THE USE OF THE INTERNET TO SUPPORT AND DEVELOP DEMOCRACY

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In terms of cyberdemocracy, the Internet's main task is to promote the overthrowing of dictatorships, which are essentially mafia structures regardless of whether they are presented as nationalistic, xenophobic, military, communist, integrist or other forms.

A country where more than 25% of the households have Internet access cannot tolerate an authoritarian government will gradually achieve pluralism, a representative democracy and universal suffrage - the key components of a nation's collective conscience. Therefore, we are making giant leaps in this direction...
Pierre Levy, Cyberdemocracy

Abstract: The realization of the idea of e-democracy is an important part of the information society, the establishment of which is a priority for the EU. The article analyses some of the aspects of e-democracy and their importance for strengthening democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes.

Its primary objective is to determine the conditions for implementing of the idea of e-democracy in Bulgaria by defining the key problems related to e-democracy and the causes thereof.

A large amount of data was subjected to comparative analysis to determine the current status of the information society, e-government and e-services in Bulgaria and in other European Union countries.

The author has put emphasis on the essential role of social media in the process of implementation of various forms of electronic democracy.

The author's main thesis is that information and communication technologies (ICT) are a prerequisite and a very important factor for the development of e-democracy. However, the use of the Internet in various forms of democratic life depends heavily on the degree of the e-readiness of the country, its efficient e-government and e-services, the sustained interest of its citizens in participating in its governance and their requirements for transparency and free access to information, its government and civil organizations, the

adequacy of its legislation, the level of development of its civil society and its drive for continuous strengthening and development of democratic institutions.

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Introduction

Generally, e-democracy is defined as the use of modern ICT (internet, social media, smartphones, tablets, etc.) for the protection and development of fundamental democratic values, and above all for the participation of citizens in the process of the government's decision-making, i.e. their inclusion in the political processes (dissemination of information, making joint decisions, monitoring the implementation of decisions, etc.) at all levels.

The realization of the idea of e-democracy is an important part of the information society, the establishment of which is a priority for the EU. The article analyses some of the aspects of e-democracy and their importance for strengthening democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes.

The author presents the nature and manifestations of this new phenomenon and attempts to define the conditions for the realization of the idea of e-democracy in Bulgaria by analysing the key problems related to e-democracy and the causes for their occurrence - technology-related conditions and problems (the availability of access to the Internet for individuals and businesses; the implementation of an e-government strategy; electronic identities and digital signatures; access to electronic services for individuals and businesses; the availability of broadband Internet; the use of smart devices; improved telecommunications services; level of e-readiness, etc.), problems related to the level of Internet culture and virtual political activity and orientation; problems related to the readiness of citizens and authorities to implement the idea of e-democracy; problems related to the availability of effective democratic mechanisms and a developed civil society.

A large pool of recent data was used for a comparative analysis of the information society, e-government and e-services in Bulgaria and the other EU member-states.

Considering the enormous role of Web 2.0 in business and people's lives in recent years, the article emphasizes the crucial role played by social media in the process of implementation of various forms of e-democracy.

The author's main thesis is that information and communication technologies (ICT) are a prerequisite and a very important factor for the development of e-democracy. However, the use of the Internet in various forms of democratic life depends heavily on the degree of the e-readiness of the country, its efficient e-government and e-services, the sustained interest of its citizens in participating in its governance and their requirements for transparency and free access to information, its government and civil organizations, the adequacy of its legislation, the level of development of its civil society and its drive for continuous strengthening and development of democratic institutions.

1. Nature and scope of e-democracy

In recent years ICT has penetrated deeply the public sphere and governments not only in Europe but all over the world, and these countries have the initiative use them to remodel their democracy mechanisms and redefine citizen-government relations. The development of the e-government concept resulted in the establishment and rapid development of the idea of "**electronic democracy**" (e-democracy, Internet democracy). In essence, these two concepts are very different (see. Figure 1.)

