

SLOVENIAN E-GOVERNMENT: A CITIZEN-CENTRED PERSPECTIVE

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ICT and the Internet are frequently seen as a viable solution for achieving better government, increasing citizens' political participation and improving service quality and the quality and delivery of government services. This article explores the systematisation and services of the Slovenian e-government through a citizen-centred lens. The development and current systematisation and functioning of e-government is analysed in two respects. First, the article assesses and interprets the (historical) formation of Slovenian e-government from its early beginnings, especially focusing on key documents such as strategies, action plans and certain Internet-based tools intended for wide citizen use. The aim is to disclose how citizens as end-users have been perceived and encouraged to actively participate in (e-)government. Second, the Slovenian e-government is analysed via an interpretation of available statistical data with an emphasis on how citizens use e-government, how efficient and effective it is, and whether it can be considered a participatory platform for citizens to become engaged in political matters.

Key words: e-government; Slovenia; citizenship; e-participation; e-democracy.

1 INTRODUCTION

Electronic government (e-government) is no longer simply regarded as an added value but as a fundamental component of countries' aim to improve their governance. Although seen by different authorities as one of the key elements of successful governance, the e-government concept remains elusive and vague for various reasons. The very different and complex political and institutional contexts in which e-government is implemented are not the least important of these reasons. Given these environmental differences, e-government is also known by different, interchangeable terms such as electronic governance,

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digital government, online government etc. (Grönlund and Horan 2005, 63). Even more importantly, the concept has been defined in many ways that vary significantly as a result of different theoretical perspectives, methodological outlooks and dissimilar priorities of governmental strategies and concrete policies.

However, most scholars (see Welch, Hinnant and Moon 2005; Carter and Bélanger 2005; Jaeger and Thompson 2003) agree that one of the main focuses when developing e-government in many countries is on the interactions between the government and the citizens as users. Looking from a citizen-centred perspective, e-government is for example defined simply as “utilising the Internet and the World-Wide-Web for delivering government information and services to citizens” (UN and ASPA 2002, 1). Abie et al. (2004, 8–9) claim that e-government may be considered a powerful tool for effectively organising and integrating a large amount of available information as well as a tool for seamlessly integrating citizen interaction with its services. The novel forms of communication and interaction not only affect the relationship between citizens and governments but also transform citizens’ understanding of their identities, political processes and governmental arrangements, including their possible political actions. For example, Silcock (2001, 88) argues that e-government is “the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens [...]. It has the power to [...] deliver a modernised, integrated and seamless service for their citizens. The relationship is no longer just a one-way ‘us-versus-them’ proposition; rather, it is about building a partnership between governments and citizens”. Similarly, Kumar, Mukerji, Butt and Persaud (2007, 64) contend that the quality of the tools and services provided to citizens can be significantly improved with e-government while attaining greater efficiency for all participants. E-government tools and services also play a crucial role in legitimising authority since the provision of always-available services can improve the citizens’ level of satisfaction and enhance their acceptance of the public sector. Correspondingly, Silcock (2001, 89) states that citizens demand ‘one-stop shopping’ and ‘service-in-an-instant options’ from their governments which are increasingly becoming the norm in the public sector, transforming not only the services but also citizens’ attitudes to the government and thus the relationship between the state and the citizens. Steven L. Clift (2004, 2) goes even further by arguing that e-government is one piece of the e-democracy puzzle in which governments as public institutions need to play a proactive role in the online world by offering the citizens possibilities to participate in democratic processes while at the same time striving to more effectively meet public challenges in the information age (Clift 2004, 3). Notwithstanding Clift’s notion of e-government being part of e-democracy, it should be stressed that the latter cannot be regarded solely in relation to the former. There are many e-democracy theories and practices (Päivärinta and Sæbø 2006) that are quite often reflected and implemented as a potentially critical or even subversive instalment challenging the prevailing institutionalisation of contemporary dominant democratic (offline and online) practices (Dahlberg and Siaperä 2007). What the majority of perspectives have in common is their emphasis on novel ICT-based possibilities for citizens’ participation. Therefore, it is not rare for the new technological possibilities, especially web-based ones, to be regarded as an extension of active citizenship. The latter is broadly understood in this article as citizens’ engagement in various political processes.

However, despite the importance of citizens as end-users of e-government services and particularly the performance of web-based government websites and tools in facilitating citizen-government interaction, relatively little research

is available on the topic. Most research available on e-government services focuses, for example, on the private sector (government-to-business) (Benbunan-Fich 2001). Other studies that analyse e-government seldom consider the (historical) process and context of e-government development as well as citizens' behavioural aspects and the frequency of using online services not only to obtain information but also to interact and transact with the government. Therefore, to analyse Internet-based e-government services in an effective way, several important features must be considered. While the development process and characteristics of websites and tools are important, the frequency and specific ways in which individuals actually use them must also be taken into account and rigorously analysed.

