

The Romanian E-Government Strategy and the E-Europe

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The Necessity of an e-Government Strategy

For the European countries in transition to the market economy willing the accession to the European Union, the choice to implement or not e-government solutions is not a free one.

The reason is the Action Plan eEurope 2005; this action plan is in fact a political strategy (with measures and objectives), inviting EU countries to act (it means implementing national policies) in order to fulfil the proposed objectives at European level.

The eEurope means (among others), e-government, but the concept is larger, including also e-health, e-business, e-learning, etc.; until 2005, the EU objective is an information society.

The eEurope 2005 project it is not something new, it means developing and continuing the previous efforts. Also, for the candidate countries, already exists eEurope+, an Action Plan (prepared by the candidate countries with the assistance of the European Commission) from 2001, a co-operative effort to implement the information society in Europe. This is why the problem is not *if*, but *how* to be implemented e-government in transition economies, like the Romanian one.

Achievements and Shortcomings in Implementing e-Government in Romania

The candidate countries agreed to use the same set of indicators for monitoring and benchmarking the process as those used by the European Union countries, in order to facilitate the comparison.

The list of eEurope benchmarking indicators include:

Cheaper, faster Internet

1. Percentage of population who regularly use the Internet;
2. Percentage of householders with Internet access at home;
3. Internet access costs;
4. Speed of interconnections and services available between and within national research and educational networks (NRENs) within the EU and world-wide;

Secure networks and smartcards

5. Number of secure servers per million inhabitants;
6. Percentage of Internet-using public that have experienced security problems;

European youth into the digital age

7. Number of computers per 100 pupils in primary/secondary/tertiary levels;
8. Number of computers connected to the Internet per 100 pupils in primary/secondary/tertiary levels;
9. Number of computers with high-speed connections to the Internet per 100 pupils in primary/secondary/tertiary levels;
10. Percentage of teachers using the Internet for non-computing teaching on a regular basis;

Working in the knowledge-based economy

11. Percentage of workforce with (at least) basic IT training;
12. Number of places and graduates in ICT related third level education;
13. Percentage of workforce using telework;

Participation for all in the knowledge-based economy

14. Number of Public Internet Points (PIAP) per 1000 inhabitants;
15. Percentage of central government websites that conform to the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines at A level;

Accelerating e-commerce

16. Percentage of companies that buy and sell over the Internet;

Government on-line

17. Percentage of basic public services available on-line;
18. Public use of government on-line services - for information/for submission of forms;
19. Percentage of public procurement which can be carried out on-line;

Health on-line

20. Percentage of health professionals with Internet access;
21. Use of different categories of web content by health professionals ;

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European digital content for global networks

22. Percentage of EU web sites in the national top 50 visited;

Intelligent Transport Systems

23. Percentage of the motorway network (versus total length of network) equipped with congestion information and management systems.

Taking into account this analytical set of indicators, without proposing to realise an exhaustive analysis, we will try to highlight some of the achievements and shortcomings in the Romania's road to eRomania.

Of course eEurope means much more than e-government, but realities illustrated by some benchmark indicators are directly connected with this.

E-government applications addressing the general population presuppose that citizens understand the phenomenon of e-government and have certain skills concerning the use of computer, of Internet and also have access to a computer connected at Internet.

Taking into account a study realised by Gfk Romania (*Gfk Internet Monitor*) in September 2002, it results that:

- only 13% from the Romanian population accesses the Internet, 6% at least once a week and 7% as occasional users;
- 33% from the Romanian population never heard about the Internet;
- more than 50% from the population heard about Internet, but never used it;
- only 4% frequently uses the Internet, for business or obtaining/sending information.

On the other hand, the number of Internet users is increasing very fast, as shown in Figure 1.

****Fig. 1. ****

Figure 1. The average number of Internet users (in thousands/week) and Internet subscribers (in thousands) in Romania, in the period 1998-2002

*Estimations for the Internet subscribers.

** Estimations both for the Internet users and Internet subscribers.

Source: *Capital IT*, no. 43, 24th of October, 2002, p. 35 and *Capital*, no. 36, 7th of September 2000, p. 23.

When implementing e-government solutions centred to citizen, it must take into account some specific factors, depending on the Romania's economic development level:

- the reduced number of computers;
- the reduced number of telephone lines (for dial-up access);
- the reduced number of mobile phones as alternative for Internet access.

Figures representing the Romania's situation in 2001, compared with some other Eastern Europe countries are shown in Table 1.

****Tab. 1.****

Table 1. Number of computers, principal telephone lines and mobile phones for 1000 inhabitants in Romania and some Eastern Europe countries in 2001

Source: *Roland Berger Strategy Consultant*, quoted after *Capital*, no. 48, 28 November 2002, p. 15.

This is why, 50% of the users access the web from public places, 25% at the office, 20% at home, 12% from friends/relatives, 10% at school, 7% at the university, 3% from other place and 1% from the mobile phone.

