

PUBLIC POLICY PAPER

**INCREASING THE USE OF
GOV.MK WEBSITES AS
TOOLS FOR TRANSPARENCY,
ACCOUNTABILITY AND
E-PARTICIPATION**



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This public policy paper was created with the financial support of Slovak Aid, provided through the Pontis Foundation and the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), as part of the Slovak and Balkan Public Policy Fund. The sole responsibility for the content of this paper lies with the authors and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of Slovak Aid or its partner organizations.

CIP - Каталогизација во публикација
Национална и универзитетска библиотека "Св. Климент Охридски", Скопје

352/354:004.774.055(497.7)

INCREASING the Use of gov.mk Websites as Tools for Transparency,
Accountability and e-Participation : public policy paper / [research
team Bardhyl Jashari ... и др.]. - Skopje : Metamorphosis
Foundation, 2014. - 36 стр. : илустр. ; 26 см

Библиографија: стр. 32-33. - Содржи и Annex 1: Interviewed experts
and representatives of institutions

ISBN 978-608-4564-48-5

а) Локална и централна власт - Прилагодување кон граѓаните - Веб
страници - Македонија
COBISS.MK-ID 96520714

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Executive Summary

The aim of this public policy paper is to examine the current level of use of the websites of central and local authorities in the Republic of Macedonia (mostly using .gov.mk domains) in the areas of transparency, accountability and e-participation of the citizens in the decision making process, and to offer recommendations on how to overcome the obstacles preventing the citizens to use the full potential of the new technologies in these areas.

New technologies offer effective and cheaper means for including citizens in the decision making processes, but their potential is not completely used in Macedonia. The research was conducted in the period from **December 2013 to May 2014**, through an examination of the possibilities offered by **220 websites** run by government bodies and institutions of the state administration, and through structured interviews with **10 public institutions and 17 experts** from various fields related to public citizen participation and the internet.

The research findings indicate that the websites of the public institutions lack public data, particularly in the area of fiscal transparency and accountability, and there is also a lack of mechanisms that allow citizen e-participation and inclusion in the decision making process. One-third of the registered web domains are not working. Over half of the reviewed websites are not timely updated with general news, less than one-third of the websites have a section on free access to information of public character, more than three-quarters have not published a work program and fiscal information, the majority of the websites have not published the complete legislation that applies to their work, and over 95% have not published privacy policies.

Communication is mostly one-way and the opportunities for two-way interaction are generally limited to e-mail and telephone. Only two websites enable public discussions about changes in legislation and public policies and are rarely used because they are not completely and regularly updated, and citizens are uninformed or demotivated due to previous experiences with such processes, in which their opinion was not taken into consideration.

The majority of websites are neither optimized for use by persons with disabilities, nor do they meet the W3C standards (www.w3.org/WAI) The obligations that Macedonia undertook



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

within the framework of the Open Government Partnership, regarding access to open data, are also not completely fulfilled.

The Republic of Macedonia has a legal framework governing civic e-participation, but it is necessary to implement it consistently, and to raise the awareness of citizens and institutions, about the existing opportunities, and about the importance of using new media - in this case websites as tools for transparency, accountability, and e-participation. The development of these systems depends on the political will of the Government and the officials from the subordinate institutions. The development must be based on standards that place the citizen and his needs at the center of the system and simultaneously promote the principles of e-inclusion and protection of human rights in the digital sphere.

Introduction

This public policy paper examines the current level of use of the websites of central and local authorities in the Republic of Macedonia (i.e. the websites with .gov.mk domains) in the areas of transparency, accountability and e-participation of the citizens in the decision making process. The public policy paper offers recommendations on how to overcome the obstacles preventing the citizens to use the full potential of the new technologies in these areas.

In 2014, many Macedonian citizens are using digital technologies, and most of the citizens have some form of direct internet access and/or use mobile technologies. Various estimates (imprecise due to a lack of relevant census data) indicate that over 60% of the citizens use the internet and more than 50% use the social networks (data from Facebook's marketing department).

While almost all government institutions in the country have some kind of online presence, a very small part of their websites provide services for citizens, particularly in the area of civic participation and for completing a number of other daily tasks. The institutions are mostly using the web and other information and communication technologies (ICT) as tools for providing unidirectional, selective information, or as digital "identity cards". The main motive for this research was the need to precisely determine the key parameters related to this area, as a basis for further development.

Governments in the world are trying to cope with the major social changes arising from the increasing application of new technologies through the transformation towards a comprehensive application of the e-Government concept which includes not only "the use of ICT, and especially the internet, for achieving better governance" (OECD, 2003), but also a complete change in the relations between governments, citizens and businesses, and between the different levels of government with the use of ICT (World Bank, 2009). This transformation encompasses more efficient government services, i.e. e-government services or e-services, an improved interaction with the private sector, and increases the power of the citizens by enabling access to information and more efficient management. The desired outcome of these transformations: reduced corruption, increased transparency, ease of use, increase of revenues and/or reduction of costs.