This article explores Slovenian e-government systematisation and services through a citizen-centred lens. I reflect and interpret the development and current practical systematisation and functioning of e-government in Slovenia. In this, I particularly concentrate on the question of how citizens are perceived and targeted via governmental policies, strategies and e-government websites and tools that encourage and permit their active participation and involvement in government. In this light, the paper is structured as follows. First, I theoretically reflect on contemporary practices of citizenship, especially in relation to the novel forms of political engagement and processes in the information age. I explore the notions and perceptions of e-government, particularly as concerns e-participation and other forms of online citizens' activities that are incorporated by the authorities at different levels in order to stimulate and enhance the citizens' use of the new ICTs and especially the Internet.

In the second part, I proceed to analyse the formation of Slovenian e-government from its early beginnings, looking in particular at key documents such as strategies and action plans as well as the main Internet-based tools intended for wide citizen use. E-government can hardly be analytically assessed if no consideration is given to the diachronic process in which e-government has evolved and developed, especially with regard to the context of individual citizens and their relationship to government in a specific cultural and socio-political environment (Evans and Yen 2005, 2006). Therefore, my intention here is to disclose how citizens as end-users and as such a target population of e-government have been perceived, considered and dealt with in various government documents and implemented e-government tools.

In the third section of the paper, I draw from the theoretical reflections and available research on the evaluation/analysis of e-government from a citizen-centred perspective (Kumar et al. 2007; Lili, Bretschneider and Gant 2005) in order to present and explain the methodological framework/model for analysing the Slovenian e-government. It is worth stressing at this point that, while there are numerous dimensions of citizens' online political activities (see Schwartz 1996), my focus is on the systematisation and functioning of Slovenian e-government relative to citizens' online behaviour and activities. Therefore, I built an analytical model along four dimensions (each consisting of corresponding variables), namely Slovenian Internet-user characteristics, e-government adoption, e-government website and tools design, and e-government service quality as perceived by Internet users (citizens). Fourth, I show and interpret statistical data on Slovenian e-government according to these four analytical dimensions. The data for each variable related to a specific analytical dimension is considered in a comparative manner by juxtaposing the data for Slovenia and the EU average so as to place the findings related to

Slovenian e-government within a broader (European) context. In the concluding section, I present and discuss the main findings.

2 TRANSFORMATIONS OF CITIZENSHIP, E-PARTICIPATION AND DIGITAL GOVERNMENT

As a concept, social status, and a set of political practices, citizenship has always been a contested concept. However, as Sassen (2002, 7) writes, citizenship is most commonly defined in terms of the legal relationship between the individual and the polity, the latter predominantly being a nation state. Historically, it was the evolution of polities closely related to state formation processes that gave citizenship, especially in the West, its full institutionalised and formal character. This made nationality a key component of citizenship. This long-term process contributed to an understanding of citizenship as a legal status of an individual in terms of state membership. Many developments in economic and political spheres within states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries contained an articulation between the nation state apparatus and the growth of citizens' rights and entitlements. Thus, the state came to be seen as a primary agent ensuring the well-being of practically all members of a society. Although predominant, this did not fix and stabilise the meaning of citizenship. Isin (2002, 2) clarifies that the "modern conception of citizenship as merely a status held under the authority of a state has been contested and broadened to include various political and social practices of recognition and redistribution". This also added to the reinvigoration of theoretical distinctions: communitarian and deliberative, republican and liberal, feminist, post-national and cosmopolitan notions of citizenship (Sassen 2002, 10).

Various political and social practices were not only reflected in the theorisations of citizenship but also contributed to the transformations and thus novel forms of citizenship (Ong 2006, 499). Especially at the end of the 20th century, the use of different technologies, including ICTs, enhanced the consolidation of a new type of citizen, the e-citizen. Di Meglio and Gargiulo (2009, 33) argue that this new form of citizenship is not simply a new step in the process of expanding political participation but also widely understood as an alternative way for gaining access to various rights. E-citizenship represents a new way of exercising at least some of the civil, political and social rights that citizens already have but do not effectively put into practice.