Figure 1. **The terms "e-governance", "e-government" and "e-democracy"**

E-governance	E-government	E-democracy
• The use of ICT by central government authorities (executive, legislative and judiciary) and local governments. • Key element of the information society. • Aims to improve the provision of information and services, stimilate the participation of citizens in decision-making processes, increase government transparency, accountability and efficiency. • Defines the relations between citizens, government organizations, media, businesses, democratic institutions and NGOs.	• The use of ICT by state administration combined with organizational changes intended to improve the public services and the democratic process. • A component of e-governance. • Aims to provide fast and efficient access to public information and services for all citizens as well as to enable them to execute all their constitutional rights related to governing the country. • Provides better convenience and efficiency of access to administrative services from every location and at all times as well as a more efficent control over the state administration. • Top-down initiatives serving the interests of the state	• The use of ICT to enhance the direct participation of the citizens in the process of electing/the establishment of governing institutions and their decision-making process as well as their direct control over state administration. • Aims to promote the active participation of citizens in democratic processes. • Facilitates bottom-up, top-down and horizontal initiatives and represents above all the interests of the citizens. • An increasingly important role for the mechanisms of e-democracy is played by social media (e-Democracy 2.0).

E-democracy is a relatively new term that emerged as a result of the immense popularity of the Internet, the development of ICT and the need for raising citizens' awareness in democratic processes. The availability of access to the Internet and active civil society is of paramount importance.

The term was used for the first time in 1997 by scientists from the UK and the US in relation to the concept of e-government and gained rapid popularity worldwide. Since there are many interpretations, there isn't a unanimously accepted precise definition of the term because the concept of e-democracy is constantly evolving and expanding, because e-democracy is based on the Internet and modern ICT - areas that are constantly evolving and whose advancement is difficult to forecast beyond a time horizon of 1 to 3 years.

Generally, **e-democracy** is defined as the use of modern ICT (internet, social media, smartphones, tablets, etc.) for the protection and development of fundamental democratic values, and above all for the participation of citizens in the process of government decision-making, i.e. their inclusion in the political processes (dissemination of information, making joint decisions, monitoring of the implementation of decisions, etc.) at all levels. Obviously, it is a new form of social and political activity of citizens, which is carried out by means of modern information technologies and which provides operational and efficient communication among citizens, public authorities, public and business organizations and other participants in the political process.

On the other hand, e-democracy can be seen as **a form of direct democracy**, in which citizens actively participate in the process of governance by means of the Internet and other ICTs at a local, regional, national or international level.

The **subjects** of e-democracy are the government, elected state officials, the media, political organizations and the citizens.

The core of e-democracy is the use of ICT for the development and strengthening of the democratic institutions and promotion of citizen participation in public and political processes. Thus it enables citizens to actively participate in the policy-development process, increases the transparency of the decision-making process and brings the government and the state authorities closer to the citizens by providing the possibility for direct communication between the citizens and the state.

The main objective of e-democracy is to promote the active participation of citizens in the mechanisms of contemporary representative democracy by means of the Internet, mobile communications, social media and other technologies, as well as through active public participation or direct forms of involvement of citizens in the discussion of various socially important issues. The electronic support of democracy is intended to overcome people's alienation from democratic processes and their negative attitude towards govern-

ment authorities in many countries. There are other goals of e-democracy, which are similar to the goals of effective governance - transparency, accountability, responsibility, involvement, discussion, accessibility, participation, subsidies, confidence in democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes. The goals of e-democracy – which are similar to those of good governance – are transparency, accountability, responsiveness, engagement, deliberation, inclusiveness, accessibility, participation, subsidiarity, trust in democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes.[1]

The Council of Europe defines e-democracy as, "*the support and enhancement of democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes by means of ICT.*"[2] It aims to facilitate citizen's access to information and civil participation in the democratic processes.

This definition emphasizes one of the main goals of e-democracy – *to facilitate civil participation in government policy-making and democratic processes*.

E-democracy is closely related to several other terms such as:
- Information society;
- E-governance;
- E-government;
- E-administration;
- E-participation.

These terms are not synonymous and have their own specific characteristics, content, goals and usage.

There are two points of view regarding the comparison of e-democracy and e-government in terms of their scope and contents.

The first one assumes that e-democracy is part of e-government and includes only electronic voting and electronic elections. The second one assumes that e-democracy has a wider scope and includes e-government.

