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**E-GOVERNMENT INFORMATION COMMUNICATION
SYSTEM AND TRANSPARENCY: AN OVERVIEW OF THE
SITUATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA**

Abstract

The modern benefits that result from the introduction of the latest technological advances in the management process in the state are certainly associated with the introduction and principles of e-Government information communication system.

The Republic of Macedonia is a developing country and it makes efforts to catch up with modern trends and enable more responsible governance, which will be in accordance with the principles of good governance, which are incepted and based on the highest constitutive act of the state as well as on the relevant legislation, which addresses the issues of good governance of the administrative bodies. This paper gives a review of the implementation of the concept of e-Government in the Republic of Macedonia. The main goal of this paper is to present the projects implemented under the “National Strategy for e-Government 2010-2012” and its benefits in terms of improving transparency of government institutions. Based on a review of the legislation, strategic government documents and projects, it can be concluded that the

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implementation of e-Government offers great opportunities for increasing the level of openness and transparency of government in order to establish better communication and flow of information.

Key words: *information, transparency, openness, e-Government, communication.*

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Introduction

Open government, as a value of highly developed democratic societies, and an extremely important standard in the functioning of the administration, means a high level of transparency.

Modern technological advances have enabled governments to better manage communications and the flow of information, using e-Government information communication system.

The terms electronic administration, e-Government and e-administration mean intensive use of the information technology for electronic work in the administration, the administrative bodies, communication between bodies, communication between institutions and citizens, businesses and other organizations using the services. According to the United Nations, e-Government is defined as “the use of ICT and its application by the Government for the provision of information and public services to the people. The aim of e-Government therefore is to provide efficient government management of information to the citizen, better service delivery to citizens and empower”⁵.

The definition of the World Bank (AOEMA report) is: “E-Government refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. These technologies can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information or more, efficient government management. The resulting benefits can be: less corruption,

⁵ Definition taken from United Nations E-Government Development Database (UNeGovDD), Available at: http://unpan3.un.org/egovkb/egovernment_overview/ereadiness.htm

increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth, and/or cost reductions”⁶.

For the purposes of this paper, the author agrees with the following definition given by Zhiyuan Fang: “E-government is defined as a way for governments to use the most innovative information and communication technologies, particularly web-based Internet applications, to provide citizens and businesses with more convenient access to government information and services, to improve the quality of the services and to provide greater opportunities to participate in democratic institutions and processes”⁷. This includes communication between government and business, government and citizen, government and employee, and also among different units and levels of the government. According to Fang, “the e-Government presents a tremendous impetus to move forward in the 21st century with higher quality, cost-effective, government services and a better relationship between citizens and government”.

As pointed out by a group of authors, “New challenge in 2000s is to create an e-Government (electronic government) which reflects the ultimate visions for governments to modernize and change the way their administrations work - that in general, is organized in a rather rigid and bureaucratic manner - in order to move forward in the 21st century with higher quality, cost-effective, government services and a better relationship between citizens and government”⁸.

In the Ministerial Declaration: e-Government, A Priority for Europe since 2001, there are emphasized principles particularly important for the development and implementation of the e-Government in Europe. Among them is the principle of Encouraging Participation. In relation with it, it is stated that the “Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are a powerful tool for good governance, and that the Ministers endorsed five key principles: Openness, Participation, Accountability, Effectiveness and Coherence. The transition to e-Government must improve all of these dimensions”⁹.

⁶ Definition taken from World Bank, Available at:

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTINFORMATIONANDCOMMUNICATIONANDTECHNOLOGIES/EXTGOVERNMENT/0,,contentMDK:20507153~menuPK:702592~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:702586,00.html>

⁷ Fang, 2002:2.

⁸ Soumia A., Rabah I., Mouhamed M., Abdelaziz K., 2011.

⁹ Ministerial Declaration, 2001:3.

However, everywhere in this modern life, information technology plays a vital role and e-Government is the gift of information technology, which is contrasting itself with ordinary government whose basis is bureaucracy - a fear of red lace¹⁰.

