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Political Reflections on E-Governance, International Cooperation and Security.

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Talking about Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and their impact on developing countries, about the information society, electronic-governance and potential "leapfrogs" of these countries into a prosperous future, all this is becoming a common thing for researches, journalists, politicians, and sociologists. Information technology is changing the world, enriching and integrating communication means worldwide breaking all geographical and social borders. It is creating conditions for more economical and political freedom, which may lead to new movements and institutions for democracy. We are at the beginning of a new technological revolution whose consequences is difficult to evaluate. The ICT impacts get shaped as result of the fusion of globalization, worldwide connectivity and knowledge networking.

Information revolution is accelerating all human activities. The world is transforming into a "global village" of information society. How would it be this future society - it is difficult to predict; but Wriston [1997a] writes: "*despite all of the advantages of science and the ways in which it is changing the world, science does not remake the human mind or alter the power of the human spirit.*" The reality seems to be too complex for early optimism or pessimism. What we know for sure is that: (1) widespread of ICT applications is changing radically our world, our work and our living in community; (2) ICT is creating a worldwide public space, breaking all borders of space and time; and (3) all communication-related problems of humanity are extending in this new public space that seems to be without borders.

ICT revolution creates opportunities as well as risks for developing countries. Widening the gap of digital-divide will have grave consequences for the society. "Digital divide" means the separation of society in different communities distinguished by the degree they have access and are "visible" in the worldwide communication and information networks - the so called "cyberspace". Neglecting them would lead to transforming the digital divide in a information and knowledge divide. It would be fatal in a society based on information and knowledge. It may lead to new polarization of society and new social and political crises. The importance of knowledge for the societies of today and tomorrow is crucial for sustaining economic growth and welfare in a context of globalization. Dieter [2001] writes: "*if national governments would manage to build robust knowledge-based societies, globalization may become an opportunity rather than a threat*."

Information revolution changes the ways how the society works and is governed, creating good opportunities for effective and good governance, but all this is privilege of being online and having access to digital information and knowledge. Heeks [2001] writes: "*E-governance lies at the heart of two global shifts: the information revolution and the governance revolution"*. If the attention is concentrated only on intensive use of ICT to gain production efficiency using information as capital, this ideology leaves no place for other social values; and technology serves in what Chester [1998] defines: *"maintaining a culture of unrestrained capitalism rather than a new society"*, leading to surprises with unforeseen results. To address the interests of the society as a whole, it is necessary a well planned and managed process, taking account of resulting social consequences. This process must push developing communities for what Garcia [2001] describes as "*reengineer themselves to meet the requirements of a*

knowledge-based network economy … they must integrate their economic activities, and thicken their institutions by reinforcing their local and regional ties."

ICT is changing our world, but it is not ICT the cause of these changes. The Krantzberg's Law cites that "technology is neither good or bad, nor it is neutral". Historically the humanity depends on the information, and new technologies only change the means and ways of its circulation. In this context, the e-governance is result of adoption of new ICT by governments. This adoption implies profound changes on information resources and information flows, changing inter-government and citizen-politician-state relationships. ICT may change the ways of making politics, but not its content. The challenge for both governments and international community is sustainable development through use of ICT, and it conditioned not by technological factors but by political decisions. Beside needs and ideology elements for a reform, there is also the third element - the political will to do the reform. Mathews [2000] considers Information Revolution as "*shaped by wise or stupid policies and social choices.*"

It is naïve to consider ICT as one of most important forces for the development of DCs. Important are Information Systems (IS) - "virtual engines that collect, store, process data and produce information". IS as a virtual engine is composed by rules, protocols, and procedures based on formalizations. IS run over a certain infrastructure, that may be based on ceramics, carved stone, leather, paper, or modern ICT. All together are called Information Systems and Technologies (IST). Good governance requires good evaluation of the reality through processing multiple data, to produce the necessary information for supporting decision-making. It is responsibility of institutions, linked with each other in the framework of public administration structure, to exchange and process multiple data. The individual work is only a necessary condition for functioning of different nodes of administrative structure; to get a sufficient condition we need to add the capacity for data exchange between different nodes both horizontally and vertically, as well as their integration in organization scale to produce information. In this framework, Bangemann Report of European Commission [1994] cites that "*interconnection of networks and interoperability of services and applications are recommended as primary Union objectives*."

