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## DEVELOPMENT OF E-DEMOCRACY IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Jiří Dušek – Lubomír Pána\*

### ABSTRACT

E-democracy (a neologism and contraction of electronic democracy) is the utilization of electronic communications technologies, such as the Internet, in enhancing democratic processes within a democratic republic or representative democracy. It is a political development still in its infancy, as well as the subject of much debate and activity within government, civic-oriented groups and societies around the world. In the Czech Republic, this concept has been used for the first time by a relatively new political party called Věci veřejné (Public Affairs). Public Affairs is a party which was founded as early as 2001, but it was not until the year 2010 that it was elected into the Czech Parliament for the first time. The party puts stress on direct democracy and on close cooperation with citizens. It was the first party in the Czech Republic that started using the concept of e-democracy in the form of so-called "internal referendums". This contribution aims to analyse the level of success and effectiveness of this new tool of direct democracy, including its positive and negative impacts. On the Czech political scene, the concept of e-democracy is an utterly new and exceptional phenomenon. If it proves to be successful, it will be copied and used by other political parties. At the moment, however, experience with this concept in the conditions of the Czech political scene seem to be rather ambiguous (which, nevertheless, does not diminish the importance of internal referendums of the Public Affairs party, with the use of which, for, example, voters and supporters of this political party were approving the inclusion of the party in a government coalition with the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the conservative TOP 09). For the first time in the history of the Czech Republic, e-democracy was the deciding factor deciding the fate of government and the political development of the country in the next four years.

**Keywords:** E-democracy, Internet, Public Affairs (Czech conservative liberal political party), Voters

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## **Internet as a political medium**

The significance of the Internet is growing with the growing number of its users and the growing popularity of fast broadband connections. The Internet is viewed as a platform and delivery medium for tools that help to eliminate some of the distance constraints in direct democracy; its use is discussed in the context of Internet democracy. Technical media for e-democracy can be expected to extend to mobile technologies such as phones. There are important differences between previous communication media and the Internet that are relevant to the Internet as a political medium. Most importantly the Internet is a many-to-many communication medium whereas radio/television (few-to-many) and telephones (few-to-few) are not. Also, the Internet has a much greater computational capacity allowing strong encryption and databasing (important in community information access/sharing, deliberative democracy and electoral fraud prevention). Further, people use the Internet to collaborate or meet in an asynchronous manner - that is, they don't have to be physically gathered at the same moment to get things accomplished. Due to all these factors, the Internet has the potential to take over certain traditional media of political communication such as the telephone, the TV, newspapers and the radio. Some would argue that the form of output of the computer does not have the same convenience of the newspaper. The advent of electronic paper is likely to change that (WordIQ.com, 2012).

## **Definition of e-democracy**

Electronic direct democracy is a form of direct democracy in which modern communication media are used to ameliorate the bureaucracy involved with referenda on many issues. E-democracy (a combination of the words electronic and democracy) refers to the use of information technologies and communication technologies and strategies in political and governance processes. Democratic actors and sectors in this context include governments, elected officials, the media, political organizations, and citizens/voters. E-democracy aims for broader and more active citizen participation enabled by the Internet, mobile communications, and other technologies in today's representative democracy, as well as through more participatory or direct forms of citizen involvement in addressing public challenges (Clift, 2004). E-democracy is a relatively new concept, which has surfaced out of the popularity of the Internet and the need to reinvigorate interest in the democratic process

(Bellamy, Taylor, 1998). Access is the key to creating interest in the democratic process (Stockwell, 2001). Citizens are more willing to use Web sites to support their candidates and their campaign drives (Franke-Ruta, 2003). The research indicates that the political process has been alienated from ordinary people, where laws are made by representatives far removed from ordinary people (Bellamy, Taylor, 1998). The goal of e-democracy is to reverse the cynicism citizens have about their government institutions (Mercurio, 2003). However, there are doubts about the real impact of electronic and digital tools on citizens' participation and democratic governance, and warning against the "rhetoric" of electronic democracy (Mosco, 2005).

## **History of e-democracy in the Czech Republic**

Most of advanced democracies all over the world are witnessing decreasing election turnouts and growing disinterest and apathy of voters towards politics. Representative democracy, in which individuals are selected in a process of majority voting who then represent the interests of their voters and vote on issues related to social choice is thus undergoing a deep crisis, the consequence of which, apart from low turnout, are stalemate results in many parts of Europe. An ideal method of making voters more interested is more a frequent use of direct democracy, in which social choices are made directly by citizens based on rules of majority voting (Dušek, Protiva, 2007). However, direct democracy is very expensive. In the conditions of the Czech Republic, a state referendum costs about CZK 500 million. It is thus much cheaper and more effective to use the Internet.