As a result of the need for worldwide coordination, the Open Government Partnership (OGP) was established in 2011, as an international platform uniting reformers from the government sector and the civil society sector from 64 countries in an effort to make the governments more responsible, accountable and open to the citizens. As a member of this partnership, Macedonia has an obligation to promote the following priority areas:

- ▶ participatory policy making,
- ▶ improved electronic services and procedures
- ▶ open data
- ▶ protection of consumers and citizens
- ▶ open information on a local level

According to the progress report on Macedonia within the framework of the Partnership for the period 2012-2013, out of the total of 35 commitments, the Republic of Macedonia has completely fulfilled 2, significantly fulfilled 6, partially fulfilled 17 commitments and is yet to start fulfilling 10 remaining commitments. At the time of this research, the new National Action Plan is being prepared.

According to the “Measuring the Information Society” report of the International Telecommunication Union identifying key elements of ICT development for the UN and monitoring the costs and availability of ICT services in line with internationally established methods through the index for ICT development, the Republic of Macedonia held the 57th place according to the 2012 global ranking, and the 55th place in 2011 (ITU, 2013).

Metamorphosis is an active participant in the development of information society in Macedonia and the region since 1999, with a series of efforts based on the premise that the citizen must be at the center of his development. Metamorphosis held the position that the e-government concept is not a concept of “old government” plus internet, but that this new concept relates more to the “government” part or organizational changes in management and procedures, rather than just the “e-” part i.e. the introduction of electronic devices and software. Metamorphosis participated in the preparation and adoption of a number of key documents, such as the National Strategy for Information Society (2004-2005), the ICT strategy for the judiciary (2006), the National Strategy for Electronic Communications (2007), and in the development of key documents for public policies in the field of e-government (including the implementation of USAID's e-Gov project in 2011). In addition, Metamorphosis had a positive impact on the inclusion of the values of inclusion of all members of society, protection of the human rights in the digital sphere and promotion of the active citizen participation on a public policy level. The e-Citizens section of the National Strategy from 2005 explicitly states that: “E-services taking into account the needs of citizens are one of the main reasons for the overall transformation to a knowledge-based society. They will bring real improvement to the quality of life of citizens, as well as increased participation.”

This research also builds on the research for web presence of municipalities conducted by Metamorphosis in 2010, which found that almost half of the municipalities practically have dysfunctional websites (or no websites at all) and only partially fulfill the obligations from the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Character.

Although new technologies offer effective and cheaper means for including citizens in the decision making processes, their potential is not completely used in Macedonia. This research was conducted in the period from December 2013 to May 2014, on a sample of 383 internet domains, i.e. 220 websites owned by government bodies and institutions of the state administration, providing a detailed insight into the situation with and the use of the government websites as tools for transparency, accountability and e-participation.

Apart from the review of the content available at the gov.mk websites and the functionalities of the government websites, 17 structured interviews were conducted with experts in various fields, answering questions about their expert opinion on the situation with government websites in Macedonia, for what functions and to what extent do the government bodies use the new technologies, in order to provide relevant information and e-participation of citizens, what information is missing, what are the standards, laws and regulations governing civic e-participation in the Republic of Macedonia, what's missing in RM in terms of standards at EU level guaranteeing the participation of citizens in the decision-making process by using new technologies, and what should the Republic of Macedonia do to enhance the opportunities for civic e-participation.

Ten interviews were also conducted with representatives of government bodies in order to determine which new technologies are used by their institution, what functions are they mostly using the websites for, what are the standards, laws and regulations governing civic e-participation, what steps are taken to improve the transparency, accountability and civic e-participation, what information of public character is available and what information is proactively published on their websites, what mechanisms for e-participation are they using, how do they familiarize citizens with the institution's e-services and mechanisms for e-participation, how much do they consult citizens and how often do they update their websites.

In order to analyze the initial results from the research, Metamorphosis organized a public consultation meeting on June 2, 2014 attended by 13 representatives of public and private institutions, as well as representatives of the NGO sector who shared their opinions, remarks and comments. Public insight and an opportunity for consultation with the general public were provided over the internet in May and early June 2014.

The purpose of this public policy paper is to contribute to raising the awareness of the key stakeholders: government officials and employees, the business sector, civil society



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activists and the media, about the level of development of e-government services related to civic participation and to serve as a roadmap for their improvement on a local and national level.

All data collected for the purposes of this public policy paper, and the results from the structured interviews are available as open data in the section “Publications: Research” on the www.metamorphosis.org.mk website.



Current developments and research findings

The situation in Macedonia

The websites of government bodies, mostly using the gov.mk extension, are focusing on one-way communication and offer limited opportunities for interaction.

Over the past few years, the Government of the Republic of Macedonia has established several mechanisms related to citizen participation, transparency and accountability. In 2006, the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Character was adopted and its implementation was initiated. In 2008, the National Electronic Registry of Regulations of the Republic of Macedonia (ENER.gov.mk) was established as part of the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) process which implies the implementation of appropriate and coordinated consultations with the public by submitting proposals, opinions and comments, with an opportunity to include the stakeholders in the creation of regulations in a timely manner. In 2011, the Government of RM adopted the Code of good practice for civil participation in the policy making process through the Department for Cooperation with NGOs of the General Secretariat (ivosorabotka.gov.mk). That same year, the Code for consultation with the public during the preparation of the regulation with accompanying guidelines was also adopted, and in 2012 the Ministry of Information Society and Administration launched the e-democracy portal (e-demokratija.mk), aimed at increasing citizen participation with similar functions as ENER, but with additional features: forum and blog.



