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Republic of Macedonia and Citizen Participation in the Digital Age: Where Do We Stand?

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Abstract

The paper evaluates citizens' participation in e-democracy processes in the Republic of Macedonia i.e. e-participation. It reflects upon the availability of digital tools and availability of online platforms set up by the institutions on their official webpages in order to enable active citizens' participation. Methodological approach used in this research relies on analysis of the obtained answers from an online questionnaire that explores citizens' awareness of the possibility to use digital tools in the democratic process, their participation via usage of digital tools and their attitudes towards e-democracy process. The questionnaire was distributed via social networks Facebook and LinkedIn in the period from November 2015 to February 2016. The empirical findings in this study research enhance our understanding of citizens' awareness of the possibility to use digital tools in the democratic process, their participation via usage of digital tools and their attitudes towards e-democracy process in the Republic of Macedonia. As findings suggest, there is stillroom for improvement of the factors that determine citizens' participation in digital age.

Keywords: e-democracy, citizen awareness, citizen participation, e-participation, digital tools, webpages.

1. Introduction

"It took just 40 years for the first 50 million people to own a radio; just 16 years for the first 50 million people to own a PC; but just 5 years for the first 50 million to be on the Internet."
Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer, to the Government Leaders Forum Europe, at the Scottish Parliament,
31 January 2007

We are living in the age of Internet and digital technologies that have already penetrated into all the aspects of our day-to-day life. They have changed the way of dissemination of the information and the way of our communication thus affecting many processes in the society including the democratic one. Therefore, today we are talking about e-democracy, e-government, e-parliament, e-campaign.

As stated in *Recommendation on e-democracy*, adopted by the Council of Europe (CoE Recommendations in text) in February 2009, *e-democracy* is the support and enhancement of democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes by means of technology. E-democracy concerns all sectors of democracy, all democratic institutions, and all levels of government. E-democracy cannot be isolated from traditional democratic processes. It is additional, complementary to, and interlinked with traditional democratic processes, so as to widen the choices available to the public for taking part in political processes.

If according to Webster Dictionary, democracy is defined as *a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation*, then e-democracy is nothing more than the use of digital tools in order to enhance the tree pillars that underpin democracy, such as: *transparency*, *accountability* and *participation* (citizen engagement in democratic process).

E-democracy is not only about technology (and involves both so-called e-participation and e-voting) but also impacts every aspect of an organization involved. In addition, it captures the behavior of members of society (citizens, lobbies and opinion leaders), the media (media, agencies and market researchers) when interacting with, and attitudes towards, government agencies and representatives (Mahrer and Krimmer, 2005).

E-democracy can also be considered as a set of tools i.e. applications by means of which the goals of democracy can be achieved, in other words to improve the connectivity (information-communication) between government, stakeholders and citizens, raising engagement and participation in democratic processes. Some of the most commonly used e-democracy tools are the following: e-discussion, e-consultation, e-initiative, e-petition, e-polls, e-voting, webcast, etc. Different e-democracy tools provide different levels of citizen involvement. According to *Handbook on e-democracy*, levels of involvement can be categorized as: *information* (informative public participation)[1], *consultation* (consultative public participation)[2] and *cooperation* (cooperative public participation)[3].

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[1] The active provision of comprehensive, balanced and objective information designed to help the public understanding of problems, alternatives, opportunities, and solutions to democratic issues. Participants receive information about the planning or the decision. They do not have any influence on it, however. Communication is only one-way, namely from the planning or decision- making bodies to the public.

[2] Participants can give their comments on a question asked or a draft presented. They can thereby influence the decision, even though the extent of influence may differ considerably. Communication is in both directions, from the planning or decision-making body to the public and from the public back to the planning or decision-making body, as well as, under certain circumstances, once again backs to the public; for example, if the comments received are answered.

[3] Involvement of citizens and groups of citizens, such as interest groups, corporations, associations, and non-profit organizations,

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E-democracy is closely linked to good governance, which is the efficient, effective, participatory, transparent and accountable democratic exercise of power in electronic form, and includes informal politics and non-governmental players (CoE).

According to Steven Clift (n.d.), to many peoples, e-democracy suggests greater and more active citizen participation enabled by the Internet, mobile communications, and other technologies in today's representative democracy as well as through more participatory or direct forms of citizen involvement in addressing public challenges.

E-democracy is anything that governments do to facilitate greater participation in government using digital or electronic means. These initiatives can include e-forums, e-town hall meetings, e-consultations, e-referenda, e-voting, e-rule making, and other forms of e-participation. We can also term it as any form of 'digital engagement' (Coleman and Norris, 2005).

E-participation is a necessary component, or even, more precisely, a prerequisite of e-democracy. It refers to the means of ICT-supported participation in processes concerning administration, policy making, decision making, service delivery, information provision, consultation, deliberation, etc. (CoE Recommendation).

In this paper we investigate citizens' participation in the e-democracy processes in the Republic of Macedonia. In other words, the focus of our investigation is the citizens' usage of digital tools available on the online platforms set by the Government institutions in order to enable active citizen's participation.

2. Method

Methodological approach used in this research relies on the analysis of the obtained answers from the online questionnaire distributed via social networks Facebook and LinkedIn in the period from November 2015 to February 2016.

The questionnaire contained 17 questions that explore citizens' awareness of the possibility to use digital tools in the democratic process, their participation via usage of digital tools and their attitudes towards e-democracy:

- Are the citizens aware of the possibility to use digital tools available on the webpages set up by the state and local self-government institutions in order to enable their active participation?
- Are the citizens interested in following the activities of the Ministries, Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia and municipality where they live on their official webpages?
- Have they ever used the possibility to report any idea or complaint using digital tools set up by the state or local self-government institutions?
- Have the citizens ever used some kind of e-service available on the official webpages of the state or local self-government institutions?
- Citizens' attitudes toward e-democracy process and their willingness for e-participation.

The questionnaire also contained a section dedicated to demographic data.

