or less political matters. One downside to using questionnaires is that one might miss out on important views the respondents might have but do not have the possibility to express in the limited and structured questionnaire (Bryman, 2004: 133-135). This limitation was countered by providing a space for comments after the closed questions as well as by some open ended questions.

The comments which are used as examples throughout the text were selected after coding the data in the open-ended questions into categories. A representative quote for each of the categories is presented to give a fruitful picture of the opinions that were expressed.

3.2 Challenges and limitations

Due to the project time limitations the questionnaire was not preliminary tested for which reason it showed some flaws which should be eliminated in further studies. A design mistake left the option of exiting the survey before completing it which is the reason for some respondents filling only the first couple of questions in.

The questionnaire was distributed in Bulgarian thus the responses were in Bulgarian as well. It should be taken into account that some nuances in the open-ended responses might be lost in translation. Besides this the translation was done by one of this article's authors, who understands Bulgarian. Although the author tried to stay close to the original opinion of respondents there might also some subtle distinction between the translation and original ones. The translation was done in a direct manner, to come closer to the original statement, which in some cases means that correct sentences are not as important as meaning.

4 A brief presentation of the results

In order to give an unbiased picture of the present offline as well as online political activity among the respondents, the statistical data is presented in this section without any comments.

4.1 Demographic characteristics

The average age of the respondents is 23 years (median: 22) with only 3 of all the 113 being over 35 years of age. The young age of the respondents explains why 63 % of them are still in university or college. The other 41 people have graduated from university or college and only 1 of the respondents has only secondary or high school education. These demographic characteristics of the sample make it possible to label it as representative of young educated people in Bulgaria.

4.2 Offline political activities

The political activities which are the most practiced by the respondents are voting and discussions with friends. Voting in parliament elections is practiced by 88% of the respondents and 77 % has voted at least once in local elections. The activity which is the most appealing for future participation in is the voting in a referendum as 64 % have never voted in one but intend to do it. Another activity which is appealing for future practice is community actions.

The activities which are the least appealing to the respondents are membership in a political party (81 % has never been a member and do not intend to become one) and participation in official political discussions with 66 % answering they have never done it and do not intend to.

4.3 Online political activities

The most practiced activity is the information search - 66% of the respondents have visited the official government site in search of information, 74% have searched information in NGOs' sites and 77% in local governments' official sites. The second most practiced online political activity is the signing of a petition as 44% of the respondents have signed a petition online. The activity which the respondents are the most willing to practice if there was such a possibility is voting – 77% would vote online in referenda and local elections and 70% would vote online in parliament elections. The activities which the respondents are the most unwilling to practice are the creation of own political blogs and the discussion of political matters in a forum without a politician.

Besides their current political behavior, the respondents were asked about their opinion on some general statements on online politics. The answers to most of the questions are quite evenly distributed between somewhat agree and somewhat disagree so it is hard to make any solid conclusion on whether the respondents as a group agree or disagree with them. What can be said is that the majority of the respondents agree that more people will take part in voting as well as in discussions if these activities were in an online form.

Young people are generally skeptical to the suggestion that their opinion has greater chances of being taken into account if it was expressed online – 53% of the respondents somewhat or strongly disagree with that statement. At the same time 38% are willing to discuss issues in a forum with a politician. In the next section we discuss these contradictions and explain the results using the data gathered from the open ended questions as well as the theoretical models which were already discussed.

5 Analysis

5.1 Offline participation

The results show that young people in Bulgaria are very active in voting contrary to the widespread opinion of their political apathy. They are also willing to vote in referenda, which shows their desire to take an active and direct part in the decision making processes in the country. Voting, as means of stating one's views and taking a position, is considered essential because *"Inactivity is the most stupid action according to me, as far as elections are concerned [...] But I would not call myself a very active citizen, I do the minimum of what is required"*. Those who have a negative attitude towards voting tend to motivate their opinion with the statement that voting, or the representative system as a whole for that matter, in Bulgaria is corrupt; *"I am not particularly interested in politics, in Bulgaria it is hard to talk about politics – only lies. That is why I do not engage in things I do not understand and I think most of the people should do the same"*. In this statement there is also a claim about the individuals' own political abilities and for the abilities of the public representatives as a whole, making the distrust in politicians evident. Bearing in mind that in Bulgaria the tendency is towards politicians, especially the ones occupying top positions like ministers etc, being perceived as persons rather than as representatives of a certain party ideology, public distrust poses a serious problem: *"I think that nowadays there are not many public persons who are worth voting for and who are worth following"*.

