

E-Government at Supranational Level in the European Union

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INTRODUCTION

The term “e-government” became part of the political vocabulary toward the end of the 1990s. Previously, with the onset of new technologies, it found its place in the wider “semantic container,” the information society. To respond to the United States and Japan’s economic challenge, the European Commission drew up a “White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness, and Employment: Challenges and Ways Forward to the 21st Century” (the so-called Delors’ White Paper). The construction of the IS is considered one of the five fundamental priorities of the Union to create a “common information area” based on ICTs and telematic infrastructure. E-government was the key element of significant community programmes (i.e., IDA [Interchange of Data between Administrations] and TEN-TELECOM [from 2002 renamed eTen]).

A decisive step toward the development of EU policies for e-government came with the approval, in June 2000, of the Action Plan “eEurope 2002: An Information Society for All.” Guidelines were fixed for greater use of the Internet, and the initiative “Government online: electronic access to public services, [which] aims to ensure that citizens have easy access to essential public data, [...] [and, in order to improve] efficiency in the public sector, will require a re-thinking of internal organisation and of electronic exchanges between institutions” (Council of the European Union & Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p. 22).

A few months previously, based on numerous EC documents, the Council of Europe of Lisbon indicated an ambitious objective for the European Union: “to become the most competitive and dynamic economy based on knowledge in the world, capable of achieving sustainable economic growth, creating new and better jobs and more social cohesion.” The so-called “Lisbon strategy” to permit Europe to recover the delay accumulated compared to the U.S., was intended to guide community policies up to 2010. It is in this context, interwoven with different and often conflicting pressures (economic competition and social cohesion, market logics, and the language of rights) that action plans are formulated and policies for e-government implemented in Europe.

BACKGROUND: E-GOVERNMENT BETWEEN MARKET-POLITICS

The context of e-government in Europe is in the dynamic framework of three key issues:

1. The globalisation of the economy and the challenges posed by competitors on the global market
2. The construction of a European identity (enlargement, constitution, the existence of different models for European development and issues relative to the democratic deficit of the EU)
3. The exponential growth of the ICT sector and the Internet

E-government represents a core issue in these areas (i.e., effective implementation should lead through the integrated use of ICTs (3) and together with organisational change, to economic advantages for the public and private sectors (1), and a greater integration of the “European system” (2)).

The vision of e-government at EU level is quite differentiated. The EU strongly promotes open markets and competition while maintaining commitment to specific principles of the European public law tradition and human rights (embraced by the Fundamental Charter of Human Rights, integral to the EU constitutional framework). These factors have significant implications for e-governments policies, which embody the institutional expression of values such as human dignity, participation, and transparency (Van Cuilenburg & McQuail, 2003) to be safeguarded when implementing e-government solutions.

There is evidence that the development of e-government, more than acting as a catalyst for the processes previously described, has played the role of dependent variable. Thus, European strategies for e-government have been determined by economic and technological considerations rather than social or cultural factors.

If “the simultaneous existence of three divergent approaches—the EU liberal market model, the EU public service model and the EU national-cultural model—to the Information Society confers a unique character on the European communications market” (Venturelli, 2002, p.

79), policy decisions or policy perspectives have ended up being “*mainly technologically and/or commercially driven*” (Servaes & Heinderyckx, 2002, p. 98). Support for this view comes from the structure of many Community position papers (from the Delors White Paper to the Green Book on the Information Society of 1997), where a preference for deregulation and liberalisation endows the private sector with a much larger role (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2000) than the public authorities, which retain the residual role of “establishing new rules for the game” (Commission of the European Communities, 1994).

There have been remarkable repercussions on the development of e-government. The Commission has in fact left ample margins for Member States action, not only in terms of the principles of subsidiary and decentralisation, but also in the legal area. The Amsterdam Treaty (1997) gives the Commission no legal authority to intervene in relation to the public administrations of Member States. Consequently, any changes that concern the public administration cannot be imposed *top-down*, but must be *bottom-up*. The EU context is neo-liberal and increasingly market-oriented, although the form that this takes at national level is rather more differentiated than might be suggested (i.e., each country to its own specificities) determined by national political objectives and administrative traditions.

The EU has developed a new form of governance to tackle these new challenges: the open method of coordination (OMC) a soft-law instrument which allows the Union to fix guidelines which Member States must then translate into specific policies and benchmarking systems.

CONSTRUCTING A EUROPEAN E-GOVERNMENT MODEL

Clearly, a coherent and united European Union policy on the issue of e-government does not yet exist, and no single document expresses the strategies pursued by the Commission. However, by analysing the documentation produced, it is possible to locate specific elements that enable us to outline a European model of e-government. Among the most significant documents, are “e-Europe 2005: An Information Society for All”—the continuation of the action plan “e-Europe 2002,” “The Role of E-Government for the Future of Europe,” and “E-Government in Europe: The State of Affairs,” presented at the European Conference of Cernobbio (Italy) in 2003 (Leitner, 2003).

European e-government appears to be characterised by the following elements:

1. Close attention is paid to the technological and infrastructural dimensions: viz. in eEurope Action Plans, where reference is made to initiatives “[t]o stimulate the use of the Internet” and to create “a cheaper, faster, secure Internet” (Council of the European Union, Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p. 2) as well as for the diffusion “of broad band infrastructures” (Commission of the European Communities, 2002)
2. From the centrality of technical issues, interoperability emerges as an important factor: “[s]tandardisation in technology and harmonisation in legislation are just two ways to achieve this” (IDA, 2004, 24). Standardisation in organisations, infrastructure, procedures, and above all in semantic codes and legislation is needed, to encourage safe and clear interaction between Europe’s public administrations. The Commission’s working paper “Linking up Europe: The Importance of Interoperability for E-Government Services” (2003) and then an actual framework document, the “European Interoperability Framework for pan-European E-Government Services” (2004) is in this direction
3. By decentralising the context of decisions and policy implementation, in line with the principles of subsidiarity and regionalisation (reiterated in the White Paper on European Governance), the role of states, regions and municipalities is exalted. The declared objective is to enhance territorial and cultural specificities, although the legal limits posed by the Treaty are also relevant here
4. The preference for open source software, compared to proprietary brands: this is motivated by the need for interoperability and to reduce costs, although object of much criticism (CompTIA, 2004). This controversy has been fed by the confusion made in specific documents between open source software and open standards

Clearly, on the political plane, the most problematic issue is the reconciliation of objectives two and three (i.e., finding an uneasy (but necessary) balance between the *top-down* standardisation and *bottom-up* enhancement of territorial and cultural differences). These dynamics risk producing *top-down* policies centred on technology and a fragmented *bottom-up* policy concerned with decentralisation:

Member States’ preference for administrative autonomy has to be balanced against the Union’s need for effective and uniform implementation. [...] The European context suggests that administrative convergence is more likely to follow from attractiveness than from imposition.

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