

Digital administration in the Republic of Serbia

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Abstract

Public administration reform is a permanent process and undoubtedly represents an essential precondition for successful adaptation to new needs of the modern society. European countries have done a lot to make the public administration more efficient, transparent and cost-effective. The use of the information communication technology has greatly contributed to this. This article, through an analysis of the current situation, considers the case of Serbia.

Keywords: eGovernment, digitalization, public administration, information society, electronic administration

INTRODUCTION

As can be easily seen, the use of information and communication technologies over the past three decades has resulted in a total change in all aspects of society. The importance of ICTs is also reflected in the fact that the EU has recognized them as a major factor in the impact on economic growth and innovation [1] and has placed the Digital Agenda for Europe among the seven leading initiatives of the Europe 2020 economic strategy [2].

As one of the first steps towards accelerating the development of the information society can be considered a requirement of the European Council that a group of prominent persons prepare a report which will be used for adopting an operational action program to foster an entrepreneurial mentality and to develop “a common regulatory approach to bring forth a competitive, Europe-wide market for information services” [3] During 1994 and 1995, a large number of European countries developed their plans and policies for the development of electronic communications. In December 1999, the e-Europe project was launched, and with the Lisbon Strategy 2000 EU agreed on new strategic development goals for its member states. In doing that, EU adopted as a motto: “An information society for all“. The European Council called in particular on preparing “legislation on the legal framework for electronic commerce, on copyright and related rights, on e-money, on the distance selling of financial services, on jurisdiction and the enforcement of judgments, and the dual-use export control regime [4]“.

They defined that “fully integrated and liberalized telecommunications markets should be completed by the end of 2001 [4]“, and, also, that all schools get Internet access up to the end of 2001. The Lisbon agenda pointed to the establishing a European area of research and innovation through supporting R&D partnership, private research investment, and high technology start-ups.

A special attention was paid to creating a friendly business environment, and “education and training for living and working in the knowledge society“. [4]

To achieve the set goals, it is necessary to reform the state administration and bring it closer to the citizens and the economy, to adapt the education system to the new circumstances, to provide user-oriented electronic health services, and to stimulate e-business.

Two chapters in the Lisbon Agenda were devoted to the countries of the Western Balkans and to Russia, but they are practically not related to the previous issues and are mostly of the declarative nature and related to the political situation in the Western Balkans and the Russian presidential elections.

In October 2002, at the Telecommunication Development Conference held in Belgrade, some of the countries of Southeastern Europe "(Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, FYR Macedonia, Moldova, Serbia, and Montenegro) accepted and signed an international agreement 'eSEEurope Agenda for the Development of the Information Society' [5], as a basic document for the development of the information society in that region. This agreement is in line with the eEurope 2002 and 2005 Action Plans and the eEurope+ Plan for candidate countries and represents a confirmation of the willingness of Southeast European countries to work on the development of the information society in line with the development processes of IT in Europe. [6]“

1 ELECTRONIC ADMINISTRATION IN SERBIA

1.1 Status and development of the information society in Serbia

Under the development of the information society, all changes in the society that result from the application of information communication technologies are understood. The Republic of Serbia considers that the engine of development of the information society consists of [7]: open and to all accessible high-quality Internet access and developed e-commerce, e-government, e-justice, e-health, and e-education.

Serbia as a candidate for admission to the EU continuously harmonizes its legislation with EU regulations. Thus, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the Strategy for the

Development of Information Society in the Republic of Serbia until 2020. According to the Strategy [7] in the year 2009 in Serbia, 36.7% of households owned an Internet connection, while in the EU this number was 65%. The access to broadband Internet 22.9% of households in Serbia had and in the EU the share was 56%. The degree of sophistication of eGovernment services was 46% in Serbia, and 83% in the EU. [7] Serbia plans to reach the EU average of the indicators of the development of the information society by 2020. However, these statistical data should be considered with reserve, because in Serbia in 2016, 91.8% of the population aged 16 to 74 used mobile phones. Previously, in 2015, 91.4% of the population used mobile phones, which can mean that the number of users is practically the maximum possible. If one considers that the vast majority of users use smartphones, then it is very likely that the number of Internet users is significantly higher than the one shown. According to the same survey [8] around 28.1% of the population used electronic public administration services in 2016.

