

Smart citizens for Smart cities: the role of social media for expanding local democracy (The case of local referendums in Bulgaria)

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to analyze the role of social media to boost democratic citizenship and contribute to the creation of smart environment through the perspective of direct democracy in Bulgaria. The issue of “smart cities” will be tackled from a broader media and communication perspective. The term “smart city” does not denote the symbiosis between urban development and new information technologies only but it signifies a new vibrant social ecology rooted in the thorough use of the Internet for wider democratic participation. As a theoretical basis of my survey I shall use Dewey’s model of the inherent bond between communication and enlightened citizenry and Robert Putnam’s theory about the social capital facilitated by social networks generating trust and solidarity among community members. As a case study I shall dwell on local democracy and particularly on two recent referendums in Bulgaria (2017) - in the cities of Tran and Stara Zagora, their basic premises, claims, organization, social media use, outcomes and impact. Though not mandatory for the governing bodies the referendums’ results demonstrated the level of social activity in the country underpinned by networks. Democracy should be understood best through the Abraham Lincoln’s centuries-cherished metaphor as “government of the people, by the people, for the people”. In the current research I build on a previous investigation done in 2013 on civic journalism, blogs and protests in Bulgaria and on my contribution to the book “Smart journalism” (Zankova, Skolkay, Franklin (2016), presenting findings from the New Media Literacy Project 2012 - 2014. This interdisciplinary paper will be useful for both academics and practitioners and specifically for media specialists who will get knowledge about the state of direct democracy in a new democratic country in SEE, new media non/ contribution to this state and what the necessary conditions are to make this democracy really workable at a community level to turn the cities into future-oriented democratic centres.

Keywords: social media, local community, democratic citizenship, participation, democracy.

1. Introduction

The world we are immersed in today develops within a completely new paradigm. The Internet has become an essential tool for human life, everyday activities and social objectives. Participation in public affairs through platforms is a vigorously pursued goal.

The optimistic view on the role of the new information and communication technologies claims their use contributes to the building of a more advanced environment serving people’s interests and needs. As announced by international organizations the Internet “constitutes a new pervasive social and public space” which should be based on “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law” and possesses a significant public service value. (Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec (2007)16) Our societies rapidly move towards ubiquitous information societies and the Internet underpins the creation of “knowledge based societies” that help human intelligence become a genuine creative force (Towards knowledge societies, UNESCO, 2005).

On the other hand, skeptical voices warning about the risks of the new information and communications services can also be heard. In the media field Jakubowicz dwelling on Brown (1994) and Firestone (1994) calls them “the paradoxes of the new media” (Jakubowicz, 2011: 411).

No doubt the new technology is capable to bring forth interactivity and participation that invigorate democracy (Fenton, 2012: 561 in Dobek-Ostrowska & Garlicki, 2013: 15) but phenomena like lack of accountability and anonymity of messages, fast communication resulting in inaccurate news circulation and generally the poorer quality of journalism can “lead democracy towards depression”. However, the anticipation that the digital age is broadening the opportunities for direct democratic involvement, diversity and creation and is transforming the globe into a smarter and more human friendly environment prevails. Online communication “triggers completely new structures of political exchange and may indeed fulfill hopes for more inclusive, democratic public discourse”, Pfetsch and Adam conclude (Pfetsch & Adam, 2013: 39).

Though the signals about censorship on social media are not an isolated phenomenon, due to their mobilization and communication functions they has become an unalienable component of the contemporary dialogue between various groups and between citizens and public authorities. Such exchange is a necessary prerequisite for the creation of a smart and socially sensitive environment which can serve best the cravings of persons and communities particularly at the local level which is vital for the everyday life of people.

The purpose of this article is to tackle the issue of citizens’ involvement in democratic initiatives through the prism of the role social media play today as facilitators of the democratic processes. The central question in the discussion is whether and how social media foster local democracy, more particularly how and whether they assist local referendums. With regard to this as a case study I have chosen to analyze two referendums that have been carried out in Bulgaria in 2017 in the cities of Tran and Stara Zagora and have captured the general public attention through both social networks and traditional media. The referendums’ results demonstrated the level of social activity in two provincial cities channeled and supported by a Facebook exchange among citizens. They can serve as an example of the social media impact in smaller urban communities. Before dwelling on the various aspects of social media, their proliferation and democratic role I would proceed with the analysis of some terms with respect to the better understanding of the context of the topic.