In this context, the most important is that the application of the latest advances in information technology have rejected the old way of communicating with government (sending written requests or questions and lengthy wait for the response), and allowed quick and easy way of contacting, asking questions and getting answers. These technologies promise important changes in the working of the government, as well as the communication processes. Selective provisions and retrieval of information is easier and more cost effective, while asynchronous and synchronous communication methods have the potential to revolutionize relationships between citizens and government¹¹.

Developing countries are faced with the challenge of achieving a higher level of democracy, transparency and openness in their governments. In that direction, each of them, according to their own capacities, implements the concept of e-Government.

1. Macedonia's efforts toward e-Government and transparency

1.1 Constitutional and legal fundamentals

The Republic of Macedonia is a developing country and its efforts to catch up with the modern trends and to establish more responsible governance, which will be in accordance with the principles of good governance, are incepted and based in the highest constitutive act of the state, as well as in the relevant legislation which addresses the issues of good governance of the administrative bodies.

The legislative in the Republic of Macedonia emphasizes the principles of legality and transparency in the work of the public administration. According to Article 16 of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, "the freedom of personal conviction, conscience, thought and public expression of thought is guaranteed." Article 24 provides that "every citizen has a right to petition state and other public bodies, as well as to receive an answer. A citizen cannot be called to

¹⁰ Bashar et al, 2011.

¹¹ Shi et al, 2000.

account or suffer adverse consequences for attitudes expressed in petitions, unless they entail the committing of a criminal offence".

Related to the Government, Article 88 of the Constitution states that the executive power is vested in the Government, and under Article 91, the Government, among other things, "lays down principles on the internal organization and work of the Ministries and other administrative bodies, directing and supervising their work".

These constitutional provisions are incorporated in the legislation of Macedonia, which emphasizes the principles of legality and transparency in the work of the public administration. The Law on Organization and Operation of the State Administration Bodies from 2000, in Article 9 states that "administrative bodies are obliged to inform the public about its work in accordance with the Constitution and law."

In the same Law, Article 3 states that the state government bodies should "perform their competencies established by law on the basis of the principles of legality, accountability, efficiency, cost effectiveness, transparency, equality and predictability."

The transparency of the administrative bodies was addressed in the Law on Civil Servants in 2010. According to Article 21 of this Law, "the civil servant shall, in accordance with law, be obliged to provide information upon request of the citizens required for exercise of their rights and interests, except the information referred to in Article 20 of this Law¹²".

Apart from the legislation relating to administrative bodies, transparency as a duty and obligation of civil servants is also listed in the Law on Local Self-Government from 2002, which precisely enumerates the obligations of the municipal bodies, committees of councils and public services established by the municipality, to inform citizens about their work without compensation, as well as about plans and programs that are important for the development of the municipality (Article 8). The municipality is obliged to allow citizens access to basic information on the services they provide, in a manner and under conditions determined by statute.

To fully implement the constitutional provision related to free access to information and the freedom to receive and transfer information, as specified in Article 16 of the Constitution, the Assembly

¹² Article 20 which refers to the obligation of the civil servant to keep a state secret and an official secret in a manner and under conditions stipulated by law and other regulation.

of Macedonia in 2006 adopted the Law on Free Access to Public Information, which defines the procedures for the exercise of this right. This Law emphasizes the obligation of institutions to provide accurate information with precise deadlines. It provides transparency in the work of holders of information and enables individuals and legal entities to exercise their right of free access to public information, and holders of information¹³ are required to provide information to the public about their work.

All these legal foundations laid the pillars for the advancement in accordance with the challenges of the age of e-Government. In this framework, the adoption of a national strategy for implementing the criteria of e-Government was a necessary segment of the application of the principles of good governance.

1.2. Snapshot of Macedonia's e-Government Strategy

According to the "National Strategy for e-Government 2010-2012", in pursuit of efficient and effective operation of public administration, Macedonia "is at a point of interaction of existing e-Government policies and strategies with policies and strategies for successful transformation and implementation of the new concept of e-Governance".

