Twenty Years After the Hype: Is e-Government doomed? Findings from Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

In this study the authors analyze the effects of e-government reforms that began in mid-90ies by confronting the promises which these reforms made to government performance in the period before and after the reforms took place. The authors use fiscal and performance indicators of the Slovenian government and courts to argue that e-government did not yield any notable effects on the state performance. Finally, the authors analyze the reasons why e-government technology cannot be regarded as sustainable and suggest a different approach towards researching how to sustainably improve governance for generations to come.

Keywords: e-Government, e-Government Myths, e-Government Unsustainability, Legal Certainty, State Performance

1. INTRODUCTION

Nothing less than a revolution of epic scale was the promise conveyed by politics and public administration alike in the course of national e-government reforms. The so reformed governments would be faster, easier and more effective, more inclusive and participative. Almost twenty years after the beginning of the hype however, a question needs to be answered: what kind of revolution can e-government deliver at all?

Based on powerful myths (Bekkers & Homburg, 2007; Homburg, 2005), a visionary image of e-government has been established and cultivated by politicians and researchers in the public administration domain that based on a purified image of a reinvented, new and better government, serving a new generation of omnirational, tech-savvy citizens.

For the last two decades, a complex and hazy e-government vision has acted as a driver that brought into life many new policies and technical artefacts that where put into action at the front- and back-offices of government agencies, were dealt with in plenary discussions of the lawmakers, and occupied minds of researchers and developers of advanced technical solutions aimed at increasing government performance, reducing administrative costs, and enabling new channels and ways of interaction between subjects and their sovereigns.

E-government policies and strategies aimed to deliver to an ideal, empowered, omnirational citizen, who “knows his or her preferences,
is able to master both bureaucratic and ICT skills, and actively engages in conversation with government agencies” (Bekkers & Homburg, 2007). This myth of the citizen as empowered consumer of government services is crucial for the legitimacy of e-government reform strategies, as without such citizen demanding reforms, e-government might perhaps not be required at all.

With the aim to please this optima-forma citizen, a number of e-government systems have been developed in the last two decades for delivering a wide range of services to citizens (Al-Sebie & Irani, 2003; Marche & McNiven, 2003), such as web applications to search for employment (Celino et al., 2010), public information catalogues (Veljković, Bogdanović-Dinić, & Stoimenov, 2011), municipal Twitter-feeds (Mambrey & Dörr, 2011), government registries (Lenarčič, 2009), electronic identity concepts and –signatures (Dumortier, 2004; Paulin, 2012), systems for fair non-repudiable e-mail (Paulin & Welzer, 2013; Tauber, Apitzsch, & Boldrin, 2012), etc. (One might argue that even governmental surveillance tools like e.g. the German Bundestrojaner (Berlit & Wegewitz, 2008) or the US-American PRISM programme (Greenwald & MacAskil, 2013) are nothing but e-government technology developed to handle tasks of the state machine with more efficiency.)

Alas, as research reveals, neither citizen nor state accept e-government as planned: Cordella (Cordella & Iannacci, 2010; 2007) argues that 70-87% of all e-government projects were failures, studies on open government data reveal a careless bureaucracy (Adair, Nielsen, Fuchs, Byrne, & Blanton, 2007; Paulin, 2010), and studies on the acceptance of state-driven electronic identities systems show as low as 0.1% acceptance rates (Kubicek, 2011; Ris sanen, 2010) of this technology. According to this, one might be inclined to think that there is a lack of mutual understanding between the designers of e-Government and its target audience, this fictional omnirational empowered citizen?

While the question of social (non-)acceptance of e-government artefacts has been rather well researched, to the best of our knowledge hardly any attention has been given to the exploration of the cost-benefit analysis of e-government. Bannister & Remenyi (2003) for instance discuss the complexity of assessing benefits of ICTs in general, however they do not focus on the specifics of e-government (although Tsohou et al. (2013) falsely claim that they do); other attempts to assess the implications of e-government were contributed e.g. by Tsohou et al. (2013), who focus on user/consumer-oriented evaluation, Reddick & Turner (2012) who find that in addition to e-government services traditional communicational channels remain required, or Hauner & Kyobe (2010), who focus on the efficiency of the health and education sectors, finding that in these sectors often “efficiency declines with the level of spending”.

We take an approach into a different direction, by searching for performance improvements of the state as a holistic system, assuming that introduction of technology ought to have had perceptible effects on the system as a whole (as it did e.g. in the banking-, logistics-, and aviation industries). This article therefore aims to contribute to the issue of assessing e-government cost-benefit by dealing with two interrelated questions – first, did government performance and costs improve since the introduction of e-government?, and second, are e-government artefacts able to deliver sustainable improvement to government efficiency and cost?”

The first question aims to give an answer to the straight-forward request for justification of investments from a subject- (and taxpayer-) perspective, while the second question aims to analyze the sustainability of e-government artefacts, i.e. their ability to adopt to changes in future without requiring significant re-investments. In the latter we shall follow three dimensions: 1) the proneness of artefacts to change in the jural context, 2) potential for interoperability and standards-based additions, and 3) the role of artefacts in assuring legal certainty. While the first question looks at the past to analyze performance, the second ques-
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