The impact of these new technologies and their use is so powerful and obvious that many authors (Castells 1998; Parry 2008) believe we are witnessing completely new societal arrangements in which, among others, changes in the forms of citizens' political participation occur. In this context, the Internet and modern ICTs are understood as a new arena for political action, identification and behaviour. Connecting people and communities through the new ICTs is seen as enabling the political participation of the entire population as well as the co-operation of ever increasing numbers of individuals in decision-making processes that influence the structure and organisation of the society in which we live. Technological enthusiasts (Morozov 2014) also argue that ever more people are socialising, working, organising and searching for information via the Internet. Enthusiasts have praised the Internet's potential benefits, arguing it will reduce inequalities by removing barriers to information and consequently allow citizens with different backgrounds to improve their human capital, search for and find jobs, and improve their lives. On the other hand, sceptical voices have cautioned that the Internet's unequal spread across the

citizenry will not reduce but increase inequalities. Hence, the novel forms of communication and the Internet will continue to improve the opportunities of the already privileged while denying opportunities for advancement to the underprivileged (Hargittai 2003, 824).

Regardless of these critical voices, the Internet and ICTs are frequently taken as a viable solution to people's current apathy and indifference with respect to participation in formal political processes. As Carter and Stokes (1998) highlighted, we are continuously witnessing the withdrawal of citizens from participation in formal political processes and decision-making on matters that concern the individual and his/her life. The new technological possibilities offer easier and quicker solutions for participating in political processes, while the Internet and social media provide platforms for the activities and socio-political engagement of the citizens. The Internet and new ICTs are valued as a source of active citizenship – an opportunity for individuals to participate through modern communication channels, social networks etc. in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. Hermes (2006, 304) argues that the Internet does not necessarily create new citizens, although it certainly allows new citizenship practices.

Governments have also not been immune to the fresh opportunities extended by the Internet and ICTs in general (Komito 2005, 39). As new digital technologies and practices have spread, digital government advocates have sought to recruit them for the elusive task of improving how government agencies function (Postill 2012, 166). Therefore, the Internet introduces new modes of governmental conduct and allows for a specific support system for an ordered method of government that is intimately connected with what is usually called 'electronic government' or 'e-government'. There are many different interpretations and thus meanings of e-government. However, perhaps most broadly, e-government refers to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the public administration for the delivery of state services. For example, the OECD defines e-government as "the use of ICTs, and particularly the Internet, as a tool to achieve better government" (OECD 2003).

Governments and international actors have sought to increase the number of citizens who participate in governance by broadening the network of citizens who involve themselves in policy formation (see OECD 2001). Various policy initiatives and concrete programmes to increase citizens' participation in policy-making and evaluation have emerged, and an obvious way of increasing civic commitment is to use the new technologies to enable greater participation and information exchange by citizens (OECD 2001; Norris 1999). Although many ICT developments in government have focused on service delivery or e-government rather than on public participation (Mahrer and Krimmer 2005), the participation of citizens is a key strategic aim of government when planning e-government solutions. The modernisation agenda that has stimulated the development of e-government endeavours is widely regarded as having an ethos of the citizen as a consumer of services. This so-called consumerist perspective is sometimes seen as contradicting the notion of a citizen as an engaged and politically active member of society. This furthermore devalues citizenship as a concept in the sense of neglecting the ideals of public participation. Still, governments seek to use the Internet and social media technology for activities such as democratic participation and engagement, co-production, in which governments and the public jointly develop, design and deliver government services to improve service quality, delivery and responsiveness, and crowdsourcing solutions and innovations, seeking

innovation through public knowledge and talent to develop innovative solutions to large-scale societal issues (Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen 2012).

3 THE DEVELOPMENT OF E-GOVERNMENT AND SUPPORT FOR CITIZENS' ONLINE PARTICIPATION IN SLOVENIA

In order to understand how Slovenia developed its strategies and systematisations in the field of e-government and how it stimulated and enabled the citizens' online activities (including e-participation), we need to consider and reflect on which strategies and laws related to e-government were adopted in the past, and which specific practical tools and websites were offered to citizens. We need to reflect on how they were implemented as a way to enhance the citizens' online activities directly related to government and its various fields.

Slovenia's e-government development path is not something that started abruptly or out of nowhere. It was built on the Slovenian public sector's initial computerisation already in the early 1970s and subsequent decades. As Vintar et al. (2003, 137) remind, it was especially in the 1990s that saw a major thrust in the informatisation of the public administration, which was supported by establishing a "specialised Government Agency for informatics which is responsible for the development of a national IT infrastructure and development of e-government". Thus, the intensive informatisation during the 1990s and the development of the public sector's IT infrastructure served as strong foundations for the early projects oriented to e-government undertaken in the late 1990s (Vintar et al. 2003, 137). Between 2001 and 2006, the Slovenian government and administrative bodies experienced profound organisational changes. The development and implementation of e-government tools formed part of these changes, marked in that period by strategy and programme documents, among which the most important are the E-government Strategy until 2004, the E-government Strategy for Local Self-Government, and the Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia for the Information Society (Dobnikar and Nemec 2007, 360). At the turn of the millennium, two additional foundations for the future development of e-government were laid. The first is the adoption of the Electronic Commerce and Electronic Signature Act. The government adopted the Act on 13 June 2000 and it came into force on 22 August 2000. Related Act no. 215/2002 on eSignature regulated the creation, usage, rights and obligations of corporate entities and individuals, as well as the trustworthiness and protection of digitally signed e-documents (European Commission 2015, 22). The second one is publication of the document entitled "Strategy for E-commerce in the Public Administration for the period 2001–2004" in February 2001.

