Civic E-Participation in Central and Eastern Europe: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract—Civic participation is an important aspect of democracy. The contemporary model of democracy is based on citizens' participation in political decision-making (deliberative democracy, participatory democracy). This participation takes many forms of activities like display of slogans and symbols, voting, social consultations, political demonstrations, membership in political parties or organizing civil disobedience. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 are characterized by great social, economic and political diversity. Civil society is also part of the process of democratization. Civil society, funded by the rule of law, civil rights, such as freedom of speech and association and private ownership, was to play a central role in the development of liberal democracy. Among the many interpretations of concepts, defining the concept of contemporary democracy, one can assume that the terms civil society and democracy, although different in meaning, nowadays overlap. In the post-communist countries, the process of shaping and maturing societies took place in the context of a struggle with a state governed by undemocratic power. State fraud or repudiation of the institution is a representative state, which in the past was the only way to manifest and defend its identity, but after the breakthrough became one of the main obstacles to the development of civil society. In Central and Eastern Europe, there are many obstacles to the development of civil society, for example, the elimination of economic poverty, the implementation of educational campaigns, consciousness-related obstacles, the formation of social capital and the deficit of social activity. Obviously, civil society does not only entail an electoral turnout but a broader participation in the decision-making process, which is impossible without direct and participative democratic institutions. This article considers such broad forms of civic participation and their characteristics in Central and Eastern Europe. The paper is attempts to analyze the functioning of electronic forms of civic participation in Central and Eastern European states. This is not accompanied by a referendum or a referendum initiative, and other forms of political participation, such as public consultations, participative budgets, or e-Government. However, this paper will broadly present electronic administration tools, the application of which results from both legal regulations and increasingly common practice in state and city management. In the comparative analysis, the experiences of post-communist bloc countries will be summed up to indicate the challenges and possible goals for further development of this form of citizen participation in the political process. The author argues that for to function efficiently and effectively, states need to involve their citizens in the political decision-making process, especially with the use of electronic tools.

Keywords—Central and Eastern Europe, e-participation, e-government, post-communism.

I. INTRODUCTION

CIVIC participation is a vital element of democracy. Many theories of democracy recognize citizen involvement as

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one of the key criteria determining its strength. Accordingly, "strong" democracy is characterized by the direct, deliberate and conscious participation of large groups of citizens, while "weak" democracy operates on the basis of the knowledge and skills of leaders who shape public opinion and influence the media [1]. Today, a model of democracy based on citizens' participation in political decision-making (deliberative democracy, participatory democracy) is being increasingly recognized. This participation can take many forms, from the display of slogans and symbols, through voting, social consultations, political demonstrations, to membership in political parties, or organizing civil disobedience. While democracy may be perceived procedurally as a mechanism for choosing and legitimizing governments and as means of decision-making and upholding the law, we need to remember that many thinkers such as J. S. Mill, L. Hobhouse, J. Dewey [2] treated democracy as a specific type of society, a sphere of relations between people who form a nation or community. Accordingly, liberal democracy establishes a specific model of society, not just a formal ruling mechanism. Historically, the best basis for democracy was Western Europe's civil society which developed along with economic progress and individual growth of its citizens. Based on lawful rule and civic rights such as freedom of speech and association as well as private property, civil society played a central role in the development of liberal democracy [3].

Central and Eastern European states began transforming their political systems in 1989 when the Soviet Empire ceased to exist and the communist party of soviet satellite states (Poland, DDR, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary) of the Soviet Union conceded power to the ad-hoc democratic structures. This political shift was accompanied by economic changes often resulting in dramatic consequences (falling GDP, mass unemployment and overall chaos). Since that date these former communist states have significantly diversified themselves from one another [4]. Societies of those countries have been formed and developed in circumstances of hostility towards governments that was associated with foreign sovereignty. Deception and disregard for government institutions, which previously were the only ways to manifest and defend one's identity, after that turning point, became one of the main obstacles hindering the development of civic societies [5]. Analyses of Central and Eastern Europe's societies show that in less important aspects they are not so distant from developed societies of the European Union. However, with reference to the most crucial aspects of segmentation (those that influence the effectiveness of the society as a whole, internal safety and external empowerment,

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as well as a "side effect" significant commitment of citizens in third sector associations and non-profit activities), the distance is vast. The pace of "pro-civic" transformations in post-communist states is largely determined by the following factors: past heritage, output conditions, accepted institutional solutions, scope of external help and political directions of new governments [6].