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in public affairs, so that they can exert influence and improve the quality and accessibility of the results of democratic processes. Participants have a say in the decisions, for example at Round Table meetings, in mediation procedures or in stakeholder processes. The degree of influence is high and may include common decision-making with the political decision-making bodies. Planning or decision-making bodies and the public communicate intensively with each other.

The total number of respondents was 335, including 186 female and 149 male respondents. 33% of the respondents were at the age from 18 to 28 years, 35% from 29 to 39 years, 20% from 40 to 50 years, 10% from 51 to 61 years and 2% from 61 to 75 years. The vast majority of the respondents live in a city (94%), while the rest of the respondents live in suburban area (5%) and in the country only 1%. Regarding the educational level, 45.7% of the respondents has university degree, 39.7% - academic degree (PhD, MSc) and 14.6% of them have high school degree. 80% of the respondents were employed (regular or part-time), 10% of them unemployed, 9% were students and 1% retired.

Taking into consideration that e-democracy is a relatively new academic discipline, not many researches on this particular topic have been conducted in the Republic of Macedonia. However, it has to be emphasized that this is only a preliminary research. Our major purpose was to gain initial insights into the citizens' participation and their attitudes towards e-democracy process.

3. Citizen Participation in the Digital Age

According to Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration, citizen participation may be defined as a process in which ordinary people take part – whether on a voluntary or obligatory basis and whether acting alone or as part of a group – with the goal of influencing a decision involving significant choices that will affect their community. Such participation may or may not take place within an institutional framework, and it may be organized either by members of civil society (for example, through class action, demonstrations citizens' committees, etc.) or by decision makers (for example, through referendums, parliamentary commissions and mediation, etc.).

Citizen participation is regarded as a vital for the developing not just a democratic society, but a civil society as well. Participation affords citizens in a democracy an opportunity to communicate information to government officials about their concerns and preferences and to put pressure on them to respond (Verba et al. Voice, 1995).

In the digital age the way of citizen participation changed as new technologies become available. This means that one of the key preconditions for e-participation is access to Internet, but also having a computer and digital literacy.

The aim of e-participation is to improve citizens' access to information and public services and to promote participation in public decision-making that affects the welfare of society in general, and especially the individual (Institut für Informationsmanagement Bremen, 2008). Therefore, e-participation is generally accepted term referring to participation in government and administrative processes through information and communication support. The processes can relate to the administration, service delivery, decision-making and policy-making.

The United Nations (2014), for the purposes of its global reports, defines e-participation as a set of government programs to encourage citizen participation and the willingness of citizens to get involved. It covers both, the demand side and the supply side.

The index of e-participation will also assess the quality and usefulness of the information and services provided by the state because of the involvement of its citizens in public policy making through the use of e-government programs. Thus, e-participation is an indicator of the capacity and willingness of the state to encourage citizens to participate in decision-making processes and public policies, as well as the overall social inclusive approach to governance.

According to this definition of the United Nations, e-participation should contribute to achieving the following objectives:

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- to increase electronically accessible information to citizens on decision making
- to improve e-consultations and resulting participatory processes; and
- to support of the electronic decision-making through increased citizen participation in decision-making processes.

4. Republic of Macedonia and the Information Society

The *National Strategy for Development of Information Society* was the first strategic document addressing the issues of information society, drafted and published by the Government of the Republic of Macedonia in 2005. This document refers to the development of information society as a whole, with special emphasis on the following aspects: infrastructure, e-business, e-citizens, e-education, e-healthcare and legislation. In 2008 the *Ministry of Information Society* was established and since then it is responsible for the development of information society as a whole, for creating and drafting policy papers, and for the coordination of the activities related to digital skills and e-services (Cvetanova and Pachovski, 2014). The concept of e-democracy in Republic of Macedonia was introduced throughout several strategic documents.[4]

The obligation to provide access to the Internet, as a precondition for e-participation, is a part of Package latest EU directives adopted in 2009 in the field of electronic communications, in particular the Framework Directive 140 / EC / 2009. This directive is implemented with the *Law on Electronic Communications (2013)* in Macedonia. One of the key provisions of this Law refers to the obligation to guarantee access to the Internet, but also guaranteeing technology neutrality i.e. not favouring any particular technology. This is of a significant importance in terms of fostering e-participation because it means that there is no restriction or favouring a particular technology, which facilitates the implementation of access to the Internet, and it directly affects the citizens' engagement in democratic process (Bojadzievska, 2015).

According to data from the State Statistical Office[5], in the first quarter of 2015, 69.4% of households had Internet access at home, which is one percentage higher than the same period of 2014. The share of households with broadband in the total number of households increased from 67.7% in 2014 to 69.0% in 2015. Almost all (99.5%) of the households with Internet access had a broadband (fixed or mobile) Internet connection.

The data regarding the age category of the Internet and computer users are the following: 69.2% of the total population at the age from 15 to 74 used computers, while 70.4% used Internet in the first quarter of 2015. Internet was most used by pupils and students i.e. 94.7%. 71.2% of Internet users in the first quarter of 2015 used a mobile phone or smartphone to access Internet away from home or from work.

In the first quarter of 2015, the highest rate of the usage of Internet (83.6%) goes to participation in social networks, followed by 74.9% for reading/downloading online news/newspapers/news magazines. With regards to services, 53.9% goes to seeking health-related information and 41.85 looking for information about education, training or course offers.

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[4] *National Strategy for Electronic Communications with Information Technologies* (2007-2009); *National Strategy for e-government* (2010-2012); *Strategy for Public Administration Reform* (2010-2015) with the *Revised Action Plan* (2010-2015); *National Strategy for e-inclusive ness* (2011-2014); *National Short-term ICT strategy* (2016-2017).
[5] State Statistical Office, http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2015/8.1.15.31.pdf, viewed 5 May 2016.

5.   Research Results

According to the data from the collected answers, most of our respondents (62%) use Internet regardless of their locations, i.e. continuously, followed by those respondents that use Internet at home (27%), then at work (10%) and at faculty only 1%.