Activities related to the development of the information society in Serbia and South-East Europe are based on:

- The Lisbon Strategy adopted by the Council of Europe in 2000;
- eEurope+ Action Plan launched at the EU Goteborg Summit on 15-16.06.2001 [9]
- Statement of Intent adopted in Ljubljana on 04.06.2002 [10]
- eSEE Agenda for Information Society Development signed in Belgrade on 29.10.2002
- The eEurope+ 2005 Action Plan of EC
- Joint Statement of Intent to Build an Inclusive Information Society Signed in Budapest on 27.02.2004
- The eEurope 2005 Action Plan of EC
- Ministerial Conclusions and Memorandum of Understanding for Unified Regional Broadband signed at in Thessaloniki on 01.07.2005. [11]

The Government of the Republic of Serbia has accepted the i2010 initiative as a general framework for the development of the Information Society through the signing of the eSEE Agenda+ [12] for the Development of Information Society in SEE 2007-2012. Besides the Republic of Serbia, also the Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Croatia, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, and The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo on Behalf of Kosovo in accordance with UNSCR-1244 signed the Agenda. All governments have committed to undertake concrete activities in the fields of organization, legislation, policies, and strategies, encouraging of civil society, non-governmental

organizations, e-Government, e-Learning, e-Health, e-Democracy etc. to build an information society in the countries of Southeast Europe. [12]

If one considers the situation in the field of the information society, one can see that a legal framework has been established through the signing of international agreements and the creation of strategic documents in the field of telecommunications, broadband access, electronic management and technology development, and an integrated health information system “e-Health”. More information about this can be found in the Strategy of Information Society Development in the Republic of Serbia until 2020 [7].

Also, a number of laws have been adopted, such as laws on electronic signature, electronic document, telecommunications, electronic commerce, personal data protection, ratification of the Convention on high-tech crime, as well as the Law on the Confirmation of the Additional Protocol to the Convention on High-Tech Crime. [7]

In the Republic of Serbia, the institutional framework of the information society was formed, although it can be said that it was not formed rationally. While the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Society is competent and responsible for the establishment of the information society policy and strategy, the competencies in the field of the application of information and communication technologies in public administration are provided by the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, which is in charge of the state administration system, the Republic Institute for Informatics and the Internet and the Administration for Joint Affairs of the Republic authorities, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defense and the Army of Serbia, the Tax Administration, the Customs Administration ... [7], but also many other ministries and institutions. Although the Internet itself is a distributed system and although its users are different in accordance with their requirements and needs, due to this wide spectrum it happens that the systems of certain user groups are not compatible, which drastically affects their efficiency and use in general. Often there exist parallel systems with very similar purposes. In the Strategy for the development of the information society for the period until 2020, as the priorities there were set and explained in detail:

1. Electronic communications: open broadband access; digital radio and TV; digital dividend as a separate part of the radio frequency spectrum that will be available after switching to digital broadcasting of television programs;
2. E-government, e-health, and e-justice, with the following priorities: electronic identity in public sector services; application of ICT in the administrative bodies and holders of public

authorizations; application of ICT in the health care system; application of ICT in the judiciary;

3. ICT in education, science, and culture, with the following priorities: academic computer network; ICT in education; research and innovation in the field of ICT; digital contents;
4. Electronic commerce with the following priorities: removal of normative barriers to the development of e-commerce; electronic invoices and electronic payments; encouraging the development of e-business; consumer protection in e-commerce; coordination of e-commerce development;
5. Business sector ICT, with the following priorities: human resources development; development of start-up and innovative companies; export and the cross-border outsourcing; protection of intellectual property of software and digital content.
6. Information security, with the following priorities: improving the legal and institutional framework for the information security; critical infrastructure protection; the fight against high-tech crime; scientific-research and development work in the field of information security.
7. The public sector can play a special role in the information society and e-commerce promotion in all sectors of the economy, and to be an intermediary in adopting of e-business practice in the following way [13]:
 - By applying public procurement contracts based on an electronic solution, whereby a private initiative is encouraged to introduce or increase the use of electronic data transfer modes in its business. Suppliers are given the opportunity to participate in a wide range of electronic document exchange. As a result, companies will have an additional incentive to use e-commerce solutions, as this will improve their chances to compete with the competition;
 - By electronic data transmission in the public sector financial system, which may also have an important catalyst effect in the implementation of e-business. Electronic data transfer in the public sector financial system will make information flows between businesses and relevant public authorities faster, cheaper and more reliable, and will reduce the administrative burden on companies. The success rate of interaction between the public and the private sector will depend on how well the participants are able to coordinate their own activities.