In the Green Paper "Public sector information: a key resource for Europe" of the European Commission [1996], it is pointed out that: "*public sector information plays a fundamental role in the proper functioning of the internal market and the free circulation of goods, services and people,... without user-friendly and readily available administrative, legislative, financial or other public information, economic actors cannot make fully informed decisions*." All this cannot be done without decentralization. The human society in itself is a distributed system. Centralized systems in a distributed environment cannot have any future, and the failures of former socialist "centralized" countries are the proof. While intensive use of IST opens the way for a "centralized" coordination in a distributed environment, through intense exchange of data between autonomous interconnected institutions. Interoperability between autonomous institutions implies a fundamental change of governance, it has to do with the balance between "monitoring" and "controlling". Decentralization means increase and improvement of monitoring while decreasing the vertical administrative control. It is necessary to challenge the difficulties of decentralization through improving the interoperability, and not to solve strategic decentralization problems through operative re-centralization.

Internet is becoming a political space, but its usage does not lead automatically to empowerment and democracy. It is up to the civil society to democratize the Internet cyberspace through activism, in particular by serving as interface for marginalized communities. This process relies in the democratization potential of civil society, both in local and international scale, serving as a link between local communities and institutions in both national and global scale. Without access to global communications, citizens and economies will be in difficulties before a global economy. In the future the concept of "being well-informed" would mean not only to have information, but also to have reliable

information, and in this context the accountability of service providers and mechanisms for certifying the reliability of information will be crucial. The global chaotic use of Internet does not mean democracy - anarchy and democracy are two different things.

The role of civil society in the framework of e-governance, cooperation and security issues, is something more than simply an "interface" between public administration and citizens. NGOs are an important component of the distributed social environment, making possible the redundancy of network links and of information for two security-related reasons at least: (1) to neutralize manipulation of information that may happen in monopolistic environment; and (2) to serve as backup when some system may go down or off-line. It is especially important in cases of natural disasters, or social and political crises. NGOs becomes also important because of the growth of information quantity circulating in worldwide networks. Today the main challenge is to select valuable information from available data and processing it in reasonable time. NGOs would serve as "information brokers" for their communities, strengthening the common knowledge necessary for their identity and activism.

While arguing on e-governance issues, it would be useful to understand the main factors that makes ICT to have little impact in DCs. Of course, infrastructure problems may make difficult the development. But infrastructure problems are result of low general economical development. Impact of ICT goes through transformation of production processes. In normal conditions infrastructure develops gradually in parallel with the general development of the country. Albanian public administration represents a "blurred" environment, where work practices, regulations and procedures are little formalized. If decision-making is not based on clearly defined resources, options and tasks, then we have to do with unstructured decision problems. In such conditions, using new ICT may be good to improve and make easier the work of individuals, but in institutional scale the ICT impact is negligible.

Individual use of ICT is when people use their desktop PC to keep data and texts, use spreadsheets for some calculations, exchange the files with other colleagues, but all this is organized individually by each person in its own way. Institutional use of ICT means to have built institutionally-unified databases where the main data of the organization are stored, and all the people used intensively those databases for their work. Bellamy and Taylor [1994] define this phenomena - "informatization" - as a process "*when data collected for a multiple of purposes, at different times and places, can be integrated and shared to become resources of vastly increased significance and application.*" There are organizational applications, based on ICT, that by combining and processing organizational data, produce the information necessary for decision-making. In this context, individual applications partially are replaced by organizational applications and partially are integrated in it. Related with complex data processing, informatization requires also the presence of a minimal IST expertise within the organization.