On the question "*How do you acces Internet*", the respondents were asked to select the best possible answers out of the choices from a given list of devices: personal computer, laptop, smartphone and tablet. The vast majority of the respondents acces Internet by their laptops (74%) and smartphones (73%). 48% of them use their personal computers and 26% their tablets.

The respondents were asked if they get informations by following the activities on the official webpages of the Assembley of the Republic of Macedonia, some of the ministries, Government or the municipality where they live.
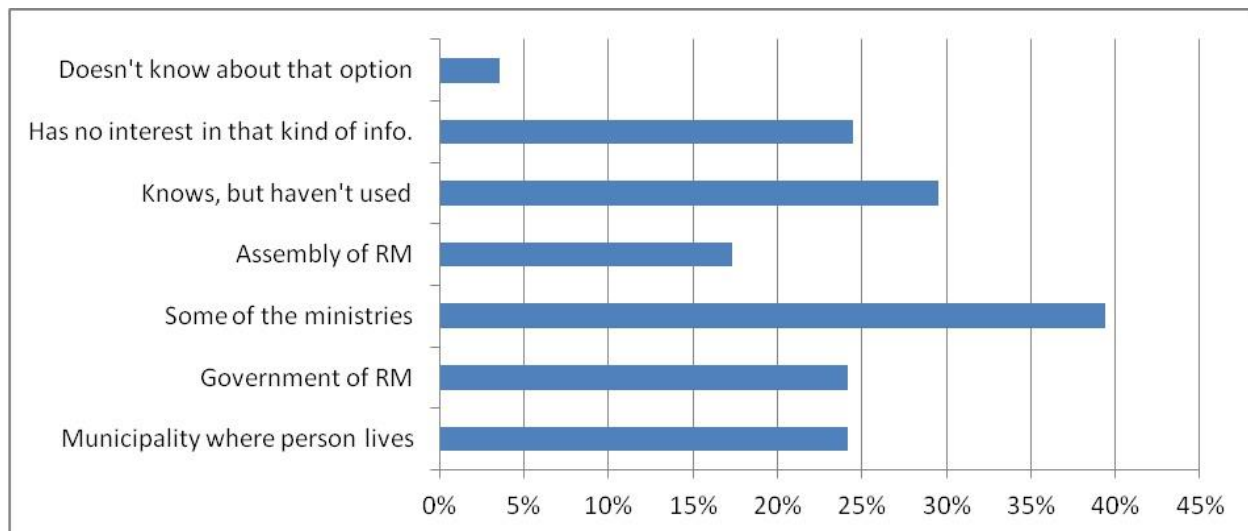

Figure 1.
Do You Get Informations by Following the Activities on the Official Web-pages of the listed institutions?

As shown in **Figure 1,** most of the respondents (39%) are interested in getting information about some of the Ministries by following their activities on their official webpages and, least interested in following the activities of the Assembley of the Republic of Macedonia. Yet, although 54% of the respondents know about this possibility they do not follow the activites on the official webpages of any of the listed institutions. The respondents were given the possibility to select the best possible answers out of the choices from listed institutions.
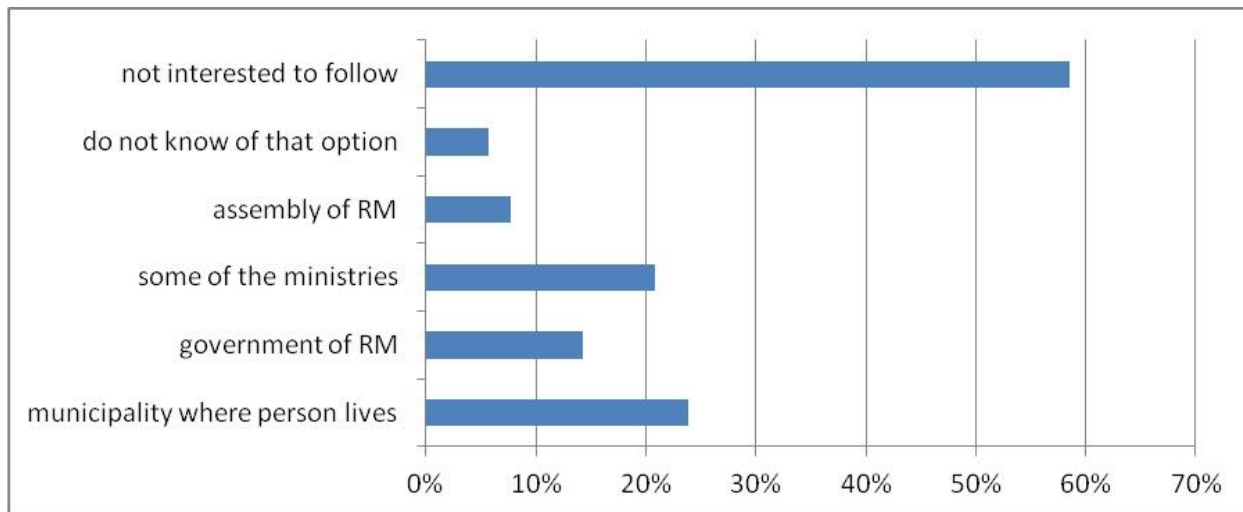
Figure 2.
Do You Follow the Activities on the Official Social Network Profiles of the Listed Institutions?

