

Honourable guests,

My name is Hannes Astok and I'm former MP of Estonia, now dealing mainly with electronic governance topics.

Today we can see E on the top of everything: we talk about e-business, e-shopping, e-health, e-learning, e-government, and now more and more also about the e-democracy, e-participation and e-voting.

Is the E on the top of everything something really new?

Or is it just a development of the existing processes, habits, manners and lifestyle?

Yes, it is normal development as computer and microchip -based technology is available for everybody. We are almost everywhere in the network coverage, we are reachable and online as we have computer or at least mobile phone and we are connected.

On the same time it is something very new.

Do you know what can be the world 3rd largest country by population after China and India? If Facebook can be the country, it will be Facebook with 600 million members.

And this kind of online communities can really change not only the virtual world, but also the real world. The Egyptian uprising few months ago was growing up from Facebook commune.

We can ask- is the new reality, the e-world is a problem or challenge for us?

Or is it a danger or an opportunity for democracy?

When talking about the e-democracy we are talking about the 3 main topic:

1. better access to the public information and better access to the decision-makers
2. the transparency and accountability of the of the government and politicians
3. the participation in the decision-making processes, including internet voting

Let me give you a brief overview about those 3 topics.

1. better access to the public information and better access to the decision-makers

The access to the public information is today in many countries considered as a human right. But in the traditional ways there is a lot of obstacles to access public information, as it is often accessible only physically and only during office hours either in the offices either in the public libraries. Also you may request the information by mail, but often you do not know what is available at all.

So the digital and internet era gives us almost unlimited access to the public information resources.

But there are also new problems rising. Is all necessary information published in the governmental institutions webpages? Is it published in the way that citizens can find and understand it? Also there is a risk that officials start to publish everything in the internet and forgetting about other, traditional channels still used by remarkable part of population, not using Internet.

But anyway it is very important step forward and allowing to access the public information also those who where earlier excluded because of geographical or physical barriers.

The second topic, transparency and accountability of the government and politicians is also reaching new limits with the modern digital e-tools.

There is a lot of information that governments can and must provide. Detailed public spendings and use of budget and public money. Salaries of the officials. Spendings of the politicians. Declarations of incomes and assets of the public officials. Financing of the political parties – what are their income sources – legal, illegal or gray?

Public tenders online – both what is procured and who is providing services for the government. And we also see in many countries how citizens are monitoring the activities of the government – how the government is fulfilling its promises and tasks, fixed in the government political agenda. This kind of monitoring results are often made public in the websites and social media and everybody can add his or her comment about government performance.

And there is a lot of communes in Facebook and other social media, developing micro-democracy in level of the neighbourhoods. Yes, in the rural areas citizens are communicating a lot face-to-face, but in urban areas people hardly know their neighbours. So there is more than one good output-citizens are more demanding towards their municipalities and governments, knowing each other better and also organizing joint activities to make their communities better.

And last but not least the participation in the decision-making processes, including internet voting. There is a lot that new digital tools can provide us.

By traditional means the participation in the decision-making processes was almost limited by participation in the elections and by participating in the public discussions in the physical premises. Today, in the internet era the limit of time of physical space does not exist any more.

Let me give you a sample. If one city is discussing about the urban planning for the certain area, the results of this planning – actually built houses and roads are affecting thousands of people afterwards, and for many years. Often citizens even didn't know that planning is going on. And they hardly understand what is really planned, because the information is provided in the expert language and manners. What we can do today?

We can provide a lot of well visualized information for the citizens, including 3D animations where citizens can virtually, through the computer screen try how the new situation feels and do they like it. They can access this information 24 hours per day and from any location, having internet access. And citizens must be informed both by traditional mail and e-mail, so they are informed either in this case when they are far from home for longer period. And they can give their opinion by the same, internet channel also.

But the most exiting is how our citizens, using modern e-tools, can participate in the elections, starting from the internal party democracy and continuing with the campaign and voting.

Still many political parties develop their political program and manifesto in closed meeting rooms. But we see already today that there is technically very easy to give access to this discussion, policy development and decision making to almost all party members around the country as online tools do not limit you with physical location.

Also internal voting inside the party - like candidates listing before elections can be done by online voting – at least my party in Estonia using this option for many years already.

And the new online tools are really great participation tool for ordinary citizens. The discussions in social media already influencing the behaviour of the politicians and parties policies during the elections. And I'm not talking about politicians accounts in Facebook and how many "Like-s" he or she can collect . We have seen already in many countries that after citizens have underlined one or another topic, missing or doubtful in the party's political manifesto, and set up discussion in social media, politicians start to rethink their promises and adjust them to the real needs of the citizens.

And online internet voting is increasing trend all over the world. As other speakers will go deeper with this topic, I do not stop on it, but I want to share with you one very remarkable result. Less than three months ago we had general elections in Estonia and 25% of given votes were given online, via Internet. Yes, we need for it solid technology and infrastructure, but the result is really remarkable as it was voluntary choice for voters. And we get internet votes from Estonians from 106 countries worldwide. It means that those citizens had easy access to the voting, comparing option to visit embassies what can be thousands of miles away.

Dear participants,

The e-democracy is here to stay. The e-democracy tools are changing rapidly and we need to follow the development and learn about it. But we can not eliminate or exclude them as our citizens like to use them and they use them. And they do not care, are politicians like it or not.

So let us take this exciting journey and I hope that such an important international organization as OECE is committed to moderate this discussion in future.