

# Citizens' local political participation in the Czech Republic: rural-urban comparison

## *Lokální politická participace občanů v ČR: srovnání venkova a města*

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**Abstract:** The Velvet Revolution in November 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia opened the way to the renewal of the democratic political system. One of the most visible aspects of the Czech political development consisted in the renewal of the essential functions of elections and political parties. On the local level, however, the political process – as well as in other post-communist countries – continued to be for a long time influenced by the remains of the former centralized system wherein the local administration used to be subjected to the central state power. Municipal elections took hold in these countries, however, the local government remained in the embryonic state and a certain absence of real political and economic decision-making mechanism on the local level continued to show. The public administration in the Czech Republic had to deal with the changes in the administrative division of the state, the split of the Czechoslovak federation as well as the fragmentation of municipalities whose number increased by 50 percent. Decision making mechanisms on the local and regional level were suffering from the incomplete territorial hierarchy of public administration and from the unclear division of power between the state administration and local administration bodies. Only at the end of the 1990s, the public administration in the Czech Republic started to get a more integrated and specific shape. Citizens' participation in the political process represents one of the key issues of representative democracy. The contemporary democracy has to face the decrease in voter turnout and the low interest of citizens to assume responsibility within the political process. The spread of democratising process following the fall of the iron curtain should not overshadow the risk of internal weakness of democracy. The solution should be looked for in more responsible citizenship and citizens' political participation. The degree of political participation is considered (together with political pluralism) to be the key element of representative democracy in general terms, as well as of democratic process on the local and regional level. The objective of this paper is to describe the specifics of citizens' local political participation in the Czech Republic and to show the differences between rural and urban areas. The paper concentrates on voting and voter turnout but deals also with other forms of citizens' political participation.

**Key words:** local politics, political parties, citizens' political participation, voter turnout, e-government, e-democracy

**Abstrakt:** Sametová revoluce v listopadu 1989 otevřela v tehdejším Československu cestu k obnově demokratického politického systému. Jednou z nejviditelnějších stránek českého politického vývoje se stalo obnovení základních funkcí voleb a politických stran. Na lokální úrovni byl však politický proces – stejně jako v dalších postkomunistických zemích – ještě dlouho ovlivňován pozůstatky dřívějšího centralizovaného systému, v němž byla místní správa podřízena ústřední státní moci. V těchto zemích se sice rychle ujaly obecní volby, ale místní samospráva zůstávala v zárodečné podobě a stále se projevovala jistá absence skutečného politického a ekonomického rozhodovacího mechanismu na lokální úrovni. Veřejná správa v ČR se musela vyrovnávat se změnami administrativního členění státu, s rozpadem československé federace a také s drobením obcí, jejichž počet vzrostl o 50 %. Rozhodovací mechanismy na místní i regionální úrovni trpěly neúplnou územní hierarchií veřejné správy a nejasnými kompetenčními vztahy mezi orgány státní správy a samosprávy. Teprve na sklonku 90. let začala veřejná správa v ČR dostávat ucelenější a konkrétnější podobu. Občanská participace na politickém procesu představuje jeden z klíčových prvků zastupitelské demokracie, která však dnes trpí poklesem voličské účasti a nízkým zájmem občanů převzít v politickém procesu odpovědnost. Rozšíření demokracie po pádu tzv. železné opony by nemělo zakrývat nebezpečí vnitřní slabosti demokracie. Řešení by mělo být hledáno v odpovědnějším občanství

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a politické participaci občanů. Stupeň politické participace je spolu s politickým pluralismem pokládán za klíčový prvek jak zastupitelské demokracie v obecném smyslu, tak politického procesu na lokální a regionální úrovni. Cílem příspěvku je charakterizovat specifické rysy lokální politické participace občanů v ČR a ukázat rozdíly, jež se z tohoto hlediska projevují mezi venkovskými a městskými oblastmi. Příspěvek se soustřeďuje na volby a volební účast, ale zabývá se i dalšími formami politické participace občanů.