These developments continued in 2002 when the government adopted the Action Plan for e-government up to 2004. This Action Plan concretely articulated the objectives, electronic services and tasks entailed in establishing e-government up to the end of 2004. The document explicitly defined the basic principles, key activities and projects needing to be implemented in subsequent years in order to develop e-government in Slovenia. One of the most visible achievements after the Action Plan had been published was the launching of the enhanced 'E-government – State Portal' (now e-Uprava) in December 2003. From the outset, it offered various services to citizens, legal entities and public employees (European Commission 2015, 18). Already at the start, the e-government state portal was conceived as a public portal of the Republic of

Slovenia for citizens and an electronic entry point for various services provided by state bodies or public administration bodies (Slovenian Ministry of Public Administration 2015). The portal's key purpose is to provide online administrative services to citizens and thus provide an additional, electronic path for the provision of these services in addition to the standard ones (ibid.). Another major change in the context of Slovenia's e-government development came in 2004 when, as a result of the appointment of a new government, the responsibility for e-government policy was transferred from the Ministry of the Information Society (that had then ceased to exist) to the new Ministry of Public Administration (European Commission 2015, 17–18). This ministry was conceived, structured and organised in such a way as to incorporate various offices whose goal is to strengthen the public administration. This entailed the improvement and simplification of (online) public administration procedures and development of e-government.

From 2005 until 2010, Slovenia adopted three documents relevant to the development of e-government and enhancement of digital citizenship. In June 2005, the Government adopted Slovenia's Development Strategy (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2005), an overarching future-oriented document setting out the vision and objectives of Slovenia's development in which the overall welfare of every citizen is at the centre. In April 2006, the Government adopted the E-government Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia for the Period 2006 to 2010 (SEP 2010). This document clearly stated, that "e-government includes ensuring the participation of various groups and institutions in discussing topics of national importance and the functioning of state and public administration. In order to do so, various methods are employed for the automating of tasks, especially for external (requesting services, distribution of products, e-democracy), as well as internal communications (linking records, automatic processing)" (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2007, 4). In this document, digital citizenship is also brought to the fore by underlining a key vision which is "to provide citizens and businesses with friendly, simple, accessible and secure electronic administrative services, e-democracy applications and information available on the Internet anytime anywhere, for all of their life events" (ibid., 5). Following publication of the Strategy, in February 2007 the Slovenian Government adopted The Action Plan for E-government for the Period 2006 to 2010. Based on these three documents, the Slovenian Government endorsed several projects aimed at stimulating citizens' participation, among which probably the most visible is the "my.suggestion.gov.si" (predlagam.vladi.si) <http://predlagam.vladi.si> project, a web tool which enhances residents' participation in government policy-making. The Slovenian Government endorsed the project on 23 July and presented it as part of the broader efforts to integrate the population into the processes of shaping government policies and actions. The project opens up a new communication channel between citizens and the state and among the citizens themselves (Vlada RS 2011). Its primary purpose is to encourage the people of Slovenia to submit their views, suggestions and proposals on the regulation of certain substantive issues. Thus, the Government's project was chiefly intended to achieve the greater participation of individuals and civil society in the formulation of government policies and to enhance dialogue between civil society and the state (ibid.).

While no new strategy for e-government was launched between 2010 and 2015, certain major developments with regard to the Government's activities in the area of e-government services were in progress. Among others, the application *Supervizor* was set up with the aim to improve the transparency of the Government's public spending and activities. The service was established by the

Commission for the Prevention of Corruption in August 2011 (European Commission 2015, 13). However, the most important development in this period (2010–2015) was the start of preparations for a new strategy in the field of the information society, including e-government. In 2014, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport prepared an initial platform for developing new strategic documents in relation to the information society and electronic communications, among which the most overarching was the Strategy of Information Society Development until 2020 (MIZŠ 2016b). One starting point when preparing the Strategy of Information Society Development until 2020 was the recognition that Slovenian society must take advantage of the development opportunities of ICT and the Internet. Based on this recognition, a key development principle was to develop an inclusive digital society (MIZŠ 2016a). After the consultation process (public discussion of draft versions), the Government finally adopted the Strategy on 10 March 2016 in which special attention is paid to the citizens: “all citizens should have fully accessible services which stimulate the development of digital society and citizens to be involved in this development” (MIZŠ 2016b, 37).

