

Considerations regarding the Management of Electronic Government Services in the European Union

Andreea-Ileana Zamfir

Academy of Economic Studies București, Str. Căderea Bastiliei, Piața Romană, nr. 6, Sector 1, București
e-mail: zamfir_andreea_ileana@yahoo.com

Abstract

The paper presents some definitions of electronic government services and also the benefits of electronic government services to the quality of life, industrial competitiveness and society. There are also presented the main characteristics of the electronic government services in European Union and a comparative approach of eGovernment strategies in Romania and Bulgaria.

In the end of the paper there are identified the major objectives for electronic services horizon 2010 and the actions needed in order to develop the electronic government services in the benefit of all European Union's citizens.

Key words: *electronic government services, innovative services, electronic government strategies*

Introduction

Today, governments all over the world face major challenges such as ageing, climate change or terrorism and citizens are demanding better services, better security and better democracy, while businesses demand less bureaucracy and more efficiency.

As the European Union continues to enlarge and embrace greater diversity, new needs and demands are arising such as for seamless public services across borders, essential to increase citizens' opportunities for mobility and for business in Europe.

There is a strong link between national competitiveness, innovation strength and the quality of public administrations, meaning that in the global economy better government is a competitive must. Now, eGovernment can help governments to meet these challenges and demands.

That is why it is important to accelerate eGovernment with a view to modernisation and innovation.¹

¹ *** *i2010 eGovernment Action Plan: Accelerating eGovernment in Europe for the Benefit of All*, Communication From the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 25.04.2006, COM(2006) 173 final, pag. 3

Definitions of Electronic Government Services

Electronic government or eGovernment is a relationship between government or other public institutions on the one hand, and citizens on the other hand, in order to provide modern, intelligent public services using the information and communication technology. Electronic government is a top-down relationship, from the government to citizens and businesses.

The European Commission defines e-government as “the use of information and communication technologies in public administrations - combined with organizational change and new skills - to improve public services and democratic processes and to strengthen support to public policies”².

So, electronic government has the important role to make public administrations more efficient and effective, promoting growth by cutting red tape.

This is something that anyone who has ever spent hours waiting in line in a government building can appreciate, seeing the difference which information and communication technologies could make to their lives.

Electronic government is a way for public administrations to become: more open and transparent, and to reinforce democratic participation; more service-oriented, providing personalized and inclusive services to each citizen; more productive, delivering maximum value for taxpayers' money.

By connecting government departments, companies and citizens, eGovernment-powered public services also become faster and more personalized, allowing citizens and companies to get on with their lives and build their businesses rather than waiting in line in government buildings.

Electronic government can also strengthen democracy by improving two-way communication between the citizens and their government.

National eGovernment solutions must not lead to new barriers within the Single Market. If national electronic identities are not interoperable, for example, both companies and people will face new barriers to working and living in other countries.³

Electronic government covers a wide area that can best be structured in “Public Services for Citizens” and “Public Services for Businesses”. Typically a public service for citizens would be e.g. declaration, notification of assessment of income taxes, or job search services offered by labour offices.

A public service for businesses would be e.g. social contribution for employees, declaration and notification of corporate tax, or public procurement.⁴

From a citizen's perspective, online interaction with public authorities typically takes the form of obtaining information from public authorities' websites, downloading official forms or sending filled in forms.

On the other hand, online public services for businesses for interacting with public authorities are either used for obtaining information, obtaining forms, returning filled in forms full electronic case handling, or submitting a proposal in an electronic tender system (e-procurement).

² *** Empirica, (2006, October), *Benchmarking in a policy perspective. Report no. 4 Public services*, final, Empirica, Bonn and Brussels, pag. 13

³ *** http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/soccul/egov/index_en.htm, accessed on May 28, 2007

⁴ *** Sumanariu, S., Vătășoiu Gogancea R., (2006), *Evaluarea stadiului informatizării administrației publice locale*, ANIAP, pag. 9-10, available online at http://www.aniap.ro/downloads/STUDIU_IAPL.pdf

Commonly, online public services are therefore differentiated into information services (e.g. obtaining information from authorities' websites), communication services (e.g. making an appointment online with a practitioner) and transaction services (e.g. sending filled in forms).⁵

Electronic Government Services in the European Union

Nowadays, e-Government promises to deliver better, more efficient public services and to improve the relationship between citizens/businesses and their governments. The resulting benefits to the quality of life, industrial competitiveness and society will only be realized if public administrations change the way they operate.

Adding information and communication technologies to government services, however, does not itself produce "e-Government". New technologies must be implemented hand in hand with organizational change and new skills if convenient, service-oriented services are to flow.