**Klíčová slova:** místní politika, politické strany, politická participace občanů, volební účast, e-government, e-democracy

Citizens' participation in the political process represents one of the key issues of representative democracy. Modern systems of representative democracy face the decrease in voter turnout and low interest of citizens to assume responsibility within the political process (Lijphart 1997; Putnam 2000: 31–47). A long term problem of representative democracy is the gap between politics on the national level on the one hand and politics on the local or regional level on the other, the cleavage between the centre and periphery, as well as among cities and rural areas. This gap could grow even wider in the context of delegation of a part of decision-making from the national level to the supra-national level. This is why new ways of participation of citizens in the political process, or of strengthening of their political participation, are being continuously sought (Milner, Ladner 2006; Howe 2006). The spread of democratising process following the fall of the iron curtain should not overshadow the risk of the internal weakness of democracy or even of the crisis of democracy, as openly asserted by A. Giddens (1998). The solution should be looked for in a more responsible citizenship and citizens' political participation. The degree of political participation is considered (together with political pluralism) to be the key element of representative democracy in general terms, as well as of democratic process on the local and regional level (CLRD 2000).

The importance of the centre – periphery dichotomy – a traditional problem of the local policy – surfaces today more than ever. Local communities cannot count on the home ground political “dead air region”. They are increasingly exposed to the challenges of the external, globalized world; their local political bodies are more and more involved in the broader political context (Hambleton et al. 2003). In addition to that, the position of the local political scene changes in the perspective of the national level of the democratic process. During the second half of the 20th century, there was a prevailing opinion between political sci-

entists and sociologists that political competition on the local level was losing importance. On the basis of decreasing membership of political parties and weakening of traditional political links of voters, it was considered that local ways of political campaigning were ineffective. In the 1990s, this position, however, started to change (Whiteley, Seyd 2003). The influence of local political level and local campaigning was reinforced, among other things thanks to information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The objective of this paper is to describe the specifics of citizens' local political participation in the Czech Republic and to show the differences between rural and urban areas. The paper concentrates on voting and voter turnout but deals also with other forms of citizens' political participation. The paper is based on two projects that are at present in the initial stages of elaboration. The first is a long-term, broad project entitled the *Information and knowledge support of strategic management*, which includes problems linked to local government development in the Czech Republic.<sup>1</sup> The second project focuses on citizen's participation in public life of rural communities in the Czech Republic.<sup>2</sup>

At the early stage of research, the data gathering consists in the use of community studies made by students attending seminars. The selection of examined municipalities is made so that the structure of municipalities in the Czech Republic is covered according to different criteria: municipality size, distance from the centre, position in the administration system etc. Each study is divided into three parts: the first part includes basic facts on the given municipality, the second treats the local political process (political parties, elections, interest groups, participation of the municipality in regional projects etc.), the third part focuses on the political participation of citizens. One of the examined areas is the web presentation of municipalities, communication between local authorities and citizens, citizens web discussion forums etc.

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<sup>2</sup> Citizen's Participation in Public Life in Rural Municipalities in the CR. Czech Science Foundation, Project 403/06/1308.

## RENEWAL OF DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The Velvet Revolution in November 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia opened the way to the renewal of the democratic political system and public administration. One of the most visible aspects of the Czech political development consisted in the renewal of the essential functions of elections and political parties. On the local level, however, the political process – as well as in other post-communist countries – continued to be for a long time influenced by the remains of the former centralized system wherein the local administration used to be subjected to the central state power. Authors analyzing processes of transformation in post-communist countries point out to the fact that in the 1990s, municipal elections took hold in these countries, however, the local government remained in embryonic state and a certain absence of real political and economic decision-making mechanism on the local level continued to show (Reid 2003).

During the years following the Velvet Revolution, the public administration in the Czech Republic had to deal with the changes in the administrative division of the state, the split of the Czechoslovak federation as well as the fragmentation of municipalities whose number increased by 50 percent. Decision making mechanisms on the local and regional level were suffering from the incomplete territorial hierarchy of public administration and from the unclear division of power between the state administration and local administration bodies. Only at the end of the 1990s, the public administration in the Czech Republic started to get a more integrated and specific shape.