According to data, the respondents are less interested in following the social network profiles of the listed institutions then their official webpages. Namely, the respondents are most interested in following the social network profiles of the municipality where they live (24%), and least interested in following the social network profiles of the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia (8%). Once again, the respondent were given the possibility to select the best possible answers out of the choices from listed institutions.
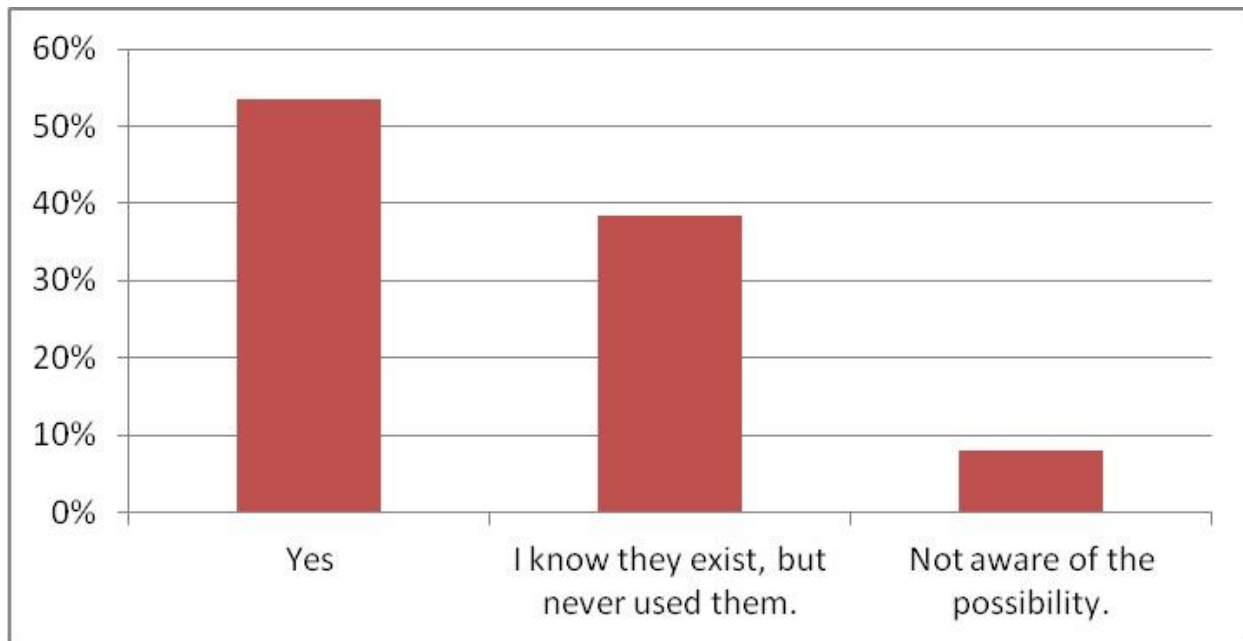

Figure 3.
Have You Ever Used Some Kind of E-service Available on the Official Webpage of the Municipality Where You Live?

The respondents were asked if they ever used some kind of e-service (e-taxes, e-forms, e-procurement, e-permission) available on the official webpage of the municipality where they live. Half of the respondents i.e. 53% already used some kind of e-service. 39% of them are aware of this possibility but never used it and only 8% of the respondents are not aware of the possibility to use some kind of e-service. This data is in correlation with the data from another research study that revealed that the most commonly implemented e-tool on the official Ministries' webpages is e-service (Cvetanova, Bojadzievska and Pachovski, 2016).
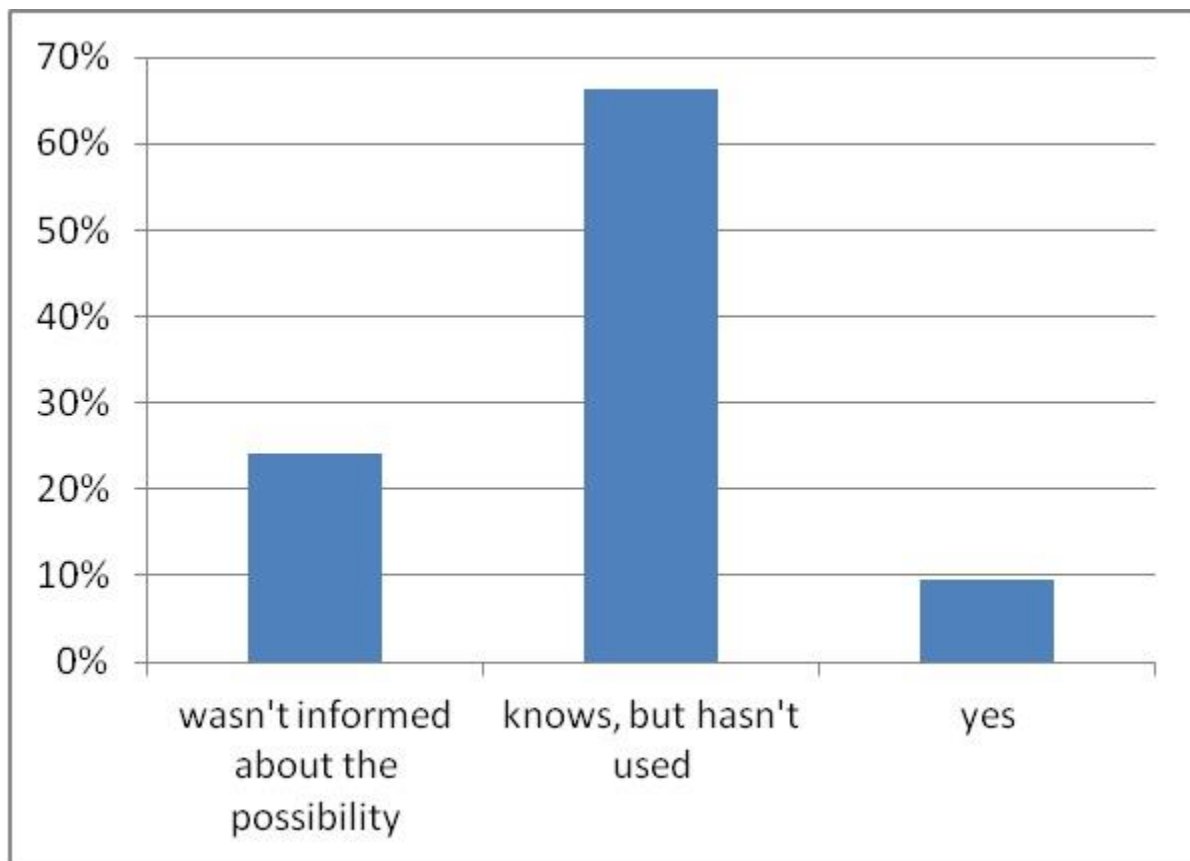

Figure 4.
Have You Ever Sent a Question by e-mail to an Assembly Speaker or to a Member of a Parliament, Using Available e-tools on the Official Webpage of the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia?