While each national, regional and local government in Europe has its own needs, they can all learn from each others' experiences, stimulating the spread of best practices, standards development and a single, European market in e-Government systems.⁶

Member States have committed themselves to inclusive eGovernment objectives to ensure that by 2010 all citizens, including socially disadvantaged groups, become major beneficiaries of eGovernment, and European public administrations deliver public information and services that are more easily accessible and increasingly trusted by the public, through innovative use of information and communication technologies, increasing awareness of the benefits of eGovernment and improved skills and support for all users.

Efficient services save time and money and effective services are more meaningful for citizens, businesses and administrations along the lines of the five objectives above mentioned. They deliver benefits at three levels:

- citizens and businesses;
- administrations;
- society and the economy at large.

Member States expect eGovernment to contribute to high user satisfaction with public services and significantly lighten the administrative burden on businesses and citizens by 2010. Moreover, the public sector should achieve considerable efficiency gains as well as increasing transparency and accountability through innovative use of information and communication technologies by 2010.

The eGovernment agenda is advancing through the modernisation of hundreds of public services. While most of these are local, regional and national, a number of services delivered across borders make a significant difference to citizens, businesses and administrations and can act as flagships for European eGovernment.

These also serve to mobilise top-level commitment and to create substantial demand for key enablers such as electronic identification and interoperability. Implementation of these services must focus on achieving measurable impact through widespread *usage*, not only on making such services available electronically.

⁵ *** Empirica, (2006, October), *Benchmarking in a policy perspective. Report no. 4 Public services*, final, Empirica, Bonn and Brussels, pag. 14-15

⁶ *** http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/europe/2005/all_about/egovernment/index_en.htm, accessed on May 31, 2007

Electronic Government has reached a critical juncture. Further significant progress requires certain key enablers to be in place, particularly for high impact services to be effective. Among those, interoperable electronic identification management (eIDM) for access to public services, electronic document authentication and electronic archiving are considered critical key enablers.

EU countries are already implementing eIDM, meeting national service needs, cultural traditions and personal data protection preferences. Harmonised national ID cards might be one specific means to implement public service eIDM, but this is a national choice. Biometric national ID cards and eIDM for public services are markedly different: national ID cards serve public security, for example by facilitating integrated border management and supporting fight against terrorism, whereas electronic identification for public services is intended to ease access and offer personalised and smarter services.

European Union recognise the importance of eIDM for ensuring that by 2010 European citizens and businesses will be able to benefit from secure and convenient electronic means, issued at local, regional or national levels and complying with data protection regulations, to identify themselves to public services in their own or in any other Member State.

There is a need for a pragmatic approach to the interoperability of different eIDM systems, with the aim to respect the different national approaches and solutions without creating a barrier to using public services across borders.

Electronic signatures provide a technology that can be used in the eIDM process. Moreover, electronic documents will be essential for many services, e.g. public procurement contracts, remote medical prescriptions or educational certificates.

Interoperable essential infrastructure services (e.g. for secure communications between administrations or cross-border access to registers), common specifications, interoperability guidelines and re-usable software are all building blocks of high impact eGovernment.

Comparative Approach of eGovernment Strategies in Romania and Bulgaria

The Romanian “eGovernment Programme” includes the following explicit measures:

- Cooperation with local authorities in order to develop informatics networks for education and competence groups;
- Cooperation with city halls, decentralised and deconcentrated services, hospitals, cultural institutions, in order to achieve a metropolitan communications network – City Net – as a management information system to provide the following services:
 - Population survey;
 - Digital plans of localities and of their territory;
 - GIS (Geographical Information Systems);
 - Management of public services, public utilities, infrastructure systems, as well as management of public office;
 - Tax collection from citizens;
 - Management of education and cultural activities;
 - Registration of commercial firms;
 - Budget and bookkeeping;

- Centre for citizens' complaints;
- Urban traffic control;
- Monitoring and evaluation of organisational performance;
- Implementation of special programmes introducing informatics systems to town halls in rural areas.

eGovernment has been actively promoted in the last years, being considered as the best way of organising public management in order to increase efficiency, transparency, accessibility and responsiveness to citizens, while reducing bureaucracy and corruption.

A National eAdministration Strategy and Action Plan was first adopted by the Romanian government and enacted by Parliament in October 2001.

The Romanian government has dedicated a lot of effort in recent years to develop a legal framework favouring the development of the information society and eGovernment.

It is to mention that Romania was the first country in Europe to transpose the European Union regulatory framework for electronic communications into national legislation, between 2002 and 2003.

Another priority is the development of the national eGovernment infrastructure. An eGovernment portal was launched in September 2003, providing a one-stop shop to public services online, and incorporating a transactional platform enabling users to register for interactive and transactional services.

In fact, Romania's eGovernment portal received an achievement award from the World Summit of the Information Society for its comprehensiveness and innovation.

