

Local Politicians On-line – A Five-Country Comparison

On-line communication plays an increasing role in the life of politicians whose job is to make informed decisions under uncertain conditions. This paper sets out to assess the extent to which local councilors use e-mail and Internet in five future members (Estonia, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria) of the European Union. It examines two questions: the level of e-mail and Internet use, and the factors that may affect this level.

The following analysis is built upon data collected under the Indicators of Local Democratic Governance Project, which is conducted by the Tocqueville Research Center (www.t-rc.org) in cooperation with the Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative (www.lgi.osi.hu). Under the project, a mail survey of local councilors and mayors was carried out in Estonia, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria in 2002-2003. (For more information, visit the Center's website.) Two questions are analyzed here:

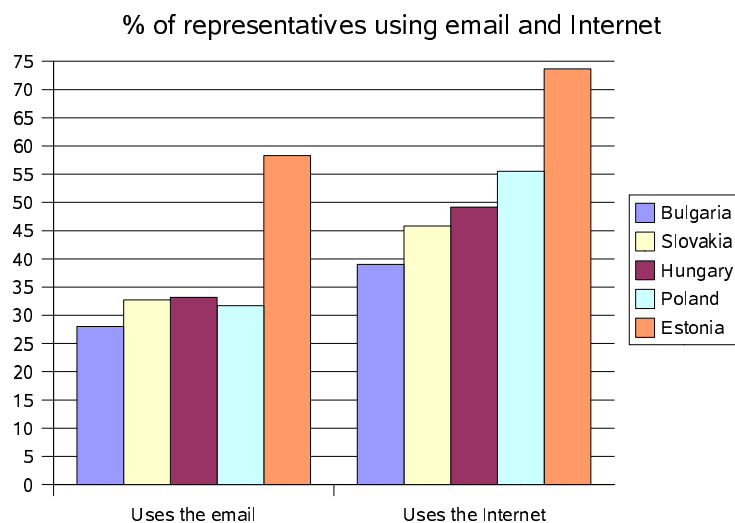
[e-mail] “Do you regularly use e-mail?” Yes/No

[INTERNET] “Do you use the Internet for getting news and information?” Yes/No

Going On-line

Many local politicians in Central and Eastern Europe already recognize the importance of high quality, up-to-date political information, which can be gained by using e-mail and by accessing the Internet.

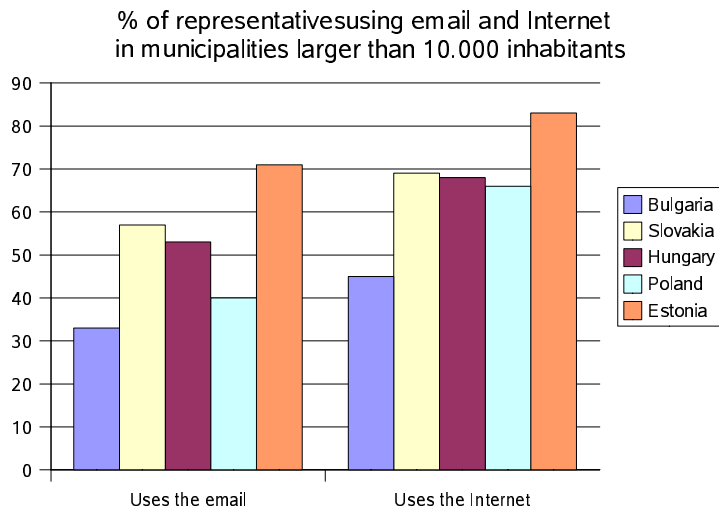
Graph 1. The Proportion of local representatives using e-mail and Internet



On the whole, in each country more representatives use the Internet than e-mail.

The ranking of countries corresponds with common expectations. Estonia, a country close in proximity to the extensively wired Northern countries, leads the five surveyed countries in the use of the new technologies: three in four local elected representatives use the Internet and almost sixty percent send and receive e-mail regularly. Bulgaria, representing South-Eastern Europe, is the least developed. Nevertheless, Bulgaria's technological lag is not as large as general economic indicators would suggest. This may be due to the fact that the number of municipalities in Bulgaria is relatively low, resources are more concentrated, and consequently, politicians are more professional and better equipped. Central European (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) countries are on more or less the same middle level. Every second local representative obtains information from the Internet, and one of every three uses e-mail.