Citizens can participate in democratic process by giving their comments on a question asked or a draft presented, or by sending some additional ideas. Thereby they can influence in the process of decision-making.

So, respondents were asked if they ever sent a question by e-mail to an Assembly Speaker or to a Member of a Parliament, using available e-tools on the official webpage of the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia. Despite the fact that 76% of the respondents are aware of the possibility of sending a question

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via electronic mail on the official webpage of the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia either to the Assembly Speaker or to some Member of the Parliament, only 10% from all the respondents used this possibility.
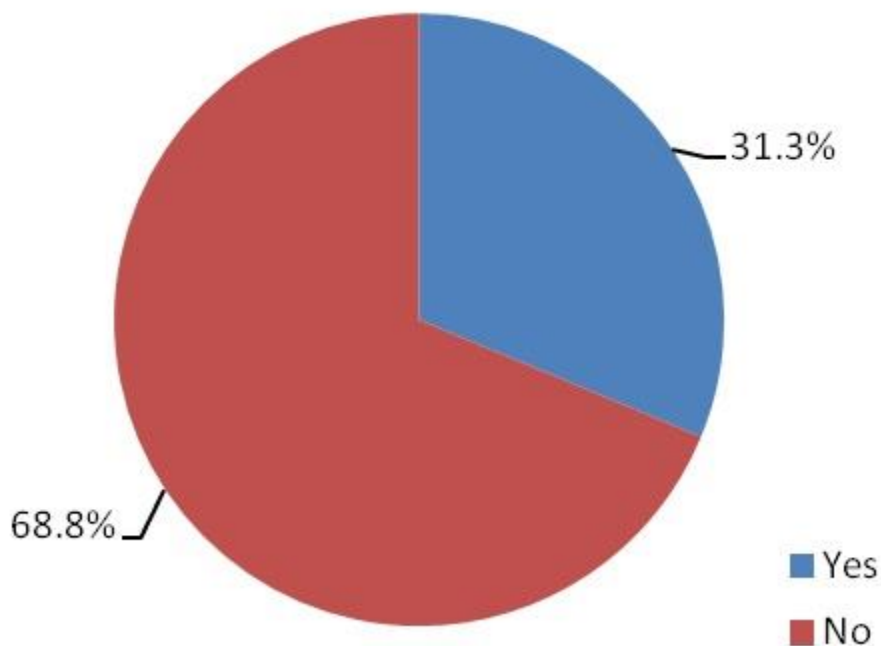

Figure 5.
Did You Receive an Answer from the Assembly Speaker or a Member of the Parliament?

Although the citizens can influence the finale decision on a question asked or a draft presented by using the possibility of sending their comments or ideas to planning or decision-making bodies, even though the extent of influence may differ considerably. It depends, for example, if the comments received are answered. In other words, it depends on the democratic awareness of the government officials and decision makers.

The vast majority of those respondents (68,8%) who sent a question via electronic mail on the official webpage of the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia either to the Assembly Speaker or to some of the Members of the Parliament, did not receive any answer from the officials, vis-à-vis those 31.1% who received an answer.
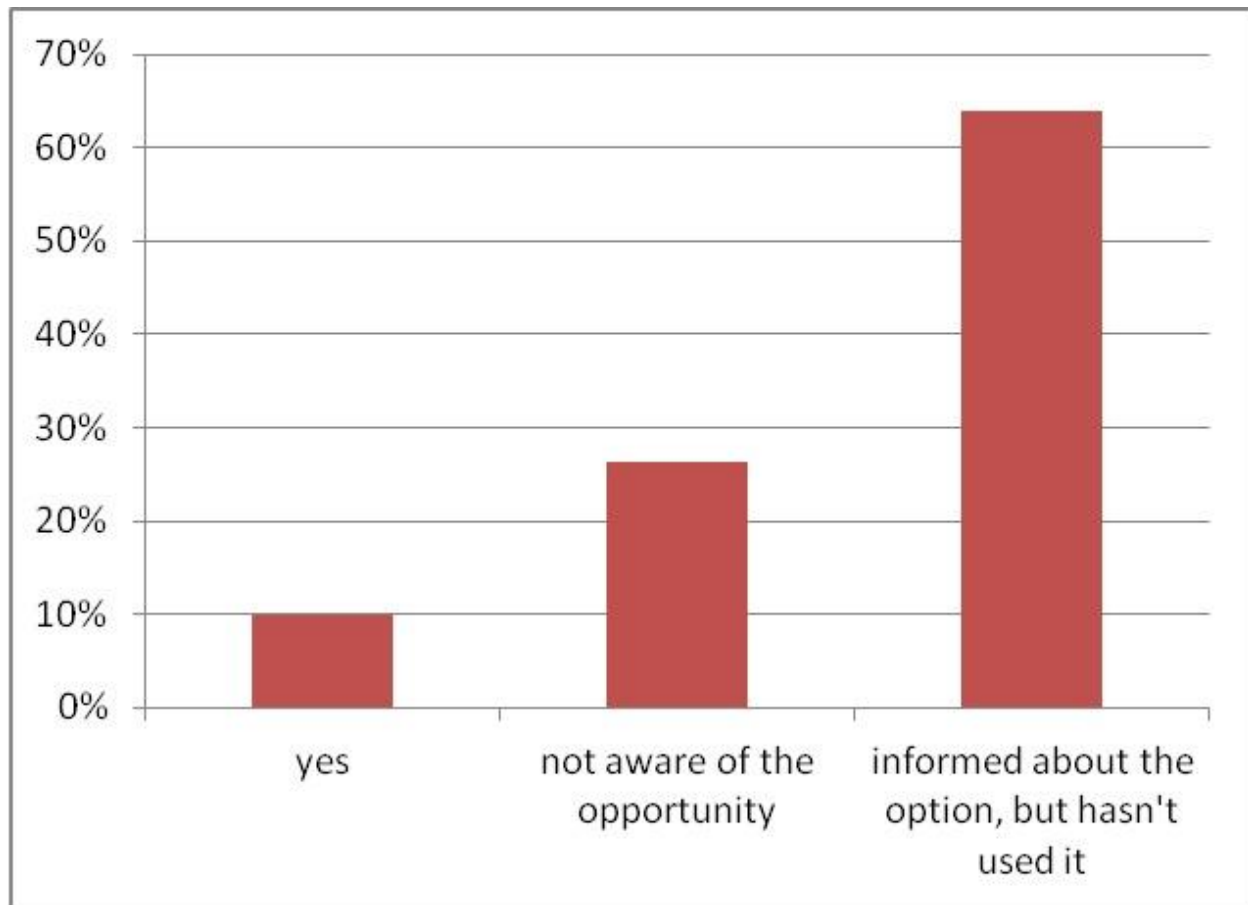
Figure 6.
Have You Ever Reported an Idea or Suggestion for a Project on the Official Webpage of the Municipality Where You Live or
Some Ministry?