Considering the aforementioned genesis of democracy in Central and Eastern European states as well as current differences in the scope of implementing and pursuing the model of participatory democracy, the author of the present article conducts a comparative analysis and asks the following research questions: How large is electronic civic participation in Central and Eastern European states? Do electronic communication tools have an influence on citizen's participation in the process of decision-making? The author argues that civic activity is undergoing crucial changes due to technological progress and constantly improving Internet access. Do the experiences of individual states confirm this assumption? The present article aims at critically analyzing how electronic forms of civic participation function in Central-Eastern European states. The author debates on the notion that efficient and effective functioning of modern countries requires the inclusion of citizens into the process of making political decisions, especially when it comes to the use of electronic tools.

II. CIVIC E-PARTICIPATION

To put it simply, the notion of civic participation is understood by the author as citizens' contribution in the process of implementing and making political decisions. Its electronic model differs from the traditional one due to the use of ICT (information and communication technologies) communication tools. Literature on the subject uses two main terms: *political participation* and *civic engagement*, which are more and more frequently joined together to form the notion of civic participation. In order to organize the understanding of these terms, the author shall quote Daniel Mider's definition, according to which political participation means, in its broader sense, general or particular actions which can be instrumental or expressive, voluntary or motivated, legal (legitimised) or illegal (non-legitimised), conventional or unconventional, violent or non-violent, made by a citizen or a political power and are targeted at government bodies or other parties with political power [7]. On the other hand, *civic engagement* means not only acting in order to change the life of communities, but also acquiring knowledge, skills, values, and proper motivation to make this change happen. This means promoting quality of life in communities both through political and non-political means [8]. In other words, our modern understanding of these terms encompasses obvious and hidden forms of political participation. This is why we can discern new forms of political behaviors and perspectives of political participation in different states [9].

Many researchers have the opinion that the use of modern technologies has a tremendous impact on the growth of citizen commitment to politics. Indeed, van Dijk and Hacker indicate

that the use of ICT and CMC (computer-mediated communication) in any type of media in order to strengthen political democracy or citizens' participation in the democratic process leads to *digital democracy* [10]. The use of such technologies in democratic systems is also called democracy 2.0 or e-democracy. It is characterized by: influence on the mechanisms of direct democracy, the growth of bilateral communication between the voters and the politicians, the increase of interest in political processes (e-participation) and the use of ICT for current public administrative tasks (e-government) [11]. There are opinions that the phenomenon of e-government is directly connected to civic participation in public debate. This in turn forms a solid basis for the growth of e-participation, which encompasses all forms of active citizen participation in the political process thanks to the use of the Internet and other ICT technologies [12].

The OECD's 2001 Citizens as Partners report is a useful source of information regarding civic e-participation. From it, we may conclude that democratic political participation must include ways of informing citizens, mechanisms of participating in the decision-making process, as well as the ability to participate and influence a political program [13]. This has been included in three following requirements:

- Information: a unilateral relation in which the governments create and deliver information to citizens. It includes both "passive" access to information and "active" work of the government aimed at spreading information across the society.
- Consultation: a bilateral relation in which citizens give their feedback to the government. It is based on the fact that citizens give their feedback regarding key information that has been previously passed to them by the government.
- Active participation, as a bilateral relation, is based on cooperation between the government and the citizens: both sides must actively engage in the political process. The citizens' role in proposing political options and creating political dialogue is appreciated, but the government is solely responsible for the final decisions.

e-Government is the use of ICTs to improve the activities of organisations in the public sector. Relations between the public sector and the citizens are called G2C (Government-to-Citizens). These are bilateral relations that take place in very specific legal and institutional frameworks [14]. It also is worth noting that such exchange of information, consultations and active participation give rise to the citizens' influence on the government's politics. Even the first level realized by e-administration significantly improves the citizens' quality of life through unified access; the ability to settle a matter and check its status at any time or place; saving time by settling matters fast; giving the disabled opportunities to settle their matters at home; flexible working hours; using a single database of documents that are necessary to use public administration services; minimizing the need to inform all institutions when changing personal data; material savings in companies. E-administration is also advantageous for institutions, as they reap the following benefits: improvement

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and popularization of electronic access to administration services, better image of the institution, standardization of data transfer, the possibility of archiving documents in electronic forms, as well as the ability to serve customers faster. However, this process also faces some obstacles, namely the lack of proper organizational regulations, no infrastructure, no staff education regarding the use of ICT and even psychological barriers [15].