Aside from the voting and the friendly discussions the other activities which comprise the list of active political participation are not that popular among the respondents. The most unappealing one is the membership in political parties which is often associated with corruption, frauds and misdoings. As one of the respondents puts it: *"I think that like many other people I find politics something dirty and that is why I would not actively participate in the political life of the country..."*. The opinions are the same regarding the campaigning in elections. Even the ones that are willing to take part in such campaigns or are interested in becoming a member of a political party would do it because: *"... if this would be to my advantage..."*. This statement perfectly illustrates the general attitude towards the political situation in the country. Viewing political party matters as "dirty" may explain why young people are not willing to engage in such activities but why are they unwilling to take part in activities which concern them directly and which affect their everyday lives, such as public discussion? Reasons for this can be that they are held in inconvenient times or information about when and where they are held is scarce. But the main reason seems to be that respondents do not believe their opinion will be regarded and here corruption, manipulations etc. come in the picture again. Surveys show that citizens do not believe that problem-

solving, especially at the local level, depends on them being active. The main non-governmental representatives taking part in consultative processes are representatives of business unions followed by NGOs with the number of civil associations being very small. (Delcheva, 2005: 91) Another reason for non-participation can be that citizens see no results when they participate. The public poll on the provision of administrative services shows that in the majority of the cases the outcome of a proposal or complaint has been no answer and no measures or an answer but no measures taken. (Delcheva, 2005: 91)

With some concern it should be noted that the number of the respondents who actively support NGOs or take part in various community activities is also very small. This may mean two things. First, that there is no clear society consciousness developed yet and second, that the public trust in NGOs in Bulgaria is very low. NGOs unpopularity can be explained with the stereotypes formed in the beginning of the transition period when the public learned about illegal activities conducted behind the cover of NGOs (Delcheva, 2005: 91). Their activity and communication with the authorities is additionally hindered by constantly changing legislation.

Still, there is a ray of light since a considerable percentage of the young people are willing to support NGOs in the future, main arguments for which are to avoid corruption: *“I would not engage in matters with political connotations because according to me the ideas of the party groups have mutated. That is why the society should express their positions and opinions in a non-governmental way.”* So it can be seen that NGOs are viewed as an alternative to the government or even to politics and that is the main driving force for their support.

To sum up the offline political participation in Bulgaria, it can be said that young people are not very active aside from the voting which is viewed as a way to give voice to one's opinion. As one of the respondents puts it *“the only way to be politically active in Bulgaria is to vote”*. A reason for avoiding further involvement is the perceived level of corruption. It seems that some responsibility is felt as far as selecting the governance goes. From that stage on the selected governance is expected to take care of the citizens: *“... we elect the governing authorities but the governing authorities decide our lives...”*

5.2 Attitudes towards online participation

It is worth noting that quite a few of the respondents are willing to use participation options such as e-mail to politicians and sign up for receiving e-mails when decisions relevant to them are taken. This gives rise to the question why these participants who are willing to use such options if they were available do not know that they actually are available. The most probable reason is that these options are not known due to the lack of promotion of the services. It becomes evident in the following sections that the respondents expect the government to provide these services, which shows that the government does

have nodality as citizens see it as central for political information. This is further elaborated in the discussion section.

5.2.1 Thin democracy: information acquisition

It is not surprising that the most practiced online activity is to search for information since this is pretty much the only option for participation provided by both central and local governments. Or to use Åström's (2001) models, the type of e-democracy practiced in Bulgaria can be defined as thin, where the focus is on information provision and acquisition. This is highlighted in some statements where the problems with already existing websites are articulated: *"I have needed to use information from the official sites of some ministries. The information is available but everything seems so unorganized and finding the needed information is sometimes impossible"*.

5.2.2 Strong democracy: deliberation

The opinions on discussion forums are quite evenly distributed with the slight overweight of the opinion that discussing politics in forums without a politician will make no difference. Blogs as a platform for politics are rather unpopular among young people in Bulgaria because they are not as interested in politics as to create a blog of their own or do not feel competent enough to do it. This is related to the statements regarding online participation only among citizens as empty talking with no effect in real life since politicians are not involved *"because without a politician nothing can be solved. I mean that even if we discuss a certain issue in a forum without someone hearing it there is no point"*. Participation online is by some seen as a good thing if it is limited to brief inputs or comments to the politicians, thus empathizing the representative aspect of democracy: *"I think that it is good if the public opinion is heard by the politicians but they are the people who should engage in the political problems"*. This last statement once again reflects the idea that citizens' responsibilities are limited to expressing opinions and the actual actions and decisions are to be taken by the politicians themselves.

