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Neki Frasheri

Trying to Develop Information Society in Albania – A Case Study

TRYING TO DEVELOP INFORMATION SOCIETY IN ALBANIA – A CASE STUDY

Neki Frasheri

Email: nfra@fti.upt.al

*Faculty of Information Technology,
Polytechnic University of Tirana*

Abstract: Deployment of IT in developing context of Albania is lead by strategies based on political agendas which do not match well with the country's reality and lead in non-efficient actions. Important steps in e-bureaucracy are undertaken, and at the same time some typical problems emerge in these actions. The paper tries to give an overview of recent developments and related problems.

Keywords: information society, development strategy, e-government, e-education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we try to analyze important steps that government is doing for the deployment of IT in the public sector in Albania and some preliminary results of this process. We try to identify gaps between official politics, implementation actions and the reality. Government has shown a great interest on IT, prepared national strategies and implemented important projects. But political forces did not consider any long term strategy and each government followed its own way to reach some political objective, often neglecting the efficiency of investments and effectiveness of services.

Different aspects of deployment of ICT in the public sector in developing countries are discussed by many scholars, in particular the e-governance and e-education. Heeks (2004) for example offers a good analysis of the phenomenon of e-governance as better governance through intense use of ICT. The success and failure of deploying ICT depends in a great scale from education. Schools and universities represent the main constituency of the education system. The government is working hard in both areas – e-government and e-education. But in practice we see tendencies of politics to dominate the information revolution.

In a developing context this tendency may become problematic because of lack of necessary forces that would put some control over the politics. Chou (2006) writes that success of e-government is limited by factors as misconception, malpractices, poor capacities, structural deficiencies and lack of political will. Such phenomena may be identified in the visions and practices for the deployment of ICT in Albania. In this context we discuss the impact of politics in drafting of development strategies and their implementation, interaction and balances between different sectors, and the role of people involved in these processes.

2. METHODOLOGY

We used the information collected while working for preparation and implementation of some important projects in the country, through contacts with other people involved in similar activities, and from the media. Several theoretical aspects were taken into account for the analysis of the information, focusing on the topics of e-bureaucracy, interaction between public and private sectors, interactional expertise, manipulation of projects, and difference of rationales. In some cases a critical evaluation of theoretical models is done through matching theoretical arguments with the concrete Albanian reality.

Authors as Cordella (2007) consider the e-bureaucracy as an e-government solution. Bureaucracy is considered as a mechanism to coordinate work activities, and as a guarantor of equal and impartial actions that enforce democratic values. But Nowicka (2007), for example, considers e-bureaucracy as synonym of e-administration but with a negative overtone, devoid of democratic elements. Bureaucracy may be seen as a tool for governance, and following the concept behind the Kransberg First Law (Kransberg 1991), a tool is not a solution but a mean to build a solution. Building e-bureaucracy seems easier and there is a tendency to focus the attention in e-bureaucratic services, considering it as important component of e-governance.

E-government may be considered as composed by three components: decision and policy making, services for citizen (inc. business), and government-to-government services. Bureaucracy dominates citizen and government-to-government services. Decision and policy-making is crucial for positive orientation of development processes, and it has to do more with human interaction and lobbies. It depends on the political will of leading circles of the country (Frasheri 2002). E-

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bureaucracy may help citizens and speed-up communication within the government, but it remains far from "better governance".

Interaction between public and private sectors is another important element of political agendas, in particular for the public procurement and outsourcing of public services. Many authors insist in problems of public-private partnerships (see for example (Broomfield 2006), (Flinders 2005), (Grimshaw 2002)). Problems get complicated in developing context when decisions are taken to promote certain policies instead of effective implementation of the technology. Introduction of IT in schools is a typical case where public-private partnership was considered more as justification instead of a solution for the sustainability.

Usually policy-makers try to hide the mismatch between the politics and the reality. Several phenomena are identified when problematic ICT policies are presented in the public and related projects are implemented, justified with a particular use of technical language and arguments.

The concept of "interactional expertise" is defined by Collins and Evans (2007) as a part of tacit knowledge of practitioners shared by people who do not have the full set of professional skills. This may be a debatable definition; but it is an old idea expressed in popular cultures, and it may be useful to describe the involvement of non-professionals in professional decision-making tasks. We will consider the interactional expertise as part of knowledge acquired by non-professionals, making them able to speak in technical language. Such people are able to present easily technical issues following political requirements instead of technical ones, and this is useful to support decision making ideas despite technical constraints. Even experts may fall in this trap when they do not have all requested information. The other side of medal is that thinking technically too hard may lead to no solution at all.