1.2 Development of electronic administration

The idea of digitization of the state administration is not new. The digitization of state administration in Serbia has been considered for a long time, and various steps were being made in the realization of this goal because the electronic administration is considered as one of the main drivers of improvement of quality, efficiency, economy, and transparency of public administration. The introduction of e-government means reducing crowds at government offices, reducing the number of employees at counters, saving money, and more satisfied citizens. This last one is important for every government, especially before the elections. The development of eGovernment in the Republic of Serbia is directed towards the following goals [7]:

1. higher customer satisfaction with public services;
2. all citizens benefit from eGovernment;
3. reducing the burden on the administration for businesses and citizens;
4. increasing the efficiency of administrative bodies and holders of public authorizations using ICT;
5. cross-border interoperability, especially with EU countries;
6. a positive impact on the freedom of movement of people, goods, capital, and services;
7. increasing transparency and accountability through the innovative use of ICT;
8. strengthening citizens' participation in democratic decision-making;
9. privacy protection and security.

In Serbia, the transformation of the public administration segment has practically begun with the Public Administration Reform Strategy of 2004. This strategy included, in addition to the analysis of the current state of affairs, the basic goals and principles of reform, the key areas of reform, and their management. [14]

In 2010, the Decree on electronic office operations of state administration bodies was adopted. [15] This regulation defined the handling of electronic documents in the office operations of state administration bodies. The same regulations are applied to all other state bodies and bodies of the city of Belgrade, as well as to enterprises and all other organizations when performing public administration tasks and public authorities. The Decree is short and adds to the previous Decree on office operations of state administration bodies ("Službeni glasnik RS", No. 80/92) and the Instructions on office operations of state administration bodies ("Službeni glasnik RS", No. 10/93 and 14/93 - correction).

During the implementation of the Regulation on Electronic Office Operations of the State Administration, shortcomings were noted in cases when a combination of electronic and printed documents appeared in the procedure, and the Regulation was amended in 2017 by correction of Article 4 defining the procedure with the enclosures printed in printed form. [16] At the same time, in the Article 5 the procedure with documents that are closed and whose shelf life has not expired was redefined.

By 2013, the legal framework for the functioning of the state administration and local self-government system is largely obtained, but that is not enough since the successful reorganization of state administration requires also the implementation of adopted policies and laws. Time has shown that the institutional framework was not effective, and the guilt is shifted to "the relative inactivity of the Council for Public Administration Reform and the insufficiently developed capacities of the ministry in charge of state administration affairs" [14].

The development of electronic administration in the Republic of Serbia is based on two valid strategies:

- Public Administration Reform Strategy in the Republic of Serbia; and
- The strategy of development of electronic administration in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2015 to 2018 [17].

Within the framework of the reform of public administration, decentralization is envisaged as one of the reform measures, but it was done only in certain areas that the Government assessed as a priority. In 2009, the Government established the National Council for Decentralization of the Republic of Serbia, but it was closed in 2012 in order to reduce the costs, and the employees were taken over by the Ministry of Regional Development and Local Self-Government. [18]

Which way the costs were reduced is not known because there remained the same people with the similar tasks. The next year, in 2013, the Council was reconstituted with the task of "coordinating the work in the preparation and consideration of the draft of the Strategy of decentralization of the Republic of Serbia in cooperation with the ministry in charge of regional development and local self-government, which submits to the Government for adoption. [19]"

So far, the results of the Council's work have been imperceptible.

One of the most important goals of the public administration reform is the modernization of the state administration. As already mentioned, several systemic laws have been adopted (on electronic signature, on electronic document, on electronic communications) and the very important Law on the Confirmation of the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data, as well as the important information society development strategies and electronic administration. A single voter list has been established,

as well as the Central System for electronic data processing and storage, and the maintenance of another copy of the registers, the Register of Companies, the Register of the pledge right on movables, the Register of financial leasing, the Register of public media, the Register of Associations, the Register of foreign associations, Register of measures and incentives for regional development, Chamber register, Tourism register, Register of financial reports and data on the solvency of legal entities and entrepreneurs, Register of bankruptcies, Register of foundations, Register of foreign delegations and foundations, Register of associations, societies and associations in the field of sports, Register of court bans, etc. [14] One of the important documents that sets out the guidelines for enabling interoperability, “The National interoperability framework” was adopted in 2014. [20]

According to the e-Government Development Strategy, it is necessary to provide a high degree of process automation and high-visibility interoperability according to G2G, G2B, G2C, and M2M models. Problems with the lack of laws, by-laws, internal instructions, regulations and guidelines for administrative procedures in the electronic environment were noticed. Problems exist even with the use of e-mail that nested itself into the communication in all the mentioned G2x models.