4 METHODOLOGY OF THE ANALYSIS OF SLOVENIAN E-GOVERNMENT FROM A CITIZEN-CENTRED PERSPECTIVE

Looking through a citizen-centred lens, e-government in its most basic sense refers to the delivery of government information and services online through the Internet or other digital means directly to the citizens (Muir and Oppenheim 2002). Similarly, Kumar et al. (2007, 68) argue that “the ultimate objective of e-government programs ought to be the frequent and recurring use of online services by citizens not only for obtaining information but also for interacting and transacting with the government”. Yet, while various technological challenges arise in the implementation of e-government services and tools (Ebrahim and Irani 2005), another key challenge is to use the available ICTs to actually enhance the operational and other capacities of government, while improving the quality of life of the citizens by redefining the relationship between citizens and their government (Gautrin 2004, 1). That is why research and analysis of e-government through a citizen-centred lens is necessary and must be continually conducted (Jaeger and Bertot 2010, 2).

The analysis of the development and implementation of e-government from a citizen-centred perspective must take into account and include at least several dimensions. According to a model for assessing the adoption of e-government developed by Kumar et al. (2007), these are: (1) user characteristics; (2) e-government adoption; (3) e-government website and tools design; and (4) e-government service quality. Below, I explain each of these dimensions, including their significance for conducting an analysis of e-government.

User characteristics is a relevant dimension since there are quite big differences among citizens regarding those who do and those who do not or cannot access computers and/or the Internet. This is due to the gap between citizens' attributes including gender, education, income, age, households, business, and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities (Akman et al. 2005). All of these factors and personal circumstances affect how Internet users behave, experience and use the Internet and e-government services. Thus, the analysis will contain three variables with regard to user characteristics, namely:

(1) the level of Internet access in Slovenia; (2) the frequency of Internet use in Slovenia; and (3) the type of Internet use.

Concerning e-government adoption, Warkentin et al. (2002, 159) describe it as “the intention to ‘engage in e-Government’, which encompasses the intentions to receive information, to provide information and to request e-Government services”. Do Internet users in Slovenia use e-government websites and tools at all? How often and how specifically do they use them? Variables responding to those questions are: (1) the frequency of e-government use; and (2) the type of e-government activities of individuals via websites.

E-government website and tools design is particularly important for reaching out to citizens and communicating with them. Government must pay special attention to designing websites and tools for them to be useful, effective and efficient. Among others, this requires a consideration of elements such as ease of navigation, aesthetics, content, accessibility etc. As Kumar et al. (2007, 70) explain, all of these elements in combination will directly influence users’ experience with a website and, ultimately, their satisfaction with and adoption of it. The analysis in this article will contain two variables concerning e-government website and tools design, namely: (1) perceived ease of finding information on e-government websites; and (2) perceived usefulness of e-government websites.

The last dimension is the quality of e-government services. This is closely related to citizens’ satisfaction with the e-government and its adoption of websites and tools (Reichheld, Markey Jr. and Hopton 2000). There is now a relatively widespread realisation that e-service quality is almost a precondition for the success (or failure) of e-government projects (Chutimaskul, Funilkul, and Chongsuphajaisiddhi 2008). It is therefore crucial for governments to ensure those services have quality characteristics such as reliability, ease of use, security etc. (Alanezi, Kamil and Basri 2010, 1). Citizens need to feel secure and satisfied with e-government services if they are to use them regularly. With regard to the quality of e-government services, three variables will be included in the analysis, namely: (1) users’ satisfaction level on the ease of using the e-government service on websites (usability); (2) problems experienced when using e-government websites; and (3) types of problems and/or failures.

To interpret the Slovenian e-government through these four dimensions (and corresponding variables), I will draw on available Eurostat data, particularly the Information Society Statistics database (Eurostat 2015). The data given in this domain are collected each year by the National Statistical Institutes and based on Eurostat’s annual model questionnaires on ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) usage in households and by individuals (ibid.). Within the database, a special ad hoc e-government module was implemented in 2013, which is also the main data source I draw from, particularly to show and interpret variables related to the e-government dimensions of the analysis (e-government adoption, e-government website and tools design, and e-government service quality) (ibid.).