III. CIVIC E-PARTICIPATION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The idea of a civil society resurfaced due to actions of democratic opposition in Central Europe. In practice, it meant a society willing to fight for its independence and empowerment. This term was associated with civil resistance to politics understood as conforming all ways of life to the party-state [16]. When considering the necessity to very quickly make up for any delays in the process of forming civil culture and political/societal transformations, as well as the state of social consciousness, the lack of education, upbringing and a tradition of political activity, erroneous definitions and negative connotations of political terms, it might be argued that in Central and Eastern European states there was no proper basis for civil society and civic participation to flourish [17].

If the idea of civil societies were to come true, each citizen would have to be empowered. This is only possible in states that have developed institutions of both direct and indirect democracy, formed within the framework of parliamentary democracy. It is also tied to the fact that states need to guarantee their citizens the freedom of acting in the socio-political sphere. This process takes place where the state is being deprived of its overwhelming role in organizing the entire civil life of its society. However, such a society cannot develop in situations where the vast majority of citizens is being marginalized and, consequently, feels discouraged or lacks any interest in politics or civil activity [18]. In the context of e-participation such marginalization can take the form of limited access to the Internet. According to Eurostat's data in 2013 at least half of the citizens aged between 16 and 74 of most Central and Eastern European states had access to the Internet at their homes. The highest percentage was reported in Estonia (76%), Slovakia (74%) and Czech Republic (71%), the lowest in Romania (46%) and Bulgaria (51%). This is the latest data on the subject. These numbers are expected to successively improve in each state due to a linear increase of home Internet usage since 2002.

Internet access is the first step in the development of e-participation. Many states are introducing it in the form of e-government. The below table compares data about individuals using the Internet at home (2013) with 2016 data regarding Internet use in contacting public authorities. Both values are nearly identical only in the case of Estonia and Latvia. In the remaining states significantly fewer people use the Internet for the purposes of interactions with public authorities than suggested by their Internet access at home.

EU member states are being researched in terms of electronic administration and e-participation. All the gathered data is published in the "European Digital Progress Report" [20] procured by the European Commission. The report is based on the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) — a combination of Europe's digital efficiency rating and the evolution of EU member states in terms of digital competitiveness. According to the latest report, among all Central and Eastern European states the best score was achieved by Estonia, whereas Romania had the lowest score. In 2016, all EU member states improved on the DESI. Slovakia and Slovenia progressed the most (more than 0.04 as opposed to an EU average of 0.028). On the other hand, Latvia reported the lowest increase (below 0.02). European champions in Digital Public Services in 2016 were Estonia, Finland and the Netherlands. But in Central Europe such countries like Romania, Hungary and Croatia were lagging behind. The quality of European online public services improved on a small scale comparing with an increase in the number of public services available online (online service completion score rised from 75 in 2014 to 82 in 2016). Meanwhile, the rate measuring the reuse of user data already known to the public administration as a way of facilitating the distribution of online services, remained stable.

TABLE I
INDIVIDUALS USING THE INTERNET, CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE
(% OF INDIVIDUALS AGED 16 TO 74) [19]

Country	Internet access at home (2013)	For interaction with public authorities (2016)
Bulgaria	51	19
Croatia	62	36
Czech Republic	71	36
Estonia	76	77
Hungary	69	48
Latvia	70	69
Lithuania	65	45
Macedonia	60	17
Poland	61	30
Romania	46	9
Slovakia	74	48
Slovenia	70	45

Another comparison, although considering a much broader geographical context, is the United Nations Public Administration Country Studies (UPACS) report. It is based on the E-Government Development Index (EGDI) and presents the state of E-Government Development of the United Nations member states. Along with an appraisal of the website development patterns in a country, this index incorporates the access characteristics (like the infrastructure and educational levels), to reflect how a country is using ICT to promote access and inclusion of its citizens. The EGDI is a composite measure of three important dimensions of e-government: provision of online services, telecommunication connectivity and human capacity [21]. The e-participation index (EPI) is derived as a supplementary index to the UN E-Government Survey. It extends the dimension of the Survey by focusing on the use of online services to facilitate provision of information by governments to citizens ("e-information