Use of interactional expertise facilitates the manipulation of projects to match specific interests instead of real needs, resulting in low effectiveness, lack of sustainability, but probably good publicity (Frasheri 2002). Technical presentation helps to convince the audience to accept problematic ideas, especially when stakeholders are more interested in formal results instead of the real impact. A preferred way to justify problematic ideas using interactional expertise is the blind use of imported models without counting for the local reality – the difference of rationales.

Difference of rationales is an important factor for the effectiveness of IT projects (Avgerou 2000), related with differences between conditions in exporting and importing countries. Policy-makers imitate solutions suggested by specific case studies, without counting for local conditions. Imported ideas may be formally successful, but with problematic impact in the terrain. A typical instance of the phenomenon is using of ICT "in my own way" as a "golden solution" for all problems. This is a sort of cargo cult (Harris 1998) blended with the "ego" cult – "I did it".

The combination of all these phenomena gives a wrong shape to processes for implementation of ICT and pushes segments of politics to oscillate from one extreme to the other. Drafting of National Strategy for ICT is a typical case of such extremism.

3. NATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR ICT

In a global political climate of promoting ICT, compilation of national strategies seems to be a precondition for collaboration with many international actors. In 2003 Albanian government accepted and approved the national strategy for the development of ICT. The draft was prepared by international actors in collaboration with local experts. In 2005 the new government decided to revise this draft. At the same time the deployment of ICT in public services is increased considerably, and the government launched the initiative to introduce ICT and Internet in all schools of the country. Important ICT projects are implemented, but with problems in the effectiveness of solutions and the efficiency of investments.

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The first document of the national strategy for ICT was compiled by a team of foreign and local experts, funded by international donors. It was presented in a national conference and discussed in separate sessions for each of its main topics. The final draft was approved by government in April 2003 and one of ministers was charged with its implementation. The draft of the strategy included the e-readiness of the country, development indicators, and the roadmap its implementation. The major drawback of this document was the e-readiness, because of missing official statistical data. One of objectives of the strategy was improvement of the state statistical service to add more ICT related data and improve future assessments.

Implementation of the strategy failed. Strategic objectives included the creation of a consultative body for the government, with representatives from different communities. This body was created, but composed by some of ministers serving as consultants of council of ministers (!). Actions defined in the roadmap were not seriously followed, except the creation of principal segments of the government network and basic Internet services, initiated and funded by international actors.

In 2005 the new government decided to revise the strategy and charged the ministry responsible for telecommunications to compile the new document; also some foreign expert was invited to help with the task, but without public consultancy. In 2007 the relevant ministry informed other institutions about the new draft in its web site, inviting for comments. Until mid 2008 there was no sign for a formal approval of the new strategy. Instead, from private contacts was learned that the working group was making some consultations, and that ICT experts from universities were not involved despite the high priority of ICT in education.

The Strategy of 2003 (ICT Strategy 2003) has 92 A4 pages and is published in both Albanian and English as book and CD; while the new Strategy of 2005-2007 (ICT Strategy 2007) has only 54 A4 pages and it is published in the Internet. The old document was well structured, clearly separating priorities, objectives and actions. The new strategy was drafted from the scratch and it is more government-oriented. It offers also some evaluation of the costs for its implementation, which was missing in the old strategy. But concepts are confused with each other – the same words are used for priorities, objectives and policies at the same time. The draft has unclear formulations and unrealistic goals, for example “collaboration to raise necessary regional basic technologies to profit from economies of scale in the region”, or “connect the base network of the country and base internet network of European Union and other countries in the region”.

It is possible to compare the old and new strategies, focusing in main topics of both drafts. Strategic goals and plans are compared side by side in the Table 1. Differences are mainly in formulations and details of strategic topics. But they remain in paper, because the actions for implementation of key services are already in progress and without strong correlation with each other.

4. ACTIONS TO BUILD THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

It was expected that the national strategy for ICT would serve during the process of implementation of ICT. The new document is not yet completed; some of its objectives are unclear, out of the scope or unrealistic. Nevertheless the government has multiplied its actions for the deployment of ICT, preparation of legislation and creation of some structures in its own way. Projects with important ICT components are funded with about 64 million EUR, mainly from international donors (ICT Strategy 2007). The new legislation includes completion of liberalization of telecommunications market, creation of the system for public electronic procurement, rules for electronic signatures and issuing of electronic certificates,

