



# E-Governance in Slovenia—Part III

by Uroš Pinterič

The Slovenian government has made progress in opening up e-portals to its citizens and businesses, but how much has it made, and can it continue?

This third article in our four-part series focuses on the Slovenian government's efforts to provide effective e-portals for citizens, businesses, tax applications, and urban planning. These four areas are the highest priority e-governance applications in Slovenia, and this article evaluates their success from the citizens', or users', point of view. It also highlights aspects of these efforts that make the applications unpopular or even useless, thereby threatening continued transformation.

## Getting the Digital Signature

E-governance applications in Slovenia deal with a broad range of security levels and types of sensitive data. Some applications are not sensitive to security issues and are created specifically for broad citizen access. Others are much more security sensitive (like e-personal income tax or e-urban planning) and require a special digital signature. This signature, called SIGEN-CA (Slovenian General Certification Authority), is necessary for encrypting and decrypting messages, digital signatures, authentication, exchange of data with public agencies, and use with other applications requesting this signature. The Centre of Slovenian Government for Informatics provides SIGEN-CA, which is valid for five years. Similar digital signatures are provided to citizens for other uses, but they are not valid for all e-services provided by the Slovenian government (banking, postal services, etc.).

## Citizen Portal

One can access the common Slovenian government e-portal via <http://e-uprava.gov.si/e-uprava/>. This opens the main page, where a citizen can browse the latest news, updates, and applications. The language can be adjusted from Slovenian to English and to the languages of both national minorities (Italian and Hungarian). However, only the English version is fully functional: choosing Italian or Hungarian turns us back to Slovenian after two pages.

The citizen portal is organized in sixteen life areas, each of which offers necessary information for elements that involve public agencies:

- ◆ Marriage and childbirth
- ◆ Personal documents
- ◆ School and youth education
- ◆ Work and employment
- ◆ Entrepreneurship
- ◆ Traffic, car registration, and driver's license
- ◆ Real-estate buying and building
- ◆ Personal finance
- ◆ Culture, sport, traveling, and humanitarian activities
- ◆ Health care, personal disability, and nutrition
- ◆ Agriculture, environment, and pets
- ◆ Security, rescuing, military, and weapons
- ◆ Elder, retirement, and pension funds
- ◆ Death and mourning
- ◆ Slovenia and foreign countries and society
- ◆ State and law.

Each area is further detailed with more specific situations and contains frequently asked questions, allowing users to find short descriptions and explanations with links to relevant jurisdictions and forms, if necessary. If a specific form requires appendixes, a list of them is available as well. Most administrative procedures require a completed form and attachments with other personal data. Fortunately, along with the introduction of e-governance in Slovenia, the government set up a common database. This system is accessible by public servants, so that citizens are not obliged to attach all required personal documents if the information is already in the common database.

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People who have a better knowledge of Slovenian e-governance offerings can use a more sophisticated way to find the appropriate forms or initiate the correct procedure. All online services and forms are listed and separated for citizens and business, each part of which is divided into two subcategories—insight or service:

- ◆ *Insight* is available only for documents where the citizen has a right to see his or her current status in a governmental database.
- ◆ *Service* implies the right to start a procedure without the necessity of another administrative institution changing, acquiring, or reporting information.

Documents for services can be printed out and completed manually or followed by a link to their interactive version (if available). Forms that are completely interactive are listed, making difficult administrative procedures much easier for citizens.

As mentioned earlier, some links to interactive forms require a digital signature. In other cases, the links lead to the e-portals of another unit that handles the initial steps of a process (<http://upravneenote.gov.si/upravneenote/nagovor.ue?ue=portal>). Of course, when an administrative border is crossed, it's not unusual to find different choices and additional data requests as if the user were starting from scratch. Users who have just negotiated one obstacle course are usually not pleased to face another battery of questions and life situation checkoffs at the new portal. Worse yet are situations where they must also print out the forms, complete them manually, and then either mail them to the government office or hand-deliver them to the administrative unit—rather than going directly to interactive e-forms that can be completed online and sent via the Internet with a digital signature.

## Business Portal

The business portal is available through <http://e-uprava.gov.si/e-uprava/poslovni.euprava>, where a special one-stop application enables e-registration for independent entrepreneurs and lists different types of contacts companies might have with the Slovenian government. Also, business applications are linked to the type of organization looking for assistance (small companies, big companies, private institutions, associations, foundations, etc.). In the next step, when a user chooses the type of organization, a list of choices appears that allows the user to select the appropriate action (such as

establishing a new business or closing down an organization). However, the same problem occurs here as in the citizens' portal. That is, the user may get bounced around to another Web site (via multiple pop-ups) before finally reaching the application to complete the desired e-procedure. This can be very frustrating—particularly for first-time users—and ultimately can have a chilling effect on continued utilization.