In the Strategy, the vision for e-Government is formulated as "Providing integrated, efficient and modern operation of public administration and providing services that are fully tailored to the needs of citizens and businesses". The goals that will be achieved through building an e-Government are:

- Improved offer of the government services through completely coordinated and integrated activities of the public administration;
- Improved interaction with the business sector and the industry;
- Quality and fast response to citizens' needs and requests;
- Participation of the citizens and the academic sector in building an informational society;
- Efficient government management;

¹³Holders of information are state administration bodies and other organizations and institutions, which are determined by law, bodies of the municipalities, bodies of the city of Skopje, bodies of the municipalities of the city of Skopje, public institutions and services, public enterprises, legal and physical entities who perform public jurisdictions and services of public interest, established by law.

- Increased number of ICT experts and an increased level of ICT literacy in the public administration;
- Open, participative and democratic government;
- Decreased corruption;
- Increased transparency;
- Increased income and decreased expenditure;
- Increased energy effectiveness;
- New forms of evaluation and improvement of the work of public administration and creating values for the society as a whole.

With the implementation of the strategy for e-Government, conditions for new opportunities, new services and new work models will arise. The citizens will have open access to government information and services, will have an opportunity to participate in the building of a democratic society in Macedonia, through using Internet, phones and other types of technologies, and this will also contribute to the decrease in corruption, increased transparency and increased information safety while exercising their rights and obligations.

Defined for a country, the basic processes related to the e-Government information communication system are: the use of information and communication technologies combined with organizational change processes, acquiring new knowledge and skills in public administration in order to improve public services and to strengthen the democratic process.

1.2.1. Principles of e-Government and their meaning

The Strategy for e-Government is based on principles including the principles confirmed in the Declaration of Ministers of the EU Member States and applicant countries:

- E-Government which is completely focused on the needs of citizens. A principle that is formulated in this manner means that the services of e-Government should be constantly available, to be easily accessible and fully adapted to the needs of the citizens.
- Confidentiality and safety. This means that citizens must have confidence in the electronic government as much as they have in the traditional one.
- Transparency. The new technological advances will be accepted only if those who are completely affected by them, from the employees in the public administration to the citizens and

businesses, are fully involved in the processes and activities carried out in a transparent manner.

- Quick, cost-effective and efficient. The use of new information and communication technologies and the appropriate organizational structures will enable fast acquiring of e-services and information. The more effective functioning of the entire state administration will contribute for the electronic services and information to be cheaper and better for citizens than the classical communication channels (counter, phone).
- Accessibility and Inclusion. The services of the public administration must be available to everyone without any discrimination. The digital gap, which means division between those who have no problem using the new technologies and those who have difficulties, should not exist.
- Usefulness and simplicity. The offered electronic services must be structured in an easy, clear and simple way.
- Cooperation. There should be cooperation between government agencies at all levels and in all segments, as a basis for the introduction of new technological solutions.
- Standardization. The state administration will function as a coordinated mechanism at a central and local level. This will allow users to communicate with the authorities and to use their services with the same quality, speed and through the same medium, regardless who provides the specific service.
- Interoperability. Different types of systems to be able to communicate with each other, regardless of their platform. E-Government solutions will be designed in accordance with generally accepted standards.
- Participation in decision-making, i.e. e-democracy. E-Government takes into account the needs and wishes of citizens, businesses, NGOs and other institutions, and includes all parties in their work. The Government will develop tools for effective public debate and participation in the democratic process of decision making.

Thus, formulated principles standardize the manner of operation in administrative bodies, which in their basis includes openness and transparency, and responsiveness in accordance with the needs of the citizens. Moreover, what is essential is that people are put in the role of

active subjects and participants in the process of deciding and decision-making.

2. Overview of e-Government projects and risks for their implementation

Macedonia is in the process of moving towards efficient and effective operation of the public administration, i.e. in the process of building the e-Government concept - strengthening the relations between public administration and society, which will ultimately result in a stronger, more transparent, more accountable and inclusive democracy.