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sharing"), interaction with stakeholders ("e-consultation"), and engagement in decision-making processes ("e-decision making"). In terms of e-government, the leader in the group of Central-Eastern European states was Estonia, which was placed 13th in the ranking (with a rating of 0.8334). Slovenia and Lithuania were placed 21st and 23rd (with ratings: 0.7769 and 0.7747 respectively) with the following states in the next decade: Russia, Poland, Croatia and Serbia. Romania was again at the very end of the list (placed 75th in the ranking with the rating of 0.5611). In terms of e-participation in 2016 Central and Eastern European states shown completely different results with Poland being the best among them (14th in the United Nations ranking with a score of 0.8814) and Hungary taking the last place (91st with a score of 0.4915). A much deeper case study is required to better understand this data.

Analyses of these reports and reviews of studies regarding e-participation in Central and Eastern European states show that Estonia is this region's leader. Estonia started e-government services in 2000, when introduced a public system for electronic tax filing. In 2002, this country established a universal electronic identification card with digital signatures, for all citizens at the age of 15. The ID cards and signatures have become the keys to nearly universal access to government information and services as well as private sector services in health care, banking and education, and law. Today, Estonia has the most advanced e-society in the world, with the government offering some 600 e-services to citizens and 2,400 to businesses [22]. On March 1, 2015, Estonia held a parliamentary election, becoming the only country that allows all voters to vote online in general elections. All Estonians are obliged by law to hold a national ID card that has a microchip with identifying information and they are also issued two PIN codes. This solution causes that the combination of machine-readable ID cards and PIN codes makes it difficult for one person to vote for another. Estonian online voting is estimated to be demographically representative and politically neutral [23]. Researches show that 71% of Internet users in Estonia are completely satisfied with the offered public e-services. The majority of them (87%) agree that e-services have helped them save time and enabled them to get more information (85%). Besides, 75% of Internet users also agree that e-services have helped them save money and decrease bureaucracy [24].

Czech Republic, Russia and Poland were placed in the middle of the ranking. Their situation will be described below. Analyses of Czech e-government tools show what web pages of their statutory cities almost exclusively offer e-information tools rather than instruments that would allow for more transparent e-participation. The authorities also mostly follow legislation duties and do not go beyond them. Basing on the survey of David Špaček [25], it can be argued that information published on web pages of Czech city councils is affected by the requirements stipulated by law regarding the public character of Council meetings. Only in limited cases statutory cities publish documents which are supplementary to upcoming Council meetings. This reduces the potential of

Council meetings being attended by informed citizens. The use of Facebook is also following the trend to inform, but not contain transparent e-discussions. This will be a characteristic feature of many countries placed in the lower portion of the ranking- they have an e-government system which provides e-information and sometimes e-consultations, but e-participation did not have time to develop there yet.

A bit surprising is the relatively high position of Russia in the rankings of e-participation. Denis Volkov's findings [26] show that those who are the most well-informed are the least interested and in a state of relaxed demobilization. He claims that among the young people of the capital who prefer Internet publications as their main source of information, mostly people who have no particular political leanings predominate. Russia's non-system opposition parties and movements which have been relegated by the authorities from television to the Internet, in spite of the fact that they are relatively well known, have not been successful in securing trust or, even less, enlisting participation in their actions by the Internet audience. At the same time the Putin administration was gradually limiting freedoms associated with an "information society," this institution expressed symbolic and concrete support for its development [27]. This support appeared in the form of a governmental resolution (2003), mandating access to governmental information via websites and other means, and through the passage of Electronic Russia (E-Russia) program. According to the program description, one of the main goals of E-Russia was to overcome Russia's lag behind the developed countries in the level of the use and development of ICTs, provision for consistent entry of Russia into the world economy due to cooperation and information transparency, ensuring the right to confidentiality of all information stored in information systems protected by law. E-Russia program consisted of conceptions of e-government, enclosing G2C and G2B elements, but also envisioned comprehensive investments in computer and network infrastructure, IT education, and informatization at all levels of government. E-Russia included goals to connect all universities to the Internet by 2005, but also all smaller higher education institutions by 2010, and achieving this they wanted to cut the price of Internet access in half.