Graph 2. E-mail and Internet use in large municipalities (more than 10.000 inhabitants)



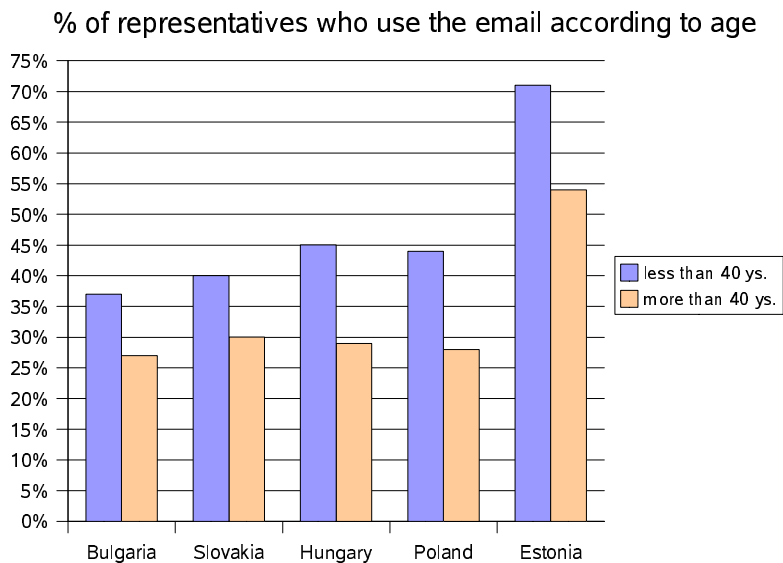
In countries like Slovakia and Hungary, where the average size of local government is small, i.e. where there are many small local governments, the picture can be deceptive in comparative terms. The differences in the level of fragmentation of local government systems can be eliminated by separately analyzing urban and rural governments. When one looks at size, a more homogeneous picture of Central Europe emerges. In local governments of 10,000 or less inhabitants, two out of five representatives use the Internet and one of every five uses e-mail. In larger municipalities, approximately half of them use e-mail and two-thirds the Internet. Poland lags somewhat behind in terms of e-mail usage. In both size categories, significantly less Bulgarian representatives and significantly more Estonian representatives use the new web-based technologies.

Who Goes On-line?

There are several demographical and social characteristics that explain the use of e-mail and the Internet. The most important factors are age, education, professionalism, and municipality size.

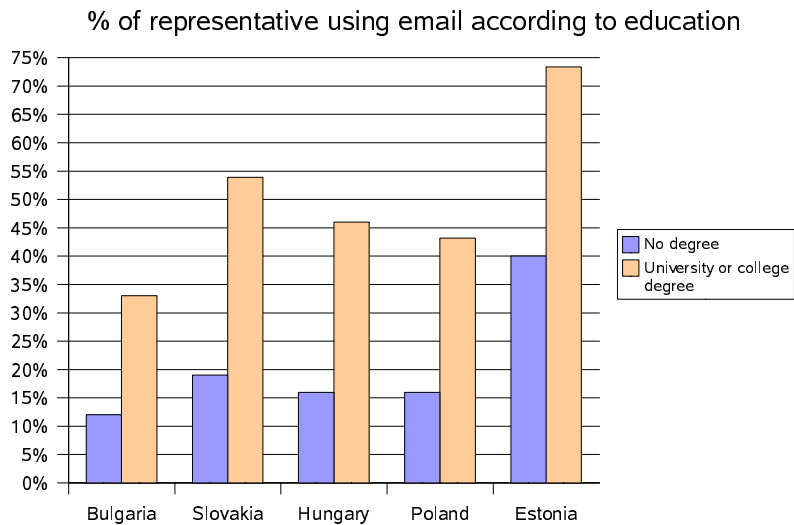
There appears to be a generation gap regarding the frequency of Internet use among mayors and councilors. In every country, older respondents reported using the new technological utilities much less than their younger colleagues. Older representatives are probably more conservative and less open for new technological developments.