The modern definition of e-democracy is based on the second view. While e-government aims *to improve access to public services from each location and at any time,* e-democracy is the use of ICT to *promote the participation of every citizen in the political process.*

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[1] We must, of course, take account the risks related to the use of ICT in business and in the social sphere as well as their importance for the mobilization and effective participation of citizens in democratic processes.

[2] The Council of Europe Recommendation on E-democracy 7th Eastern European e|Gov Days. **Thomas M. Buchsbaum** | Prague, 23 April 2009. http://www.epma.cz/Docs/EEE GD09/prezentace/Prague%20Buchsbaum%20090423%20final.pdf

2. Specific characteristics of e-democracy

In this section we will outline some of the main characteristics of e-democracy.

- E-democracy is considered in the context of the **information society and e-government**. E-democracy and e-government are at the **core** of an information (or knowledge-based) society.

- **ICT** is a key factor for the implementation and strengthening of e-democracy because it facilitates the dissemination of information about, and discussion of, political issues, wider democratic participation by individuals and groups and greater transparency and accountability in democratic institutions and processes. At the same time, ICT, the Internet and social media are only means and necessary conditions for increasing the transparency of public authorities by providing quick and easy access to information.

- The ubiquity of the **Internet and social media**, the low costs of communication, sharing and access to information on the Web and the ever increasing amount of time users spend online have turned the Internet into a suitable medium for political messages and political e-participation.

- The role of **social media** in the implementation of the mechanisms of e-democracy is growing as well. For example, we now use the term "e-Democracy 2.0". Considering citizen interest in social media, we may claim that Web 2.0 applications will be a key component of e-democracy in the coming years and will contribute to increasing the level of online participation of citizens in political processes.

- The importance of **mobile technologies** and wireless communications in the field of e-commerce, e-business and e-services is increasing. Combined with the social media, they become even more important in the political process. They are expected to mitigate citizens' distrust towards their governments, increase their participation in elections, improve the efficiency of government bodies and make their activities more transparent.

- E-democracy has turned into a **means for increasing the level of participation in the political process** and the degree of responsibility and transparency of the decision of politicians and political parties.

- The technological evolution of e-democracy should comply with democratic principles: **"E-democracy can only be instrumental for democracy in a democratic environment in which human rights and the rule of law are implemented and observed. Freedom of expression and the exis-**

tence of free and pluralistic media constitute a necessary precondition for exploiting the benefits of e-democracy."[3]

- E-democracy makes for **greater individual and group participation**, allows those whose voices are heard less often or are less powerful to express their views, and fosters participation on an equal footing. It can lead to more participatory forms of decision making and democracy.

- E-democracy **concerns all sectors of democracy**, all democratic institutions, all levels of government, and a wide range of other sectors and processes in society.

- E-democracy provides new possibilities for the **development of social relations** between individuals and informal groups and enhances their awareness and interest in developing the democratic processes.

- The effect of e-democracy **depends on the democratic values of society and government authorities, their respect towards fundamental human rights and minority rights and the level of the democratic processes and political participation of citizens.**

Nowadays citizens express their political will with the mediation of various political parties and public organizations. Very often, due to objective or technical reasons, they cannot express their opinion regarding socially important decisions and projects that directly affect their interests. E-democracy, as a set of hardware and software resources and organizational procedures, provides citizens with *tools for the direct and accurate expression of their political will* by circumventing the various mediators that traditionally express their will. It ensures integrity, security, long-term storage and quick access to data.

> *"The trend is clear – we are moving towards a digital Europe with e-government, electronic ID cards, electronic signatures. In some countries, such as Estonia, this is to a large degree a reality and I expect that in a few years, following a discussion with the European citizens, the tools of e-democracy will become something ordinary"*
> **(Marosh Shevchovich, Vice-President of the European Commission)**

Moreover, e-democracy will enable the citizens to *participate in the work of the government authorities*, which will respond more precisely and adequately to their needs and requirements.

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[3] Electronic democracy. Parliamentary Assembly. Doc. 11783, 22 December 2008. http://www.assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewHTML.asp?FileID=12069&Language=EN

3. Contents and mechanisms of e-democracy

From a practical point of view the content of e-democracy and its field of application is particularly interesting. Note that the forms and mechanisms of e-democracy evolve mainly sue to the rapid development of ICT and its gradual penetration in all aspects of our lives.

