DISCUSSION ON INFORMATION SOCIETY BUILDING ISSUES PLATFORM – STUDY CASE "DISCUS" PROJECT, MOLDOVA

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Abstract

The DISCUSsion on Information Society Building Issues Platform (established within a project supported by the International Visegrad Fund in 2015) represents an excellent opportunity for relevant stakeholders from Moldova to approach the information society aspects, from the European model perspective and experience of V4 countries in the field. The platform allowed the communication among different actors involved in the information society development process and facilitated an effective experience exchange between Visegrad countries and Moldova. DISCUS is focused especially on local public authorities from Moldova that lag behind compared to the central level, in terms of electronic public services. Ranges of events were organized in Chisinau in order to bring together both local and central levels, plus other relevant sectors and with participation of V4 experts. Important aspects and good practices of e-government (at local level) were presented by V4 experts, development partners, government, central authorities and academia representatives. The Research Studies that followed each project event emphasize the achieved results, including relevant conclusions and recommendations, as well as research on issues that emerged during the discussions.

The article briefly presents the project impact with an accent on situational analysis, lessons learnt, good practices applicable for Moldova and the next steps.

1. Introduction

Republic of Moldova has embarked in the process of implementation the strategic goals aligned with Digital Agenda for Europe through national strategic documents on building information society such as "Digital Moldova 2020", "e-Transformation Agenda", "Enhancing competitiveness of ICT sector Strategy" which are contributing to achievement of the "Roadmap For Enhancement of Moldova's Competitiveness" tasks and finally to the implementation of the Moldova – European Union Association Agreement. [5]

The multiple issues should be overpassed in this process, including, but not limited to, how to keep the common vision of different actors under the main development direction, how to deal with the persistent resistance to change and to acceptance of e-Governance, e-services, ICT tools etc. Different, and sometimes contradictory, points of view of government, business, academia, civil society representatives on the issues and challenges in country transformation could hamper the pace of development and to lead to projects fail. A significant amount of assets and backlogs created and accumulated within the last years in Government institutions and beyond, may never be

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used. On the other hand, during the time, the proprietary software licenses purchased by different public authorities may come to their end of support by the producer. To identify assets and backlogs as well as emerging strategic issues in building e-Governance, a project was initiated - to build a special communication platform – a serial of permanent, regular, periodic seminars on information society development issues.

The DISCUSsion on Information Society Building Issues Platform was established within the project, with the same title, supported by the International Visegrad Fund in 2015 (12 months). The Information Society Development Institute (ISDI) from Moldova had the role of project applicant and coordinator. Three organisations from Slovakia, Poland and Czech Republic were project partners from Visegrad group (V4).

To achieve the project objective aiming at promoting the European model of effective application of information society policies/e-Governance tools in Moldova to strengthen participation of academic sector, local government, business, civil society, mass-media in decision making process, using the experience of V4 countries a range of activities and events have been undertaken.

The objectives of the project events: workshops and seminars were to inform and raise awareness among Moldovan local public servants, as well as different stakeholders regarding the information society development process, with an emphasis on the needs to develop and implement e-services at the local level. The purpose of the two study visits organized within the DISCUS project during 2015 was the exchange of experience, the transfer of best practices from Visegrad countries (Poland and Slovakia) to the Republic of Moldova, establishing contacts and fostering collaboration on Information Society field (focusing on local electronic services). [12]

The platform aimed to bring together international and local thought leaders, representatives of academic sector, Government, Business, Civil Society and mass media from Moldova and Visegrad countries. Each of 2 days seminar/workshop discussing the most actual and challenging issues ended with the agreed list of recommendations for relevant decision-making institutions.

2. Situational analysis in Moldova

In the Republic of Moldova, the main necessary regulatory framework was created for building information society. It currently includes more than 20 laws, 80 Government decisions; about 70 approved conceptual documents regarding the information systems of public authorities, more than 20 general-purpose regulatory acts and more than 75 with a specific purpose issued by the National Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Information Technology (ANRCETI). [7] The relevant institutional framework is in place, which includes the Ministry of Information Technology and Communications, ANRCETI, National Radio Frequency Centre, Centre for Electronic Governance, National Centre for Personal Data Protection, etc.