Graph 3. E-mail use by Age



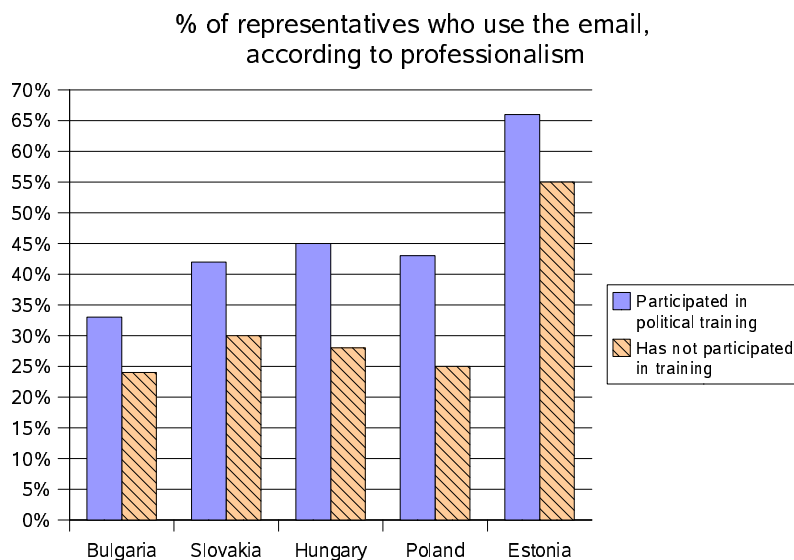
The educational gap, also well-known from citizen surveys, exists in all the surveyed countries. Less human capital leads to less knowledge about new technologies. Local representatives with college or university degrees are invariably more computer and Internet literate than those who are less educated. The effect of education on email and Internet usage decreases as the Internet becomes more widely available across the population--equality is linked to the general penetration of the Internet. The educational gap is particularly wide in Bulgaria, while it is less observable in Estonia.

Graph 4. E-mail use by education



Mayors, full-time politicians, use e-mail and the Internet more frequently than other representatives. In general, professionalism (as measured by participation in political training) matters. Those who are more ambitious in their political career make the effort to be up-to-date and connected to the World Wide Web.

Graph 5. E-mail Use by Professionalism



Gender did not turn out to be important in any of the surveyed countries. Male and female local representatives do not differ much in their use of Internet and e-mail.

As demonstrated, municipality size has an effect on the use of the new Internet-based technologies. In larger municipalities there is better infrastructure and

greater possibilities for connecting to the Internet. The available technology and the complexity of issues in urban municipalities result in more frequent use of the new technologies.

Multivariate analysis shows that all of the above-mentioned factors have an independent effect on local representatives' e-mail and Internet use. So, for example, municipality size has an influence that is independent of the fact that urban representatives are more educated and more professional.

Conclusion

The mail survey of local councilors and mayors in five CEE countries, within the framework of the Indicators of Local Democratic Governance Project, contained two questions about e-mail and Internet use of local councilors and mayors. It turned out that local representatives reported going on-line more frequently than ordinary citizens. In each country more representatives use the Internet than e-mail. The ranking of countries corresponds with common expectations. Estonia, a country close in proximity to the extensively wired Northern countries, leads the five surveyed countries in the use of the new technologies: three of four local elected representatives use the Internet and three of five send and receive e-mail regularly. Bulgaria, representing South-Eastern Europe, is the least developed. Nevertheless, Bulgaria's technological lag does not seem at first sight as large as general economic indicators would suggest. This is due to the fact that Bulgarian municipalities are large, and consequently, politicians are more professional and better equipped. Central European countries (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) are on more or less on the same, middle level. Every second local representative obtains information from the Internet and one of three uses e-mail. Age, education, professionalism, and municipality size all have an effect on the use of the new web-based technologies.