The first country in the world where it was possible to vote via Internet in state-wide election was Estonia in local government elections in 2005. Even though this was not the historically first on-line election in practice (it was possible to vote via the Internet in primary elections of the Democratic Party in Arizona in 2000 and in Michigan in 2004, or in several referendums in the Swiss town of Geneva), Estonia was the first country which enabled this type of voting in elections with a nation-wide significance. Among the main reasons why Estonia is introducing the possibility of Internet voting are a high turnout and motivation of young people to vote. As a result of higher turnout, the elections more realistically reflect the actual preferences of society. It can thus be said that such elections contribute to further development of democracy. A higher turnout can also mean the inclusion or exclusion of some voted representatives.

According to authors of the project, a possibility of organising this kind of elections belongs among basic entitlements of an information society (Rada, 2006).

*Table 1 – Voter turnout in the Czech Republic (in %)*

<i>Results of Elections</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2010</i>
Chamber of Deputies		76,41	74,01		58,00			64,47			62,60
Regional Councils				33,64			29,62			40,30	
Local Governments	60,68		45,02		43,39			46,38			48,50
European Parliament							28,32		28,22		
Referendum on Accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union						55,21					

In the Czech Republic, some elections are taking place almost every year; the year 2010 was sometimes called a “super election year” when three elections took place – general elections, municipal elections and senatorial elections. The higher frequency of elections thus leads to higher and higher professionalization of election campaigns where even foreign specialists are hired to manage the elections. The Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) in the past few years has tried to understand the public opinion on various issues using marketing surveys, in order to address the so-called median voter. In a way, the Czech Democratic Party can be considered a predecessor of e-democracy in the Czech Republic. This political party did not allow its party members or the public to vote directly but was surveying their stance on certain issues. The first political grouping which started to intensively use so-called e-democracy in the Czech Republic was the Public Affairs party (*Věci veřejné*). It has already happened in the past that the Public Affairs party included in their political programme a commitment that if they get into the House of Parliament, members and supporters of the party will co-decide on further direction of the party in internal electronic referendums. At that time, no one could foresee that the Public Affairs party would become a Parliament party and on top of that such a significant player on the Czech political chessboard. It was thus historically for the first time that, in July 2010, some Czech citizens decided over the Internet in an intra-party referendum whether the Public Affairs party will

become a member of the coalition, together with the Civic Party (ODS) and the conservative grouping TOP 09.

## History of the Public Affairs party (*Věci veřejné*, 2010)

The Public Affairs party was founded in 2001 as a party of citizens who wanted to solve problems in the capital city of Prague, especially those which, for some reason, were not solved by the City Hall. In 2001, the Public Affairs party won one mandate in the municipal council of Prague 1 and was active in opposition. In 2005 and 2006, local cells of the Public Affairs party started up in Prague 7, in Černošice and in Kostelec nad Orlicí. At present, local organizations are present in all regions and are expanding rapidly.

*Figure 1 – Example of the e-referendum in Public Affairs (Věci veřejné), abbreviated to VV, a conservative liberal political party in the Czech Republic (ElectionsMeter.com, 2010)*

**Referendum**  
Téma: Sociální politika

Měl by stát více podporovat bydlení dostupné pro sociálně znevýhodněné skupiny?

ZVOLTE, PROSÍM, VÁŠ NÁZOR:

**ANO** **NE**

TOTO REFERENDUM JE PLATNÉ OD 24.02.2012 DO 26.03.2012

Odhodnot referendum (více je lépe): ★★★★★

DISKUSE K REFERENDU (18 příspěvků)

In the 2006 elections, the party got surprising 22% of votes in Prague 1 and became the runner up in the election. In 2008, the Public Affairs party ran in Senate elections where its two candidates (in the competitive districts of Prague 1 and Prague 5) were not elected but finished in top spots. The Public Affairs party also ran in European Parliament elections and got 2.40% of all votes which was the best result of all non-parliament parties and even exceeded the parliamentary Green Party.

In 2010, the party was led into Parliament elections by its new leader **Radek John** – a former journalist and TV reporter who was elected a leader in 2009 in a historically first direct on-line election in the Czech Republic. In the 2010 Parliament elections, the Public Affairs party got the total of 10.88% of votes and won 24 mandates. However, in local government elections (10/2010), the Public Affairs party won only 304 local representatives (0.29%) from the total of 62,178 elected representatives.