The public administration reform was designed along the lines of the so-called integrated model of public administration, where state administration bodies execute public administration only on the central level, whereas on the regional and local level, the execution of public administration was delegated to local governments. This solution, which strengthens the role of local administration bodies, must be understood as an effort to implement the consequent decentralisation and consistent implementation of the subsidiarity principle, and probably even as an attempt to get rid at last of the tradition of the centralised, one-way public administration that existed prior to 1990. This solution strengthens the role of citizens in the decision-making process on the local and regional level and opens the opportunity for their broader political participation.

## VOTER TURNOUT

Voting is the most important interactive political act and voter turnout is the basic indicator of citizens' political participation. In the Czech Republic, the voter turnout has been showing a downward trend from the beginning of 1990s, be it parliamentary elections or elections to local authorities. Election results comparison indicates interesting differences between municipal and general parliamentary elections (Czech Statistical Office's Election Server 2006). As Figure 1 shows, voter turnout figures are higher in parliamentary elections than in local elections, the decrease in the instance of parliamentary elections in comparison with local elections is, however, steeper,

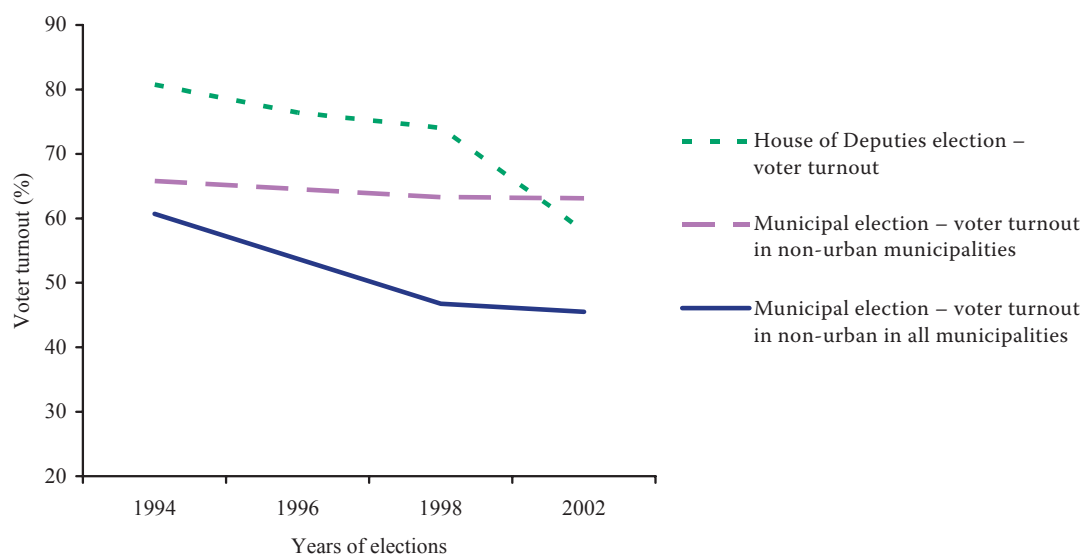


Figure 1. Voter Turnout in Municipal and Parliamentary Elections

Source: Czech Statistical Office, Election Server

Table 1. Municipalities by Population (as at 1<sup>st</sup> January 2003)

Population	Number of Municipalities
Up to 199	1 635
200–499	2 034
500–999	1 284
1 000–1 999	665
2 000–4 999	369
5 000–9 999	131
10 000–19 999	68
20 000–49 999	41
50 000–99 999	17
Over 100 000	5
Total	6 249

Source: Czech Statistical Office. [http://www.czso.cz/csu/2003edicniplan.nsf/publ/1301-03-k\\_1\\_1\\_2003](http://www.czso.cz/csu/2003edicniplan.nsf/publ/1301-03-k_1_1_2003)

so that the difference fell from 20 percent in 1994 to 12.5 percent in 2002. Voter turnout in local elections went down from 60.7 percent in 1994 to 46.7 percent in 1998 and to 45.5 percent in 2002.

