

Municipality websites as a communication channel

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Abstract: The research on the digitalisation of public administration is crucial in the case of the Czech Republic and its rural areas due to the nature of the Czech settlement structure with many small rural municipalities. The article deals with the development of e-government in the Czech Republic from the perspective of rural development. The paper's starting point is a characterisation of the digitalisation process of state and local government in the last quarter of a century. The paper focuses on developing municipal websites, which represent a crucial communication channel in the rural environment. The paper also discusses the possibilities and limits of e-democracy in rural development.

Keywords: digital divide, public administration reform, rural development, municipality websites, e-democracy.

JEL Classification: H10, H75, H79, R58

1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, Czech society has been undergoing a transformation process associated with creating a pluralistic democracy and transitioning to a market economy. The public administration was in many respects provisional in character, and the concept of its reform developed hesitantly. Decision-making mechanisms at the local and regional level suffered in the 1990s from an incomplete territorial hierarchy of state and local government, unclear competence relations between individual institutions and subjects in the decision-making process, and an inefficient system of local government whose competencies overlapped with those of the state administration. The introduction of new information technologies and the formation of an information society have long been neglected by governments in the Czech Republic. A specific turnaround occurred only in 1999 when the government approved the first comprehensive concept of the state policy of building the information society in the Czech Republic and the concept of building public administration information systems. At the same time, the reform of territorial public administration began to take on a more solid shape.

In the 1990s, the Czech countryside had difficulty recovering from the effects of the social and political transformations of the second half of the 20th century. The emergence of collectivist forms of economic life in the post-war period led to the disintegration of traditional local communities, networks, and ties. On the other hand, there was an increased emphasis on cooperation and the spontaneous participation of citizens in public life was encouraged, but only within controlled limits. As in other totalitarian systems, a sharp dichotomy gradually developed between public space, where people play their "roles" according to imposed rules, and private and family activities, seen as an escape and a real place of personal self-realisation. All this began to change only after 1989. The transformation processes of the 1990s then opened the space for efforts to renew rural areas in the Czech Republic. This process included using information and communication technologies, efforts to overcome the digital divide and introducing e-government tools at the level of rural municipalities. This paper focuses on municipal websites and aims to show how they have evolved over two decades. Particular attention is paid to using municipality websites for communication between the local government and citizens. Related to this is the question of the use of e-government in the political space of rural municipalities.

2 Methods

In considering the digital aspects of rural municipality development, the paper focuses on information, communication, or transactional services, representing the three levels of e-government. In the area of information services, the main concern is the availability of documents, especially those related to development projects; in communication services, it is a discussion forum where citizens can express their views on current municipal development issues. The options for transactional services are not yet significant, but that is a general problem. The paper is inspired by research and theoretical discussions focused on the impact of information technology on the development of rural space in European countries after 2000. The issue was discussed at the World Congress of Rural Sociology in Trondheim in 2004 (IRSA 2004) and the Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology in Keszthely in 2005 (ESRS 2005), and inspiring research has

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taken place in the UK (Warren, 2006). In the Czech Republic, too, after 2000, at the height of the reform of territorial public administration, the issue of e-government was investigated, also in the context of rural development. Within the framework of a comprehensive research project of the PEF ČZU called Information and Knowledge Support for Strategic Management, conducted in 2005-2011, the issue of development of territorial self-government and implementation of e-government was investigated. The second project, supported by GA CR, focused on research on citizens' participation in public life of rural municipalities in the Czech Republic (Čmejrek et al., 2010). Valuable data were obtained from competitions concentrated on projects in the digitalisation of public administration and on web presentations of municipalities and regions (the Czech Zavináč, the Gold Coat of Arms, the Objev roku). A large amount of data was provided by community studies prepared in seminars by Public Administration and Regional Development students at the Faculty of Economics and Management of the ČZU. The selection of the surveyed municipalities was controlled so that the work covered the settlement structure of the Czech Republic from several aspects: size of municipalities, distance from the centre, position in the public administration system, etc. In addition to basic information about the municipality, each study included data on the local political process (political parties, elections, interest groups, involvement in regional projects) and citizens' political participation. One of the areas monitored was the web presence of the municipality, communication between the local government and citizens, and citizen discussion forums on the web. With a gap of ten or fifteen years, this paper refocuses on the data and findings and contrasts them with the current situation. This is especially the current form of municipal websites and local government portals examined after 2000. The comparison should show how these Internet tools have changed regarding information availability and communication between local governments and citizens.