Strategic Program for Governance Technological Modernization (e-Transformation), supported by the World Bank, was adopted in 2011. In 2013, the National Strategy "Digital Moldova 2020" [11] was approved by the Government and is being implemented. Recently, the Government approved a package of initiatives to increase the competitiveness of the IT industry: the Strategy for the years 2017-2021 and the Law on information technology industry parks, aimed at creating the necessary prerequisites for boosting development of the information technology industry oriented towards export.

The e-Governance Centre is the institution responsible on behalf of the Government for the implementation of the e-Transformation Agenda. The Centre is under the supervision of the Prime Minister and under the coordination of the National Commission for e-Transformation that formulate the strategic objectives and the e-Transformation priorities. The e-Governance Centre coordinates and directs the work of the e-Transformation Coordinators Council (established in 2011 by Government Decision; it is formed of representatives of ministries and central authorities). Council's mission is to ensure the implementation of e-transformation agenda across sectors and to coordinate the necessary processes for e-Transformation in public sector. [20]

The e-Governance Centre set up (in 2012) a unique platform for public services provided by the central authorities - www.servicii.gov.md portal. This platform functions as an electronic catalogue for public services provided by the authorities dedicated to citizens and the business. The main purpose of this platform is to offer brief, correct, accessible and complete information on the public services available in the Republic of Moldova. Currently, there are 548 available services on the portal, of which 125 are e-Services (on-line services) with data opened for access. [21]

The Republic of Moldova Government is determined to transform all traditional counter services into e-services by 2020, through the „Open Government action plan" and the „Government technological modernisation strategy" [20]. In this way, the citizens will be able to access over 500 e-services.
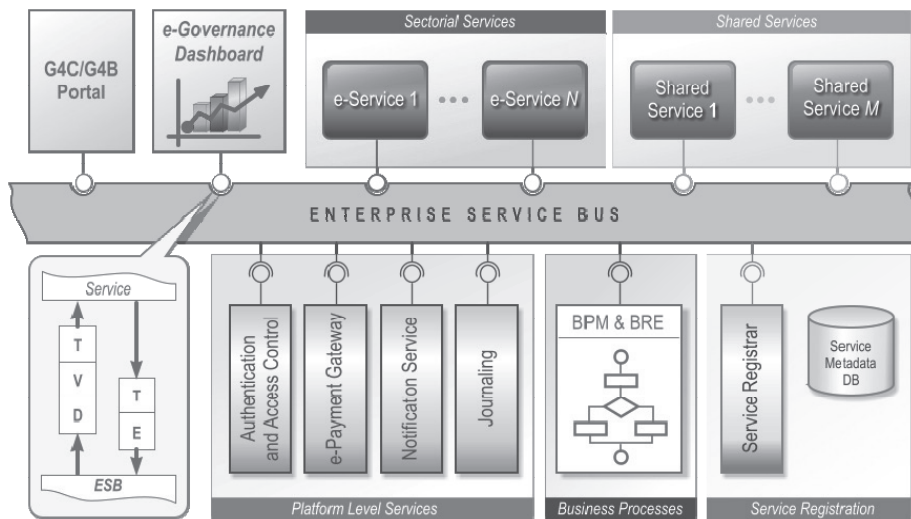

Figure 1: e-Government Platform [19]

Every year the "Citizens' perception, uptake and support for the e-Transformation of Governance in the Republic of Moldova" is being undertaking [2, 3]. The 2015 survey shows that citizens perceive e-Transformation of Government in Moldova as an important reform for society, as 79% of respondents said they support e-Transformation, which is an increase by 6% compared to the value reported in 2014 and by 21% compared to the data of the 2012 survey [1].