Structure of the sample

As part of this research, and in order to determine the extent to which the regulation and the tools available to the institutions in the Republic of Macedonia are used for transparency, accountability and e-participation – all websites that could be determined as belonging to the bodies of the central and local government were reviewed. These websites are a representative sample that reflects the general situation, although it is possible that there are other government websites that were not included in the research. For example, these could be websites without gov.mk domains, or websites using subdomains of level 4, on some of the identified domains.

The initial source for obtaining a list of such websites was the list of government domains registered on the Macedonian Academic and Research Network - MARNet (whois.marnet.mk). The criterion for identifying government domains was the use of the gov.mk extension.

Although the registry of .MK domains is specified as one of the open data collections within the framework of the Open Government Partnership, the list of domains could only be obtained by performing a manual review. The reason for this is that the data are not available in a form that allows processing and MARNet rejected the request to provide a list of domains owned by government bodies, due to its Rulebook (indicating non-compliance with the principles for open data). Part of the process for requesting this data included arbitration by the Directorate for Personal Data Protection, determining that the request for the list of domains owned by the government bodies of Macedonia is not contrary to the Law on Personal Data Protection.

In the interest of time, the registry of MARNet was manually searched (which according to the independent service domejn.ot.mk contains over 28,000 domains) and 373 registered gov.mk domains were found. After April 1, 2014 by applying a concept of liberalization, MARNet transferred a part of its competences to private registries, and the list with all the .MK domains is no longer publicly available, and citizens can only check whether a particular domain is already registered or not.

In addition to the .gov.mk domains from MARNet's registry, the sample for this research was supplemented with an additional 10 domains in possession of state administration organs and government bodies, associated with the protection of citizens' rights, as a precondition



for e-participation. They mostly use other forms of domains, mainly in the form *institution.mk* or *abbreviation.mk*. An additional search was carried out by a manual review of the base of public information holders on the website of the Commission for Protection of the Right to Free Access to Information of Public Character (komspi.mk) in the sections "State Institutions" and "Municipalities in the Republic of Macedonia". This search also served to verify the already obtained list of .gov.mk domains.

With the initial review of these 383 domains, it was determined that 62% or 236 of the domains are active and lead to a functional website, whereas 4% (16) of the domains are redirecting to a website that uses a different domain as the default. 34% of the reviewed domains are not working (do not lead anywhere or lead to a server page). By examining where these domains are directing, it was established that there are 220 unique government websites.

Table 1:

Structure of the sample of examined domains and functional websites

	Domains	Web sites
.gov.mk	373	210
other types of domains	10	10
Total	383	220

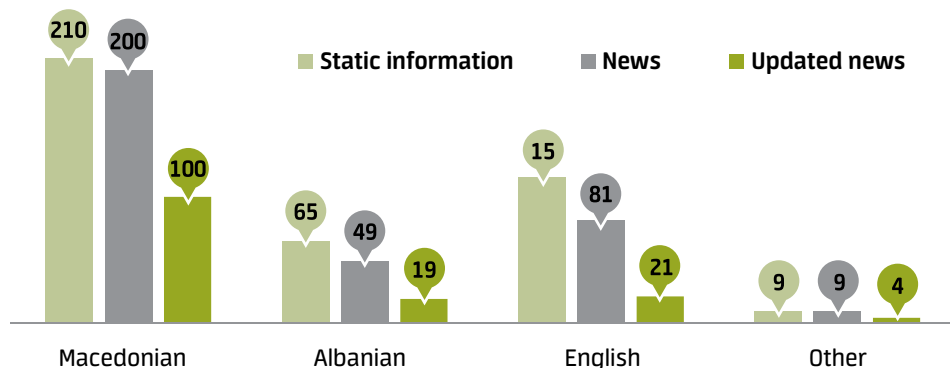
In terms of languages used for the domain names, 65% of the reviewed domains are in Macedonian, 11% in English and 2% in Albanian language. When visiting domains that lead to active websites, 87% of the content that appears first on the websites is in Macedonian, 7% is in Albanian and 6% is in English, and 1% of the websites show content in another language or a combination of the foregoing languages.

Basic information

All interviewed representatives from the government bodies confirmed that the website of their institution is mostly used to inform the citizens about the ongoing projects and activities of the institution, and for publishing information of public character.

Out of the total of 220 reviewed websites, 95% have Macedonian language versions, 52% have English versions, 30% have Albanian, and 1% have versions in Turkish, German and Spanish language, while 0.005%, i.e. one website has Italian, and another website has a French version. In addition, the contents in different languages are mutually synchronized in 16% of the total number of websites.

Language versions and news





The research indicated that 91% of the websites have a news section or periodically publish news in Macedonian, 22% of the websites have a news section in Albanian and 37% have a news section in English language. By comparing the date of the last update with the date of the visit, it was established that:

- ▶ 50% of the news in Macedonian language have been updated during the previous month, 17% have been updated during the previous 1-2 months, 17% were updated more than 2 months prior to the research (2009-2013), and it could not be determined for 17% of the websites when they were updated because no dates were specified;
- ▶ 39% of the news in Albanian have been updated during the previous month, 22% have been updated during the previous 1-2 months, 20% have been updated more than two months ago (2010-2013), and it could not be determined for 16% when they were updated because no dates were specified, and the news sections of 2% of the websites are not working due to other problems.
- ▶ Least updated are the news in English, 26% of which were published during the previous month, 20% during the previous 1-2 months, 31% were published more than 2 months ago (2007-2013), the date of publication could not be determined for the news sections of 17% of the websites, and 6% of the website are not working due to other problems.