As we can see from the **Figure 6**, only 10 % of the respondents reported an idea or suggestion for a project on the official webpage of the municipality where they live or some of the ministries. The rest of the respondents (90%) did not use that possibility – 26% because they were not aware of that possibility and 64% of them, despite the fact that they were aware of the possibility yet, did not use it.
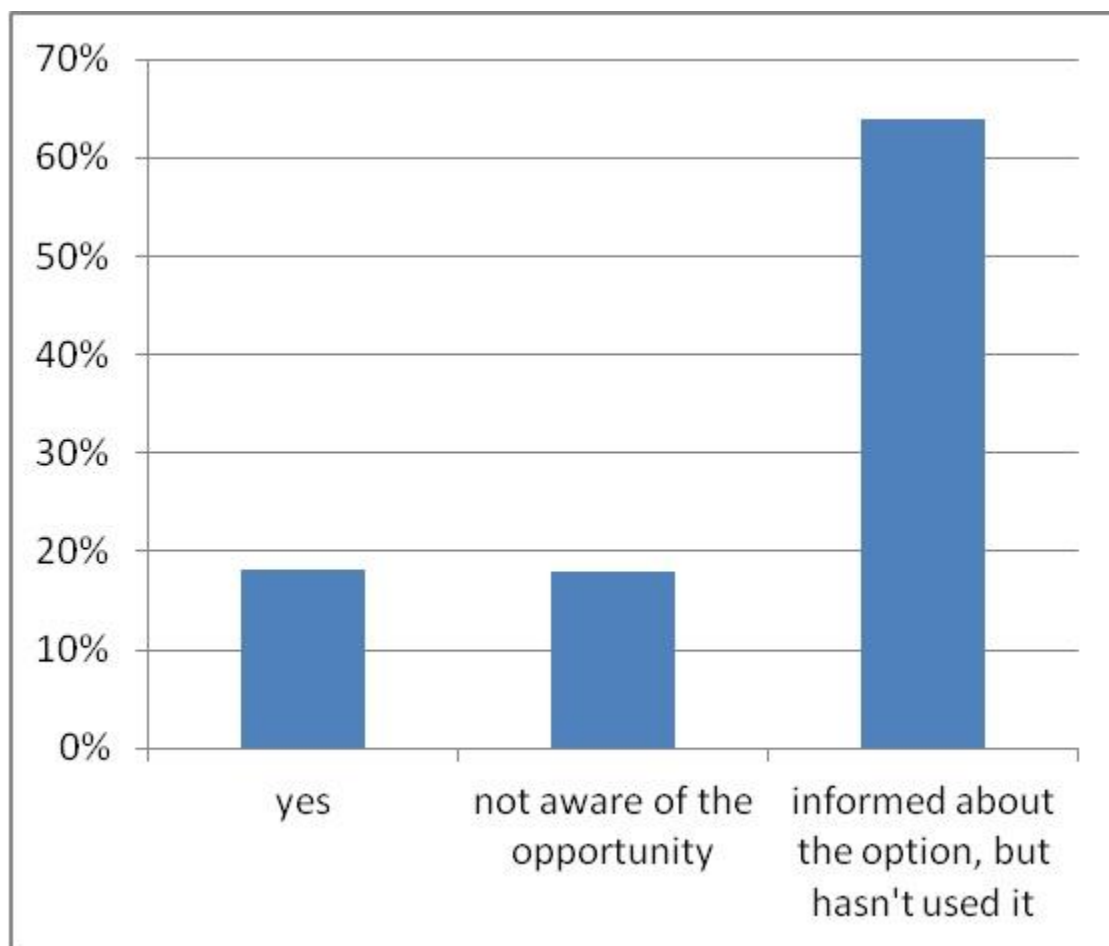
Figure 7.
Have You Ever Reported a Problem or a Complaint Using Available e-Tools on the Official Webpages of the Municipality Where
You Live or Some Ministry?

The vast majority of the respondents (82%) are aware of the possibility to report a problem or complaint using available e-tools on the official webpages of the municipality where they live or some of the ministries. Yet, only 18.2% of all the respondents used this possibility and reported some problem or complaint using available e-tools.
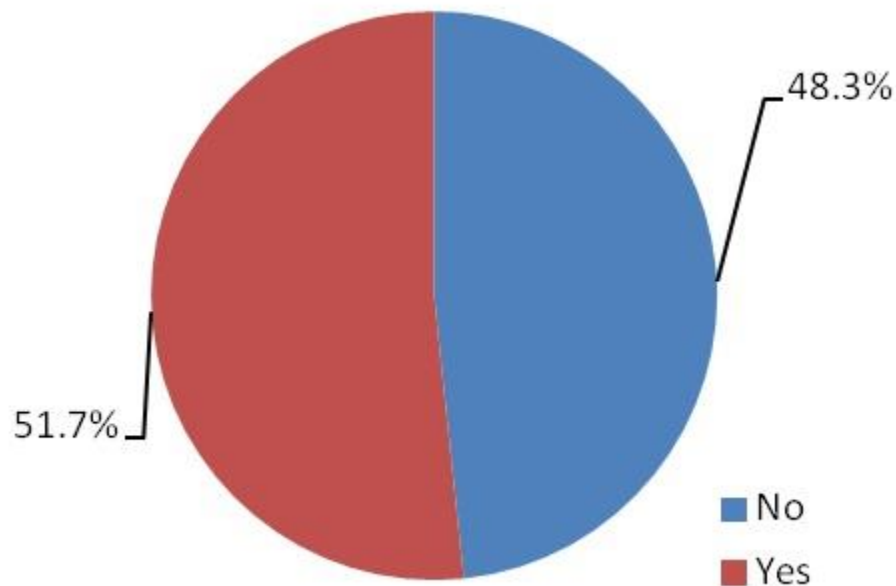
Figure 8.
Did You Receive an Aswer from the Municipality or the Ministry?