Many of projects are sponsored and controlled by foreign organizations or governments, following a neo-liberal agenda oriented towards the private sector. If projects have little impact, it is not a justification the fact that objectives of projects were defined through interaction with end-users. When unstructured decision problems prevail, even end-users do not know what they want. The chain that leads to the social-economical-political impact of ICT may be represented as follows: "Infrastructure => Access => Usage => Cognitive-Phenomena => Impact-on-Work". The bottleneck in the case of Albania, a well as other DCs, lies in the "middle" of the chain, i.e. "usage". Without a proper usage that can develop such particular cognitive phenomena at the head of people, to lead them in changing for better the way of working, we cannot have impact of ICT simply by building the infrastructure.

Lack of structured information systems is one of the causes why ICT have little impact. Another typical bad practice is "manipulation of projects". Managers who control the program under which the project is situated, use their influence to manipulate with objectives and selection of people or organizations

charged with the project. Another bad practice is the consideration of 'good users' as 'experts', i.e. people with good 'product knowledge' are considered as "experts" of ICT able to lead development and deployment of IST. The latter requires 'conceptual knowledge' that is different form the "production knowledge". The public administration actually suffers from the lack of ICT experts, because many people have left it or even the country, including young experts. Meanwhile the public academic institutions (i.e. research institutes and universities) are pushed aside, "leaving their brains to evaporate".

A balance between public and private sectors is a crucial issue for institution building processes. Even in developed countries with a consolidated private sector, services for citizens have suffered because priority was given to private sector. There are two questions related with these trends: (1) how much the ICT development is outsourced (contracted) to private firms), and (2) how public administration collaborates with other public sectors. Many studies have shown that it is risky giving priority to private sector, while excluding internal specialists; it is risky especially for the sustainability of new implemented IST. The Albanian reality proves that existing trends lead towards a polarization of the society in a dipole Administration <=> Private without space for other structures as public academic institutions.

The question of academic institutions is strongly related with the quality of education, considered by Choucri [2000] as "the fundamental source of national power". "*The information society must become a 'lifelong learning society', which means that the sources of education and training must be extended beyond traditional institutions to include the home, the community, companies and other organizations*", this is one of basement bricks of European policy [Forum 1996]. Penalizing directly or indirectly the education, we create a fragile background for future development, and good probabilities to remain forever in a "gravity hole" as we are today. The public sector may be improved if direct "private-like" mechanisms would be implemented and encouraged to motivate people. There will be no development without motivated people - "only people may solve problems created by people" wrote Nixon [Wriston, 1997b].

Looking toward a "central coordination" in a "distributed environment", we need to match together both bottom-up and top-down ways, using common guidelines to assure the interoperability of separate "bricks" of IST, to assure their function as a single body. The solution would be a "national policy" for institution building, including structured and formalized IS. Implementation of ICT must be seen as consequence of development of IS, and not as a cause for development. Applying such strategy, we may build interconnected autonomous systems following compatible rules, protocols and procedures to assure their interoperability. That does not mean "control from the top-level instances". Instead, it consist in what Landsbergen and Wolken [2001] called "*recognizing that in a technological society technical standards are another kind of public law*".

It not simply ICT we need for the development of the country. First of all we need the political will to develop and integrate the country, and clear political objectives how to do it. Second, we need a development strategy of IS as part of institution building strategy, defined on the basis of those political objectives. Third, we need close collaboration with both private and public ICT specialized sectors, motivating people for implementation of the IS strategy and massive education. The deployment and impact of ICT, leading toward the information & knowledge society, will come as result of these combined activities. All this may seem difficult to be achieved, like to "tie a bell in a cat's tail". But earlier or latter people will be not more surprised with the view of big computers, and will ask how they are used. One day someone will remember the old proverb: "one is incorrigible if falls two times in the same hole".

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