Voter turnout is influenced by the size of the given municipality. There are 6 249 municipalities in the Czech Republic (see Table 1), which is quite a high number for a country with only 10.2 million inhabitants. The average population in municipalities is about 1 630 inhabitants. Small rural villages represent the majority of Czech municipalities. Almost one third

of all municipalities have less than 200 inhabitants. A considerable number of municipalities have less than 2 000 inhabitants. These rural villages represent over 90 percent of all Czech municipalities, which shows that the settlement structure is highly diversified and dispersed across the country's territory. According to the EU definition, 80 percent of the Czech municipalities are located in rural areas with the rural areas covering 75 percent of the country's territory. 22.3 percent of the population of the Czech Republic lives in rural areas.

Small municipalities that do not have the status of the town achieve, when compared with the national average, a higher voter turnout in municipal elections and its decrease is also much lower. In non-urban municipalities, 65.8 percent of voters came to the ballot in 1994 which was by more than 5 percent above the nationwide average. In 1998, 63.3 percent of voters cast their ballot in non-urban municipalities that is 2.5 percent less than in previous elections, but the difference against the average increased from 5 percent to 16.6 percent. In 2002, local voter turnout in non-urban municipalities exceeded with 63.1 percent the nationwide average by 17.6 percent and for the first time since the beginning of 1990s, it exceeded by 5 percent the average voter turnout in the elections to the lower house of the Parliament.

Differences in voter turnout between urban and rural voters are seen even in the instance of elections to the Lower House of the Parliament. For instance, voting turnout in the district Louny in parliamentary elections in 1996 was 75.1 percent, whereas voting turnout in the two biggest towns of the district (Louny and Žatec) was only 74.6 percent and 68.9 percent

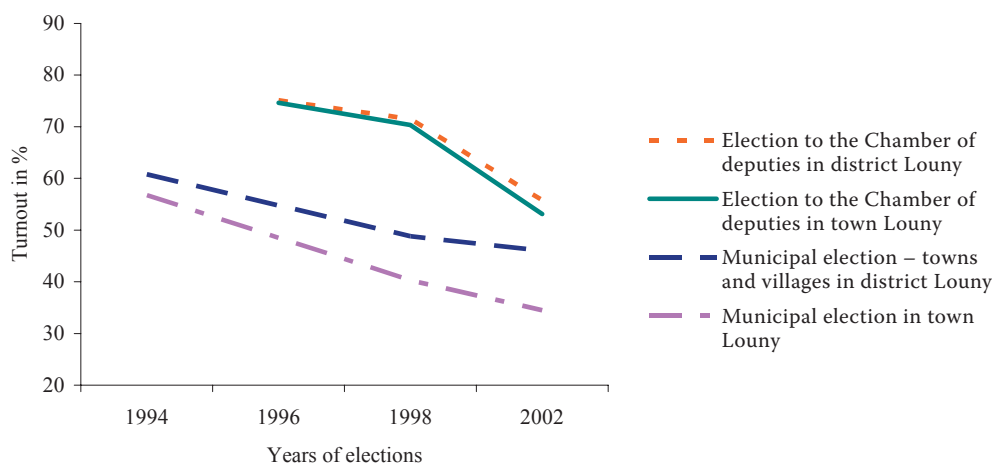


Figure 2. Voter Turnout in District Louny

Source: Czech Statistical Office, Election Server

respectively. We can detect similar differences in the other parliamentary elections (see Figure 2) and in other districts.

## POLITICAL PARTIES AND INDEPENDENTS

The voter turnout represents only one of the aspects of citizens' participation in the political process. Activities of citizens in local organizations of political parties are also very important. Nevertheless, political parties – not only in the Czech Republic – have moved from the earlier developmental stages in which they had centralised hierarchical structures with strong grounds of membership to a new stage in which “the relevant relationships (within the parties) are ... more stratarchical than hierarchical” (Katz, Mair 1994: 17). “Party in public office” is more important than “party on the ground”; local party structures are poor as is the case of municipal politics in the Czech Republic, especially in lesser towns and non-urban municipalities.

