

The Role of E-Government in Rebuilding Bosnia-Herzegovina

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INTRODUCTION

The world is currently experiencing a period of major change. The emerging new world is variously referred to as the third wave, the information age, the information society, or the knowledge-based economy. Regardless of the terminology used, what matters is that the new social, political, and economic world is globalized, based on the production, distribution, and use of knowledge, and is heavily reliant on information and communication technology (Handzic, 2004a). It is also characterized by increased complexity, uncertainty, and surprises. Some analysts like Raich (2000) think of it as a period of living in the centre of the “Bermuda Triangle” where individuals, organizations, and societies have to deal with the increasing turbulence and speed of change in order to progress.

The rise of the information society has brought major changes in citizen and business expectations, as well as organizational structures, cultures, and work processes. To remain responsive to the changing needs of their constituents, governments increasingly have to adopt information society tools and working practices. Essentially, they have to use information and communication technology (ICT) as tools in private and public sector renewal, develop information industry, maintain high level of professional expertise in ICT, provide opportunities to use information society services and have information infrastructure capable of providing such services. The purpose of this article is to explore how these processes are helping in rebuilding Bosnia-Herzegovina.

BACKGROUND

As any other country, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) cannot stay out of the way and isolated from current world trends. Its transformation into a modern knowledge-based economy and information society is viewed by BiH government as the key for its prosperity or even survival in the global competitive environment. There is also a recognition that only as an information society can the country decrease the existing divide between different social groups and individuals, and ensure progress and a future

for all its citizens. Finally, there is a recognition that, in order to catch up with more advanced countries, the transition of BiH from an industrial to an information society will require proactive and accelerated application of information and communication technologies (Policy of Information Society Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2004).

In addition, BiH transformation to a modern information society is seen as a strong means of rebuilding the confidence and regional collaboration destroyed by the 1992-1995 war. More importantly, the development of an economy and governance based on the application of information and communication technology is identified as the only plausible path that will enable BiH to take a worthy place within a united Europe (Policy of Information Society Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2004). Finally, there is a widespread agreement among the international and local community that the transformative processes should not happen haphazardly, but rather by using experiences from other countries to direct and develop these processes (Strategy of Information Society Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2004). Of particular importance is harmonization with European processes (Handzic, 2004b).

The transformation of public administration in the direction of e-government is one of the key segments of the overall process of building an Information Society in BiH. It is also a crucial pre-requisite for the integration of BiH into the European Union. Therefore, it is important to understand what courses of action, development factors and activities are being undertaken related to the reconstruction of public administration, and how successful they have been so far.

INVOLVEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IN THE E-GOVERNMENT STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

The EU defines e-government as the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) combined with organizational change and new skills in order to improve

public services and democratic processes and strengthen support to public policies (<http://europa.eu.int>). In the broadest sense, the expected impact of e-government is simply better government. More specifically, e-government promises better policy outcomes, higher quality services and greater engagement with citizens and private sector. Typically, e-government initiatives focus attention on effective collaboration among institutions, enhancing customer focus and building relationships with business partners. However, e-government benefits to the quality of life, industrial competitiveness, and society can only be realized if administrations change the way they operate.

E-government has only recently received systematic attention, and is now becoming a positive factor in the long-term development of BiH. Several factors have been identified that contribute to the stronger attention given to e-government issues in the post-war rehabilitation and development of BiH (eSEEurope, 2004). One is an understanding of the beneficial role ICT could play in the interaction between government, citizens and business. The other is active involvement of a number of international bodies in creating standards, models, and best practices. Most notable among these are the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the European Union (EU).

E-government development effort in BiH is based on a number of important initiatives. These include the 1995 G7 government online initiative, the Feira 2000 eEurope Action Plan, eEurope+ plan for informatisation of EU candidate countries, the global initiative for the Information Society under the auspices of the United Nations, the eSEEurope Agenda for the Development of the Information Society adopted by the Southern European countries, and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). These initiatives have raised awareness and paved the way for the start of the BiH national Information Society Development. The following are some major steps undertaken in this process presented in chronological order.

First, the ICT Forum was started with support from UNDP to develop situation assessments and preliminary recommendations in a number of areas relevant to the use of ICT in development. It was divided into seven round tables that covered the most important aspects of ICT usage and development. The Forum and its round tables gathered more than 100 local experts from various fields, as well as hundreds of participants of public discussion in entire BiH. Based on their conclusions and recommendations the ICT Forum issued a variety of reports in late May 2003, including: (1) Millennium Development Goals and The Information Society; (2) Infrastructure for an Information Society; (3) Policies for an Information Society; and (4) Information and Communication Technology

for an Information Society—Final Recommendations and Conclusions. These documents provided a basis from which the BiH national Information Society Development proceeded in fast and effective manner

As the next step, the Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the UNDP entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Information Society Development. The parties undertook to formulate a joint Project Document that outlined the process, expected key results, and a time-frame relating to the development of the Information Society. This MOU formed the basis on which UNDP was supporting the development of a comprehensive policy for an Information Society in BiH, a process taking place at the expert level and with public participation but under the overall guidance of the Council of Ministers. The idea initiated on the international level was diffused by media to ensure the widest possible visibility, support, and continuity of the process.

The actual development of a BiH national information society (IS) strategy started in October 2003. An expert group consisting of both government and non-government members produced the document “Policy for Development of Information Society in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” That document serves as a framework in accordance with which future legislation, acts, and other regulations will be passed in the process of building and development of an information society. It also serves as a baseline upon which future decisions will be taken on development directions, action plans, and priorities at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its entities.

Starting from the Policy document, larger expert groups developed the documents “Strategy for Development of Information Society in Bosnia and Herzegovina” and “Action Plan for Development of Information Society in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” Both documents cover five key development pillars identified by the Policy document (e-education, e-governance, ICT Industry, ICT Infrastructure, and e-Legislation). The Strategy document includes a short review of current sector status, defines the vision for the period 2010-2015, and provides a set of strategic recommendations for achieving the envisioned status. According to the strategy document, the action plan defines a set of concrete actions (initiatives, large development programs, projects, pilot projects, etc.) that should be implemented during the period 2005-2010, in order to achieve the goals defined by the strategy paper.

By the end of 2004, all three papers were officially accepted by the BiH Council of Ministers, as well as the representatives of the international community. Before that, the documents passed extensive public and expert debates and consultations. The second conference on Information Society gathered over 400 participants including government officials, local and international ex-

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