2. Smart environment and smart democracy

According to the Oxford Dictionary “smart” informally means “having or showing a quick-witted intelligence”, clever, bright, intelligent, sharp. For the purpose of this study I shall prefer the wider in connotations synonym “intelligent”. The word “*smart*” has acquired not only large popularity but a special symbolic sense nowadays. Any advanced technologically element enriches the “smartness” of life today - from the Internet of things like smart TV, smart phones, smart watches, smart cars to the more general conditions of our existence like smart cities and smart governments. The “*smart environment*” concept can be considered the most comprehensive and multifaceted of all

the terms characterizing the new setting people live in - a setting that should be supportive to and extend human intelligence. Apparently a smart environment represents a complex milieu, a result of “*smart development*” blending human and technological components. The Internet Society for instance, has defined the three foundational pillars on which the Internet’s power as an open platform for economic and human development can only truly be unleashed: human infrastructure, in the form of people educated and empowered by technology; technical infrastructure; governance infrastructure, a “range of simple, but meaningful parameters designed to spur investment, deployment and public engagement”.

“Smart Development is as much about developing and cultivating the resources already at hand as it is about creating new ones,” is the conclusion made by the Internet Society.

From a political perspective, our cherished desire is to experience “*smart democracy*”. Sevinc claims that this is what we need today - a “smart democracy” 21st c. institutional model. “Democracy is not only about elections every 2-3 years it is about people, their lives and about values. Our current political system is too much focused on ballot-boxes”, this is how she describes the political system we need (Sevinc, 2016).

Another widespread term is the “*smart cities*” term. The concept is subject to numerous interpretations. Some of them stress the developmental aspect, others – the futuristic one. The most general explanation of the term “smart city” refers to the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance quality, performance and interactivity of urban services, to reduce costs and resource consumption and to improve contact between citizens and government. This can be considered a basic but too narrow definition which does not fully capture the human components’ presence in urban life.

The UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) views smart cities as “a process rather than a static outcome, in which increased citizen engagement, hard infrastructure, social capital and digital technologies make cities more liveable, resilient and better able to respond to challenges.” On its part the British Standards Institute (BSI) defines the term as “the effective integration of physical, digital and human systems in the built environment to deliver sustainable, prosperous and inclusive future for its citizens”. On a European scale the understanding of smart cities relates to the notion of *smart communities* and a combination of economic factors for their accomplishment are emphasized. The European Commission Communication titled “Smart cities and communities - European innovation partnership”, for instance, renders the issues in concrete economic terms and underlines the cross-sectoral nature of such project, transcending the areas of “energy, transport and information and communication with the objective to catalyse progress in areas where energy production, distribution and use; mobility and transport; and information and communication technologies (ICT) are intimately linked and offer new interdisciplinary opportunities to improve services while reducing energy and resource consumption and greenhouse gas (GHG) and other polluting emissions“. Speaking about the environment we cannot distance ourselves from the role of communication and media in its establishment and operation. The media are a vital force for shaping a smart and enabling citizens setting either as channels for the

promotion of such policies or for driving the debate between different stakeholders. Nowadays the media should also be smart and rely on “*smart journalism*” which represents journalism bearing the light of dedicated, accountable and future oriented journalistic activity that inspires participation and innovation (Zankova, Skolkay, Franklin, 2016).

The technological advent is a major force for changes nowadays but we have to have a clear vision how these opportunities can be deployed in the most effective manner by communities and persons. In his book on smart cities, big data and civic hackers Townsend argues that the “powerful operating systems of our handheld devices - our iPhones, for example - will revolutionize citizen-driven urban development and networking.”(Townsend, 2013). However, do the devices that are invented so quickly have a sufficient force to turn the changes they bring into a sustainable practice? Regarding this we have to think about the social prerequisites that have to be available in order for the technology may come to fruition and serve people. More precisely the problem is not only about the technological advancement as such but about the social conditions that have to be in place in order for technology can be utilized best to the benefit of society making it really “smart”. As Mattern claims in her comprehensive article on city optimization “a city is not a computer” and “urban intelligence is more than information processing”(Mattern, 2017). Referring to Mumford’s ideas (Mumford, 1961) she concurs in the conclusion that “the city is a fundamentally communicative form”, “an assemblage of media forms”.(Ibid.)