Within the concept of e-Government, the following projects have been planned:

- A system for managing documents in the public administration bodies (DMS): Development of an integrated e-Government system for document management, which will enable the processing of documents to be 100% electronic. The system will be positioned as an e-Government spine, which will involve all relevant institutions. This will enable the Government to automate key administrative processes and introduce an electronic flow of documents in the process of creating and approving in every government institution as well as between institutions. The strategic objective of the project is increased efficiency and effectiveness in the operations of the state administration. The expected outcomes are efficient, effective and transparent execution of administrative processes; automated and controlled processing of work documents in and between institutions.
- A system for issuing digital certificates to public administration in order to increase the security in ICT systems and the information flow.
- Interconnection and use of registries and databases between state bodies and institutions (interoperability). This project means interconnection between registries and databases in ministries and other state institutions. With this solution, the institutions will not collect information that other institutions already possess, which will reduce duplication of data.
- E-documents. The project e-documents for citizens is aimed at significantly reducing administrative barriers. In practice, when a

citizen requests a service from any institution, the institution itself will need to request electronically all the necessary information and documents for the citizen from other institutions. Therefore, the implementation of this project is related to the Project for interconnecting registries and databases between state bodies and institutions.

- Electronic identification cards: Introduction of electronic identification cards based on public-key infrastructure which will incorporate a qualified digital certificate for all citizens and which will be used for any electronic service.
- Web portal for e-democracy: Creating a web portal for citizen participation in creating the public policies, which will allow the application of information and communication technologies in improving the democratic processes of the country
- Manage relationships with citizens (CRM): Delivering services to citizens in an effective and efficient manner, which will be completely tailored to their needs. This will be achieved through a range of government services through call centers, web portals, SMS, offices for citizen services, and by establishing the concept of "one-stop-shop government" in which citizens will have an opportunity to receive the necessary services through the channel of communication they prefer.
- Information safety: Adopting a legal solution for measuring and standardization of information safety, which will establish the minimum criteria for the protection of classified and unclassified data in information systems in Macedonia.
- IT Standards in state institutions: Establishing safety measures and recommendations for the protection and development of IT systems, where application will be mandatory by the state institutions. The goal is increased safety of ICT systems and information flow.

Other projects listed in the Strategy are: the Project for electronic payment of administrative fees, the Project Complete e-Treasury system, the project e-Cadastre and the Project One-stop-shop for import and export.

The main objective of these projects is to establish an infrastructure that will be the basis for the implementation of e-services. The implementation of most projects is provided in the period from 2009 to 2012.

The Strategy for e-Government lists the following as potential risks that slow down the implementation: resistance towards change of the current mode of operation, dual mode of operation, or parallel operation (on paper also), lack of IT staff in state administration bodies that will maintain and upgrade the system, insufficient funds for expanding and upgrading the solution; insufficient cooperation and coordination between different government departments and agencies; unpreparedness of state bodies to accept electronic payment of administrative fees; distrust of citizens in the new ways of payment of administrative fees, rejection of the importance of the introduction of IT standards and disrespect of established IT standards, inefficient reorganization of state bodies.

The following risks for implementation of a Web portal for e-democracy are listed: resistance of institutions to actively participate in the project, usage of the portal as a political medium, lack of confidence by citizens in the usefulness and importance of the portal.

Conclusion

The basic processes related to the e-Government concept are: the use of information and communication technologies combined with organizational change processes, acquiring new knowledge and qualifications in public administration in order to improve public services and strengthening the democratic process.

The concept for e-Government represents much more than just a support in the work of administration and an important factor for a sustainable development of the entire society in the country. Furthermore, the e-Government concept can be characterized as a central dimension of the global capacity, to collectively address the challenges of sharing information, knowledge and capacities for action. The real benefits of the e-Government do not consist in the use of technologies, but in the application of technologies in the transformation of processes.

The implementation of the "National Strategy for e-Government 2010-2012" in Macedonia resulted in increased transparency and accountability in the work of state institutions. However, the Republic of Macedonia still has challenges to face in the implementation of the overall principles set in the Strategy. This will require not only the overall commitment of government institutions, but also encouragement

and raising awareness of citizens about their rights and possibilities to use the benefits of the e-Government and participate in the decision-making process.

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