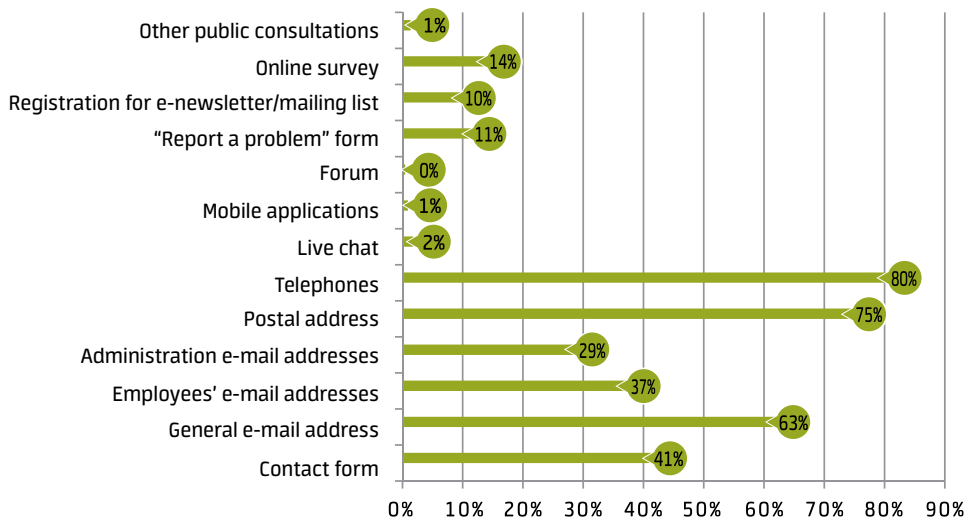
According to the surveyed institutions, state institutions are mostly using their websites and the social media to provide the citizens with relevant information and opportunities to participate in the decision-making process. Representatives of the government bodies who participated in the research said they generally introduce citizens to the e-services and mechanisms for e-participation offered by their institution through press releases and information on their website.



Opportunities for communication

41% of the reviewed websites have made available a contact form, and 11% have a form for reporting problems. A general contact e-mail is available on 63% of the websites. E-mail addresses for contacting the staff are available on 37% of the reviewed websites, and e-mail addresses for contacting members of administrative structures are available on 29% of the reviewed websites.

Opportunities for communication





In order to test whether they respond to questions via e-mail, invitations for participation in the research were sent via e-mail to a total of 179 institutions, through the addresses published on the 220 reviewed websites. Only 8 of them responded (0.04%).

Information about the address of the institution is available on 75% of the reviewed websites and 80% of the websites provide telephone numbers.

Only 2% of the institutions have a Live chat option on their websites, and 1% have developed mobile applications that are available on their website.

As for communication via the social media, 23% of the government websites have set up an option for linking to a Facebook profile/page, and 88% of these links lead to a Facebook profile/page of the institution. 10% of the institutions are present on Twitter, and 76% of the linked Twitter profiles belong to an institution. 13% of the institutions have their own YouTube channel, out of which 96% are registered to the institution that has set the link on its website.

The remaining presences on social networks are mostly registered to the head of the institution. This practice creates many questions, for instance, about the ownership of such a profile/page - whether it is owned by the institution or the politician himself. In such cases, citizens who are interested in the work of the institution are forced to become followers of a certain politician (at the same time sharing personal data). The politician also receives an additional social capital that he can use after his mandate is over, or for electoral purposes outside of institutional competences. During 2013, and especially before the start of the election campaign in 2014 for promotion of the Facebook pages of high government officials, paid ads were posted, and the officials were first presented with their title, and then with their party affiliation or personally. Information about the payment for these ads (personal, partisan, or from the Budget of RM) was not available to the public.

Another aspect of inconsistency in the use of social networks is that some of the state institutions have banned access to the social networks, while the institutions themselves maintain their profiles and pages. One such example is the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia. This approach adversely affects the inclusion of the citizens and the interaction with the employees and with the elected officials through these channels for communication.



Accessibility

E-accessibility and the development of an inclusive e-government are priorities from the National Strategy for e-Inclusion 2011-2014, with the Ministry of Information Society and Administration in charge of its implementation. The measures that are related to the subject of this research and that are arising from the first priority include the preparation of a Guide for the implementation of the WCAG 2.0 standard and its promotion, which was accomplished, but the Ministry has not announced the extent to which the measure "Application of the WCAG 2.0 standard for web-accessibility of the websites and electronic services of the state administration bodies" has been fulfilled. According to this measure, the state administration bodies should be obliged to "additionally develop their websites to comply with the recommendations of the W3C Consortium for web-accessibility through the published Guide for implementation of WCAG 2.0."