3 Research results

The Digitalisation of Public Administration

The situation at the time of the Czech Republic's accession to the EU is well characterised by a strategic and conceptual document called the State Information and Communication Policy (e-Česko 2006, 2004), which the Czech government approved in the spring of 2004. In the attached SWOT analysis, the strengths of the Czech Republic included high penetration of mobile communication (above the average of EU Member States), high general literacy of the population, advanced infrastructure, even territory settlement, and unencumbered by obsolete systems and technologies. Weaknesses of the Czech Republic in this area included low penetration of information technologies in households and high relative costs of their acquisition and operation, low penetration of high-speed access to the Internet, insufficient administrative capacity for the use of EU funds, underestimation of the role and potential of information technologies in the development of society, inconsistency in political support for the development of information policy, low computer literacy of the public and insufficient motivation to use modern technologies. The document saw opportunities in integrating the Czech Republic into the EU, in the high penetration of information and communication technologies in the business sector and public administration, as well as in public administration reform and financial reform. On the other hand, threats included the unfinished liberalisation of telecommunications, slow implementation of national legislation, inefficient spending on projects, insufficient coordination of projects, persistent resorts and poor vertical cooperation, inadequate involvement of new technologies in teaching, underestimation of the role of research and innovation, and erosion of security and privacy in the use of information and communication technologies (e-Česko 2006: 25).

The expansion of computer literacy has become an integral part of the state policy of building an information society. In February 2003, the National Computer Literacy Programme was launched to provide beginners with basic computer and Internet skills. The project was based on public-private partnerships (PPP projects). The introduction of eGovernment in the Czech Republic 20 years ago consisted of computerising newly established regional and municipal authorities (Public Administration in the Czech Republic 2004, p. 75f.). Part of this process included establishing and interconnection electronic portals, especially the portal of local governments ePUSA (<http://www.epusa.cz>). Support actions have been of great importance in the development of digitisation. These included the annual international conference on the Internet in state and local government, which brings together representatives of public administration, the professional community and business entities. The panel also regularly includes the Czech Zavináč, a competition for the best project in the computerisation of administration. An analogous competition is the Gold Coat of Arms (Zlatý erb). This competition evaluates the level of web presentations of municipalities, cities, and regions. The results of these competitions are a valuable data source for research on the problematics to date.

Exciting information is provided by research from the period before the Czech Republic acceded to the EU, in particular the Analysis of the Information Needs of the Public and the Evaluation of Public Satisfaction with Public Administration Information Services, which has been carried out under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic since 2000. Research has shown that citizens' interest in public administration information is more

declarative than urgent; citizens mainly use national media and private family sources to obtain information on public administration, and only a minimum of citizens draw information from the Internet. The most challenging information is those that directly affect citizens - information about citizens' rights and obligations, laws and orders, the functioning of authorities, taxes and fees, or health care—about a quarter of citizens had terrible experiences obtaining this information. According to the survey, only 9 per cent of households could use the Internet, and a quarter of adult citizens could connect to the Internet, most often at work. Four per cent of citizens used the internet daily, and another five per cent visited it at least several times a week. More than half of the Internet population repeatedly saw the websites of public institutions, with the most frequent being the websites of municipal and city authorities. However, the websites of the commercial register, ministries and financial authorities had high traffic. Higher traffic levels were also recorded on the websites of employment offices (Analýza, etc., 2000).

In this context, it is essential to consider the lack of information technology equipment for citizens and households two decades ago. According to the document e-Czech Republic 2006, only a quarter of households (about 26 %) had a fixed telephone line or mobile phone and a computer. However, of these households with potential Internet access, only 16.4 % used this option. The main reasons for not using the Internet were that families did not need the Internet (67 %). Respondents also cited the high cost of the equipment (36 %), the prohibitive price of Internet access (21 %), lack of computer skills (17 %) and the possibility of accessing the Internet elsewhere (13 %). The growth of household Internet access in the Czech Republic up to 2002 was slower than in EU Member States (e-Česko 2006, p. 26). The situation today is quite different.

The digitisation of territorial public administration depended on state policy and, to a large extent, on the activities of municipalities, regions, and their organisations. Twenty years ago, the level of information and communication technology equipment of local government officials was higher than that of the population. After the year 2000, the Internet has already become a fixed part of the functioning of local government. The number of municipal websites has steadily increased. This applied to large towns and small rural municipalities, many of which have acquired more than one website. Local government websites were registered by several portals, which were also largely grassroots initiatives but which naturally work with the central public administration. This is also the case with the ePUSA local government portal, created as a regional initiative of the former Pilsen North District Office (<http://www.epusa.cz>). Later, the portal, which provides contacts with regions and municipalities, became a joint project of the Association of Regions of the Czech Republic and the Ministry of the Interior. The Cities and Municipalities Online portal has gained significant importance. The portal creates a publishing environment for municipalities and towns and tries to develop user-friendly services to improve communication between public administration and citizens (formerly <http://www.mool.cz>, now <https://mesta.obce.cz/>). The Towns and Municipalities Online portal shares its data with the ePUSA portal.