The most accurate and complete classification of the **main components of e-democracy** is provided in Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. According to this document the term "e-democracy" includes 12 sectors (see Figure 2):[4] e-parliament, e-legislation, e-justice, e-mediation, e-initiative, e-referendum, e-voting, e-consultation, e-petitioning, e-campaigning, e-polling and e-surveying.

Figure 2. **Scope and sectors of e-democracy**

E-parliament	E-legislation	E-justice
E-mediation	E-initiative	E-referendum
E-voting	E-consultation	E-petitioning
E-campaigning	E-polling	E-surveying
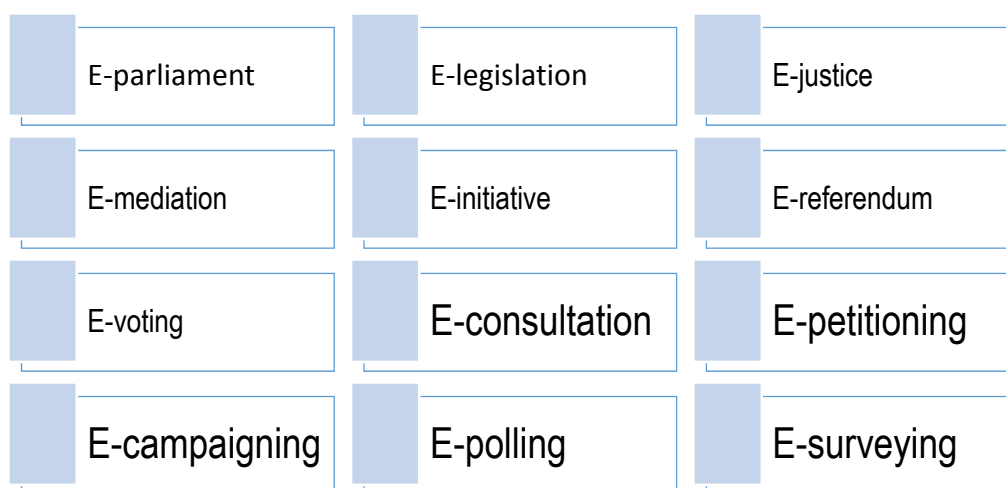
However, all of the above aspects of e-democracy cannot be introduced simultaneously. In introducing them, account needs to be taken of the level of readiness of the particular country.

We have noticed that the developed countries give priority to **8 main sectors** of e-democracy (see figure 3) - e-Discussions; e-Petitioning; e-

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[4] Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on electronic democracy (e-democracy) (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 18 February 2009 at the 1049th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies).

Collaborating; e-Consulting; e-Voting; e-Campaigning; e-Budgeting and Open Data.

Figure 3. **Priority sectors for the implementation of e-democracy**
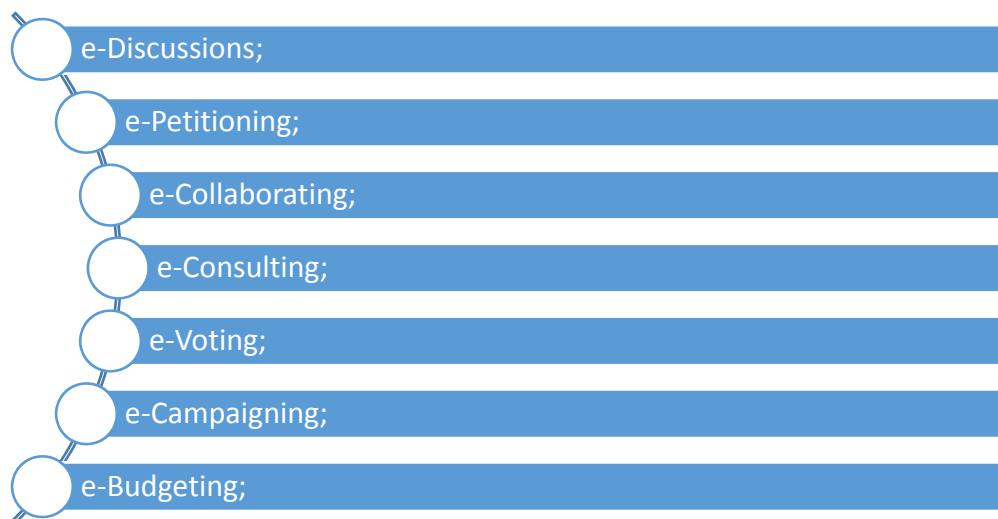
These are the most mature systems of e-democracy at present, i.e. these are the sectors that are being prioritized today in countries that are systematically and purposefully implementing e-democracy.[5]