Unlike the data presented in **Figure 5** where is showen that the vast majority of the respondents (68.8%) did not receive any answer from the Assembly Speaker or a Member of a Parliament, in the case when it comes to receiving an answer from the municipality where they live or some of the ministries, almost half of the respondents i.e. 48.3% from those who sent a project/idea or reported a problem/complaint using digital tools available on the official webpages of those institutions received an answer.
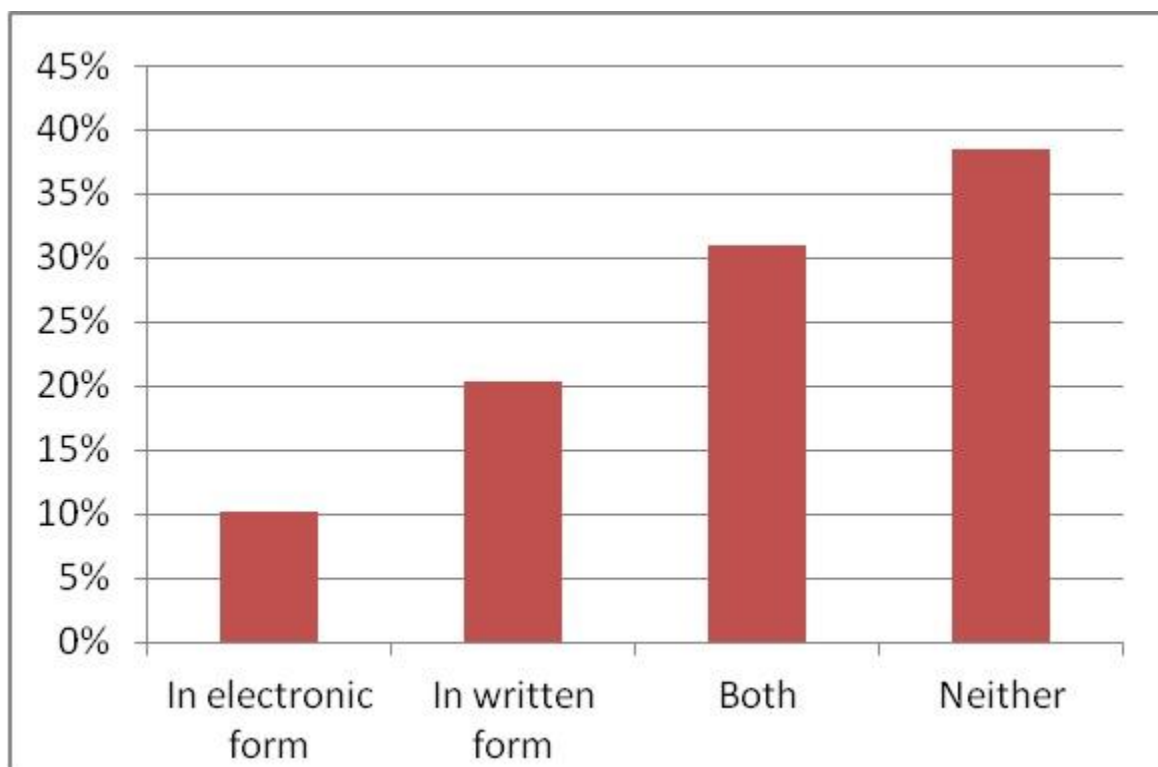
Figure 9.
Do You Believe that the Chances for Getting an Answer are Bigger if You Send Your Request in: Electronic Form; Written Form, Either Ways or Neither?

The respondents were asked about their opinion regarding the chances for getting an answer form the officials and state institutions. Do they believe that the chances for getting an answer are bigger if they send the request in electronic or written form, either ways or neither? The purpose of this question was to gain insight into citizens' attitude toward e-democracy process but also, in a certain way, to measure their trust in the Institutions and Public administration. As presented in **Figure 9**, 31% of the respondents believe that the chances for getting an answer both in written or electronic form are equal, 10% of them believe in electronic form and 20% in written form. However, it remains a big percentage of those respondents (39%) that do not believe in getting an answer in any of the listed ways, the fact that has to be taken into consideration.
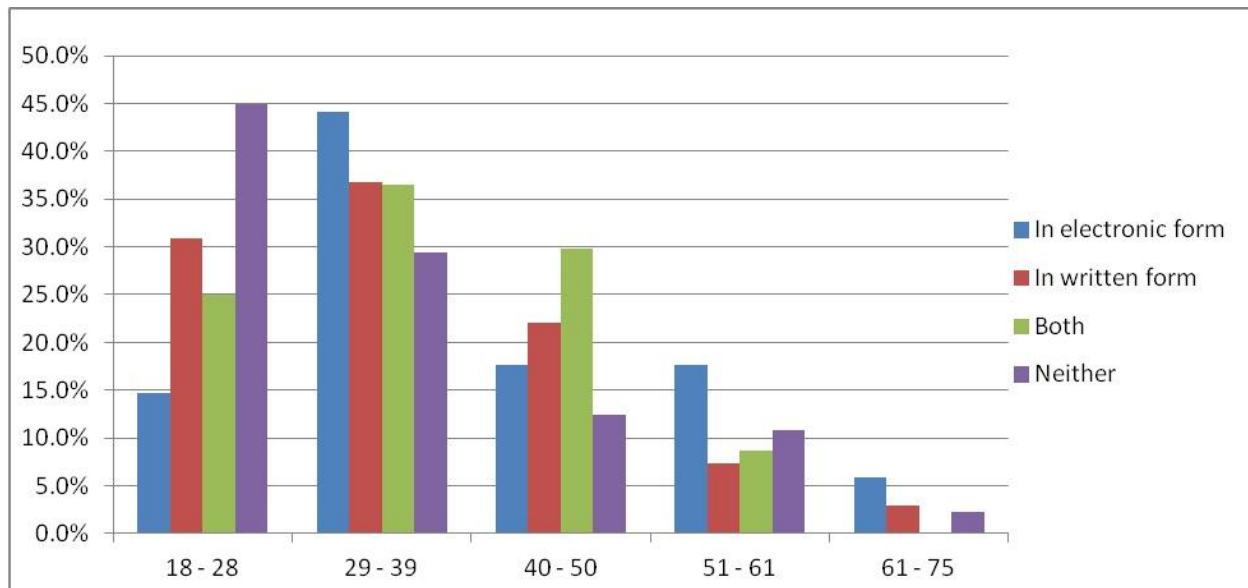
Figure 10.
Do You Believe that the Chances for Getting an Answer are Bigger if You Send Your Request in: Electronic Form, Written Form, Either Ways or Neither (age category variable)?