It is also interesting that only 18% of the Internet users use it for communicating with the authorities, meanwhile 46% use Internet for chat, 37% for obtaining information about events, 26% for diverse news and 21% for job search. The only 18% of the users that use Internet for communicating with the authorities could be explained taking into account the situation of the public administration web sites (incipient, in some cases).

A special attention is focused in the last couple of years on youth, facilitating for them the entrance to the digital age. Thus, it exists a complete project for the informatisation in the teaching field, proposed by the Group for Promoting the Information Technology.

The program "Informatised Educational System" has as target that each of the more than 1,200 highschoools in the country to have a laboratory with 25 PCs plus server and performant accessories (printer, scanner and educational software), program estimated to cost more than 60 millions USD.

According to the proposed calendar:

- until April 2003 all the highschoools will be equipped;

- until September 2003, all highschools teachers will be included in a program for qualifying in using computers. Now, according to the Ministry of Education and Research, Ecaterina Andronescu, over 50% of the teachers know how to use the computer and 30% know to use it well;
- until September 2003 the curricula for highschool graduation will have and educational software as support;
- furthermore, it is expected that until the end of the school year 2003-2004 will be similarly equipped with networks of computers 7,000 schools.

At the end of this huge and ambitious program, will be 8.4 computers/100 pupils, comparing with the European Union average, 15.4 computers/100 pupils.

The efforts focused on hardware are sustained by plans in the software part: after the successfully ADLIC application in 2001, the 2002 highschool entrance exam was sustained by an educational portal, having also a discussion forum. Beside the educational software program started, the Ministry of Education and Research started the informatisation for the administration of schools (more than 20,000 schools).

According to the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, Dan Nica, at the end of 2002, Romania was the only European country where 95% of the population had (potential) access at one of the 6 ways to connect to Internet, at a 230KB/second speed. As the president of the ITC commission from the Deputies Chamber Varujan Pambuccian declares, from the point of view of the existing technology, Romania is at least three years before any other European country in the field of communication, being extremely sophisticated.

Successful e-Government Projects

In the Romanian case, the "strong point" is represented by the some successfully punctual e-government projects, initiated by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (e-procurement, e-tax).

In this sense, a good example is represented by the e-procurement, whose use increased in the last few months. More than 20,000 transactions concluded since its start, in March 2002, valuing more that 40 million of euro, permitted to realise important savings, hundreds of billions of lei, for the participant public institutions.

For example, the recent compulsory introduction of e-procurements for purchasing medicines in the national programs (like for AIDS), determined savings for the budget, only for the last 6 months of this year, more than 12 million of euro. According to the declarations of the Minister of Health, Doctor Daniela Bartos, there are 8 billion lei in savings each week.

In another program, addressed to the younger pupils, in the intent to provide a meal at school, using the e-procurement system to select suppliers, in more than 100,000 auctions reaching 1,000 billions of lei, were made savings representing 24% of the starting price in the auctions.

The official estimations are that in the next three years the national budget will save 750 millions of euro. In the first year of use, in the more that 40,000 transactions, were saved about 10 millions of euro.

Beside these savings, the e-procurement eliminates the corruption and bribery, things that, it is known, are present in Romania, and the state must fight against them.

The second major central e-government project (at national scale) is e-tax.

Although the local authorities were obliged to offer electronic payment systems for local taxes until February 2003 in major cities, due to delays in implementing it, the official beginning date was postponed for the second time. However, there are a lot of important towns where the system is already functional. Probably e-tax will be a success from the perspective of the IT solutions used - even heterogeneous, the implementation being at the choice of each local authority. The problem will be in this case *the impact*: the number of users, at least at the beginning.

Directly connected with the development of e-tax is the use of cards. One from six Romanians had a card at the end of 2002, the total number of issued cards being around 3.6 millions (mainly VISA and MASTERCARD).³ A pool effectuated by BancPost in August 2002 showed that for 69% from the interviewed the card was only the tool for receiving the wages and withdraw money from cash machines; only 6% used the card for payments.

The electronic identity card, whose introduction was approved by the Government at the end of 2002, will replace the actual identity card by the end of 2006. It will contain, beside the usual information, data concerning the health and social insurance of the owner.

The superior exploit of this supplementary data suppose a higher level of hardware and software endowment in the (local) public administration institutions. The identity card on smart-card permits to use it in a lot of different applications: as driving licence, in the election process, for on-line transactions, for security and identification reasons, for digital signature. For example, the Moscow City Hall use a smart-card for paying those entitled to the social aid (students, retirees, army members, other categories), offering them speed, security, the comfort of electronic payments, including for the underground fair.

³ In 2001, the increase was 100,000 cards/month, Romania being the country with the highest growth rate in the Central and Eastern Europe.

The Next Steps

The e-government solutions can have a different addressability and a different impact, depending on the targeting legal entities (Government to Business) or citizens (Government to Citizens). The biggest and the sharpest problems appear exactly in this last case, but the satisfaction of implementing a successful policy is greater. Generally speaking and also in the concrete case of Romania, for the public authorities there are more tempting the government - to business e-government applications. These are more "cost-effective", have an immediate impact and leads to substantial savings (such an example is the Romanian "success story" of the e-procurement), but for the common citizen there is no direct gain.