The share of citizens who needed and accessed public services provided by central public administration authorities in 2016 made up 31%, remaining at the same level (30% in 2015, 2014 and 2013), that demonstrates the need to additional analysis of such stagnation in uptake.

The level of satisfaction among online service users remained the same as in previous years and accounted for about 66% (fig. 2). More satisfied are young people aged 16-25 years, respondents from villages, Romanian speakers while less satisfied are people from cities, except for those from the capital (Chisinau) who have used the relevant services [2].
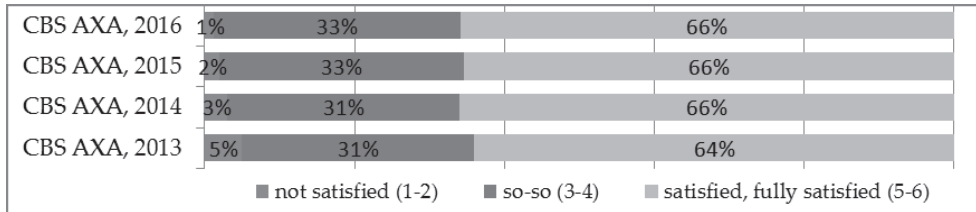

Figure 2: Level of satisfaction related to electronic services quality [2]

The main advantage of e-Government, reported by 29% of respondents, is that problems are resolved rapidly without queues. [1] Although the pace of growth of the level of access of government institution by population is significant in the last years, the level of e-Transformation agenda implementation is not yet at the satisfactory level. The level of knowledge by population of the e-Governance concept continues to be quite low in Moldova, with almost similar levels during the studied periods (2013-2016) [2]. A substantial gap exists between the level of accessed web pages of government institutions by population from the capital city - Chisinau, and citizens from urban areas and those who live in rural areas (fig. 3). These differences in accessing of government institutions web pages demonstrates the gap in government on-line services uptake by population living in rural areas compared with urban areas, and especially from Chisinau and indicates that the population from rural areas have lower readiness to use e-services.
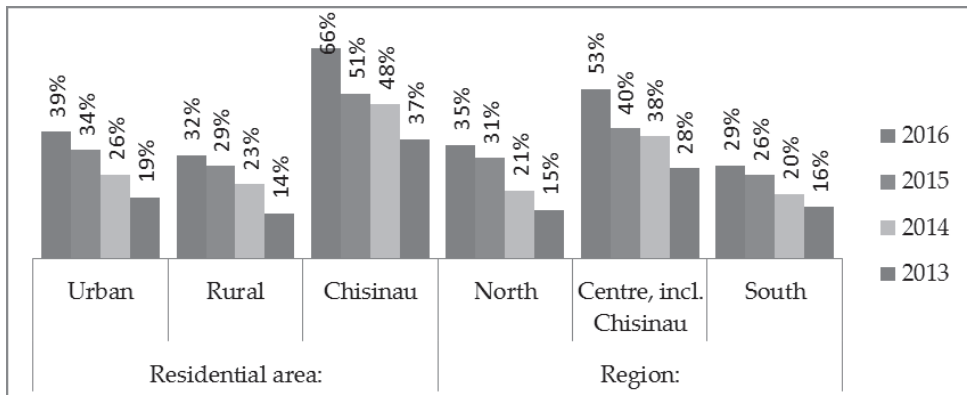

Figure 3: Level of access of web pages of governmental institutions depending on residence areas [2]

Among main causes of lower uptake of e-Government services by *rural population*, but not limited to, are:

- lower average income per capita (approx. 66% from urban level) [14];
- massive emigration of the most young and active part of population, the remained part of population being elderly people; [3]

- lower number of computers per household (60% compare to urban - 77% and the capital Chisinau - 86%) [2];

- lower Internet usage (59% compared to urban - 79% and the capital Chisinau - 92%) [2];

- lack of e-services provided by local public authorities and lack of ICT skills.