In the digital age communication among persons and communities comprises the most important glue for the creation of the cherished enabling environment and technology can foster this process. Via the new media channels communication can become widespread, fast and timely and can facilitate the struggle for various social causes. Social media possess enormous potential for the entrenchment of a novel vibrant social ecology of interaction and participation that can turn cities and regions into living democratic units. In the next section I shall make a brief overview of the social theories that explain the necessary conditions for strengthening the social bonds and educating keen and active citizens.

3. Social theories: active citizenry and social capital

Human capital is the real force for building smart societies and smart cities environment is nurtured by open and dynamic citizens. Such citizens are educated with the support of the media, too. We can call these citizens and the relations they establish an associated community, social capital or simply civil society. I would present some of the ideas of two philosophers that can guide research and policy towards the upbringing of robust and engaged citizenry capable of tackling problems at any level.

3.1 John Dewey and the role of the public

Many commentators on democracy and especially on American democracy consider Dewey as an outstanding spokesperson of deliberative democracy. The basic premise is that Dewey considers democracy as emerging in an attempt to block arbitrarily exercised political power and connects the idea of representative government to deliberation among

citizenry. Within this general context the central place of the public is of crucial importance.

According to Dewey the public is a fundamental category and it is a precondition for the establishment of the state and the government. The public for him does not appear by chance. It comes into being as a result of “the lasting, extensive and serious consequences of associated activity.” In itself it is unorganized and formless but it serves as a basis for the formation of the state. As Dewey explains by means of appointing officials and their special powers the public becomes a state. “A public articulated and operating through representative officers is the state. There is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public.”(Dewey, 2016:1572 - 79)

In a society a plurality of social groupings exist. The state is a distinctive and secondary form of association possessing special functions and specified organs of operation. When devising the government actually an indirect link is set between the public and the state. This requires scrutiny on the part of the public. “Only through constant watchfulness and criticism of public officials by citizens can a state be maintained in integrity and usefulness” is Dewey’s opinion. (Ibid: 1587 - 94) Admitting that democracy is a word of many connotations, a complex affair in itself, Dewey focuses on one meaning which is distinctly political because it “denotes a mode of government, a specified practice in selecting officials and regulating their conduct as officials”. At the same time democracy is a high ethical and social ideal.

In his book on the public and its role Dewey emphasizes particularly the role and contribution of associated behavior. This does not mean that the fact of association makes a society. It demands a perception of the consequences of a common activity and such perception creates a common interest. Common activity is a creative force, it can generate new social forms and organizations and by and large can push forward social life. According to Dewey “associated behavior directed toward objects which fulfill wants not only produces those objects, but brings customs and institutions into being”.(Ibid, 2009 - 16) However, Dewey also observes that “the new era of human relationships” has no political agencies worthy of it. “The democratic public is still largely inchoate and unorganized” he concludes. (Ibid, 2044 - 53)

Under these circumstances the essential necessity of society is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion. This is the problem of the public. The improvement depends predominantly on freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and of dissemination of their conclusions. Dewey vigorously defends the communal dimension of democracy. “In modern times community and community activities are becoming words to conjure with”, he insists. “The local is the ultimate universal, and as near and absolute as exists,” reads Dewey’s conclusion (Ibid, 3187 – 3193) Civic participation aspires to pervade all of society. Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find its identity. The problem of “securing diffused and seminal intelligence can be solved only in the degree in which local communal life becomes a reality”.

Dewey believes that the public in itself comprises the fundamental space that enables the democratic state to see widely and feel deeply in order to make an informed judgment. For him “unless restoring a sense of communal life we cannot move from impersonal Great Society to the personal and meaningful Great Community” and it is the ultimate aim members of society should pursue.

3.2 Robert Putnam and social capital

Robert Putnam also came to the conclusion that the sense of community and civic participation occupies a central place on the path to democracy. In his seminal work “Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy” (written with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti) on the basis of a profound study of the relationships in Northern and Central Italy he claims that social capital is key to high institutional performance and democratic development. For Putnam community connectedness is the foundation of social capital which “makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy.” Among the conditions that are essential for the rise of social capital is the good communication among the members of communities and groups. Taking into account the importance of the social fabric he predicts that “social capital may turn out to be a prerequisite for, rather than a consequence of, effective computer-mediated communication.”

Though there is no universal definition of social capital, there appears to be a general agreement on the importance of networks, trust, reciprocity and other social norms to social capital. Nowadays the media and the Internet in particular play an integrative role to the creation of vibrant networks and communities (evidence shows a positive association between social capital and the Internet).