5.2.3 Quick democracy: decision-making

Most of the respondents are in favour of e-voting because it is convenient, saves time and eliminates the problems with the address registrations. Still the problems of the digital divide are recognized by the respondents because *"as we know the older and retired people constitute the major part of the electorate"*. Also rules to avoid abuse are by some stated as necessary before implementation of online participation: *"first the country's politics on keeping regulations and norms should be specified. There should be strict rules so that misuse can be prevented"*.

It seems that e-voting would be the most favored type of online political activity which mirrors the offline practices as voting is the most favored activity and that corruption is the primary reason for skepticism towards it.

To sum up, it can be said that when it comes to the present state of e-democracy in Bulgaria it is still at the thin informative level, but the young people are willing to practice the quick type of democracy where they are directly involved in the decision making. This can, at least partly, be explained by the fact that the survey sample is collected from big densely populated towns with higher income per capita which is a precondition for the direct involvement level of participation being demanded by the citizens (Medaglia, 2007: 142).

5.2.4 Do online activities influence real-life decisions?

The distrust in the political institutions influences the attitudes to the online activities as well. It does seem, however, that young people are willing to participate in some online activities even though they do not believe it will influence real life decision making and are skeptic about online deliberations' ability of reaching the respectively responsible authorities. These attitudes are presented in Figure 1. Note that the number of responses in the table is higher than N due to the fact that one respondent could be willing to use several of the options.

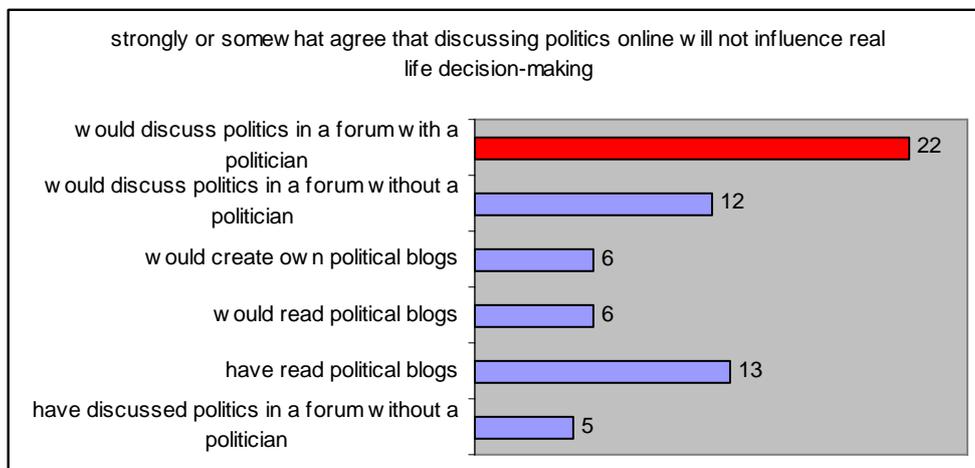


Figure 1: attitudes to specific online activities of people who think that online discussions do not influence real life decisions. N=42

The figure suggests that young people are interested in discussing politics especially in a forum and the presence of a politician would decrease their skepticism about the real life result of the discussion. It should also be mentioned that 41% (N=42) of those who strongly or somewhat agree that online discussions will not influence real life decisions have signed petitions online and 27% of them would sign a petition online. So they are not over-skeptical about the possibility of real life impact of online activities.

Those, who argue for the use of ICT to promote participation go in line with “*the more the better*”, as respondents in the same manner argue for more channels of input in general. The opinions differ on to what extent the services would be used but the core is that it is at least worth a try. Another statement supporting the use of ICT is that the Internet is a somewhat natural part of society today and that “*Internet is the future – including politics*”.

Another assumption that is viewed with skepticism is that expressing one’s opinion online makes it more likely that it would be taken into account. But here also some positive pattern can be noticed – 34% (N=44) of the respondents who strongly or somewhat disagree that online expressed opinions stand more chances of being taken into account has signed online petitions and 25 % would sign such petitions, while a whole 50 % would discuss politics in a forum with a politician.

On the basis of the facts presented above it can be claimed that skepticism and mistrust in the governing authorities can be fought with them actively encouraging and participating in deliberations with citizens since many young people are willing to be engaged in such discussion.

5.3 Online vs. offline participation

It is interesting to see whether the respondents who are not politically active offline would actually be interested to be active online.

Out of the 10 people who have not voted in parliament elections but intend to do it, 6 would do it online if there was such a possibility. Of the 22 people who have not voted in local elections but intend to do it, 11 would vote online if there was such a possibility and only 3 are reluctant to vote online. These relations make it possible to say that there is a good chance of online elections being favorably accepted by the part of the electorate which still has not executed their right to vote.