Noticeably, the democracies around the world are trying to establish new relationships with their citizens and need to encourage all stakeholders to study, analyse and take advantage of the benefits of ICT in order to improve their democracy mechanisms. All developed democracies have set clear objectives to achieve better civil participation and consideration of citizens' needs. They are actively seeking solutions to the question "How will the democracies of the 21st century face the challenge posed by their citizens, who are becoming better informed and more demanding?"

The **main trends in the development of e-democracy** around the world are interesting as well. According to the Phil Noble & Associates survey agency, the 10 main trends in the development of e-democracy worldwide are: [6]

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[5] In some countries (e.g. Estonia) priority is given to e-Parliament.

[6] The framework for sustainable eDemocracy development Suree Funilkul and Wichian Chutimaskul School of Information Technology, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand. [19.05.2015]
http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Suree_Funilkul/publication/235318688_The_framework_for_sustainable_eDemocracy_development/links/02e7e53c893b0cb14c000000.pdf

1. More **collaboration and sharing** of information among the countries.

2. **E-mail use will increase** although online government sites, unlike political and advocacy sites, which seem to shy away from using it.

3. **Use of portals will rise**, because there are many websites while people want information in an easy-to-use place.

4. **Cyberservices** are what people want.

5. **Innovation and responsiveness are increasing**.

6. **Governments will integrate services more often** in the future.

7. There is a fast-developing **public marketplace of ideas**. The Internet has become a true public marketplace where citizens can share successes and failures to improve democracy (online debates, protests, municipalities, voting, petitions).

8. **Openness** will foster better democracy (this is still an expectation rather than reality.)

9. **Investment in e-government will skyrocket** (they save a lot of money).

10. In the near future the number of **e-leaders** will increase.

In our opinion some of these trends (e.g. 2 and 4) are quite questionable. We have to add *several other important trends that will become dominant in the next few years*.

The use of social media is increasing. Web 2.0 is based on *attracting users* to create and share content. Today 4 out of 5 Internet users have social media accounts and rank social media as the foremost Internet activity. Social networks play an important political role in many specific ways. Social media communications have become dominant and rapidly undermined the importance of traditional e-mailing.

Citizens have become more active due to the availability of Web 2.0 technologies.[7] Using blogs and microblogs, social networks, RSS channels, mobile text messaging and Wiki sites, central and local governments can efficiently share information with citizens, communicate with them online and encourage them to participate more actively in discussions and decision-making. Thus we can now claim that there is a second generation of e-democracy - E-Democracy 2.0.[8]

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[7] For more details see **Върбанов, Р.** Бизнес в средата на Web 2.0. (Web 2.0, Enterprise 2.0, Cloud Computing, SaaS). АИ Ценов, Свищов, Библиотека „Стопански свят", 2011, №111, 243 с. ISSN 1310-2737.

[8] See for example **Andrew Chadwick**. Web 2.0: New Challenges for the Study of E-Democracy in an Era of Informational Exuberance. http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/ static/f/127762/17971662/1335910108743/Chadwick_Web_2.0_New_Challenges_for_the_St udy_of_E-Democracy_I-S_2009.pdf?token=x%2F30vHJdslJ2yOQE%2BDgVc7TAr%2Bs% 3D [24.05.2015]

Social media has definitely become a factor that directly *shapes the individual and community identity*. The increasing use of social media has resulted in significant and ubiquitous *changes in communication* among businesses, organizations, democratic institutions and citizens.

Dominant role of mobile communications. Mobile technologies are valuable for all citizens and businesses because they give them greater opportunities to receive various high-quality services via their smartphones and tablets at any time of the day. Customers actually do not make a difference between physical and virtual offices if they can save the time and effort that are important for them. This has led to the development of mobile e-government and mobile e-democracy concepts.