The construction of a national network linking all local and central government information systems is underway, and the introduction of an electronic identity card is being prepared.

The national infrastructure also comprises an effective, fully operational central eProcurement platform, which has already enabled savings of approximately € 178 million on government procurement costs since its launch in 2002.

This fast-developing infrastructure makes it possible for the Romanian government to deliver a number of interactive and transactional services online, such as VAT declaration, submission of statistical information, electronic payment of social security contributions and of local taxes, advanced job search facility and civil service recruitment platform.

Although some of those are on offer to large taxpayers (legal bodies) only, the initial target was that all 20 'basic public services' identified by the European Commission were to be available online by 2005, something which, however, has not been attained yet.

The government is guided by a wider eReadiness policy, which aims to promote wide access to public services and information through information technology and the internet.

As part of an anti-corruption legislative initiative, the government has recently promoted concrete measures to insure online availability of all public information and to lay the foundations for online complex and complete governmental services.

With respect to those objectives, the legal obligations of the central and local public administration authorities will be defined by law.

The goal is a functional system allowing all citizens' access to public information and services, ranging from filling of different forms to processing them online.

Also, any Romanian citizen must be able to access the Internet, from either home or a public place, for interacting with the administration.

On a similar note, advanced eBusiness and eGovernment applications will be developed through the Knowledge-Based Economy project, co-funded by the World Bank. Among them are the online registration of authorised individuals and family businesses and the integrated system for issuance of civil status documents.

Other activities served by the systems will be the administration of the Local Evidence Register and data provision to central authorities and institutions in accordance with legal obligations.

These activities will be complemented by the eStore Portal for the promotion of electronic commerce and the business networks.

Lastly, in order to enhance digital inclusion throughout Romania, numerous networks aimed at connecting local communities (schools, public offices and libraries) to the Internet will be created. In each area covered by the networks, Public Access Points will be set up.

The objectives of this project are to reduce the rural-urban digital divide, stimulate the use of ICTs in schools as well as facilitating the interaction between citizens and administration.

The project will be running from 2007 to 2010 and will cover 251 rural communities and small towns throughout Romania, targeting over 1.7 million Romanian citizens (10 % of Romanian's rural areas).

On the other hand, **eGovernment in Bulgaria** is seen as an element of the transition from industrial to information society and is a tool to increase the competitive ability of the Bulgarian economy and to improve the whole business climate.

It is a process of change whose critical factors for success may be reduced to the following five key spheres:

- Presence of political will: by the formation of the Ministry of Public Administration and Administrative Reform (MSAAR), the administrative resource and functional conditions have been created;
- Provision of the necessary financial resources: in the draft budget 2006 significant funds to the amount of 15 million leva are provided, along with grant programs such as PHARE and local co-financing;
- Intuitional provision, including management capacity, improvement of the qualification and training of the civil servants in eGovernment and information technologies, with the ministry already developing programmes for mass training of the civil servants eGovernment and IT, with special attention paid to the provision of places for public access to services, such as libraries, community centres, and a national net with near 100 remote centres;
- Overall development of the information society and wider access to computers and the web through digital literacy;
- Need for the development of the eGovernment recognised by society. Investigations carried out have indicated unbalance in the demand of electronic services. The need for the development of eGovernment is recognized better by businesses than people.

Historically, the Bulgarian process of introduction of eGovernment may be divided into three stages:

1. 2002 - preparatory stage, related to the adoption of strategic documents;
2. 2003 - 2005 - experimental stage, related to the introduction of 20 indicative e-services for the citizens and businesses defined by the European Commission, introduction of e-documents and e-signature in the work of the administration and, as a whole, work on basic, conceptual and methodological projects;

3. 2005 - 2008 - real stage of dynamic development, during which a re-engineering of the business processes in the administration and total introduction of e-services, including also cross border services within the frame of the single European market will be carried out.

Actually, the e-services offered by the institutions at the moment in Bulgaria are insufficient in number and functionality. Bulgaria is at one of the last places in Europe in this sphere.

During the past years significant preparatory work has been performed both on central and institutional level.

The administration has been supplied with hardware and software and communication connectivity, and a plan for implementation of the eGovernment Strategy (2003 - 2005) has been drawn up and followed.

The necessary environment is supplemented by suitable legislation, for example the Law on Electronic Document and Electronic Signature, the availability of providers of certifying services provide the necessary environment and the e-Governance Law, currently under preparation.