5 KEY FEATURES OF SLOVENIAN E-GOVERNMENT: A CITIZEN-CENTRED VIEW

Contemporary e-government tools and services clearly rely on a high-quality ICT infrastructure, especially high-end Internet connections. ICT infrastructure

is identified as one of the biggest challenges for e-government, particularly to enable the appropriate delivery or exchange of information and to open up new forms of delivery of new services (Ndou 2004, 5). Sharma and Gupta (2003, 34) also emphasise that implementing the whole e-government framework requires a strong technological infrastructure. In order to deliver e-government services, a government must therefore develop an effective telecommunications infrastructure. The involvement of governments and suitable e-government tools is particularly important when addressing and seeking to reduce the so-called digital divide among citizens. Governmental ICT applications can play a crucial part in shrinking the digital divide between the young and elderly, women and men, the illiterate and the educated, or even between less developed regions and countries (Stoiciu 2011). All of these factors and personal circumstances critically influence how citizens behave, experience and use the Internet and how e-government is positioned in a specific social environment. The benefits of e-government services are very much determined by the number and type of users of these services, and the frequency of their use (United Nations 2012, 101). Therefore, I start the analysis with an overview of Internet-user characteristics that considers three key variables, namely: (1) the level of Internet access in Slovenia; (2) the frequency of Internet use in Slovenia; and (3) the type of Internet use.

In Slovenia, 78% of all households had Internet access in 2015, which is slightly below the average of the EU-28 (83%). Remarkably, all households in Slovenia with Internet access (78%) have a broadband connection, whereas the EU-28 average is 80%. These figures show that Slovenia and the EU countries in general have achieved a high level of availability of broadband Internet connections.

The data on the frequency of Internet use in Slovenia in 2015 show that 61% of individuals use the Internet on a daily basis (compared to the EU-28 average of 67%). The share of individuals who use the Internet at least once a week (including daily) is slightly higher, at 71% (the EU-28 average is 76%). Internet users in Slovenia typically access the Internet at home. A survey from 2013 shows that 70% of individuals use home Internet access, while 34% access the Internet at a place of work.

When considering Internet-user characteristics, the most important aspect is how citizens use the Internet; are they passive users (for example, limited to seeking information) or do they actively engage in online communities and participate in civic and political affairs? In 2015 (see Table 1 below), 61% of individuals in Slovenia (the EU-28 average is the same) used the Internet to find information about goods and/or services. Fewer Slovenian citizens use the Internet as a source of news. Namely, 56% of individuals (compared to the EU-28 average of 54%) used the Internet to access and read online news sites/newspapers. Even lower is the share of citizens (38% compared to the EU-28 average of 45%) who used the Internet to consult wikis (to obtain information and/or knowledge on any subject).

Probably the most widespread active Internet use today is participating in social networks (creating user profiles, posting messages and other contributions to Facebook, Twitter etc.). In Slovenia, only 37% (the EU-28 average is 50%) of citizens were involved in social networks. Posting opinions on civic or political issues via websites (e.g. blogs, social networks etc.) can also be considered one of the expressions of active digital citizenship. Available data on this kind of political participation come from 2011 when 14% of Slovenian

individuals (the EU-27 average is the same) participated in online environments.

TABLE 1: THE TYPE OF INTERNET USE (ACTIVE/PASSIVE)

Variable	Indicator	Slovenia (% of individuals)	EU-28 (% of individuals)
The type of Internet use – Passive use (2015)	To find information about goods and services	61	61
	To access and read online news sites/newspapers	56	54
	To consult wikis	38	45
The type of Internet use – Active use (2015)	To participate in social networks	37	50
	To post opinions on civic or political issues via websites (e.g. blogs, social networks etc.)	14	14

Source: Eurostat (2015).

We can conclude from the data shown above that in Slovenia passive use of the Internet is more widespread than active political participation or engagement. While the passive type of use in Slovenia is comparable to the EU-28 average, Slovenian Internet users are less likely to actively participate online than users in other EU member states on average. The fact that there are more passive users is not surprising. Passive users are prevalent in the real world (Montague and Jie Xu 2012, 703), which is precisely why they need to be considered as much as active users when e-government websites and tools are being conceived and developed. As I show below, influenced by the general prevalence of passive Internet use in Slovenia, e-government users are also much more inclined to the passive use of services and tools.

Being familiar with the characteristics of Internet users in Slovenia, I now focus on those dimensions of the analysis specifically related to the e-government, starting with e-government adoption. The latter is about citizens' intention and commitment to take advantage of the opportunities offered via e-government. Among others, this encompasses the intentions to receive information, provide information and request e-government services. Variables related to e-government adoption are: (1) the frequency of e-government use; and (2) the type of e-government activities of individuals via websites.