Regarding accessibility, 80% of the interviewed representatives of government bodies stated that their websites are not optimized to meet the needs of persons with disabilities. The remaining 20% responded that their websites are partially optimized. Overall, the reviewed websites do not fully adhere to the standards for persons with disabilities. The review with the WAVE tool (wave.webaim.org) which is recommended by W3C, on a sample of 22 websites that were identified as good examples in the research indicated errors in all of the websites. The number of errors is smaller for websites that use some kind of standardized software for presenting content (CMS) and HTML5. Some of the errors identified with this tool were related to the contrast (easier viewing for visually impaired persons) which depends on the graphic design.

Another aspect of accessibility is also the use of different languages understandable for the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, especially the mother tongues of the ethnic groups. With the lack of a clear standard and commitments, the development of different language versions depends on the political will of the governing structures of the institutions, leading to the inconsistency which is evident from the results listed in the Basic Information section.

Data published on the reviewed websites is mostly in a form that allows easy automatic processing. In cases that are designated as open data sets in terms of fulfillment of the obligations under the Open Government Partnership, we can often find information



published as part of articles (for instance, by the Ministry of Interior, MARNet), and not as complete sets/databases in standardized formats that can be downloaded.

Although the Search function is expected to be a default function for any website, only 50% of the reviewed websites offer the functionality to search through the content available on their webpages. The Search function was not working on some of the websites, such as president.gov.mk during the time of the review (on March 15 – before the presidential elections, and on April 25, May 20 and June 5).

The most common format of the published documents is PDF (75%), followed by MS Office (26%). 100% of the interviewed representatives of the government bodies stated that PDF is the most common format they use for publishing documents on their website. In some cases, the documents in this format consist of images - scanned documents that have not been subjected to automatic text conversion, and are therefore unreadable for specialized screen readers, and users cannot search through their text.

Transparency

When asked about the steps taken by their institution for improving transparency, accountability and e-participation of citizens through their website, all respondents said their website is being updated with important information about their work.

On the other hand, the review the websites indicated that only 10% of the government bodies and institutions have published the annual work program for the current year on their websites. An additional 15% of the reviewed websites have made available a general annual program of the body/institution covering the current 2014.

57% of the reviewed websites have a section for the relevant legislation for the specific institution, such as laws, rulebooks and regulations. This research was limited to only determining the presence of this section, and due to the limited resources it could not be determined whether the section contains *all* applicable regulations pertaining to the institution, and whether they were updated, which may be the subject of other research. In some cases this section contained draft-laws without any information whether they were adopted or fair copies without a date or information whether there were any amendments in the meantime. Furthermore, 17% of the institutions publish an Official Gazette or their official bulletin.

As for providing access to information of public character, a special section/page for free access to information of public character is available on 33% of the websites of the government institutions, and this page is easily accessible, often through a clearly visible link in the main menu. In addition, 24% of the institutions provide complete information in terms of the applicable regulations (contact person, list of documents of public character).

Most of the interviewed representatives of government bodies (70%) responded that part of the information of public character is available on their website.

When asked about what kind of information of public character they are publishing proactively on the web, without the need for citizens to submit a special request, the representatives of the government bodies replied: information pursuant to the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Character and in accordance with the Law on Personal Data Protection; announcements, reports, information about the work of the Municipal council

and its committees, as well as information about the activities of the Mayor; programs and strategies for work in the field of public services and local economic development; financial statements; public procurements; urban planning documentation; statistical data and annual reports; financing, budget, annual statements, action plan; official gazette of the municipality; as well as information about the activities in the schools, kindergartens, cultural events, information about the construction of infrastructural facilities, urban equipment, lighting and other information from a communal aspect.

On the other hand, the majority of the interviewed experts believe that the government websites are usually missing information of public character (53%) and fiscal data (76%).

During the review of the websites, we were not able to determine a correlation with the claim of 40% of the surveyed representatives of institutions that the information of public character requested by citizens are also published online, apart from being sent to the information seekers. On the other hand, it is exactly because of this low level of engagement of the institutions in this regard, that the civil society organizations have launched the web platforms spinfo.org.mk and slobodenpristap.mk, used for publishing the answers to citizens' questions received in accordance with the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Character.

50% of the reviewed websites have made available information about the officials, such as board members, members of a municipal council, or MPs.

Only 8% of the government bodies/institutions publish their answers to questions of general interest in a separate section of their website.

Only 5% of the websites covered with the research have privacy policies, and 90% of these websites make their privacy policies available on their homepage. Having a privacy policy is not a legal requirement, but it is a good practice for the entities from the public and private sector to explain to their users what data of theirs is being controlled and processed and what measures are taken to protect the data in accordance with the Law on Personal Data Protection. This is an important factor for strengthening the trust between the users and the institutions, i.e. the service providers.

Only a small portion of the websites (2%) has a section/page for open data (sometimes titled as "Отворено владино партнерство", according to the initial translation of "Open Government Partnership"). As an obstacle for the development of the public consultations on this topic during 2014, experts and representatives of government bodies indicate the lack of communication between the institutions, and emphasize the need for increased awareness among those responsible.