Besides voting, another activity which seems to provoke the interest of young people is discussions with a politician in a forum. Even respondents who would not take part in offline political discussions would do so online with a politician. Reasons for this are the anonymity, the convenience of the own home and the informality associated with the internet communications. One statement that is made says that the participation would increase in general “*because people will be more willing to express opinions hiding under a pseudonym in front of their home computers. Sincere and honest opinions are more easily expressed anonymously than openly*”.

The greater part of the respondents who would discuss politics in a forum with a politician participating would do so without one participating if there was such a possibility. It is interesting to ponder on why they do not know that such a possibility actually exists. The answer could be that such forums are initiated by private citizens hence they are not well known and popular. A possible solution to the issue would be an official non-governmental site maintained by the local

authorities where citizens can post opinions, discuss problems etc. An example of such a portal can be the Manse square in Tampere, Finland (Lehtonen, 2007).

The results also show that discussions with a politician are preferred to the ones without an official representative of the authorities. Reason for this is the assumption that talking with each other stands no chances of being heard by any authority hence stands no chances of making a difference. This issue was addressed in detail in the previous section. Besides the conclusions drawn from the statistical results, some patterns in the attitudes of the young people can be seen in the respondents' answers to the open ended questions. Not surprisingly, the opinions are divided between positive and negative. Some argue that the use of ICT would not increase participation partly due to the digital divide and partly due to the fact that citizens do not want to participate more, or even at all. Arguments for the political apathy are similar to those about politics in general and focus mainly on the corruption in the country. It is also stated by some that these services probably would be used to some extent but that the politicians would not listen anyway. The distrust in the politicians is argued by many to be an important factor. Thus some state that discussing politics online would only be empty talk, either because nobody will listen or because *"nowadays people complain to each other in the cafes, face to face, later they will do the same on Internet... this will be the only change"*. It is also stated that Internet as technological platform is not strong enough to actually produce any deeper deliberation. Some do not agree with that arguing that *"it is more likely for a piece of information to be read if it is published online rather than in a daily newspaper"*. Other reasons for the positive impact of ICT on political participation are the convenience, the easy access to information and the time saving. It should be pointed out that these opinions, in their majority, regard online voting as an alternative to the traditional methods. Here, the issues of security and technical literacy are also taken into account.

As a whole, the online political activities are still only at the information acquisition level but the uni- and bi- directional communication leading to formation or expression of opinions is fairly popular among young people. Still the most desired form of online participation is e-voting with some concerns expressed about the security and the manipulation of the results of course. The reluctance for involvement to a larger extent than voting is explained in the same way as in the offline politics – corruption, distrust, feeling that citizens' opinions are not regarded. However there seem to be a positive attitude towards input in the form of discussing politics online, given that a politician is involved. This leads to the conclusion that the interest of young people to participate in a deliberative form of democracy can be stirred if the presence of the governing authorities is strong and visible.

6 Challenges and prospects of e-participation in Bulgaria

6.1 Conclusions

Young people in Bulgaria are not very politically active aside from the voting which is viewed as a way to give voice to one's opinion. The lack of motivation is ascribed to the perceived level of corruption.

Skepticism and mistrust in the governing authorities can be fought with them actively encouraging and participating in deliberations with citizens. The government is nodal in the sense that the citizens expect it to do this, and not other actors such as NGOs. An online approach to this seems to be favored since many young people are willing to be engaged in such discussion online.

It can be said that online political activity will mirror the offline one and will because of this probably focus on voting as the respondents favor a quick democracy. It is also visible that a fair number of respondents would participate in discussion forums with a politician.

6.2 What should be done

People seem reluctant towards implementing platforms for engagement themselves. There seems to be a wish for the government to develop services and also to promote these services. If the government wishes for not only those who are interested in politics now to participate it seems plausible to assume that resources need to be spent on promoting not only the websites but the fact that the government wants an active civil society. This might promote trust in the democratic process in the country. At the same time the distrust for the institutions (who are supposed to promote the democratic process) seem to be one of the major obstacles. This is as discussed earlier, however, not something that is unique to Bulgaria but is common in democratic societies today.

The government's largest issue in Bulgaria seems to be the perceived level of corruption which explains the citizens' sometimes negative attitude towards politicians and the government. The corruption is something that needs to be dealt with, which might also be done parallel to (or integrated with) the development of websites for transparency of decisions and platforms for discussion.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

One question that could be treated in further studies is whether the government can develop an online platform for participation parallel to raising the level of trust in the government? How should this be promoted? For further research we

also suggest that opinions are gathered from a wider sample, thus taking an empirical approach to the digital divide issues. The next stage could also be action research where small platforms for political activities are developed and studied in for example a municipality, possibly with guidance from already put-into-practice cases like AskBristol (Bristol city council, 2008).

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