The current state of digitisation of public administration shows that the digitisation of local government has been more successful than that of state administration. Even in 2023, it was possible to read reports such as, "Healthcare electronization is lagging, and key areas are not functional." We find a similar situation in other state administration departments. Local governments are more successful in digitalisation because they can rely on grassroots initiatives.

Municipality Websites as a Communication Channel

The establishment of municipal websites, which began over two decades ago, was initially spontaneous. Twenty years ago, many municipal websites were clustered around rural micro-regions, which groups of municipalities set up to implement joint regional projects, often including projects seeking to make greater use of information technology and digitalisation. The websites of the micro-regions and their member municipalities provided exciting information on regional development in their respective areas. The breadth and diversity of the websites of the municipalities and micro-regions also revealed numerous problems with the use of information technology at the local and regional level, particularly problems with updating information. From this point of view, there were significant differences between the websites of the individual municipalities or regions from the outset.

What can be achieved by using information technology was shown, for example, by the municipality of Okříšky, which was awarded the Golden Coat of Arms in the competition for the best websites and electronic services of towns and municipalities in 2004 (Zlatý erb). This municipality in the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands, with about five hundred houses and 2,000 inhabitants, was impressed with the information it provided on its website to the public, businesses, tourists and interested parties from elsewhere. In addition to information about the municipality's history, interesting places in the region, and rich cultural life, it was information about the general binding ordinances and regulations of the municipality, news and business contacts. The municipality's website was regularly updated (Okříšky, official website).

Two decades ago, however, contradictory examples could be found in abundance. Many were located near the distinguished municipality, even in the same micro-region. The Černé lesy micro-region was founded by 18 municipalities, which have acquired websites within the framework of a joint project (Černé lesy website). Twenty years ago, the website of the municipality of Okříšky was a shining example within the micro-region. The other municipalities had their websites but with poor and un-updated content. The websites usually contained only basic information, and the menus were mostly empty. For example, on the website of the municipality of Bransouze, one could still read at the beginning of the summer that the municipal authority wished the citizens a Merry Christmas. More recent statements were not there.

How can we explain such stark differences within the same micro-region? Introducing information technology in municipalities and regions is business and entrepreneurship. Business companies try to sell hardware and software. They must convince municipal governments and mayors of the merits of introducing information technology, connecting to the Internet, and setting up websites. Introducing information technology requires financial resources, projects, and the support of the local community and entrepreneurs. The success of such projects depends on the capacity of local citizens and interest groups. Initially, good websites were created by those municipalities whose citizens were interested in them, used them as a source of information, participated in discussions on the website, responded to calls, answered surveys, etc. In some places, however, a website was set up as part of the project implementation, but then the whole thing went to sleep, and the introduction of modern technologies had no effect. However, the situation is quite different if we look at the Černé lesy micro-region today (it still exists). All municipalities of the micro-region have websites of excellent professional standards and are regularly updated.

In the early phase of the digitalisation of territorial public administration, the information and the communication level of e-government developed. The website of the municipality of Okříšky, which was awarded the Golden Coat of Arms in 2004, attracted attention primarily because it became a forum for a broad dialogue between citizens and the municipal government. By the spring of 2007, 1,285 posts had been made to the discussion forum on the municipality's website. The discussion forum on the Okříšky municipality website had by far the most considerable number of posts on topics directly related to the introduction of information technology. From November 2003 to April 2006, 92 posts, some very extensive, were made on cable television and Internet connection, and 163 posts were made on the topic of the municipality's information system. Incidentally, the introduction of information technology is often the reason for the association of municipalities with rural micro-regions.

Two decades ago, information technology already served to sustain the cultural life of rural communities. Dolní Vilémovice (Třebíč district, 398 inhabitants) has become a characteristic example. The municipality tried to maintain a school in the village with too few pupils by providing the citizens with lifelong learning and other services. The municipality promoted the "Community School in a Small Village" project online. The project included online courses to improve citizens' access to information and education, facilitate communication with the authorities, and find employment (Dolní Vilémovice website). Another remarkable example in this respect is the village of Mokré in the Hradec Králové Region. It is a small rural village with only about 160 inhabitants and 74 houses. Nevertheless, the municipality has been remarkably successful in the use of information technology. In 2007, it won three prizes in the regional round of the Golden Coat of Arms competition: second place in the category of the best website of the Hradec Králové Region, second place in the type of the best electronic service of the Hradec Králové Region and the Public Prize of the Hradec Králové Region (Mokré website). The village had no school, post office, or medical facilities, only a very agile municipal library with Internet for the public. Its website has become an excellent example of the use of information technology in providing cultural life in a small rural village (Knihovna U Mokřinky website). Municipal websites play an irreplaceable role in promoting cultural events. Closely related to this is the development of the tourism potential of rural areas. A significant part of the websites of rural municipalities and micro-regions is oriented in this direction.