Cloud computing. Cloud services have been available for 4 or 5 years already and their advantages have been repeatedly confirmed. Users have easily accepted them because they are quite similar to their conventional office environments. In many countries with developed information societies cloud computing has become the preferred environment for e-services and e-democracy.

4. Possibilities for the implementation of e-democracy in Bulgaria

We have noted that, while conceptually there is some clarity, the practical implementation of e-democracy has been delayed. In this field the most developed countries also rank first in terms of e-readiness and the provision of electronic services to citizens and businesses.

The most important factor is the **propensity of the population to accept the idea of e-democracy**.

Naturally, not all of the e-democracy sectors listed in Figure 1 can be implemented quickly and simultaneously. Some of them cut across e-government and e-services concepts and this is why these sectors are often blurred.

The **factors** that promote the development of e-democracy in our country include: a sustained interest by business and citizens in ICT, broadband Internet coverage over most of the territory of the country, the availability of qualified IT specialists, an incentive for the development of democratic institutions, relevant regulations, a large number of mobile phone users and wide mobile network coverage, a significant number of citizens who actively use social media and mobile devices to express their opinion, protect their rights and freedoms, communicate with authorities and various political organizations, the ongoing construction and operation of a national IT infrastructure.

Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1 of the Committee of Ministers states that "**enablers of e-democracy** can be initiatives by any stakeholder or factors conducive to the introduction and operation of e-democracy, such as new ICT and ICT-readiness, government and public interest, legislation and regulations, adequate resources, a well-developed civil society and systems to enhance democracy."[9]

The experience of some countries has shown that the **main drivers** behind e-democracy are: the level of e-readiness, effective e-government and e-services, the sustained interest of citizens, the government and NGOs, adequate legislation, a developed civil society and a drive for the continuous strengthening and development of democratic institutions.

Unfortunately, despite the promises of several governments and the considerable amount of money spent, Bulgaria still does not have a functional e-government. Very few Bulgarians use e-services and they are not very interested in the various forms of e-democracy.

The problems (factors) that hinder the development of e-democracy can be classified into several categories:

- Technical problems (factors) - the use of the Internet by people and businesses; the implementation of an e-government strategy; electronic identities and digital signatures; the use of electronic services by citizens and businesses; the availability of broadband connectivity, the use of smart devices; improved telecommunications services; the level of e-readiness, etc.);
- Problems related to the level of Internet culture, virtual political activity and awareness;
- Problems related to the readiness of both citizens and the authorities to implement the idea of e-democracy;
- Problems related to the availability of operational democratic traditions and a developed civil society in the country.

Technical problems include:
- The rapid development of ICT;
- The improvement of telecommunication services;
- The use of digital signatures;
- The use of smart devices;
- The availability of broadband Internet connectivity;
- Electronic identity;
- The safety and security of Web and social media;
- The use of social media and mobile devices;
- The security of online transactions;
- The digital divide;

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[9] Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on electronic democracy (e-democracy). (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 18 February 2009 at the 1049th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies). https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1410627 [16.05.2015]

- E-skills and e-leadership, better competitiveness, productivity and qualification of staff in the digital era.
- Other **technical** problems**.**

In order to determine the intensity of these problems, we have to compare the situation in Bulgaria to that in the other EU member-states.

According to a recent survey conducted by the NSI, in 2014 53.7% of our citizens had access to and regularly used the Internet. (The "Digital Bulgaria 2015" programme adopted in 2012 envisioned that 75% of Bulgarians would have access to the Internet by 2015.) The largest group of Internet users (83.1%) are people between 16 and 24 years of age.[10]

Almost **57% of the households** in Bulgaria had access to the Internet in their home in 2014 and almost all of them had a fast and reliable connection.

The same survey shows that in 2014 the Internet was used regularly mostly for **communication**. 95.7% of the users responded that they used Internet for e-mailing, chatting or videoconferencing (using applications such as Viber, Skype, etc) or other activities in social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)

87.8% of the users would go online **to access information** (to read online newspapers and newsfeeds or look for goods and services.)

The third largest group (63.9%) are those who go online for **entertainment** purposes (to listen to radio, play games, download pictures, films or music, etc.) followed by **artists** (people who upload their own content such as text, music, video to sharing websites or create their own websites, blogs, etc.) − 36.6%.