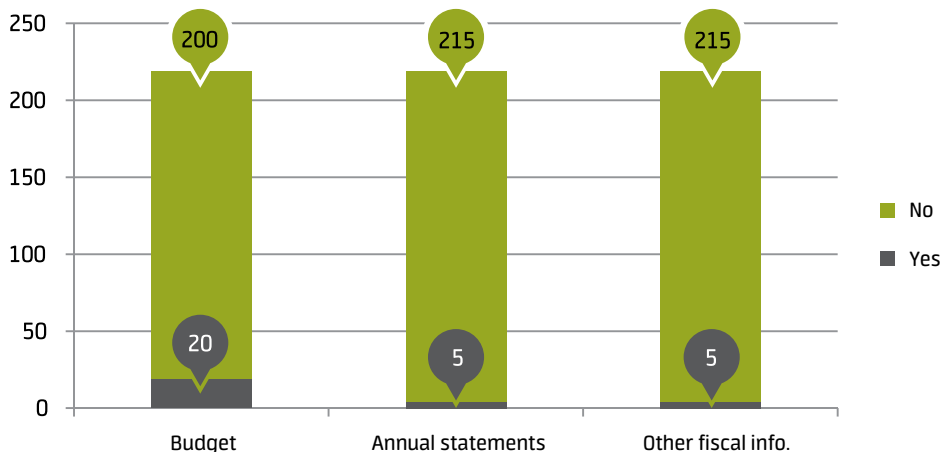


Accountability

The availability of fiscal data was used as an indicator for accountability in this research. It was examined whether and in what form the institutions publish their budgets, annual statements and other data in this field.

The availability of fiscal data is limited. In fact, 9% of the government institutions have published their budget on their website, 2% have published their annual statements, and 2% have shared other fiscal data. Furthermore, the institutions are legally obliged to publish their budgets in their official gazettes/bulletins, but official bulletins are only present on 17% of the reviewed websites.

Fiscal information



On the other hand, 50% of the interviewed representatives of government bodies responded that financing schemes, data on tenders and signed contracts are available on the websites of the ministries and easily visible. 40% responded that these are not available at all. This indicates that in some institutions there is willingness for greater accountability and transparency, which is reflected through the willingness to participate in this kind of research.



E-participation

The utilization of the websites of government bodies and institutions as mechanisms for public consultations on a level of the central and local government is low. Only 12% of the interviewed experts believe that the government websites are used for enabling citizen participation in the decision-making processes, and 70% believe that there is room for their improvement.

As much as 60% of the interviewed representatives of the government bodies responded that the citizens are not consulted during the preparation of draft-laws by the Ministries and they are not able to comment and submit petitions in electronic form through the website of the institution. This was also confirmed with the structured interviews with the experts, of whom 82% said that so far, they have not been consulted through the mechanisms for e-participation during the decision making process.

Online surveys for citizens' opinion are available on 14% of the websites, and registration for an e-newsletter or mailing list is offered by 10% of the websites. Other opportunities for public consultation are available on 1% of the reviewed websites, such as: "Give us an idea", "Free line for consumers," "Questions from citizens".

Only one of the reviewed websites, e-Democracy, offers an opportunity for consultations through the "Forum" section, whereas ENER also provides an opportunity for registered users to leave comments. In addition, 150 discussions in 15 categories with a total of 173 comments were published in the Forum of e-Democracy before the research, with the last comment posted on November 17, 2012. Only a small part of the large quantity of new laws and amendments adopted by the Assembly are published for a public debate through ENER. For example, in the period from December 24, 2012 to February 25, 2013, 90 new laws were adopted, 36 of which were adopted in a shortened procedure (FOSM, 2013), whereas during the same period only 24 new draft-laws were posted on ENER. In addition, the draft-laws posted on ENER are marked with "Status: Open", i.e. there is no information whether they have been adopted and in what form, or whether they were changed by the Assembly via amendments. Only a part of them contain responses from the competent institutions to the comments from the citizens.

The small number of opportunities for public discussion through open forums is actually a deterioration of the situation, because dozens of websites of institutions of the central

and local government in the first decade of the 21st century offered forum sections. During the public consultation on this topic in the period 2007-2009, some of the representatives of the institutions cited the inability to hire additional civil servants who would serve as moderators, as the reason for termination of the forums. This is contradictory to the increased number of employees in the public administration during the mentioned period, and in the following period.

40% of the interviewed institutions responded affirmatively to the question “Do you consult the citizens through the mechanisms for e-participation when making a decision?” and cited an example of doing this through their websites and on the social networks, through public debates with the citizens on the draft versions of the documents, stating that the calls for these public debates are announced on their websites, as well as the reports from the public debates, ENER and e-Democracy, and the citizen surveys.

On the other hand, 30% of the interviewed representatives of the institutions stated that their institution is never using ENER or e-Democracy during the initiation of changes to the legislation (laws, bylaws, regulations).

Almost all of the interviewed representatives of the institutions and representatives of the civil society sector and the private sector indicated that there is a low level of awareness about the existence of mechanisms for consultation, and that their visibility is also low. This was confirmed with the review of the websites in terms of informing the citizens on this subject. There is a generally low level of connection of government websites with other websites that may offer useful general information and opportunities for e-participation of the citizens. Namely, 24% of the websites link to the sobranie.mk website, 18% link to uslugi.gov.mk, 4% link to e-demokratija.mk, and only 2% of the websites link to ener.gov.mk using banners, while only 1% of the reviewed websites link to the specialized government website for open data opendata.mioa.gov.mk.