The measurement of social capital can potentially provide valuable insights how the networks and links can be utilised to contribute to positive outcomes for the individual and the community alike. In this way the measurement of social capital may foster our perception of how individuals in a community can work cooperatively to achieve shared goals and to deal with difficulties. Putnam (2000) observed strong correlations between social capital and education, child welfare, lower crime, neighbourhood vitality, health, happiness and democratic government. All these are elements of a smart and healthy living environment. OECD publications, for instance, draw attention to the correlation between social capital and wellbeing from the perspective of policy frameworks and particularly stress the importance public policy bears to complement and strengthen social and civic participation (OECD, 2001, 2002).

The social capital theory provides clues for intensifying social bonds at a grass root level, for boosting civil society and encouraging citizens' involvement in decision-making. Though it attracts serious criticism the ideas it brings forth if realized can counteract passive and unresponsive governance or high corruption. Social capital can make democracy really effective if it works together with other factors (democratic culture). In their influential article entitled "Social Capital, Ethnicity and Support for Democracy in the Post-Communist States" Dowley and Silver analyze data about post-communist states in transition and make the conclusion that higher levels of social capital did not equate to

higher levels of democracy. There is a “weak overall relation between indicators of social capital and democratization” in these countries. (Dowley&Silver, 2002: 21). At the level of individual data the authors found some “evidence of a positive correlation between social capital and attitudes supportive of democracy” (Ibid.)

Dowley and Silver explain the phenomena with the characteristics of plural societies and rapid political changes. Besides models from established democracies is hard to transpose to the new democratic states. In the same vein other authors capitalize on the quality of democracy in the central and eastern European countries undergoing transformations. They point to the “deficit of some democratic ideas, the underdevelopment of civil society and the deficiencies in the public sphere” when analyzing the persisting pitfalls (Dobek-Ostrowska&Glowacki, 2008: 12) The shortcomings of the young democratic systems lay a bearing on their overall characteristic as immature democracies and consequently on their media as not fully free and independent. In this respect civil initiatives at least at a local level prove to be sporadic and not very successful. In the next section I shall discuss the role of the media for democratic advancement and the contribution of social media for democratic deliberation and participation.

4. Social media as a factor for boosting civil participation

4.1 Social media and participatory democracy - pros and cons

The media in a democratic society performs a range of essential functions of which the participatory function merits special focus. As Jakubowicz argues it pertains to the involvement of citizens in the media affairs as well as in social networking and public life. (Jakubowicz, 2013: 19) Theoretically networks like Facebook and Twitter can enhance democracy horizontally, helping everyone to get involved with the feeling that their input matters. They make possible the opinion of people on issues of public concern to be expressed on a daily basis, too. Further to this Jakubowicz also underlines that direct democracy in modern societies is not feasible unless the Internet, referendums and plebiscites are put in practice (Jakubowicz, 2013: 26). The bottom up media approach here is of special significance as it opens the public space for neglected and suppressed local voices which can raise alternative views opposing political elites.

Academic research so far consistently shows that people who consume more news media have a greater probability of being engaged in civil society actions and politics. In an era when platforms attract public’s time and attention, scholars are searching for methods of evaluation of the expanding relationship between social media use and public engagement. Wihbey (2015) informs about a 2015 metastudy “Social Media Use and Participation: A Meta-analysis of Current Research.” published in the journal *Information, Communication & Society*, analyzing 36 studies on the relationship between social networking sites use and everything pertaining to civic engagement. Among all of the factors examined, 82% showed a positive relationship between the sites’ use and some form of civic or political participation.

In a less optimistic tone, Unwin emphasises several key points based on the understanding that historically “technologies have usually been shaped and used by those in power to maintain their positions of power”(Unwin, 2012: 5). Referring to the

ICTD2012 conference in Atlanta (USA), he maps four broad sets of globally significant issues raised there which need adequate policy responses: the need for digital access in order for social media to contribute to democracy - broadband for all is essential in this regard; there are many different variations of democracy, and it is important that our technologies are used to support systems that do indeed serve the interests of all people; ICTs can definitely be used against democracy and the whole system of the Internet ownership and management should become more democratic; there is a strong need to develop and implement effective policies about privacy and security online (Ibid: 6).