Only 3.5% of regular Internet users utilised e-healthcare services (scheduling medical appointments with GPs, hospitals, etc.) 29.5% of the respondents used other online services such as online booking, purchasing of goods and services, banking, etc.[11]

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[10] http://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/2814/%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B0-%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B3%D1%83%D0%BB%D1%8F%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%89%D0%B8-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%82; [13.02.2015]

[11] 56.7% of the households in Bulgaria have access to the Internet at their homes. http://econ.bg/%D0%9D%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8/56-7-%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B2-%D0%91%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%82-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D1%8A%D0%BF-%D0%B4%D0%BE-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%82-%D0%B2-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B5-%D1%81%D0%B8_l.a_i.624043_at.1.html [13.02.2015]

Note that our country ranks *among the last EU member-states* in terms of using the most important aspects of digital technologies[12] and that the Internet is used mostly for entertainment (games, music, films) and access to information rather than important aspects of our everyday lives (shopping, administrative services, business, communication, healthcare, etc.)

This is confirmed by several facts related to the use of Internet for business and everyday purposes.

Internet penetration. In 2013, 51% of Bulgarians used the global network at least once a week compared to 72% across the EU. The leaders in this respect are Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Luxemburg and Holland, where the Internet was used by more than 90% of all adults.

Access to the Internet via mobile devices. In 2012, 13% Bulgarians accessed the Internet using mobile devices compared to an average of 36% for the EU.

E-commerce. In 2013, 12% of Bulgarians purchased goods online compared to 9% in 2012. This level is still well below the EU average (47% in 2013.) Only 2% of online retailers claim that they have received online orders and e-commerce accounted for only 1% of the domestic trade in Bulgaria.

E-services for citizens and businesses. Our country is one of the few EU member-states which does not provide the compulsory 8 e-services for businesses. Not a single business service is available online in Bulgaria. Across Europe their share is 72 %. The number of Bulgarians who use e-government services is a trifle (a mere 6 %) while in the EU 30 % of the citizens prefer this type of communication with authorities.

Fields of Internet application. The results show that Bulgarians use the Internet mostly for free telephone conversations and videoconferences - in this field the level is above the EU average. 25% use the network for e-mailing and 10% read newspapers and magazines online. The difference in the field of online banking is the most striking - the EU average is 25% compared to only 2% in Bulgaria.

Households with Internet access. Less than one fifth of households in Bulgaria have access to the Internet compared to the average of one half in the EU. An interesting fact is that most of the households (81%) are connected to LANs and have abandoned telephone modems. The EU average is several percentage points lower.

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[12] Bulgaria is at the bottom in terms of Internet usage in the EU. http://www.investor.bg/novini/261/a/bylgariia-e-na-dynoto-po-izpolzvane-na-internet-v-es-173192/ [13.02.2015]; The global network is used mostly for communication rather than services, trade or transactions. http://www.arcfund.net/arcartShowbg.php?id=9325 [22.02.2015]

Internet literacy. The percentage of Bulgarians who are completely unable to use the Internet is significantly higher than the EU average (66% compared to 40 % of the population.) The good news is that their number decreases each year - in 2006 there were 6% more than in 2013. At the same time the percentage of the people with good Internet skills is almost the same as the EU average.

The use of modern IT in business. SMEs use the Internet mostly for e-mailing and online communication (Skype, ICQ, Facebook Messenger). They scarcely use the Web to interact with authorities, seek information, trade online or conduct online marketing surveys. Few companies have ERP systems, order and sales management systems or other systems and CRM software. The owners of SMEs are not aware of and do not use the possibilities of modern ICT (cloud computing, social media and mobile technologies) for their business.

Despite the overall growth of investments in Bulgaria, the country is still the last of all EU member-states in terms of **innovations** (in products, processes, marketing, organization, patent applications, etc.) We lag behind significantly in the sector of digital technologies as well. For example, according to the Digital Europe programme, 33% of our SMEs should sell their products online by 2015. However, as of the end of 2014, only 4% of them were engaged in e-commerce compared to an average of 13% across Europe.

According to European forecasts, at least 50% of the population will shop online by the end of 2015 while in Bulgaria this percentage is still very low – 10 to 12% of the people shopped online in 2014.[13]

The opportunities for the growth in sales provided by e-commerce are still underused. This reduces the level of competitiveness of our SMEs.