E-services

The level of e-services was evaluated according to the methodology used in the EU, developed by "Capgemini". According to this approach, the process of providing e-services is conducted on the following levels: (1) information, (2) one-way interaction, (3) two-way interaction, (4) transaction, (5) targeting/personalization.

Research on the development of e-government services in the past established that in the initial period of development of this area in Macedonia priority was given to the development of e-services bringing revenue to the state, that are among the 20 core services on an EU level, enabling the strengthening of the reputation of the country on the international comparative ranking lists.

50% of the reviewed websites provide downloadable forms for services to the citizens.

2% of the gov.mk websites offer e-services: e-employment; electronic exchange of documents with the Customs Administration of the Republic of Macedonia (with a login system); report a problem; login system for bidding in auctions; cadastral data, cost of living index calculator; electronic travel registration and e-taxes.

When asked whether their institution offers e-services, 20% of the interviewed representatives of government bodies responded negatively. Those who responded affirmatively cited the following e-services: e-registration of residence, scheduling appointments for applying for personal documents, e-applications from citizens, e-requests and payments for personal documents, e-journal, e-map, e-catalogue, e-tax system, e-building permit, report a problem, e-problems, issuing of building permits, e-reminder.

Specified examples

The interviewed respondents specified the following websites as positive examples in certain fields.

Ease of use

- ▶ ipard.gov.mk
- ▶ uslugi.gov.mk
- ▶ katastar.gov.mk
- ▶ strumica.gov.mk
- ▶ ujp.gov.mk
- ▶ caska.gov.mk
- ▶ veles.gov.mk
- ▶ ener.gov.mk
- ▶ sec.mk
- ▶ avrm.gov.mk
- ▶ sobranie.mk

Easy navigation and search

- ▶ sobranie.mk
- ▶ strumica.gov.mk
- ▶ uslugi.gov.mk
- ▶ ujp.gov.mk
- ▶ veles.gov.mk
- ▶ ener.gov.mk
- ▶ mtsp.gov.mk

Regularly updated

- ▶ ipard.gov.mk
- ▶ uslugi.gov.mk
- ▶ sobranie.mk
- ▶ ujp.gov.mk
- ▶ vlada.mk
- ▶ caska.gov.mk
- ▶ veles.gov.mk
- ▶ mvr.gov.mk
- ▶ mon.mk
- ▶ e-nabavki.gov.mk
- ▶ nvosorabotka.gov.mk
- ▶ aerodrom.gov.mk

Application of most progressive technology

- ▶ katastar.gov.mk
- ▶ sobranie.mk
- ▶ e-demokratija.mk
- ▶ e-nabavki.mk
- ▶ meteo.gov.mk
- ▶ veles.gov.mk
- ▶ mon.gov.mk
- ▶ ener.gov.mk
- ▶ ujp.gov.mk
- ▶ avrm.gov.mk
- ▶ bjn.gov.mk
- ▶ crm.com.mk

Policy making opportunities

The adoption of public policies that affect the increased use of websites owned by government institutions and state administration bodies as tools for transparency, accountability and e-participation is directly dependent on the political will of the highest levels of government.

The general conclusion of the respondents is that the existing legislation is satisfactory, but additional stipulation is needed with documents on a national level (strategies and action plans), and with rules adopted by individual institutions, thereby ensuring its implementation, regardless of staffing and other decisions. By specifying the responsibilities of institutions, their work would be facilitated, and citizens would have a clear insight into the ways in which they could influence the fulfillment of the obligations assumed by the institution.

The introduction of clear standards that would obligate the institutions to implement additional mechanisms for transparency, accountability and civic participation, and to promote the existing mechanisms, could be conducted by adopting procedures for decisions made by the Government of RM, at the proposal of the Ministry of Information Society and Administration. An additional impetus and incentive in this process is Macedonia's membership in the Open Government Partnership, making the fulfillment of the obligations a priority, and the expansion of the scope of future national action plans in this area.

Additionally, the relevant institutions can despite the legal obligations voluntarily adopt rulebooks and develop e-services in this area, and some of them can apply methods for self-regulation - for example, municipalities by using the ZELS decision-making infrastructure.

In all these cases, the role of the citizens and civil society organizations that represent their interests is also crucial. Their proactive and continuous engagement through consistent requests to the institutions to consistently use the existing mechanisms for transparency, accountability and e-participation and to develop new ones in accordance with the expressed needs, as a factor that ensures long-term sustainable development in this area.