One important factor is the territorial – administrative division of the Republic of Moldova. Since 2001, Moldova had reapplied the soviet system of Rayons (districts) as main territorial-administrative units. According to the Law no. 764 from 27.12.2001 on territorial – administrative division of Republic of Moldova [13], the territorial – administrative system is organised in two levels:

1st level - 896 Local Government Units (864 communes (villages) and 32 district residence towns); 2nd level - 38 Local Government Units (5 Municipalities plus 32 Rayons/ Districts, and 1 Autonomous Territorial Units - Gagauzia).

In order to comply to the European standards, since 2007 Moldova is organised in 5 development regions: North, Center, South, Chisinau, and ATU Gagauzia (Law no. 438 from 28.12.2006 on regional development in Moldova, Decision no. 158 from 04.03.2010 on the National Strategy of Regional Development).

In addition, the territory on the left side of the Dniester River, so-called Transnistria, is a specific case, so as Moldavian laws are not applied there.

The existing territorial – administrative division is inadequate for a such small country as Moldova. Because of this system, for the majority of local governments, the expenditures exceed revenues, and there is a lack of resources for capital investments. Also there is a low level of transparency of local government's activity and a weak local fiscal system, as well as many other problems connected with the territorial-administrative structure.

Thereupon, only 28% of the total localities in Moldova are present in the web space - almost half of them have just one informational page (a kind of sub-page) on the website of other institution, most of them on websites of municipal district councils. 193 localities hold a website, and 60 - have blogs [22].

The level of computer and Internet use, as well as that of computer possession in households is directly linked to the citizen education level, i.e. higher level of education induce a higher rate of computer use. [2] The lower level of access of Government web pages by population means as well the lower participation in decision-making process. It was important to find out the mechanisms to enhance the level of local e-services presence and to improve the level of access of government e-

[33] In 2012, according to data of the National Bureau of Statistics (www.statistica.md), 78% of Moldovan labor migrants were aged from 15 to 44 years old, of which 22% were 15-24 years old, and 34% were 25-34 years old. (Migrant support measures from an employment and skills perspective (MISMES) Moldova, 2015)

services by rural population making possible to increase the participation in decision-making process.

How the identified gaps could be closed? What actions may be undertaken to improve the situation? The discussion platform was suggested to be established bringing together representatives of local public authorities, civil society, academic sector, central public authorities to discuss problems in ICT driven local development and to identify most relevant solutions. The project was formulated with the task of creation of such platform on Information Society Development Institute ICT and organizational resources. The platform represents mainly organisational architecture, which established a network of representatives of different actors within Moldovan society and a special website for communication the events, news and project results including on-line broadcasting of project events.

The discussion platform offered by DISCUS project on ICT- driven local development was aimed to identify relevant issues and enhance local participation in the decision-making process that could help in strengthening the capacities of local authorities on the one hand. On the other hand, it was important to stimulate the involvement of central public authorities, academic sector and civil society in discussion of local public authorities' problems. A series of events organised during the project resulted in identification of priority (most necessary) services to be implemented at local level (cadastral e-services, archive services, educational and health services, etc.). The participants showed interest regarding the subject of local electronic services and awareness on the importance of technology in all areas of public life. [8]

Although Republic of Moldova progressed in the digitization of public services at the central level, it still is behind at local level. However, the success of these activities at central level creates promising prerequisites for the digitisation of the local public services, by providing access to registries and databases of central authorities, by transfer of experience, by adapting existing technical solutions to the specific local context. However, at the moment, there is a lack of consolidated vision on local public services that could be digitized, as well as future institutional framework, to ensure their digitization. The Visegrad countries experience and learning from the best practices were considered as a relevant approach within the DISCUS project to enhance the situation in Moldova.