The establishment and development of information and communication infrastructure in the Republic of Serbia in the previous period were mainly financed from donations without strong coordination at the state level. Part of the equipment is also provided within the framework of some interstate projects, and there is incomplete and poor documentation thereon. The variety of equipment makes it difficult to maintain it. “From the EU funds, the hardware and software environment for the virtual service environment at the national level (state cloud) has been provided, but the low-level utilization is due to the lack of coordination between the state authorities regarding the establishment of electronic services, and the fact that the authorities still procure hardware infrastructure singly [17]”. One of the significant problems related to the development of e-Government is the issue of system and data security. The level of protection of certain systems is different and varies from the basic protection (firewalls, virus-scanners, and backups) to highly sophisticated solutions. The problem is that the first group is the most numerous.

According to the criteria for assessing e-government sophistication, defined by the European Commission and Capgemini, the national eGovernment portal provides a fourth level of sophistication of services (see Figure 1), but it is rarely used and existing services are generated at lower levels.

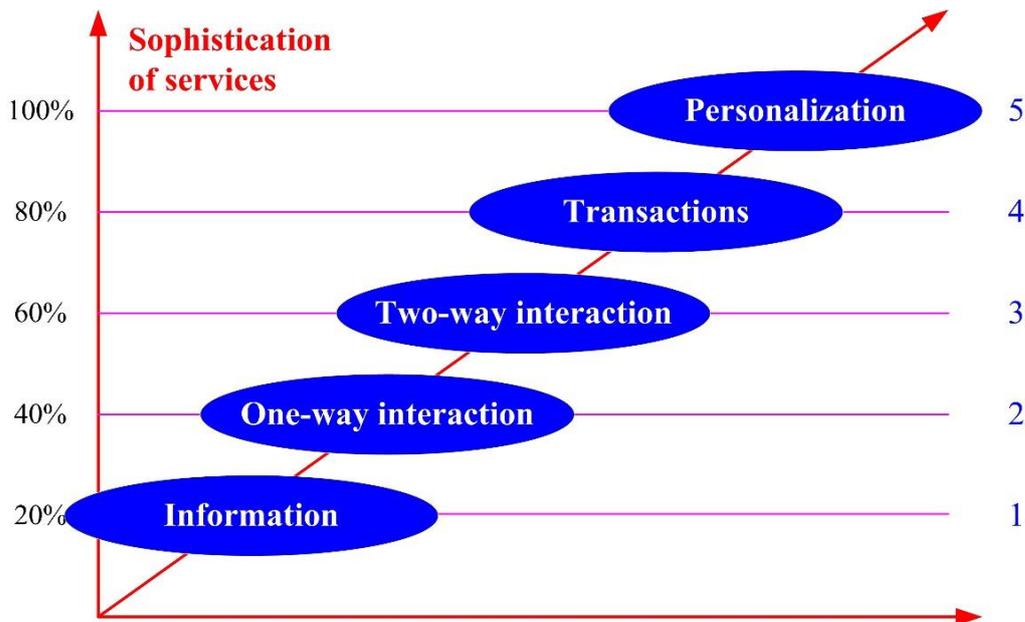


Fig. 1 Level of sophistication of electronic services according to Capgemini methodology

(Source: authors, based on [17])

To accelerate the realization of the project, the Government of the Republic of Serbia established the Office for IT and Electronic Administration in July 2017. Even Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic stated: "Digitalizing of public administration and providing services to citizens who will use them in an easy and quick manner is one of my priorities"[21]. This could mean that the work on the introduction of eGovernment will be accelerated.

CONCLUSION

Public administration reform is a permanent process and undoubtedly represents an essential precondition for successful adaptation to the needs of the society. There is a desire in the Republic of Serbia for the improvement of electronic administration. The citizens and the public administration, they both are fairly good trained in the use of e-government services, although it is still necessary to raise the level of knowledge and skills in the field of information technology applications. There are software and hardware for e-government implementation, but much more needs to be done to make the use of available services more comfortable. Due to the rapid change of hardware, it is necessary to constantly update the equipment and improve the communication links. Although many, if not the most, was done in terms of legal and other regulations, many by-laws have not yet been adopted, although they are envisaged by certain laws. This disable, or at least complicates, the application of particular laws. In Serbia, special attention should be paid to the standardization of procedures, methodologies, and linking of particular systems within the state administration. Particularly, attention should be

paid to managing human and IT resources. So far, much, if not everything, depended on the support of the state authorities. It is necessary to move the responsibility to individual perpetrators, and give them appropriate rights and obligations. This can be achieved by using the appropriate procedures.

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