The analysis of the municipal election results shows that lesser towns and non-urban municipalities have

usually “incomplete” party spectra in comparison with the parliamentary level. The smallest municipalities that have less than 1 000 inhabitants often are without parliamentary parties and independent politicians create their political scene. As an example, we can use municipal election results in the district of Strakonice in 2002. There are 111 municipalities in the district. Only four municipalities have more than 2 000 inhabitants. In two of them – Blatná (6 644 inhabitants) and Volyně (3 194 inhabitants) – all parliamentary parties operate and moreover other local or regional political parties and associations participate in the municipal elections. In Strakonice (23 800 inhabitants – centre of the district) and Vodňany (6 581 inhabitants), one of the parliamentary parties (US-DEU – the smallest parliamentary party) did not participate in the 2002 municipal election. 107 municipalities in the district of Strakonice have less than 2 000 inhabitants. Table 2 divides these municipalities by number of parliamentary parties. Most of the 64 municipalities without parliamentary parties have less than 1 000 inhabitants (63 municipalities). On the other side, all municipalities with four parliamentary parties have more than 1 000 inhabitants.

Table 2. District Strakonice – Municipal election 2002. Parliamentary parties in non-urban municipalities

	Number of municipalities up to 2000 inhabitants
No parliamentary party in the municipality	64
1 parliamentary party in the municipality	26
2 parliamentary parties in the municipality	10
3 parliamentary parties in the municipality	4
4 parliamentary parties in the municipality	3
All 5 parliamentary parties in the municipality	0
Total	107

Source: Czech Statistical Office. Election Server <http://www.volby.cz/pls/kv2002-win/kvs?xjazyk=EN>

Table 3. Blatná 1998 – Municipal election results (%)

	Votes for election parties	Party membership of elected representatives
Czech Social Democratic Party	20.4	20.4
Civic Democratic Party	17.0	5.2
Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL)	12.3	6.1
Communists	10.0	8.0
Union of Freedom	9.4	2.4
Independents	15.6	Independents 57.7
Independents	13.6	

Source: Czech Statistical Office. Election Server <http://www.volby.cz/pls/kv1998-win/kv>



A numerous representation of independent candidates and their associations is the most characteristic feature of elections and political life on the municipal level. In the smallest municipalities, the independent candidates and their associations often represent the only form of political engagement. In bigger municipalities, independent candidates and their associations complete the party spectrum and they are often on the lists of candidates of the parliamentary political parties. A comparison between votes for election parties and party membership of the elected representatives demonstrates the role of independents in local politics. Let us look at the municipal election results of 1998 in town Blatná. Table 3 compares votes for the election parties in the municipal elections and the party membership of the elected representatives.

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ICTs

There are also other forms of political participation of citizens in the local political process, especially activities in interest groups, citizen initiatives, various forms of public opinion creation, activities of local government etc. ICTs open a new channel for the participation of citizens. In the Czech Republic, the introduction of ICTs into the public administration represents a relatively new concept. On the level of national government and parliament, a systematic effort in this field only started in 1999. Since 1999, e-government in the Czech Republic has been spreading quickly, however, unevenly. On the one hand, fast informatization of the public administration and public services is under way (Economist Intelligence Unit 2004; Czech Republic Benchmark Report 2004); on the other hand, the use of ICTs in the political participation and political process is slow, facing legislative and technological obstacles. Besides, a general underestimation can be seen of the importance of application of electronics in the democratic process. Whereas the concept of e-government comprises three basic components: e-administration, e-services and e-democracy (Prisma 2003), in practice the term e-government is commonly understood in a simplified way as electronic support of administrative acts and the broad area of political participation and democratic process stays out of focus.

The underestimation of the democratic dimension of e-government in the Czech Republic may be clearly found in the documents and materials of the ministries and other bodies that are responsible in the Czech Republic for the dissemination and use of ICTs in the public sector (Ministry of Informatics 2004).

For example, the Ministry of Informatics interprets its role as “the development of public administration information systems and e-government, i.e. electronic public administration which, using modern information and communications technologies, allows for a better co-operation among public authorities” ... “It also facilitates contacts between citizens and businesses on the one hand and the government on the other, making public administration more transparent and efficient” (Ministry of Informatics 2006). The narrow perspective of e-government, making the e-administration absolute and leaving aside the democratic process, may also be encountered in other countries, even in the countries which already made some progress in the application of ICTs in the democratic process and rank among initiators of international exchange of experience in this field, e.g. Austria (Prosser, Krimmer 2004: 21).