3. Lessons learnt from Visegrad countries experience and recommendations for Moldova case

Despite of the more or less favourable conditions for information society development set up in Moldova, these should be enhanced, especially for closing the rural-urban gap in ICT based development. Although state policies are focused on improvement the global competitiveness of the country and its position in e-Government development ranking [11, 15, 17, 19], lack of financial resources and of venture capital funds is hampering the pace of development progress. Therefore, a series of measures to easier availability of venture capital funds to boost the use of multilateral partnerships ensuring adequate financing for the implementation of approved strategy and policy documents are necessary.

Based on the experience of Visegrad countries, it can be ascertained that the digitization of local services was initiated based primarily on the degree of demand for these services, while the informational support relies, primarily on centralized resources. For Moldova case, the prioritization of public services to be reengineered and digitized at local level shall be based also on the citizen

demand and quick-win approach as already is being used at central level. The most requested services to be provided at local level (based on project events findings), is the issuance of various documents to citizens: family composition certificates, notice of payment of taxes, the certificate on place of residence, certificate about possession (loss) of share of farmland and must be implemented as priority services in a uniform way regardless of the locality.

The legal-normative framework has a key role in the digitization of local public services, in the absence thereof, the services that could be provided in electronic form become mainly only information services for the citizens. [7]

Interoperability remains a condition for digitization of local public services, this task being, most certainly, the responsibility of central authorities, which should develop and publish interoperability standards and unified methodological approach. In spite of existing regulatory documents on the interoperability of services [16, 17] and functioning interoperability platform M-Connect, the level of interoperability between information systems of government institutions shall be further strengthen based on best V4, EU practices and ISO interoperability standards. The digitization of public services can be performed only after their successful reengineering. In many cases, preserving existing technological schemes for the delivery of local public services remains a major obstacle to achieve efficient services and ensure universal access. [7] An important role in facilitating the digitization of public services in Visegrad countries was played by the standardization of public services, which allowed increasing their accessibility and reducing costs for development and implementation of a proper information infrastructure.

Digital technologies are progressing, which could repel less knowledgeable citizens. In order to ensure universal access to local digital services it is necessary to develop/purchase ICT tools, not dependent of certain manufacturers of digital equipment and technology (technological neutrality), as well as to implement life-long learning programs for potential applicants of digitized local public services. [6]

One of the major priorities in the government IT systems infrastructure building area shall be increasing involvement of local ICT companies removing artificial barriers such, for example, as very high level of company income requirements for participation in tenders. Public-private partnerships are a key to success in digitizing local services. It is for certain, that setting-up ICT departments for maintenance and especially the development of new ICT tools in every public authority, is not feasible in a situation of a permanent lack of financial resources.

In terms of capacity building, the training of qualified ICT staff should be set as a national priority. In order to strengthen young people's digital potential, a network of competence centres in areas outside the capital was recommended by participants at the project events. Measures aimed to increase the ICT competence of teachers is necessary, the development of motivation mechanisms to increase the use of interactive methods and modern ICTs in the teaching process to ensure availability of ICT skilled local workforce is a must.

The digitization and uptake of local public services in Visegrad countries became possible due to extensive digital literacy campaigns of the population, especially the elderly. The change of attitude and mentality of the citizens towards the way of providing local public services based on their digitization should be a task, as important as equipping public authorities with ICT tools for electronic provision of the services. [8]

In terms of building confidence and security in the use of ICT, special attention should be paid on training courses on information security. It is necessary to increase the efficiency of ICT implementation at the regional level, because ICT tools are poorly implemented at the local level, due to the lack of funding and qualified staff.

It is necessary to promote the active use of ICTs, as a tool for environmental protection and sustainable use of natural resources. The country is an agrarian one and modern development requires ensuring the full integration of ICT in agriculture, rural development and systematic dissemination of information and knowledge in agriculture using ICTs.

Based on Visegrad experience, clearing the digital divide between urban and rural environments is a necessary condition for successful implementation of digital services provided by local authorities. In this context, Government support is necessary for implementation of information systems at the local government level in Moldova to close the rural-urban gap [7].

