

Chapter 17

E-Government and Its Evaluation in South East Europe: The Case of Albania

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ABSTRACT

E-government (electronic government) has spread globally as a phenomenon that involves the use of information technologies supports delivery of public services. There are different actors and organisations being involved in e-government implementation and use, three of which are government organisations, businesses and citizens. In the case of government institutions, a common goal is to provide an appropriate service environment for both businesses and citizens. Citizens want to maximize their benefits received when for instance they pay taxes, and businesses have a goal to maximize profits. How to assess and improve e-government services is still a challenge in many countries. This chapter will offer some insights into the e-government phenomenon which could inform its future evaluation. The objective is to review e-government in the light of new public management (Barzelay, 2001), a term used in the last 30 years to describe new themes, styles, and patterns of public service management. This will lead us to consider alternative ways to evaluate e-government services (e-services). One of these is a technology acceptance model (TAM) to describe e-government related reforms in Albania and the Balkans region towards building a better understanding of how evaluation could be conducted. The insights from the Albanian case open up a number of opportunities that could be taken forward by policy makers, developers and other stakeholders. For those researching on e-government evaluation, the chapter offers a view of why we need to consider different aspects in the evaluation process.

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INTRODUCTION

The South-East Europe, or better the Balkans, is often mentioned for its communist past, for its problems but also for its present huge reforms. Surprisingly the region has the lowest negative economic growth predicted in Europe for 2009, the year of the world crisis, due to reforms and economic development. In Albania, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the situation looks even more promising, with positive instead of negative growth being predicted for 2009, which has turned it into one of the most interesting European countries in terms of investments.

With current integration developments of the Balkan to the Euro-Atlantic structures like North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU), e-government services to improve relationships between government institutions, businesses and citizens are crucial. These services can help improve the quality of the country's electronic networks of information, communication and transaction systems. Despite a perceived degree of progress, some key questions remain: To what extent are e-government services being accepted specifically in Albania? What are the e-government systems' drawbacks? How to adapt and encourage the use of these systems by different actors?

In this chapter we will review the Albanian case to give some answers to these questions. Throughout the discussion, we will use ideas of new public management (NPM) to contextualise the definition of existing policies and strategies of the Albanian government and private sector to improve e-government systems. We will suggest ways to evaluate systems by considering a variety of actors and e-government configurations that have emerged throughout. Our chapter begins by situating e-government as a worldwide and emergent phenomenon.

A CONTEXT FOR THE EMERGENCE OF E-GOVERNMENT

In a so-called era of technological progress, a new kind of rationalization has been introduced in the public sector worldwide by the use of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2006). Increasingly the use of ICT tools and applications is leading to transformational shifts in public policy, processes and functions of e-government. Such transformations are not only aiming to provide citizen-centred services but to increase the efficiency of public sector organisations, as well as improving cost efficient transparency and accountability in government functions. These transformations are being labelled under the banner of e-government.

Transformations are also shifting traditional roles. Governments are becoming partners rather than dictators of rules and regulations. Citizen groups have come to expect a 24/7 convenient service user interface provided by the government with ease of use, in a language the user understands and which is tailored to individual needs. This is the case in countries like Albania or any other so called 'developing' one. In order to be able to implement this 24/7 type of vision, government institutions are acknowledging that they need to integrate their government systems (UN survey on E-government for 2008), as well as accompany this integration with more fundamental (legal) reforms, training and infrastructure. As a result, we now have in governments complex arrays of organizational projects across government institutions, some of which aim to connect diverse technological platforms across them as well as automate delivery with the help of internet or intranets. Profound changes are envisaged within government institutions and citizens are becoming more aware of services they can use online.

Within the variety of projects labeled under the banner of e-government worldwide, something can be distinguished as common: the use of ICTs

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