The results from the answers analyzed through the age category variable, point out that almost half of the respondents from the youngest category (from 18 to 29 years) i.e. 45% do not believe that they will get an answer from the institutions no matter in which form they will send their request which implies mistrust in the state institutions, government officials and decision makers. On the other hand, most of the respondents from the category form 29 to 39 years (44.1%) believe that the chances for getting an answer are bigger if they send their request in electronic form. The next generation of respondents (from 40 to 50 years) believes that the chances for getting an answer are equal if they send the request in electronic or written form, the facts can be interpreted as a positive attitude towards e-democracy.

6.   Study Limitations

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that gained insight into citizens' e-participation and their attitudes towards e-democracy process in the Republic of Macedonia. Yet, the study has some limitations. A major though natural limitation comes from the fact that this was only a preliminary research and, consequently, there is a lack of in-depth analysis on these topics. Another limitation is the fact the questionnaire was distributed only via Social Networks, as well as the sample of the respondents, in particular their age, employment status and educational level. Further research should be undertaken in order to investigate the analytical perspective on these topics.

7.   Conclusions

In this paper we investigated citizens' participation in e-democracy processes in the Republic of Macedonia i.e. e-participation. In other words, the focus of our investigation was the citizens' usage of digital tools

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available on the official webpages set by the state and local self-government institutions in order to enable active citizen's participation.

For the purpose of our research we created a questionnaire that explored citizens' awareness of the possibility to use digital tools in the democratic process, their participation via usage of digital tools and their attitudes towards e-democracy process. Methodological approach used in this research relied on the analysis of the obtained answers from the on-line questionnaire that was distributed via social networks Facebook and LinkedIn in the period from November 2015 to February 2016.

The findings based on collected answers indicated that the citizens are more interested in following official webpages of the state institutions than their social network profiles. However, the research also revealed that, comparing to following the activities of some of the ministries or municipality where they live, the citizens are least interested in following the activities of the Assembley of the Republic of Macedonia in both cases i.e. whether it comes to official webpage or social network profiles.

The findings suggest that the most commonly used e-tool by the citizens is e-service. It means that 39% of the respondents have used this possibility.

Despite the fact that 76% of the respondents are aware of the possibility of sending a question via electronic mail on the official webpage of the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia either to the Assembly Speaker or to some Member of the Parliament, only 10% from all the respondents used this possibility.

Only 10 % of the respondents reported an idea or suggestion for a project on the official webpage of the municipality where they live or some of the Ministries. The rest of the respondents (90%) did not use that possibility – 26% because were not aware of that possibility and 64% of them, despite the fact that were aware of the possibility yet, did not use it.

The vast majority of the respondents (82%) are aware of the possibility to report a problem or complaint using available e-tools on the official webpages of the municipality where they live or some of the ministries. Yet, only 18,2% of all the respondents used this possibility and reported some problem or complaint using available e-tools.

The vast majorityt of those respondents (68,8%) who sent a question to the Assembly Speaker or to a Member of a Parliament using official webpage of the Parliament did not receive any answer. When it comes to receiving an answer from the municipality where the citizens live or some of the ministries, almost half of the respondents i.e. 48,3% from those who sent a project/idea or reported a problem/complaint using available e-tools on the official web-pages of those institutions received an answer.

The findings based on collected answers indicated that almost half of the respondents from the youngest category (from 18 to 29 years) do not believe that they will get an answer from the Institutions no matter in which form they will send their request. This fact points out that the youngest generation from the respondents does not trust the government officials and decision makers. On the other hand, most of the respondents from the category form 29 to 39 years (44.1%) believe that the chances for getting an answer are bigger if they send their request in electronic form, a fact that can be interpreted as a very positive attitude towards e-democracy.

The empirical findings in this study enhance our understanding of citizens' awareness of the possibility to use digital tools in the democratic process, their participation via usage of digital tools and their attitudes towards e-democracy process in the Republic of Macedonia.

Based on the findings it can be concluded that despite the fact there is sufficient amount of e-tools set up on the official webpages of the state institutions enabling citizen e-participation, further effort is required to promote the usage of ICT, digital and social media tools as available manner of communication with the government officials and decision makers.

Also, further efforts are needed to build trust in e-participation and to demonstrate that using these tools is a reliable channel for citizens' engagement in the e-democracy processes. On the other hand, efforts are needed to increase democratic awareness of the government officials and decision makers as well as their understanding of the importance of the citizens' engagement in the decision-making process as one of the pillars that underpin democracy.

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