A number of pilot projects for delivery of on-line administrative services have been implemented at central, regional and municipal level. Analysis made on progress so far has indicated problem areas such as:

- Insufficient in number and functionality services;
- Lack of uniform information environment in the state administration: The information environment in the institutions is at different technological levels and decisions in the sphere of IT in separate institutions remain uncoordinated resulting in poor compatibility and lack of integrity between electronic registers and information systems;
- Absence of service oriented integration of electronic services;
- Disproportionate level of development of e-services between central institutions and local administrations.

The main activities for infrastructure development eGovernment in 2006 can be grouped in three main directions:

1. Tasks related to the development of the centralized systems for e-government:
 - Provision of a centralised integrated information environment for services;
 - Enhancement of the eGovernment portal;
 - Tasks related to the delivery of centralised services such as e-procurement, national electronic archives and registers;
 - Activities related to security of centralised information and systems;
 - Tasks related to the management of the eGovernment process.
2. Technical and methodological provision of regional and local administrations;
3. Training in IT in the administration and in the implementation and use of the services of e-government.

Actions to Develop eGovernment in the European Union

The European Commission adopted on the 25th of April 2006 the **i2010 eGovernment Action Plan (Accelerating eGovernment in Europe for the Benefit of All)**.

The Action Plan defines five priorities or major objectives for eGovernment horizon 2010⁷:

1. **No citizen left behind:** advancing inclusion through eGovernment so that by 2010 all citizens benefit from trusted, innovative services and easy access for all;
2. **Making efficiency and effectiveness a reality:** significantly contributing, by 2010, to high user satisfaction, transparency and accountability, a lighter administrative burden and efficiency gains;
3. **Implementing high-impact key services for citizens and businesses:** by 2010, 100% of public procurement will be available electronically, with 50% actual usage⁵, with agreement on cooperation on further high-impact online citizen services;
4. **Putting key enablers in place:** enabling citizens and businesses to benefit, by 2010, from convenient, secure and interoperable authenticated access across Europe to public services;
5. **Strengthening participation and democratic decision-making:** demonstrating, by 2010, tools for effective public debate and participation in democratic decision-making.

The i2010 eGovernment Action Plan – “Accelerating eGovernment in Europe for the Benefit of All”⁸ seeks to:

- accelerate the delivery of tangible benefits for all citizens and businesses;
- ensure that eGovernment at national level do not lead to new barriers on the single market due to fragmentation and lack of interoperability;
- extend the benefits of eGovernment at EU level by allowing economies of scale in Member States’ initiatives and cooperating on common European challenges;
- ensure cooperation of all stakeholders in the EU in designing and delivering eGovernment.

In order to develop eGovernment, there is a need for adoption the following actions:

- Set up a common and agreed guide that aligns eGovernment developments with the eAccessibility Communication;
- Issue specifications for multi-platform service delivery strategies allowing access to eGovernment services via a variety of channels, e.g. digital TV, mobile and fixed telephone and other interactive devices;
- Propose a common impact-oriented eGovernment measurement framework and subsequently fine-tune it;
- Explore mechanisms to ensure the long-term financial and operational sustainability for sharing experiences, infrastructures and services;
- Based on existing or under development Member States solutions, accelerate common specifications of key elements for cross border public eProcurement and launch implementation pilots;
- Test ICT-based tools that facilitate transparency and public involvement in democratic decision-making. Support exchanges of experience;

⁷ Wauters, P., Colclough G - *Online Availability of Public Services: How Is Europe Progressing?*, Web Based Survey on Electronic Public Services Report of the 6th Measurement, June 2006, Capgemini, www.capgemini.com/public, pag. 15

⁸ *** *i2010 eGovernment Action Plan: Accelerating eGovernment in Europe for the Benefit of All*, Communication From the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 25.04.2006, COM(2006) 173 final, pag. 3-4

- Set advanced forms of eDemocracy as a priority of the IST research programme under FP7 etc.

Effective and innovative public administrations are essential to a globally competitive Europe. In this sense, eGovernment is the key to unlocking potential in the public sector.

Those actions, announced in the i2010 initiative, are to be implemented until 2010 and will require the cooperation of all stakeholders, in order to develop eGovernment in European Union.

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Considerații privind managementul serviciilor de guvernare electronică în Uniunea Europeană

Rezumat

În articol sunt prezentate câteva definiții ale serviciilor de guvernare electronică și de asemenea, impactul pozitiv al serviciilor de guvernare electronică asupra calității vieții, competitivității industriale și societății în ansamblul său. Totodată, sunt prezentate principalele caracteristici ale serviciilor de guvernare electronică din Uniunea Europeană și o abordare comparativă a strategiilor de eGuvernare din România și Bulgaria. În finalul articolului sunt reliefate principalele obiective pentru serviciile electronice la orizontul anului 2010, precum și acțiunile necesare pentru dezvoltarea serviciilor de guvernare electronică în beneficiul tuturor cetățenilor Uniunii Europene.