Municipal websites are nowadays an obvious part of the presentation of municipalities. The websites are of a professional standard and are regularly updated. However, a comparison with the situation ten or fifteen years ago shows one significant difference. Today, municipal websites do not have discussion forums to the extent that they used to. Communication between town halls and citizens has moved to other platforms.

E-democracy and Rural Development

The formation of modern representative democracy and its institutions was firmly anchored in the historical context of the development of the nation-state. However, in the current development of representative democracy, one cannot overlook the disturbing phenomena manifested in the persistent decline of citizen participation in the democratic process, especially in elections. The transformation of contemporary political partisanship and the tendency towards cartelising

party systems can also be considered worrying. The membership base of political parties is depopulating, and communication between the membership base and the party leadership is failing (Klíma, 2015). In the conditions of the Czech Republic, political parties are weakly represented in rural municipalities. There is usually no full spectrum of political parties in municipalities with up to 2,000 inhabitants (90 % of the Czech Republic's municipalities). In comparison, there are often no political parties in municipalities with up to 1,000 inhabitants (80 % of the Czech Republic's municipalities) (Čmejrek et al., 2010).

The decline in political participation of citizens threatens the very foundations of the democratic process. This is particularly evident in elections, which citizens perceive as secondary. In the conditions of the Czech Republic, these are senate elections and elections to the European Parliament. However, in the long term, participation in elections to the Chamber of Deputies is also declining. Can modern information and communication technologies eliminate the worrying phenomena threatening the democratic process?

In the concept of e-government, the digitisation of the democratic process represents a separate pillar, which is referred to as e-democracy (alongside e-administration and e-services). In terms of the levels of e-government, the first two levels of e-democracy, i.e., the information level and the communication level, have been developed mainly in the last two decades. The third, transactional level has stagnated, but this is a worldwide phenomenon. Fulfilling the transactional level with full functionality means implementing the electoral process via the Internet as a full-fledged alternative to traditional voting in polling stations, so-called remote voting. This is still far off (Brunclík and Novák et al. 2014). As the political discussions among parliamentary parties after 2021 show, introducing a simple postal vote, which has long been commonplace in many countries, will be a significant problem in the Czech Republic.

On the other hand, remote voting is an option that Czech rural municipalities cannot miss. Rural municipalities are characterised by high voter turnout. However, remote voting could be used in local referendums, which often fail to achieve the necessary turnout for the referendum results to come into force. Regarding the democratic process, the benefits of digitisation are unlikely to be directly reflected in the third pillar of e-government but rather in the development of social networks. Today, there is no doubt that social networks divide society. On the other hand, they open up opportunities for the development of civil society. This is particularly important in the rural areas.

4 Conclusions

A fundamental advantage of modern information technology and the Internet in public administration and the political process is that it makes it much easier for citizens to access information and public services, authorities, and political institutions. Digitisation thus represents a significant improvement in representative democracy and local self-government, as it breaks down the traditional opposition between the centre and the periphery. Regarding rural areas, the digitisation of public administration and elements of eGovernment enable rural populations to overcome their conventional disadvantageous position at the system's margins.

A comparison of today's situation with the situation two decades ago, when the reform of the territorial public administration was at its peak, and its digitalisation began, showed three main conclusions:

1. Although the digitalisation of public administration started vigorously more than two decades ago (there was even a Ministry of Informatics for some time), it is still an ongoing task. This is confirmed both by the recent difficulties of the state, e.g., in the COVID-19 pandemic, and by the programmatic goals of some parliamentary parties. Local self-government is more successful in digitalisation than the state administration.
2. Websites of rural municipalities, created at first to some extent spontaneously and often amateurishly, now have a professional level and help municipalities in their development. In this sense, what is often referred to in the literature as the digital divide has been overcome.
3. The contribution of municipal websites to the communication between municipalities and citizens is undeniable. However, on the other hand, we no longer see such broad discussion forums on municipal websites as we did two decades ago. The question arises as to whether this is a consequence of the spread of communication on social networks.

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