These discrepant positions among experts have resulted in the formation of the movement for studying alternative social media which has gained momentum in recent years. This trend attempts at responding to the problems generated by the dominant sites - Facebook, Google, and Twitter - which have retained or even intensified some of the problems of mass media power and anti-democratic communication (Gehl, 2015). All these developments signal an era of a sober and rational attitude and generally a rising critical outlook on social media. However, in order to be sure how efficient social media are for the entrenchment of democracy we have to turn briefly to national practices. With respect to the topic in this article we shall examine some practical solutions applied in the new and less experienced democratic countries.

4.2 Social media and citizens' activity in the young democratic countries

Social media are particularly important for consolidating the democratic processes in the young democratic countries as they can bring together various social groups and generations and allow deliberation among them on issues of common concern. "Democracy as a form of governance stretches beyond campaign, voting and other electoral practices as its basic components. It also involves interaction among participants in a democratic setup" Olokesusi and Aiyegbajeje state discussing the case of the smart city Lagos (Olokesusi, Aiyegbajeje, 2017). We agree with this conclusion and add: there should be political and legal guarantees at a central and local level for constant democratic interaction.

However, the picture is mixed and the situation is not encouraging every time and everywhere. Either access is not widely guaranteed, or people lack skills and facilities. Sometimes data and research of the relations between social media and democracy are insufficient and require more consistent exploration efforts to reach conclusive results. Reports that accuse governments of imposing censorship on social media are not infrequent (Hadjigenov, 2017). Civil society activists and journalists also complain of "experiments" done by the social media themselves which hamper their audiences to read regularly their publications (Dojcinovic, 2017).

In the African new democratic states, for instance, the expansion of social media is unevenly distributed. The general Internet penetration in Africa for 2017 is below the average of the world (31.2%), inner discrepancies and digital divides exist but the telecommunications market is at the same time one of the fastest growing globally. Olokesusi and Aiyegbajeje report that during the 2011 and 2015 general elections in Lagos the social media was largely deployed with more than 134 million users of mobile

phones and about 70 million on the internet, according to the statistics of the Nigerian Communication Commission. The authors pinpoint the widely shared opinion that the new media channels were attractive to young generations with their flexibility, accessibility and affordability.(Olokesusi, Aiyegbajeje, 2017). Chari however, makes a different, less optimistic conclusion concerning the potential of online news media to create an alternative public sphere in Zimbabwe. “This democratic mandate is contingent upon levels of access, content and consumption practices” is his position. ((Chari, 2013: 75). Besides Chari recommends future studies to focus on the interaction between “readers of online publications and fellow citizens” (Ibid.).

If we turn to the new democratic states in Europe the landscape of social media and their effects in post-communist countries is unclear and a recently published book by Surowiec and Stetka (2017) only shed light on the controversial relation between democracy and social media use in political processes there. The cases cited highlight both the mobilisation potential of social media in politics as well as the danger of their occupation by powerful political players.

These examples show that other conditions should be at place in order for social media networks to rise as a genuine factor for democratic reforms (despite the technical conditions there should be awareness of the role of technology for enhancing democracy, civil tradition of participation and active engagement will on the part of the public).

4.3 Social media and participation in Bulgaria

As everywhere around the globe social media comprise a very popular type of media in Bulgaria providing immediate interactive communication. Under the DESI ranking for 2016 Bulgaria takes the 27th place among the EU member states concerning the development of the new information and communication technologies and their use. A progress has been made in expanding the broadband infrastructure in the country.

Adequate computer and Internet skills, however, are of key importance for making smart use of the net and for accessing the new services and platforms. Compared to the previous years the Bulgarian public has also made a progress towards better digital skills and culture - 58 % of the people regularly use the Internet (55% before) but only 26 % of the citizens possess basic digital technology skills. The most active net users are the young people (16 - 24 years of age) and 87,2% from them use the Internet every day or at least once a week. 86,6 % of the people with high education and 95, 3 % from them being students are the most active and regular users of the world wide web. All these figures make possible the profile of the social media user in Bulgaria to be properly structured – young with or aspiring to high education. It seems that the profile does not change very rapidly and current profile is similar to the one quoted by Valkov based on the publications of the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria for 2012 (Valkov, 2013). However, technical details are not sufficient to provide knowledge about the broader social aspects of the Internet use because research on the quality of civil participation and its contribution to democracy is by and large missing.