Conclusions and recommendations

- ▶ The existing legal framework in the Republic of Macedonia regulates civic e-participation, but it is necessary to consistently implement it and to raise the awareness of citizens and institutions about the existence of opportunities and about the importance of using new media, in this particular case - the websites as tools for transparency, accountability, and e-participation.
- ▶ It is necessary to raise the awareness of the institutions about the importance of the role of the websites as tools and platforms for transparency, accountability and civic participation. Almost all processes taking place without the use of new technologies ("on paper") can be optimized with the application of new technologies, enabling a more efficient use of the financial and human resources and the time of civil servants and citizens.
- ▶ As one of the major problems cited by the institutions on a local level (municipalities) is the lack of funds intended for maintenance of the institution's website, and for a person in charge of that task. It is therefore recommended to regulate the role of the people in charge of administering the websites through a systematization of jobs, and to transfer funds from the budget of the institutions for this purpose.
- ▶ Users often indicate that they encounter difficulties in finding specific information on particular websites, and sometimes the information is dispersed on more than a single website. Therefore, it is necessary to connect all the resources and important websites in order to provide easier access to the information and increased transparency.
- ▶ It is necessary to create improved visibility and access to information on the websites. One of the possible solutions is to standardize the format and layout of the websites by using a template to achieve a uniform appearance and location of the information on each webpage, thereby promoting e-inclusiveness from all aspects in order to enable access to the services for all citizens - by also applying all the appropriate languages spoken in the Republic of Macedonia, and applying the W3C standards in the design itself, enabling access to persons with disabilities. Furthermore, the use of open standards for the published documents will increase and facilitate the search and access to published information.

- ▶ The domain names of the public institutions are chosen arbitrarily, leading to different solutions and inconsistencies – use of different languages regardless of the content, inconsistent application of the .gov.mk or .mk extensions, and cases of using .org.mk and even foreign .com domains (for instance, dojran-info.com). This makes finding and using the websites more difficult for the citizens. It is recommended that the method of selection of the domain names is consistent for all the institutions through a predetermined methodology.
- ▶ An inconsistency was also observed in the visibility of information about the spending of the institutions' funds. It is necessary to develop a system for review of finances and their allocation by the institutions in order to achieve greater transparency and accountability before the citizens. Aside from the required fulfillment of the legal obligations by publishing fiscal data in their original form, in order to increase the citizens' insight and participation it is important to develop systems for automated data processing and display in context, for instance by using visualizations. An example of such a system developed by the civil society sector is the sledigiparite.mk platform.
- ▶ Almost all of the institutions have their own website, which means that the first effort has been made, but what is missing is content relevant for the user, i.e. the citizen. More agile maintenance of these systems is needed, as well as timely updates with the necessary information.
- ▶ Although they are binding, the public consultation processes are taking place formally and are insufficiently reflected in the specified online mechanisms. Many of the laws are adopted in short procedures, making it difficult for the citizens to participate with their own proposals. An important demotivating factor for the citizens and organizations to participate in the consultative processes are the previous experiences when their needs and the public interest were not taken into consideration when adopting the legislation. Content published on the websites is relatively informative, but insufficiently participatory. Greater participation is necessary as well as its facilitation, which would lead to the drawing of conclusions from that participation.
- ▶ The systems are mainly used for providing (one-way) information to the citizens, but a more active two-way communication is needed, as well as mutual instigation of initiatives. Information needs to be published more transparently, especially when it comes to passing laws, public debates and open calls for participation in public debates.
- ▶ Since there are instruments for both participation in and control over the public institutions (adequate functioning of the State Audit Office, with a mechanism for sanctions and personal responsibility of those who do not comply with these mechanisms), these instruments must be used more actively.
- ▶ There are numerous tools offered by the institutions, but respondents indicate that there is inadequate use of these tools by the civil servants themselves, who are responsible for updating these tools, and on the other hand, insufficient activity by the public – both the expert and the general public, i.e. the citizens themselves. The capacity building

of the public administration for exercising greater transparency, accountability and inclusion of the stakeholders in the decision-making process is essential.

- ▶ There is a lack of publicly available policies regarding the use of social networks and comment moderation by the public administration or by individual institutions. The development and application of such policies, compliant with the legal regulations - especially the ones related to the fight against hate speech, would provide a suitable environment for an enhanced interaction with the citizens.
- ▶ Demonstrating awareness and concern for the protection of human rights in the digital sphere is an important aspect of building trust between the institutions and the citizens. A step forward in this direction is the posting of privacy policies, as well as other documents, such as regulations and codes that would guarantee this, within the competences of the institutions.
- ▶ The institutions are becoming aware of the importance of the web, and there is an increasing number of e-services being offered. The state should be a leader in this field. It is therefore necessary to work on the fulfillment of the principles of e-inclusion and to address the issues related to accessibility, as well as the issues related to people with disabilities.
- ▶ E-inclusion and e-participation are a reflection of the democratic capacity of the government. The democratic capacity of the authorities is currently a greater challenge than the instrument through which they realize their willingness to ensure transparency and participation in the decision-making process. The current efforts of the public institutions should be enhanced by capacity building and harmonization of the centrally adopted policies and their dispersion in all levels of the government and public administration.



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Annex 1: Interviewed experts and representatives of institutions

The research team of Metamorphosis is expressing its gratitude for the contribution of all who helped in the design and execution of the research, primarily Ivan Kuhn and Andrea Cox from the Pontis Foundation, Tanja Hafner Ademi and Deniza Bundalevska from BCSDN. The research would not have been possible without the cooperation of the following individuals and institutions who contributed as sources of information through interviews and participation in the consultations that took place online and through the public consultative meeting.

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- ▶ Maja Subotic - OSCE Mission to Skopje
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INTERVIEWED REPRESENTATIVES

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- ▶ Kiril Barbareev - "Goce Delchev" University - Stip
 - ▶ Jani Makraduli - MP and former president of the Commission for Information Technology (KIT)
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 - ▶ Ministry of Interior - response sent via the official e-mail address.
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