When specifically considering the frequency of individuals' e-government activities via the Internet, quite a large share of individuals in Slovenia interacted at least in some way with public authorities (see Table 2 below). In 2015, 45% of individuals had contacted public authorities via websites in the previous 12 months. This figure is interesting, especially when compared to 2014 when more than half (53%) the population had interacted with public authorities in the preceding 12 months. Slovenia obviously experienced a considerable drop in the share (8%) of persons contacting and/or communicating with public authorities. In addition, quite a big digital divide is visible in the use of e-government services. The share of persons interacting electronically with public authorities is highly noticeable when different groups of society are compared. In Slovenia, 24% of those citizens who had interacted electronically with public authorities had no or only low formal education. On the other hand, 79% of individuals with a higher formal education had used e-government services to contact public authorities. Although, as Stoiciu (2011) argues, e-government should play a decisive role in bridging the digital divide, the reasons for it are highly complex and debatable. This, of course, means that the mere implementation of e-government can hardly be seen as a solution since other elements need to be considered, such as promoting ICT skills and digital literacy in a non-discriminatory and inclusive manner.

With regard to the second variable of e-government adoption (the type of e-government activities of individuals via websites), individuals in Slovenia have most regularly interacted with public authorities in Slovenia to obtain various types of information from websites (see Table 2 below). In 2015, 41% of individuals had obtained information from public authorities' websites at least once in the previous 12 months. This is just above the EU-28 average of 40%. Quite frequently, people also use the possibility to obtain the official forms available at various government websites. In 2015, 28% of Slovenians had downloaded at least one official form in the preceding 12 months. Individuals in Slovenia use the available governmental tools to submit completed forms much less.

TABLE 2: CITIZENS' E-GOVERNMENT ADOPTION

Variable	Indicator	Slovenia (% of individuals)	EU-28 (% of individuals)
The frequency of e-government use	Interaction with public authorities (previous 12 months – 2015)	45	46
	Interaction with public authorities (previous 12 months – 2014)	53	47
The type of e-government activities of individuals via websites	Obtaining information from public authorities' websites (2015)	41	40
	Downloading official forms (2015)	28	28
	Submitting completed forms (2015)	18	26
	Taking part in online consultations or voting to define civic or political issues (2015)	5	8

Source: Eurostat (2015).

According to the statistical data from 2015, 18% of individuals had submitted an official form at least once in the previous 12 months. This share is much lower than the EU-28 average (26%). Obviously, Slovenian citizens are much more familiar with searching for various types of information and downloading official forms than exploiting the possibility of completing administrative procedures via the Internet (see Table 2 above).

A more active form of e-government participation is civic or political participation in the form of taking part in online consultations or voting to define civic or political issues (e.g. urban planning, signing a petition). In 2015, only 5% of individuals in Slovenia (compared to the EU-28 average of 8%) took part in online consultations or voting to define civic or political issues (see Table 2 above). The most politically engaged in an online environment (e.g. taking part in online consultations or voting) are individuals aged 25–34 years, although the percentage is still quite low (11%). Therefore, Slovenian citizens more regularly take advantage of e-government possibilities and tools to obtain information or to complete administration procedures than they actively engage in political matters. This is not surprising since general observations (see Stoiciu 2011) point out that what most e-government systems and services are lacking is the development of e-participation and the inclusion of various social categories in policy-making and decision-making.

The next dimension of e-government analysis is the design of the e-government website and tools. This concerns the government's use of a proactive approach to anticipating and responding to citizens' demands and providing integrated e-government services tailored to users' needs. Appropriate utilisation of ICTs, especially the Internet, by a government holds the potential to increase citizen satisfaction with e-government. Similarly, better and more convenient services, more accessible and complete information, and new and improved channels of

communication may reduce the information gap and improve citizens' trust in government (Welch, Hinnant and Moon 2005, 372). The variables related to this are: (1) perceived ease of finding information on e-government websites; and (2) perceived usefulness of e-government websites.

One of the most crucial aspects of e-government design is the ease of finding information on e-government websites. Namely, perceived ease of use increases e-government usage. The results of a survey conducted in 2013 show relatively high satisfaction with the ease of finding information on e-government websites among Slovenian users (41%), especially compared to the EU-28 average of 32% (see Table 3 below). Users who were most satisfied with the ease of finding information were individuals aged 16–24 and 25–34 years (67% for both groups). On the other hand, only 7% (compared to the EU average of 6%) of all users of Slovenian government websites expressed their dissatisfaction with the ease of finding the information they were searching for.

TABLE 3: CITIZENS' PERCEPTION OF E-GOVERNMENT DESIGN

Variable	Indicator	Slovenia (% of individuals)	EU-28 (% of individuals)
Ease of finding information on e-government websites	Mostly satisfied (2013)	41	32
	Mainly dissatisfied (2013)	7	6
Perceived usefulness of e-government websites	Mostly satisfied (2013)	47	33
	Mainly dissatisfied (2013)	1	5

Source: Eurostat (2015).

Besides the level of ease of finding information, another key aspect of e-government design is the perceived usefulness of e-government services and tools. If the latter do not correspond to citizens' needs, they are also not relevant to them and their demands, which thereby hampers the interaction between various authorities and the population. In 2013, almost half the users of Slovenian e-government websites found the information they obtained to be useful, while only 1% of the population using e-government websites were mainly dissatisfied with the usefulness of the information available (see Table 3 above).