In his article Valkov puts forward interesting insights regarding the types of mobilization via social networks in Bulgaria. For him “civil mobilization in and through social networks is a form of spontaneous self-organization, emotional expression motivated to pursue a specific goal”.(Ibid.) Social networks comprise the platform on which NGO’s and social movements’ agendas develop and become part of the public agenda. Since 2009 various social causes have become vigorously defended through the social media and the ecological themes occupy a prominent place among them (Natura 2000, Irakli 2007, Vitosha 2012, Dunes 2013). The local referendums in Tran and Stara Zagora also fall within this well embedded trend of public protests treating ecological issues. The role of social media in carrying out these referendums should be to provide an even level playground for a comprehensive stakeholders’ dialogue to prepare and the mobilize citizens for voting. It is worth also asking the question whether this role was positive or negative for society and for the democracy in the country. I will proceed with a more in-depth analysis of these issues in the following section.

5. The referendums in the cities of Tran and Stara Zagora and the role of social media

As an instrument for the expression of civil positions direct democracy and referendums in particular operate within the system of representative democracy and the two forms interact among themselves to pursue the accomplishment of “smart democracy” (to the best possible degree). Direct democratic initiatives are essential for educating open minded citizens and for enriching the democratic public sphere. Local referendums especially can strengthen local community life as Dewey and Puttnam dream of. However, these tools of shaping local policies and giving visibility to local voices have been forgotten for many years in Britain, for instance. Since 2011 they have become more popular and more widely used as a democratic weapon. Still their role is not considered crucial for the improvement of local life because there are other, quicker ways of making community feelings known. A member of the civil organization “Friends of the Earth” comments on this: “The benefits of a referendum, as things stand, are publicity and showing the strength of opinion. But activists tend to get on with that anyway through all the other means we have these days.”(Wainwright, 2011). In contrast in young democracies and more specifically in Bulgaria there are not many civic options available and a civil society tradition is not very well developed. That is why despite their shortcomings, local referendums are perceived as an opportunity for the correction of the deficits of the overall democratic process and for the creation of participatory and decision-making culture among citizens.(Andreeva, 2017)

The referendums in the two provincial Bulgarian cities which I chose for my case study were in the spotlight in 2017. The debate about the democratic philosophy of referendums and the necessity of these two referendums was held predominantly through the online media. As Andreeva reports national media due to their public function can always provide information (though not necessarily extensive) connected to local referendums to make their causes known among the audience. As for commercial media they have to take a special interest in the topic and this depends very much on the initiators that should present the issue not only as socially relevant but also as topical and attractive.

The referendums described here were initiated by the local authorities under the Act on the Direct Participation of Citizens in State authority and Local Self-Governance (SG, N 44/2009, am. until 2015). Under art.26 para 1 a local referendum can be carried out in municipality, neighbourhood or local authority with the purpose of solving local problems placed within the scope of the local self-governance bodies or the bodies in the neighbourhood or the local authority. Municipal councilors, mayors or citizens' committees can make proposals for the conducting of local referendums (art. 27). However, the last option does not create the guarantees needed for a full-fledged civic participation.

The referendums at all levels (especially local ones) which have gained momentum in Bulgaria raise problems related to the urban and economic development of towns and settlements. From a broader perspective they provoke also thoughts about the civic value of such direct democratic initiatives. These referendums invigorate the debate about the genuine role of the referendum as an instrument for the direct expression of the will of people in a parliamentary democracy. Some experts think of referendums as of a populist tool which can be easily applied to abuse the supreme power of the National Assembly and to mislead public opinion under the disguise of popular interests. According to them the law in force may generate risks not only for the violation of the principles of the representative democratic rule but also for social integration putting various social groups in opposition to one another. (Suhorukov, 2016). Other specialists discuss local referendums within the framework of the possible manipulations in a democracy and consider them clever PR campaigns triggered by local authorities helping them to make hard and unpopular decisions.(Andreeva, 2017). In such context Bulgarian civil society should put more efforts in improving the regulatory framework and the implementation of these instruments for the expression of the direct will of people.

The central issue of the referendum in Tran was related to the opening of a golden mine in the vicinity of the city and generally to the opening of mines for the extraction of minerals. Though Tran is one of the poorest cities in Bulgaria 93% of the voters were against the opening of mines in the city region. The referendum was successful and legally valid (60% of those entitled to vote took part in it).

