



REBUILDING TRUST IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE STATE: New reports on e-government after Snowden

Two new reports on e-government in Europe published by the Vodafone Institute for Society and Communications provide recommendations on how to create a transparent 'digital state' and promote trust in online channels between a nation's citizens and its public authorities. Among the findings:

- The UK is ahead of Germany and the Netherlands in the overall availability of online government services in the areas of identification, social security, parent support, taxation and business registration; but it lags behind Austria, Spain and Estonia.
- Estonia is leading the way in developing user-friendly, easily accessible digital government services that its citizens can trust. For example, whenever public authorities, such as the police or tax authorities use the personal data of a citizen, the data access is logged on a website, giving any Estonian the chance to file a complaint if there appears to be a misuse. On the government portal, citizens can even see if a police patrol checked their car registration plate.
- Estonia's ministry of economic affairs has calculated that the ability to sign and send any document or file digitally has helped businesses, public institutions and individuals to save an estimated one week per year per every employed inhabitant. This would amount to as much as 2% of the national GDP.

Across Europe, public administrations and governments are developing programmes and strategies for shifting communication between public authorities, citizens and companies into the digital world. But many European countries are struggling to provide user-friendly, easily accessible digital services, and the revelations of Edward Snowden have dented trust in digital communication between citizens and state.

In the first of the two Vodafone Institute reports, authors Sebastian Rieger and David Deissner explain why the Estonian system is a success and discuss how citizen services in other countries could be made more attractive but also transparent. On the basis of detailed interviews with e-government experts in politics, business and science, as well as the designers of 'E-Estonia', the report includes measures that could help other countries to introduce successful e-government initiatives:

- Online incentives: a system of incentives and rewards should be established, such as fast-track processing, to encourage people to use the public authorities' digital services. Various easy-to-use authentication systems such as authentication with mobile devices should be provided to make the citizens' portals easier to access. Citizens shouldn't be required to pay additional costs.



- More data checks and open government: there will be greater acceptance of e-government services if people are aware of when and why their personal data is viewed and processed. Unlike paper-based services, online services help to identify and penalise unauthorised access to personal data.
- Extend the digital infrastructure: establishing a digital infrastructure is an essential prerequisite for effective and controlled information-sharing between citizens and public authorities. Estonia is a good example of how the decentralised provision of digital services is possible via a 'data highway' – that is, without the need to establish extensive government databases. This permits the partially automated completion of tax returns or time-saving application for child benefit. Another prerequisite for uncomplicated communications is a user-friendly digital signature that can be provided via a mobile device.
- Increase the attractiveness of e-government services: online services have to be designed to provide citizens with obvious benefits. So e-government offerings shouldn't just transfer existing administrative procedures to the digital world (simply by putting documents online), but network and bundle processes. The obvious advantage is that citizens save time.

In the second Vodafone Institute report by Thomas Zefferer, a country ranking of e-government services prepared by the Secure Information Technology Center Austria shows that there are still significant differences across Europe in terms of public services provided. It ranks Germany behind other European countries such as the UK, Austria, Spain and Estonia. Taking a citizen's-eye view, the report compares the availability of online services in the area of identification, social security, parent support, taxation and business registration.

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