The last dimension of the e-government analysis is e-government service quality. This dimension is closely related to overall customer (citizen) satisfaction and the quality of the e-government (Omar, Scheepers and Stockdale 2011, 431). I will examine it in terms of three variables, namely: (1) users' satisfaction level with the ease of using e-government services on websites (usability); (2) problems experienced when using e-government websites; and (3) types of problems and/or failures.

The quality of e-government services with regard to Slovenian citizens' satisfaction with the ease of using them is largely perceived as good. Namely, 40% of individuals are mainly satisfied with the effectiveness, efficiency and intuitiveness of the web-based e-government services. The percentage of satisfied Slovenian users is quite high, also when compared to the EU average (30%). Correspondingly, the share of Slovenian citizens who are mainly dissatisfied is low (5%) and comparable to the EU average of 6% (see Table 4 below).

TABLE 4: CITIZENS' PERCEPTION OF E-GOVERNMENT SERVICE QUALITY

Variable	Indicator	Slovenia (% of individuals)	EU-28 (% of individuals)
Users' satisfaction level with the ease of using e-government services on websites (usability) (2013)	Mostly satisfied	40	30
	Mainly dissatisfied	5	6
Problems experienced when using e-government websites (2013)	Had experienced at least one problem when using e-government websites	17	17
Types of problems and/or failures (2013)	Found insufficient, unclear or outdated information	10	9
	Had experienced a technical failure of the e-government website	8	10

Source: Eurostat (2015).

When looking at e-government service quality through the problems individuals experienced when using e-government online services and/or websites, the individuals' perception is slightly different. Here, 17% of individuals (the EU average is the same) had experienced at least one problem when using e-government websites in the preceding 12 months. Interestingly, it was not technical failures of services or websites that were most commonly perceived as a problem, but insufficient, unclear and/or outdated information. While 10% of Slovenian respondents had actually stumbled upon inadequate information, another 8% of them had experienced a technical failure when browsing a website or using services. Compared to the EU average, the share of people who experienced a technical failure is slightly higher (10%) and just 1% above those who found insufficient, unclear and/or outdated information (see Table 4 above).

6 CONCLUSION

In today's rapidly digitalising societies, it is commonly argued that in the current technology-inspired and driven world e-government is a way to allow citizens to become acquainted with and participate in government processes. Governments and other authorities are directly reaching out to the people and thus improving their services by, for example, making communication between various governmental institutions more effective. On one hand, this keeps citizens supplied with the necessary information and, on the other, governments develop and use e-government to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery.

As we have shown, Slovenian e-government has developed gradually over decades, although the so-called intensive informatisation of the public sector during the 1990s and the development of the IT infrastructure is largely regarded as a crucial pre-step in the actual formation of e-government. This is especially because some of the early e-government-oriented projects in the second half of the 1990s were strategically reliant upon this progress. Slovenia continually adopted strategies and other relevant documents targeting informatisation and ICT use as a backbone upon which concrete solutions were conceived and implemented. Especially after Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, it followed the common key directions including, for example, the e-government Declaration presented in November 2005 at the EU Ministerial E-government

Conference in Manchester, and the Digital Agenda for Europe (2010). As I have shown, one of the Slovenian government's primary aims at that time (and still is) was to conceive and implement e-government services with the aim of improving citizens' quality of life, reducing administrative burdens on citizens and to increasing citizens' trust in government and democracy.

However, the citizen-centred analysis of Slovenian e-government revealed that Slovenian Internet users are predominantly passive Internet users, meaning they use the Internet to find information but they rarely actively participate or engage in various governmental matters. This general inclination of Slovenian online citizens is also reflected in their e-government behaviour since e-government users are much more inclined to the passive use of the available services and tools. This finding is also relevant in light of the fact that, generally speaking, while quite a large proportion of Slovenian Internet users is aware of the e-government tools and services, Slovenia experienced a drop in the share of people who used e-government websites. This leads us to the conclusion that government must continually engage in activities to increase awareness of and popularise e-government usage. However, these promotional activities are by themselves far from sufficient if the government is to go beyond merely offering various types of information and the online completion of administrative procedures to the citizens. In order for e-government to become a participatory platform allowing citizens to express their views and get engaged in political matters, citizens as well as both their online behaviour and needs must be placed at the centre of the design and delivery of e-government. In this light, e-government should be better tailored to meet the specific needs and priorities of different users (especially so-called passive users). This means that citizens' usage patterns must be continually analysed and monitored in order to provide more personalised services and tools to ensure greater participation and engagement opportunities.

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