In Poland, the notion of e-government has been introduced as a consequence of new legal regulations (2002). This helped create institutional bases for making coordinated decisions and actions regarding the implementation of IT solutions in public administration. In terms of access to public information, this is realized through websites created by each obliged party. Moreover, governmental bodies and public administration entities run their own websites, through which citizens may access information or do official business (e.g. attain and ID card, report to the Labour Office, acquire geodesic information or fill out electronic tax declarations in the "eDeklaracje" system). Usage of technologies in the daily life of cities is also accomplished through mobile smartphone applications (on a small scale) and Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS). The second form of government-citizen relations are bilateral consultations. Their goal is to encourage

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broader consideration of the society's standpoint when taking action. This is expressed by new channels of online communication. In Poland, public consultations are conducted rather sporadically. Among the most commonly consulted matters are development and zoning plans, establishing networks of schools, creating cooperation programs with non-government organizations, environmental programs and creating local strategies of solving social problems [28]. As a tool, such consultations are assessed well, but in practice they are scarcely used. The last form from the perspective of research on citizen participation is the bilateral participation entailing a specific partnership between the government and the citizens. In this regard participatory budgets stand as good practice (especially those that provide citizens with the ability to cast their votes online). In Poland, participatory budgeting was for the first time used in the city of Płock in the year 2003 (called a "grant fund"). Afterwards, it also appeared in the city of Sopot in 2011 under the name of „citizen budget", which became the official term for participatory budgeting in Poland [29]. Today, participatory budgeting is becoming an increasingly popular practice of city management that gets a lot of feedback both from the project authors and the voters.

Romania has the lowest ratings in the abovementioned rankings, generally due to the impediments presented by poor infrastructure, an often-adverse business environment and limited development of skills. The rift between Romania and other countries of the EU is colossal, therefore it needs to do a lot of work to improve its position. Even though this state has also established a platform (E-Romania) for the purpose of creating three hundred operational electronic services by the end of 2011, obtaining an interconnected public institutional system that allows both citizens and the private sector to access public services in a direct and unlimited manner, that is still less than other states have. As presented by Chiriac and Szabó [30], it may be stated that the law is the engine of development. However, the indicator of laws relating to ICT put Romania on the 63rd place among 148 economies. The effectiveness of law-making bodies situated it on the 127th position, the importance of ICT to the government's vision ranked it 103rd, the government's success in promoting ICT ranked it 114th, whereas the use of ICT and the government's efficiency placed it on the 103rd position. The e-participation indicator in case of Romania was 0.08 (on a scale 0-1), which shows that some barriers and factors exist that prevent Romania from achieving better results. In order to formulate adequate policies policy-makers must first and foremost identify the main problems.

IV. CONCLUSION

Central-Eastern European states are vastly different from each other in terms of e-participation. When considering the genesis of the democratic process in this region, as well as current economic, political, and social differences that are reflected in the level of implementing and accomplishing the model of participatory democracy, post-communist states cannot be assessed uniformly. Central-Eastern Europe has Estonia, which is the world leader in terms of e-government,

and countries such as Romania, which have only begun implementing ICT tools for government-citizen communications. Assuming that such basic level of communication largely signifies sharing information to citizens, achieving participation requires much better commitment and more resources (i.e. technologies, skills and decisions). Arguably, it seems that this process in inevitable. Ambassador Stuart W. Holliday [31], referring the world leader's meeting at the 2014 Meridian Global Leadership Summit, stated that governments can no longer perceive their citizens as problems to manage and solve — a real leader must think ahead and prospectively. Effective world leaders do not treat their citizens as something that has to be controlled, but rather see their potential to face global challenges and actively achieve their goals. This is possible through technology and cooperation.

In general, e-participation has three main advantages: it affects the quality of political decisions, increases the society's level of acceptance of actions made by the authority and places responsibility for individual initiatives also on the shoulders of citizens. Increasing civic participation is therefore a challenge both for the state and the local authorities. They should properly educate their citizens in this respect and care for integrity and practicability of used participation mechanisms. The more local authority allows different segments of society and groups of interest to take part in political decisions and social dialogue, the more active the society becomes and the more widespread the local success is [32]. The introduction of participation mechanisms allows for increased social acceptance of policies as well as optimization of decisions, which is particularly important in states with a short democratic history.

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