## **Positive and negative aspects of internal Public Affairs party referendums**

Direct democracy of the Public Affairs party consists of three basic pillars: strong public awareness, maximum participation of each interested individual in the decision-making process and systematic public control of activities, including financial management. Application of these fundamentals to the internal workings of the party requires meticulously elaborated methods, rules and constant feedback between the highest officials, functionaries, members and even supporters (registered members). In practical terms, however, Public Affairs' internal rules do not differ significantly from statutes of other parties which do not label themselves as direct democracy parties. It can even be said that authors of Public Affairs' statutes did not carefully consider processes which are necessary in the area of intra-party democratization in order for a party to be considered a direct democracy party (Hošek, 2010).

On 30 November 2010, 103 referendums were organised on the party's web pages, on topics concerning safety, transport, education, health care etc. In the summer of 2010, several opinion polls were held during coalition negotiations. These opinion polls were held to voice an opinion on specific chapters of the proposed coalition agreement and served as feedback to Public Affairs' politicians. Apart from these opinion polls, Public Affairs' ballots were voted on.

The difference between opinion polls and referendums is very clear. Opinion polls are of only informative value to the party leaders. Referendums are binding. It is a positive development that a political party can identify the opinions of its voters and supporters but it is also connected with crucial problems:

- The representative nature of voting;
- The technical issues connected with voting;
- The registration of new members and supporters.

Only 22% of registered supporters took part in Public Affairs' referendum on the creation of a government coalition in July of 2010. It should be noted that 16,873 people had the right to vote on whether the coalition government should be formed or not. Only 2,912 people (78.13% of voters) agreed with Public Affairs' participation in the coalition, 815 registered members were of the opposite opinion (21.87%). Entitled to vote were only members and supporters who had registered no later than by the day of the Parliament election (28-29 May 2010). According to **Hroník** (Hroník, 2010), this is a paradox if we consider that up to 8.5 million of voters could have come to the election and 5.2 million of them really cast their ballot. In this context, it seems almost comical that the future of a possible government should lie in the hands of several thousand people (through an on-line referendum) from a party which finished fifth in the election.

At the turn of July and August, ballot leaders for the October 2010 municipal elections were voted on. Predominantly young inexperienced politicians became the ballot leaders (e.g. the ballot leader in *Ústí nad Labem* – age 23 years etc.). Over 17% of registered supporters took part in the vote, i.e. about 3,500 people. Subsequently, the ballots for municipal elections had to be approved by the party committee. There were more than 500 candidates, so, on average, each candidate received seven votes. Theoretically speaking, in some cases it was enough to persuade four registered Public Affairs supporters in order to win the first place in the ballot (Wallerová, Zeman, 2010). In one of the election districts, no one got a vote; in another district two candidates got the same amount of votes – again, a phenomenon relatively unlikely if there were a higher number of voters. The same applies to a situation where a candidate gets 100% of votes. Even that has happened. The amount of votes each candidate received is kept secret. The selection of candidates for the Senate was not done in this way for precautionary reasons.

According to Public Affairs, the technical provisions of the voting were at a very high and professional level. Registration on the Internet is verified through a mobile phone (using a text message), by an activation code and by email. However, it is obvious that if anyone wanted to manipulate the voting, it would suffice to buy several SIM cards (at a price of approx. CZK 50-100).

Some traditional objections to direct democracy are argued to apply to e-democracy, such as the potential for governance to tend towards populism and demagoguery. The attempt to introduce e-democracy in the Czech Republic using referendums and opinion polls within the Public Affairs political party is no doubt a laudable initiative. However, this concept is still fraught with shortcomings and, at times, resembles more a cheap populist gesture than direct democracy. If intra-party referendums should be taken seriously, their security would have to be indisputable – e.g. based on an electronic signature or using a personal ID with an integrated chip, as is the case in Estonia. Mistakes similar to those which happened during a referendum on the creation of a government coalition would have to be avoided. The referendum had to be repeated due to technical problems (with a server) and also because some voters complained that after clicking “NO”, the system displayed “YES” for the creation of a government. If such voting decides on a 4-year political direction of a country, these mistakes are unacceptable. The current system of voting unfortunately does not take into account a targeted attempt at misuse by an individual (a purchase of several SIM cards and multiple voting) or by an organized group of, for example, university students who could block a proposal for e.g. the introduction of tuition fees at universities. In view of the fact that the voting and the related service is provided by an external company called NetServis, it is plausible to also anticipate other eventualities, such as a hacker attack or a misuse of results by the external company. In this context, it is not surprising that the interesting idea of participation of members and supporters of the party in its policies is becoming more of a media burden which negatively influences the party's popularity. And it is also one of the causes of its poor performance in the municipal elections of autumn 2010. The present popularity of the Public Affairs party is about 2.1% (3/2012).

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