Editor's Introduction to the Special Issue

eGovernment in Balkan Countries

Western Balkan Countries (WBC) were involved in the most conflict events in recent European history. Former Yugoslavia, consisting of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia ceased to exist. At this point, Slovenia has already joined the European Union including Euro and the Schengen borders - border crossing without any border control post, just the common EU-state sign welcoming the visitor. It is believed that WBC will soon or later follow.

There is a strong determination in the European Union and in Western Balkan Countries that WBC join EU. To foster the integration proccess, the European Union started several projects, including coordination actions (CAs) as part of the IST call 6. Among the accepted CAs, one represents the central part of this special issue: Facilitating eGovernment Innovation and Enabling Project Implementation in Western Balkan Countries (We-Go).

The idea is to introduce EU standards in regard to eGovernment in the past years. Obviously, action plans for eGovernment in local information system strategies are not fully realized and the systems are not conformant with EU policies and requirements. The low level of awareness of eGovernment services is an additional hurdle towards EU conformance. In order to ensure sustainability of eGovernment in WBC the WeGo proposal seeks the following major actions to be taken:

- Firstly the introduction of an eGovernment Framework and Interoperability Platform with focus on transactional (cross border) services, and providing context-rich descriptions for selected application domains as best practices, including demo / trials assessments for facilitating and enabling follow-on implementation projects including relevant specifications.
- Secondly, the establishment of specialized eGov Academies will increase the level of awareness regarding eGovernment and enhance the management capabilities for eGovernment solutions. Using the knowledge and input of EU government approaches the academies will deliver contemporary and actual knowledge by offering trainings and certifications for the different target groups.
- Thirdly, the eGov Resources Network Approach and the eGov Innovation Progress and Impact Evaluation will ensure sustainability and further improvements.

The project builds up from recommendations on how to improve eGovernment in the WBC countries by using scientific and practical best practices from EU and action plans by WBC governments.

If the actions mentioned are to be realized, the WBC countries and their eGovernment efforts could move a major step closer towards the EU set in i2010. The realization of action plans will support WBC countries in establishing and integrating eGovernment solutions. With measures and actions created, the EU could help the WBC countries to evaluate the efficiency of their activities and guarantee sustainability.

The current action plans in the WBC are targeted to meet the requirements set out in eEurope 2002 and eEurope 2005 and most of them are not met yet. Meanwhile we are facing the additional challenge to meet criteria set out in i2010. Therefore tremendous effort is needed to accelerate the execution of relevant action plans and to achieve EU alignment. Current overview indicates that:

- Most of the countries have adopted fragments but not set up the framework needed for eGovernment legislation. We conclude that in the WBC countries a comprehensive legal framework for eGovernment is missing.
- There is lack of interdisciplinary approach and cross-organizational initiatives as well as management capabilities to allow the management of such eGovernment projects.
- The level of IT knowledge and IT skills in regard to eGovernment for developers and information officers needs to be increased.
- Concerning applications for eGovernment basic building block e.g. registries are not fully implemented or completely missing. For cross-border and legal certainty purposes within the common EU market the implementation of such eGovernment applications has a high priority.
- The ICT infrastructure has isolated "island" structure, realized on heterogeneous platforms without possibility for interoperable functioning - individualidual solutions, no interchange of data and information, communication and transactions. They do not address regional aspects or interoperability compliance with the EU standards.
- The digital divide gap, content gap, gender gap, multicultural and multilingual gap in WBC is increasing in comparison to the EU due to following facts:
  - lack of available e-services and
  - lack of ICT knowledge and skills
  - lack of possibilities for democracy and citizen inclusion including multicultural and multilingual aspects.

The project We-Go is aiming to transfer and to adapt successfully "Good eGov Knowledge and Practices" and to create a sustainable innovation impact within the WBC Countries by facilitating and enabling imple-

mentation projects and aligning to EU standards set in eEurope 2005 and i2010.

Two of the partners in the WeGo project have achieved significant progress in recent years. Currently, Austria is the first European country in recent polls regarding eGovernment activities and Slovenia is second to third. It is expected that these countries together with other EU partners will be able to help improve progress in WBC in particular due to traditional cooperation.

In this special issue, overviews of current state of the art in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Macedonia are presented with the aim to further promote and advance eGovernment in Western Balkan Countries.

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