Editorial

When more than a year ago Professor John Taylor invited me to prepare a special issue of *Information Polity* devoted to the development of e-government in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), I did not expect that so much time would be needed before we could achieve the standards demanded by the journal and publish this 'project', thus sharing these articles with the readers.

Most of the papers selected for this publication were selected from the Working Group on E-Government that was established within NISPAcee (Network of Schools and Institutes of Public Administration from Central and Eastern Europe). Our primary aim was to take an 'x-ray' of CEE e-government and provide readers with an in-depth comparative study of e-government phenomena in this huge region.

The CEE region covers a very diverse set of countries, which have in many respects very little in common, geographically, historically, politically, and economically. Yet there is one common factor which is that most of these countries are emerging from the hegemony of the Soviet Empire. And, as they do so, more liberal governmental and democratic values are being struggled with. So, although there is much diversity in the region there is a common point of reference and a trajectory of change and development that bring value to a collection of papers on CEE.

The countries of CEE include those placed by the Cap Gemini regular measurements (Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, 2006) that belong in the upper third of the EU25's most advanced countries for e-government readiness, while there are many countries in the same region that still find themselves at the very beginning of this process. This diversity has led to us change the course of observation and set somewhat different criteria for this Special Issue.

In the end seven papers have been selected for publication. Because of the different character of the papers we decided to group them into two parts. Part I presents three papers that are not specifically focused on the e-government phenomena in the region alone, ones that attempt to outline some characteristics of e-government development which can be generalised across most EU countries, including CEE countries. Part II offers four country-based case studies.

Though the pace of development has been different, most CEE countries are trying to narrow the gap between East and West and introduce e-government in their respective countries. In this respect a simple 'transplantation' of solutions from the West often seems a very attractive choice. This is one of the issues addressed by Lenk in his introductory paper. In the first place he argues that we should not forget that e-government is just a new name or further step in the "informatisation" of the public sector, and informatisation is a process that has been running in most countries for several decades, and one that should be seen as a crucial foundation for the successful development of e-government. Thus, according to this logic, decision makers in state and local administrations should understand that successfully implementing e-services for citizens and other 'front office' solutions (which is for instance in many CEE countries very high priority on the political agenda) first require that we informatise all the necessary public registers and databases and establish the requisite information infrastructure in the 'back office'. Simply building an 'E-' front office on top of a 'paper-flooded' back office will not lead to modernisation, but rather to frustration. One further lesson from Lenk's paper should also be emphasised here: e-government solutions are so dependent on the cultural and organizational climate that they cannot be successfully transferred from one to another country without thorough adaptation to the new environment.

In our second paper in Part I Bavec attempts to correlate to e-government readiness and government efficiency some very interesting societal characteristics such as competitiveness, innovation and trust. Along these lines he compares the Central and Eastern European countries (new member states) with 'old' Europe. Some of his finding are extremely interesting and worthy of more careful study. He argues that there is a strong correlation, for example, between the e-government readiness and competitiveness of individual countries, and that countries such as United Kingdom or Sweden, with very highly developed e-government, are already harvesting results in terms of greater economic competitiveness. Bavec presents similar findings on innovation, claiming that there is a clear correlation between an innovative environment in the respective countries and e-government readiness, and vice versa. That means that e-government is correlated with increased overall national innovation, which is again an interesting lesson for politicians and others to learn. And perhaps the most worrying conclusion is that countries with less competitive and innovative environments should not expect much influence from e-government on general government efficiency.

The third and the last paper in Part I, Leben et al. is somewhat different, focusing on evaluation of public portals. Although public e-portals have over the last few years become the most common way of 'selling' public services there has so far been very little investigation and research on evaluating the overall characteristics of public portals, let alone public portals providing services according to the life-events concept. The paper presents a three-level model for the qualitative analysis of life-event portals, which is tested on a set of twelve portals from around the world.

Part II offers four selected papers (case studies) from three different countries in the CEE region. Each of the selected papers addresses the field of e-government from a different perspective. There is one we might call a whole country report – from Poland, one paper focusing on a large city – St. Petersburg, one case study on Estonian local government, and finally another from Estonia, which is more thematically oriented.

Demczuk and Pawlowska present a case study of Poland. In the first part of the paper the authors describe the strategies for e-government development in Poland, while the second part presents and analyses the results of two empirical research projects. The first is a Cap Gemini Ernst & Young survey well known across the EU and based on the twenty standardised services. The second project selected for presentation and critical analysis of the results was a project investigating the Public Information Bulletin websites administered by the local governments in the Lubelskie region. As is the case in many CEE countries, the results of the project show that most e-services provided in Poland have mainly affected the front office, and have not really reached the back-office at all.

It is becoming clearer that our approach to evaluating the maturity of e-government in individual countries has been far too oriented towards the supply side, with demand neglected until very recently. The first studies focusing on the 'demand side' and 'customer expectation and satisfaction' appeared in Western Europe in the last two years while we have scarcely any evidence about the 'demand' side from the CEE countries. In this sense Golubeva and Merkuryeva's analysis of demand for e-government in the second largest Russian city, St Petersburg, represents a fresh approach. Although working on a small sample of interview respondents, the results are interesting.

Another field that has been subject to very little attention in the past in CEE countries is local government and e-government development at the local government level. Reinsalu's study therefore represents a very welcome contribution. The empirical study, again focused on the demand side, was carried out in the city of Tartu and provides a very detailed insight into the use of different communication channels between the citizens and the local administration.

Finally in the last paper Toots analyses and defines factors influencing the quality of institutional web pages. Her main focus and hypothesis was that the type of institution (public/private, semiprivate) could

be an important factor in explaining the quality of institutional websites; however this proved to be wrong. The empirical study which was made among the selected Estonian institutions, public, semi-public and those which are closely linked to private sector showed that there is no clear correlation between the type of the institution and the quality of its presence on the web.

Although we have yet to fully provide a clear profile of e-government development in Central and Eastern Europe I do believe that the selection and variety of papers gives some deeper insight into the state of this field in the region.

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