Regarding the **use of social media,** Bulgaria does not differ from the general trend of total domination of social media in the Web space.

• According to a survey by the "We are social" international agency, at the end of February 2014, 3.8 mln. Bulgarians had access to the Internet and 3 mln. had Facebook accounts.

• According to the Digitribe Report, in 2013 Bulgarians spent on average 4.5 hours on various social media, mostly Facebook.

• Our employers have reported that their employees spend 1/3 of their business hours surfing the net. Because of the use of social media at work our economy incurs losses of BGN 300 to 400 mln. annually.[14]

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[13] BGN 1 bln. for innovations in 2015. http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId= 4215812 [26.08.2015]

[14] Шефове режат служителите от Фейсбук. http://www.blitz.bg/news/article/ 303604[10.02.2015]

In terms of its **e-readiness,** Bulgaria ranks last among the EU member-states with an index of 0.5421 (compared to an average of 0.7300 for the EU and 0.6936 across Europe.)[15]

The Networked Readiness Index measures a country's capacity to benefit from ICT in order to increase its competitiveness. This index is based on 54 measurements in various fields including regulatory framework, implementation of ICT, e-governance, business innovations, etc., which measure the technological advancement of the countries in large-scale business, their infrastructural development level and the readiness of their governments to create the framework they need to develop and increase their competitiveness.

According to the Networked Readiness Index, in 2014 Bulgaria ranked 73rd (two positions downwards from the 71st position in 2013) out of 148 countries and is followed only by Greece and Romania out of all EU member-states.[16]

Conclusion

The results of this study lead to several conclusions that support our thesis.

First, modern ICT (social media, mobile devices, cloud services, wireless communications, databases) allow the maximum convergence of civil society and government. Globally, there is large-scale penetration of the Internet and modern IT in all spheres of life. In terms of democratic processes it is obvious that ICT provides only a technological means for the development of democracy to a new level.

Second, on the one hand the transition to e-democracy is inevitable but on the other hand it is not enough to simply solve the technical problems for it to be completed. We need a certain level of political culture, Internet literacy and tolerance, trust in social media and psychological readiness among the majority of the population as well as the representatives of the authorities for an open, efficient and unrestricted online communication.

Third, Bulgaria as a whole lags behind the other EU countries in the field of ICT. This applies to several of the most important sectors, such as Internet connectivity, Internet access via mobile devices, e-commerce, e-services for citizens and businesses, Internet usage, households with Internet

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[15] UNITED NATIONS E-GOVERNMENT SURVEY 2014 E-Government for the Future We Want. United Nations. New York, 2014. http://unpan3.un.org/egovkb/Portals/egovkb/Documents/un/2014-Survey/E-Gov_Complete_Survey-2014.pdf [22.05.2015]

[16] The Networked Readiness Index 2014. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GITR/2014/GITR_OverallRanking_2014.pdf [20.05.2015]

access, Internet literacy and use of modern IT in business. This has a negative effect on the development of e-government and e-services. The current state of the democratic institutions in Bulgaria does not induce trust in the media and the authorities and our civil society is not ready to implement e-democracy.

Fourth, social media will play a crucial role in the development of e-democracy. This requires an active use of the blogosphere, social networking capabilities and the potential of Wiki sites to promote democracy, strengthen the democratic institutions and support democratic processes at all levels.

The increasing popularity of the Internet, social media and mobile devices provides citizens with vast opportunities for more active participation in public and political processes and the establishment of principally new levels of e-democracy and e-governance.

Regardless of these pessimistic conclusions we can expect that interest in e-democracy in our country will increase and that the coming years will witness some practical solutions in this field.

Of course, the existing differences among the EU countries will remain due to the different levels of their use of the Internet and their different stages of the development of democratic processes and civil societies.

To delay the use of ICT and social media in the democratic process would be risky because they are already used to manipulate the opinion of various strata of our society as well as individual citizens. This social engineering most often takes the form of threats to people who have shared information about themselves in forums, chats and blogs, the deletion of accounts, attempts at social control and manipulation of public opinion, and persistent manipulation of people to perform certain actions.

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