Underestimating of the e-government democratic dimension makes e-democracy research more difficult since there is, among other things, a more difficult access to information on this process. Whereas an overview of the degree and possibilities of ICTs use in administrative activities can be obtained quite easily from the government documents and two or three portals, information on their use in the democratic process are greatly fragmented. The research shows that the introduction of ICTs significantly enhances the access of citizens to information, not only in bigger cities but also in numerous rural communities. This is, however, namely the case of information relating directly to the activity of the given local government and to public services. If we look on the municipalities' pages for information on the competing political entities and their programmes, election campaigns, on civic associations and interest groups activities, we only find random and isolates pieces of information that cannot be used to make a picture of the local political process. There are attempts to unify this information, but these are unsuccessful for the time being. We may give the example of the Forum-net portal that aims at dealing also with municipal politics; however, its menu is empty (Forum-net 2006).

There is thus the only solution: to work and start from the national level of the political process, i.e. from political parties represented in the parliament. There are, however, significant differences between them, from the point of view of presenting their own local-level activities on their web sites. Most parties have got a very weak organisational structure on the municipal level, so often only contact addresses of local activists can be found there. Among big parties, this often concerns also the Social Democrats (CSSD 2006). The Communist Party (KSCM) has got

a wide base also on the level of municipalities, but its characteristics, e.g. members' age profile, do not really support the use of ICTs. The greatest volume of information can be found on the activities of local branches of Civic Democrats. Their web pages often link information of local nature with information provided by the metropolitan party headquarters in Prague (ODS 2006). Naturally, parties not represented in the parliament also provide information on the web, such information, though, only rarely touches upon the local level of the political process, and this often even if these parties are of more of a local or regional character. Some non-parliamentary parties have tried before the 2006 parliamentary elections to support their election campaign using web pages but they failed to fill in the content.

The use of ICTs to the communication between local authorities and citizens is booming in the Czech Republic. Citizens' discussion forums treat a wide range of urban development issues – ranging from services provided to citizens and cultural events through issues related to transport, greenery in cities and recycling to the renovation of historical monuments. The use of information and communication possibilities provided by the Internet naturally depends on the size of municipalities. Web pages of some smaller municipalities offer the citizens a discussion platform, the response, however, remains low. Though, success stories can also be found in the instance of rural municipalities. For instance, the municipality of Okrisky (2 045 citizens) shows what can be achieved through ICTs use; it was awarded The Golden Crest (the best cities and municipalities internet pages competition) in 2004 and 2006. The municipality internet pages are frequently updated and serve as a forum for dialog between citizens and the local government, as well as between citizens themselves (Municipality Okrisky 2006).

The internet web pages of regional self governing entities are registered by number of portals, which came into existence to a large extent through the initiative from below, but naturally, they cooperate with public administration on the central level. That is the case of the *ePUSA* portal of the regional self-government, which is now the joint project of the Association of Regions of the Czech Republic and the Czech Ministry of Interior, but it first came into being as a regional initiative (ePUSA 2006). One of the most important portals to the registration of municipal internet pages is that of the *Towns and Villages Online*, which has the ambition of becoming "the statewide portal of teledemocracy". Its goal is to expand the services available to users and this should improve communications between public

administration and citizens (Towns and Villages Online 2006).

Many of the web pages of small towns and non-urban municipalities are grouped around the so-called micro-regions, which are founded by groups of municipalities for the purpose of creating joint regional projects. Web pages of microregions and their member municipalities offer a quantity of information on regional development in different areas. However, many municipalities and microregions are unable to remove some of the problems with the use of information technologies on local and regional level, particularly the problems with updating information. From this point of view, there are great differences between the web pages of the individual communities, or regions.