The digitization of local public services has a social and economic impact only when any of the services can be accessed from any public authority and are provided in a uniform manner. A key role in facilitating universal access to digital services is implementing common means of identification and authentication of users, regardless of the access point and specific public authority. In the area of access to information and knowledge, practical steps are needed to provide public access points to information for the citizens on local authorities' activities, including information on the activities of state institutions on their official websites, taking into account providing access to people with disabilities.

DISCUS platform, maintained by ISDI and supported by e-Government Centre and competent central government authorities could serve as a reference platform for the exchange of information, documents, forms, etc., to support and guide the local public authorities in developing ICT-based services.

Coordination and synchronization of effective and efficient assistance projects financed by donors for local public authorities is necessary, to exclude overlapping and duplication of efforts and activities. Continuous support for local public authorities on ICT capacity building and project management, use of tested applications, document management systems, etc. is necessary. A first step towards implementing new technologies at the local level is the establishment as medium to long-term priority and allocation of resources (financial, human, etc. if possible) for the development of ICT. It is advisable that ICT-based development to be stipulated in local development strategies and other policy documents of municipalities / local councils, district councils. [10]

4. Project impact

Involving different stakeholders within project activities enabled the DISCUS Platform to become a focal point, an efficient communication platform for all stakeholders interested in information society development process in Moldova. [4] An important feature of the DISCUS project is that more than 430 people (mayors, deputy mayors, secretaries of local councils, specialists from local and central public authorities, public servants, representatives of academic sector and of civil society) from 32 districts (rayons) of the Republic of Moldova became aware of what e-services mean and how they can influence the public administrative processes, as well as decision-making process. [12]

Local Public Authorities representatives benefited through enhancing their institutional capacity for participation in the decision-making process on central level, study visits that contributed to exchange of best practices on concrete and practical examples, as well as strengthening collaboration with V4 countries and will continue to benefit using the created platform with all posted information. Recommendations on public policies' amendments based on V4 best practices [7] and the input of seminars' participants contributed and will continue to contribute towards enhanced policy/legal/regulatory documents. Development of the action plans for implementation of local e-services in rural localities will lead to improved citizen services. [9] During the events, the local representatives had the opportunity to express their problems on how they can solve them with ICTs, receiving advice and consultations of national and Visegrad experts, resulting in clear visions for the future steps and follow up actions.

The project was assessed positively by the government representatives (State Chancellery) and Academy of Sciences of Moldova management during project events. [4] DISCUS has become a unique communication platform in Moldova, where central authorities can meet face to face with local representatives, civil society members and other relevant stakeholders.

It is worth to underline that due to continuous progress in e-Transformation Agenda, including wide discussions on DISCUS platform, a new important document has been issued on modernization of public services in Moldova – "Action Plan on public services modernisation reform for 2017-2021" [1], containing solutions for a majority of identified and discussed issues on DISCUS platform, such us, but not limited to:

-      Minimal quality standards of public services;

-      Building capacities of employees involved in public services delivery;

-      Establishment of learning platform on reengineering, digitization and provision of public services;

-      Launching a special program for training of citizen and business in use of e-services;

-      Prioritization, reengineering and digitization of selected public services;

-      Enhancing use of interoperability platform.

The European Union will provide "Technical assistance for reengineering of selected public services delivery 2016/S 126-224601" to support the Government in reengineering of selected public services and their country-wide delivery and in carrying out the digitisation of 5 selected public services and consolidation of the infrastructure for digitised services sustainability with the indicative budget of 4 m EUR [18]. The DISCUS results were used by public authorities representatives in formulation of needs for the assistance project and this assistance will undoubtedly have a substantial impact on further implementation of policy documents and action plans based on the best EU practices.

In January - February, 2017 a new package of legal-normative documents on interoperability is being in the process of wide discussion: The Draft Law on Interoperability and Data Exchange, The draft Regulation on Semantic Catalogue.

In conclusion, it may be stated that such platforms create favourable environment for open, democratic and productive discussions on important community problems and identifying collaborative solutions based on best practices of advanced countries in ICT based development.

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