Most of the citizens of Tran expressed their wish to protect their city and the region as "green" and to encourage the development of tourism instead of mining via networks. The elder population of the city still keep the gloomy memories from the communist past when uranium mining operations were carried in this region. After the democratic changes the government closed down the uranium mines but such projects from the totalitarian time were skillfully exploited by the opponents to the new investment plans. Interested parties including local authorities did not seek a win-win solution through dialogue but pressed for a referendum preceded by a black campaign against the investors presented as capitalist hawks and ruthless exploiters. Local green activists were extremely aggressive on Facebook and did not allow any opposing opinion, arguments or discussion to thrive. Even profiles of users expressing more moderate and consensual positions were blocked out. The discussion about this was moved to other sites and online media. The campaign defending the referendum was emotionally hued counting on local patriotism

and nostalgia for the pristine Tran nature. Supporters of local tourism shared personal stories, pictures, judgments praising the beauty of Tran and its surroundings. At the same time none of these groups furnished rational arguments for the growth and prosperity of the city based on well-thought ideas for modern economic development. Mining concessions were defined as “the final blow for Bulgaria” and an emotional video on Facebook linked investing in mining with the sensitive issues of corruption and political blackmailing in the country.

The Stara Zagora referendum also treats an ecological problem of the city. The bone of contention was the preservation (or removal) of Bedechka Park. Many of the grounds in Bedechka were restituted after the democratic changes and the City's Master Plan envisaged construction in this area. For the fate of Bedechka in the summer of 2017 a local referendum was held upon the initiative of the municipality that failed to collect the voter turnout (the overall turnout of the referendum was 15.42% and under the law it could not be considered mandatory for the public bodies). However, the majority voted in favor of preserving the park and the mayor promised to comply with their will (85% of the active citizens voted in favour, 14 % against and 1% non-valid ballots). The issue was discussed at a governmental level and Prime Minister Borisov made a "plan" for the salvation of the green territory but later it became clear that still a part of it would be assigned to construction.

The social media communication environment in this case is not identical to the one created during the Tran campaign and the cause is also somehow different focusing on the sensitive issue of green zones and parks in Bulgaria. In the Facebook discussion, however, green activists were also attempting at belittling even blocking any opposing idea or choice. Green activists feel like saviors of the town and posts like “Preserve Bedecka” or “Occupy Bedechka” sound like immediate civil actions appeals. On the other hand, other groups supporting the rights of the landowners present videos against “the green Octopus” or “the Green Mafia” in the country and exploit people’s sentiments in favour of green, clean and healthy cities to their own benefit factually undermining the power of the green cities’ idea. The overall debate is blurred and the latter totally lacks logical economic rationale relying predominantly on personal preferences and emotions. As a consequence the democratic contribution of the discussion is uncertain.

One can agree with Valkov (Valkov, 2013) that social networks comprise platforms for spontaneous self-organization, for the expression of likes and dislikes of various social groups. In the cases of local referendums social media should be an arena for intense exchange of information and opinions. A very important point is that it should be a pluralist discussion allowing a variety of viewpoints to be heard. The discussion however, proves in practice to be limited in participants, themes and arguments and rational positions are missing while emotional attitudes prevail. Debate is not profound and can be manipulative. The impact of this type of participation is neither strong, nor enduring, it responds to the needs of the day without long term repercussions in the political or social sphere. As Dimova and Zankova observe in their article about the blogs and protests in Bulgaria the role of people’s participation online is to pose issues for debate but radical changes cannot be expected through such involvement at least at the current stage.

(Dimova, Zankova, 2013). Notwithstanding these drawbacks social media represent a public space for democratic education and for the creation of participatory culture in Bulgaria, factors which can positively influence any local initiative, though sensible outcomes come slowly.

8. Conclusion. Is a smart environment feasible?

Smart environment is a cherished ideal for every person nowadays. It is about such conditions that allow a meaningful and fully valued existence. Approaches to its creation are various but the central factor is the people and their energy to make their life better. Bottom-up and technocratic initiatives are complimentary tactics in this complex process aiming at creating a sustainable world that improves the quality of life for all beings. Smart environment can only be accomplished by smart citizens who care about their neighbourhoods, regions and countries and pursue innovative solutions combining human efforts with technology. The path towards smart environment is not easy and requires democratic experience and commitment on the part of different stakeholders. Direct democratic initiatives are essential in this respect. For their success discussion at all levels is crucial as it underpins both civil engagement and governmental action. Without proper communication driven by responsible and smart media it is impossible to generate sufficient social capital capable of facing modern challenges and turning faceless communities into “Great ones”.

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