If there are significant developments in the information and communication functions of the e-government in the Czech Republic, and this even on the local level, the transactional function of e-government, and especially of citizens' political participation, remains at present undeveloped. A conflicting situation is thus created. On the one hand, the Czech Republic ranks among central European leaders in e-government as a white paper from the Economist Intelligence Unit argues: "Estonia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic, then, get high marks in any Europe-wide comparison for e-government commitment, creativity and follow-through. It is also no accident that Estonia's citizen web portal and the Czech e-procurement platform, for example, are being studied throughout the EU for the lessons they can provide" (Economist Intelligence Unit 2004: 5). On the other hand, as concerns issues relating to the transactional function of e-government and especially of e-democracy, the Czech Republic is lagging behind many of the European countries.

The dissemination of the transactional function of e-democracy in the Czech Republic is impeded not only by technical and economic conditions but also by the factors of political and legal nature. For instance, in Austria citizens can participate in the decision-making process through the use of direct democracy tools, such as referendum, people initiative and public consultation. These tools are applicable for ICTs use. In the Czech Republic, no elements of direct democracy are applied on the national level and there is no special legislation dealing with this issue. The only exception has been the referendum on the Czech Republic joining the EU that was governed by a special law. The Parliament of the Czech Republic, notwithstanding many attempts, has not reached a consensus on a general referendum act. Referenda may only be held on local level, where the use of ICTs

is hindered by technical and economic obstacles. In contrast to other countries (e.g. Austria, Germany, Estonia but also Slovakia), there is no serious discussion in the Czech Republic on the possibilities of ICTs use when exercising the voting right.

## CONCLUSION

In the Czech Republic, the voter turnout has been showing a downward trend from the beginning of 1990s, be it parliamentary elections or elections to local authorities. Voter turnout is influenced by the size of the given municipality. Small municipalities that do not have the status of the town achieve, when compared with the national average, a higher voter turnout in municipal elections and its decrease is also much lower. Differences in voter turnout between urban and rural voters are seen even in the instance of elections to the Lower House of the Parliament.

The voter turnout represents only one of the aspects of citizens' participation in the political process. Activities of citizens in local organizations of political parties are also very important. The analysis of the municipal election results shows that lesser towns and non-urban municipalities have usually "incomplete" party spectra in comparison with the parliamentary level. The smallest municipalities that have less than 1,000 inhabitants often are without parliamentary parties and independent politicians create their political scene. A numerous representation of independent candidates and their associations is the most characteristic feature of elections and political life on a municipal level, especially in the smallest municipalities. In bigger municipalities, independent candidates and their associations complete the party spectrum and they are often on the lists of candidates of the parliamentary political parties. In the biggest towns, independents lose their function.

ICTs incorporate further information and communication channels into the political process; facilitate citizens' access to information and institutions. Analyses have not yet shown any direct connection between the level of the use of ICTs and the participation of citizens in elections or in other traditional forms of their political participation. The importance of modern technology here lies mainly in the fact that it opens up new possibilities which will supplement the traditional forms of citizens' political participation. New technologies widen the space for the so-called participatory democracy that may greatly complement and strengthen the traditional representative democracy.

Factors influencing the participation namely include the trust in the purposefulness of local activities and citizens associating, as well as the trust in local political institutions. From this point of view, ICTs are very important, as Coleman argues: "An increase in public information and deliberation will produce a much stronger and more frequently renewable mandate from people to their chosen representatives" (Coleman 2001: 123). Web pages of municipalities and local bodies may reflect the trust of citizens in the participation purposefulness and in local bodies very clearly. The research of municipalities and local participants' web pages also enables to determine the creation of horizontal networks of participants that are of utmost importance for the development of the civic society and for the stability of democratic political culture.

ICTs use in the democratic process is certainly more complicated than building of the other e-government pillars. The essential difference between the informatization of public administration on the one hand and of the democratic process on the other is that the informatization of public administration relies on a network of self-governing entities and becomes a part of their activities. The informatization of the democratic process on the other hand represents a process fragmented into a great number of individual activities. In this respect, the development in the Czech Republic is a characteristic case. The informatization of public administration in the Czech Republic may be perceived as a very successful process that is coming from the stage of information and communication to the transactional phase. What is important is the fact that the informatization of public administration is not a privilege of big cities; it also asserts itself in small municipalities. However, e-democracy in the Czech Republic remains overshadowed by this process.

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