Most information available for organizations is connected to establishing a business, taxation and employment matters, accounting, different business process situations, and closing down a business entity. Sending annual business reports via Internet applications, paying taxes, and posting free job vacancy announcements on the national e-portal are also possible. However, many e-forms and applications at the business portal are for small family farms, not for industrial farms with employees. It is hard to imagine that any Slovenian small farmer (with a small field and ten cows) sees himself as a businessman and is chomping at the bit to do business electronically. It's my hunch (not based on any empirical evidence) that the presence of so many forms to register grape crops and obtain licenses to sell homemade wine or schnapps indicates the paucity of relevant applications on the business e-portal. Again, many forms are available (albeit a large number for marginal business activities), but the user must print and submit them the old-fashioned way.

## E-Taxes

Slovenia introduced e-taxes in 2004 and strongly promotes this application, but a small percentage of citizens use it. Businesses use the application more than individual citizens, presumably because it significantly reduces the amount of paperwork—lowering the cost of doing business.

E-tax applications make it possible to use different forms and interactive approaches in four different areas: e-personal income tax for individuals, an e-VAT application for individuals and the private sector, e-contributions and tax deductions for private-sector organizations and the self-employed, and company revenue taxes for private-sector firms. All applications require a digital signature.

Each category can have a variety of forms that are merely interactive versions of paper forms. Thus, in a transformed Slovenian bureaucracy, the bureaucratic burden of a form-driven process remains even after introducing the "paperless" e-taxes system. In this case, the new approach did not truly reform the system by making it more user-friendly, but only changed paperwork to computer work without rationalizing the taxation procedures.

The e-taxes system could become more effective, but it has low support among the voting public—as do the taxes they must pay. Indeed, it is hard to accuse the e-application of low interest because at least the personal income tax applications are

working well, but people do not yet trust Internet security, and paying taxes is not a high priority in interactions with the public sector.

## E-Urban Planning

Next to e-taxes, the second most important e-governance application is e-urban planning. This application has been in the works for a long time: many different maps had to be converted to electronic form and connected to many local databases in fifty-eight Slovenian administrative units and a growing number of municipalities. (In the past twelve years, the number of Slovenian municipalities grew from about sixty to more than two hundred). Now, all documents can be accessed via the Internet from any location.

This application is working better than e-taxes because the databases offer significant and dynamic accessibility. Thus, users can access urban planning maps and databases on real-estate property (both types of data are required for home building and other administrative procedures) without going to two different locations and searching for data. Again, the main obstacle is the pop-up system's redirecting the user to other pages. Also, as is the case with e-taxes and most other e-applications, the user needs a good knowledge of Slovenian public-sector bureaucracy to negotiate the system. These shortcomings notwithstanding, this application has a good future because the interactive databases work well and ultimately are very effective. All that's needed is a reduction in pop-up redirections to an absolute

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minimum and a better integration of the application in the overall e-government portal.

## Conclusion

As discussed in this limited space, some elements of e-government are available today in Slovenia. All frequently used forms and applications are available via the Internet. The most evident exception are transactions that result in a document with a personal photo, such as a passport or identification card. At this point, all such documents still require a personal visit to a government agency. On the other hand, many applications provide the opportunity to manage a number of administrative processes from home at any time, avoiding long hours standing in line instead of being on the job or at home with the children.

Although e-urban planning and e-taxes feature a high level of interactivity, more interactive forms are needed. The main obstacles to online interactivity are user fear of reporting personal data over the Internet (despite a secure connection), the need for a digital signature, the lack of computing skills and knowledge of the system, and the incompetency of some individual government units.

The main characteristic of Slovenian e-governance today is the *slow* migration from paper to electronic applications. The government is still a long way from simplifying and rationalizing e-governance portals in an understandable and logical system that doesn't rely on redirecting pop-up windows and an elaborate array of subportals. As noted in my earlier research on the role of party Web pages in electoral campaigns, Web pages with more than four levels (links), or even redirecting pop-up windows, confuse users.

The conceptual, systemic obstacle to real e-governance is the technocratic approach to government reform. E-governance requires a simple mechanism that helps a citizen find a solution to a problem. This mechanism requires, not online application forms, but reform in the process itself. This is particularly obvious in the area of personal income tax, where the state has most of the data on individual earnings and social security payments, yet inexplicably still requires users to reenter this information.

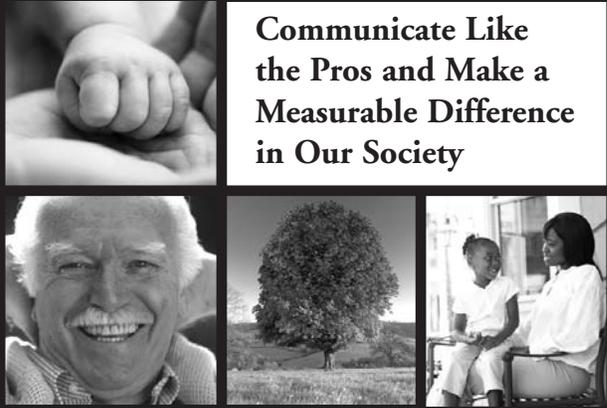
Slovenian public management is trying to introduce some aspects of e-governance—such as the online availability of forms and interactive applications—but the organization of the system as a whole needs

improvement. The government must take steps to make the system more transparent and reliable for individuals and business users, with fewer vertical links and without special redirecting pop-up windows that confuse and confound our citizens. ❖

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