For the public administration, when offering public services for business, the impact is guaranteed - there is no need for so much publicity, it is addressed to interested and advised users - at least, comparing with the individuals.

On the contrary, the applications addressing to the population supposes first of all will and understanding for the phenomenon at a local level, after this the implementation of adequate hardware and software solutions in the local administration, and after that must be expected the reaction from the population.

When statistics show that seven million Romanians never heard about the Internet and 53% from the population never used it, it is clear that for the e-government applications, of local interest and focusing on citizens, *the success must not be expected very soon. On a short term, in figures, the efforts cannot be anything else but disproportional comparing with the results*, already mentioned.

We could also add the lack of abilities in using computers for an important part of the population, a still reduced degree of penetration for the electronic payment instruments, or the weak informatisation in the public administration, especially in the local one.

In this context, it must be signalled *the quasi-total lack of preoccupation for e-government at a local level*. The only applications with impact are the compulsory ones, "imposed" by law - for example the e-tax, the local authorities being obliged to create an functional system for local tax payments via Internet.

But, this can be nothing else but the beginning; or, *the local authorities realise neither the importance nor the complexity of the problem* and the advantages that could come. It is true that the number of well advised persons in this matter, the e-government, at a local level, is extremely low, too. We do not lack good public servants and not even IT specialists working in public administration, but e-government supposes much more.

The most appropriate example in this sense is the situation of the majority of local authorities' websites. Generally, town halls, county councils and prefectures contented only to mark their presence on the web through a simplistic site (sometimes not updated or difficult to use), that offers only general information, most of the time useless for the citizen who want to solve a specific problem.

Those who have seen a "veritable" website, a foreign one, where the local authority knows that through e-government ought to welcome citizens will be disappointed. *A survey of the websites created by Romanian local authorities shows the today's stage of e-government implementation: we are still at the beginning*, the only notable achievements are a few information centres for citizens. Even these, would not pass the stage two, but sometimes offers drafts of application forms and explain the steps the citizens must to follow.

The strategy for developing the e-government in Romania must take into consideration the gap between the central and local e-government initiatives and e-applications.

The most important question is: *what will come when the central authorities will cease proposing/projecting/to impose e-government applications at local level?* What it must be found is the *mechanism through which the ideas concerning e-government to have a favourable field for development at local level*. Here, at local level, it is the place for developing e-government solutions, for making easier the life of the citizens (maybe also that of the public servants), for increasing the efficiency, the transparency, for reducing the administration's expenditures, for increasing the authorities' response promptness and the citizens' degree of satisfaction.

Nowadays, in Romania e-government could be considered a luxury or something useless, *from the point of view of the number of potential users*. But, creating satisfactory integrated e-government applications will be possible only in a few years' time, with the condition to start now the coordinated efforts in this sense. Until this applications will be available not isolated, but in a coherent structure, the users (the citizens as beneficiaries) will be more numerous and more experienced.

On the other hand, we must not forget the substantial progresses from the last few years in fields indirectly correlated with the e-government and where effectively the boom was overwhelming:

- the accelerated development of the mobile telephony in Romania surprised even the mobile phone companies;
- the number of bank card users increased very fast, correlated with the payment of salaries on card. Now, a project of law intends to generalise the obligation for public companies, to pay salaries only via cards;
- in hospitals, recently started a national program for creating local network, connected at the Internet and with the intent of creating data bases having information about patients.

The *National Strategy for Promoting the New Economy and the Implementation of the Information Society*, adopted by the Romanian Government on 1st of November 2002, established, as principal objectives, the following:

- the strengthening of the national informational infrastructure;

- to supply large mass communication services;
- to develop the national industry for ITC products and services;
- to insure the large scale access to Internet services;
- to develop high speed networks for research and education;
- to educate and train human resources for the information society.

From a certain point of view, it could be considered that e-government applications oriented to citizen must not be a priority now in Romania. We consider that the implementation process of e-government should start at local level now, even if it is addressed to a relative reduced number of citizens, potential users.

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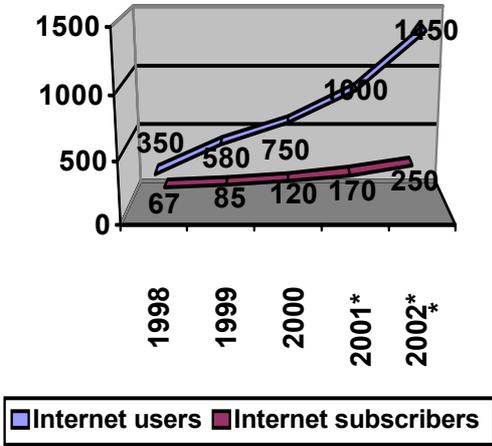


Table 1. Number of computers, principal telephone lines and mobile phones for 1000 inhabitants in Romania and some Eastern Europe countries in 2001

Country	Computers	Principal telephone lines	Mobile phones
Czech Republic	150	380	562
Hungary	135	445	370
Romania	39	180	162
Slovakia	130	321	358