

WHAT AND WHOSE E-GOVERNMENT WE WANT?

An End-User's Dimension of e-Services in Central Eastern Europe: Lessons & Questions

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This note reviews the latest e-government developments in Central Eastern Europe from the perspective of added value for end-users. It argues that e-government initiatives should be anchored into wider efforts of ICT-enabled change of public sector management and service delivery, coupled with new locally available competencies and opportunities in e-governance teaching.

Good progress but more challenges ahead...

The Final eEurope+ Progress Report¹ presented at the European Ministerial Conference in February 2004 in Budapest outlines the advancements made by the former Acceding and current Candidate Countries² (ACC) in the overall implementation of the eEurope+ Action Plan³. While identifying new challenges ahead, the Report pointed out that significant progress had been made in delivering online government services for citizens and enterprises, with the number of people making use of the Internet risen considerably and most directives concerned with Information Society Services being either under implementation or at the stage of draft laws. For example, according to the ITU statistics, the number of Internet users grew in these countries during 2001-2003 by almost 60% -- from 8.6 users to 13.9 users per 100 persons (age group from 1 to 74). However this still falls short of the UE average of 40% users.

Among other challenges, the Report underlined a need to urgently stimulate the deployment of interactive media-rich content to drive the broadband access to the Internet⁴. That should ensure access to public sector information for a faster adoption of new ways of communication with the state, invest more by regional and local governments in Public Internet Access Points (PIAP), especially school-based to bring ICTs closer to people. In addition, to continue implementation of e-government initiatives beyond simple provision of information and towards fully transactional services focused on the needs of citizens and businesses, as well as to support innovative public-private partnerships to promote investment in and use of ICTs in small and medium enterprises.

Who uses the Internet and why? Some statistics...

¹ Available for download at www.europa.int

² Bulgaria and Romania are expected to accede EU in 2007

³ An instrument of helping ACC to implement eEurope 2005 Action Plan – a strategy for EU to become the world's most competitive economy based on knowledge

⁴ Normally, higher than 128 Kbps of upstream speed

The main trend so far has been to encourage the supply side – generated by governments, as a rule. It's been done through EU-wide and relevant national Information Society and telecommunication policies. However, the demand side represented by end-users of e-government public services has received less attention than that, as it appears, it should have deserved. The Report's figures that follow confirm this conclusion.

Whereas the number of people using the Internet had been growing steadily, 80% of the Internet usage was for simple information search; 75% used the Internet for communication purposes, 40% -- for downloading games and music; 32% -- for visiting chat rooms and discussion forums; 23% -- for obtaining banking services and 3% for financial services.

In some Central Eastern and South Eastern European countries e-Banking was as low as 5-10%, with a remarkable exception of Estonia where 95% of bank transactions are conducted via electronic channels. The use of the Internet to find goods and services was at a healthy average of 51% whereas the actual online purchasing drops to mere 12%, and even less, in many countries. In e-Business, only 39% of the companies with Internet connection (70%) were present on the Web, and only less than one-tenth received orders online. Though e-services available to citizens had been growing rapidly (from a hardly noticeable 1% of two-way interactions or fully online transactions in 2001 to well-visible 20% in 2003) were still 'under construction'. Percentage of those who interacted online with public authorities to obtain, for example, official forms was on average 17% but only 9% returned these forms back to the government. Similar patterns were observed in enterprises – just 16% used the Internet to make social contribution for employees and 11% to handle VAT declaration and notification.

Technology for society or Society for technology...?

The principal question is How to make these figures higher when just one-third of people do not know what the Internet actually is, with about one-fourth not knowing how to use a computer? Even in ICT-savvy Estonia, 28% of all Internet non-users are "Passive People" who don't see any reason to use the Internet, with another 27% being so-called 'Blue Collars' who see no benefits in the Internet, as indicates the study conducted by AS Emor and PRAXIS Center for Policy Studies (2002)⁵. The both groups don't relate their lives to the Internet, and two-thirds of all non-users cannot specify any areas that could be of any use for them.

Another important question is What public sector policy makers and e-governance practitioners should make of these figures? and How to motivate people to use benefits of the information society? Mari Kalkun of Emor and Tarmo Kalvet of PRAXIS argue that the answer is in putting more emphasis on measuring and encouraging technology advances than on social and economic impacts of ICT development. They suggest that the 'Blue Collars' group should be the main target, Internet needs to be transformed into a channel for daily errands, and a 'broader understanding of the "Internet for everyone" needs to be created among the "Passive People" group.

In a similar vein, the eEurope+ Final report identified in this respect two inter-dependent priority areas of (a) the availability of a rich and highly developed set of services that will motivate adoption by the public, and (b) sufficiently large user population that will motivate the business sector to invest in the provision of ICT-enabled services.

e-Government for government or for its clients and constituencies...?

A social-oriented dimension of the Internet and e-Government is offered by Accenture in its The Government Executive Series Report "eGovernment Leadership: High Performance, Maximum

⁵ www.praxis.ee

Value" (2004)⁶. The Report states that only high-performance governments that are able to modernize radically their traditional business models and processes of public sector management in favor of newer technology-based ones can provide equally high-performance services and thus meet their obligation to transform the delivery of better public services for more people and at lower costs. This is where Accenture argues e-Government has its greatest potential, if modernized.

In order to measure more accurately what a high-performance government is, Accenture has surveyed citizen's attitudes and practices related to e-Government in 12 countries. The result was that the citizens' real needs – the ultimate end-users – are often overlooked when making decision on e-government policies and services. Even high Internet penetration rates do not automatically ensure that people visit the government's websites, some actually never do. This has far-reaching implications for decision makers in terms of where to invest when deciding to revise traditional governments' views on their products and services. This would ultimately allow balancing the supply side offered by governments with the demand side expected or sought by citizens and businesses.

A need to accelerate ICT-enabled public sector modernization and competency development through e-governance teaching

Although Estonia was not surveyed by Accenture, its conclusions provide convincing answers to the questions asked by Emor and PRAXIS in their Estonian study, namely: the end-user perspective must be thoroughly addressed in any e-government initiative, be it a small- or large-scale one, either at central or local levels. This is of utmost importance for not-so-rich Central Eastern and South Eastern European countries that cannot afford to squander their scarce resources – it is always cheaper to build the right systems from scratch rather than rebuild them...

Paradoxically, the lower levels of Internet penetration and almost a complete absence of e-government services give these countries a good entry point to start modernizing their outdated public administration practices. Real benefits of modern ICTs can only be fully felt if the public sector is being constantly changed through technology-led modernization. A strategic shift from unfriendly to people bureaucratic inefficiency towards creating high-performing governments is possible if strongly backed by a sufficient degree of government's political commitment to treat citizens and businesses as customers through provision of end-user-centered public services and reform public services accordingly. To do so efficiently and effectively needs to prioritize education of public sector officials, especially senior level. Teaching civil servants in e-governance, not only e-government per se, through general and tailor-made policy and practice training programmes across the board of public sector management will create locally available competency to put global knowledge into local practice.

UNDP Bratislava Regional Centre, e-Governance Academy in Estonia, Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central Eastern Europe (NISPAcee) in Slovakia, in collaboration with Trinity College Dublin in Ireland are working together promote e-governance through teaching, research, policy advice, and networking to make ICT work for real needs of real people and businesses

⁶ www.accenture.com