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No.	ICT STRATEGY GOALS 2003	ICT STRATEGY PLAN 2003	ICT STRATEGY GOALS 2007	ICT STRATEGY PLAN 2007
1	Pro -Active, Well-Coordinated National ICT Policies	Action plan, Coordination and Follow-up of ICT strategy	Awareness campaign in communication media	Information for decision-makers, understanding profits from ICT, getting support
2	Creation of ICT-Supportive Legislative Environment	Development of e-legislation and regulatory mechanisms	Wide and modern regulatory system	Laws for information, e-commerce, IPR, juridical capacities, regulatory organs, define by law what is ICT
3	Effective, Transparent, Responsive Government and Public Services	E-government services, interactive websites, local governance, promotion and training	Policies for modern civil services Strengthening of juridical system	E-gov services, transparency, accountability, implementation of eSEE programme, government portal, efficiency for the law court
4	Basic Computer Literacy and ICT Education for all	Basic computer literacy, certification, ICT in non ICT subjects, general awareness	Increase of human capacities	Improvement of teaching, Albanian Internet, concurrency in informatical economy, elimination of unemployment, increase of research and its connection with main flow of science and technology, investments in technology
5	Cadre of Advanced ICT Specialists – Education and Research in ICT	Certification of higher level ICT education, ICT in universities, vocational training		
6	ICT in Health and Social Services	ICT health and social services, end-user devices for medical and social care, training	Computerization of public healthcare system	Improvement of healthcare using ICT, computerization, management systems, insurances, services on line, telemedicine
7	Supporting Development of Locally Relevant Content and Applications	Internet content and web portals, software accessibility	Community connectivity for services country-wide	Public services in all country, participation in economic social political cultural life, empower local communities, decentralization
			Preparation of digital content for Albanian Internet	Incentives for online information and services, increase of information providers with address ending in ".al"
8	Creation of a competitive,	Privatization, competitive	Regulatory environment for	Deregulation of frequencies,

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	liberalized telecommunications sector	market, independent regulatory authority, 3rd generation mobile, incentives for new players	opportunities, public relations for ICT lead by government	competitiveness, connectivity for all, national base support network, telephonic services, objects of connectivity of communities in all the country, decrease of connectivity costs, expansion of government network. ICT in private sector and agriculture, blooming bussiness sector.
9	Development of the ICT Sector as a Production Sector	Favorable climate for the high-tech sector, permanent business forum, technology parks and business incubators, education, training		
10	Inexpensive, fast and secure ICT infrastructure throughout Albania	Country wide infrastructure, Academic Networks, government network, Internet in schools, public access points, advanced technologies	Development of ICT infrastructure of high speed	Information and services for all, national cohesion, connection of Albanian base network with the Internet of EU and region, collaboration to increase necessary regional base technologies to profit from scale economy of the region
11	Supporting Electronic Business	Business trade portal, Affordability of equipment, Public-Private, Training	Competitiveness of private usiness	Strengthen ICT industry, private-public, associations with foreign companies, foreign investments and know-how transfer, incentives for R&D, e-agriculture, online procurements
12	Active participation in SEE ¹ regional Initiatives	Participation in e-SEE Europe and regional projects	Implementation of eSEE ² and bSEE ³ recommendations	Unique informatics space for SEE, innovation and investments in research and education, information society for all
13	Active participation in EU Initiatives	eEurope+ and CEEC ⁴ strategies, Participation in ICT funding of EC	Tools for regional and eSEE/bSEE collaboration	Collaboration for regional network and SEE activities, empowering SEE, EU integration and interoperability
14	Monitoring of Albanian ICT Development in Regional and	Scenarios, indicators, roadmap, objectives,	Status analysis and monitoring of ICT	Needs and conditions, comparative indicators, priorities and needs

¹ South Eastern Europe

² Electronic South Eastern Europe initiative

³ Broadband South Eastern Europe initiative

⁴ Central and Eastern European Countries

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	European Context	outputs, quantitative statistics of ICT		
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Table 1. Comparison of national ICT strategies drafted in 2003 and 2007

application of electronic payments, creation of a general electronic civil status registry, use of identity cards and biometric passports, and the electronic surveillance.

Government created in 2007 some structures that include the National Agency for Information Society, the Agency for Electronic Certificates and the National Center for Registration of Businesses.

The idea of a National Agency for Information Society is included in ICT strategy and promoted by international actors as an all-inclusive forum with representatives from different communities (public administration, private sector, academia and civil society). Instead, a pure government institution was created. Its role is to propose strategies, coordinate and implement important projects, promote and lead implementation and deployment of ICT country-wide.

The Agency for Electronic Certificates is in process of creation. It will serve as a regulatory body, defining the rules and licensing different organizations that will deal with electronic certificates. It is not clear when services for electronic certificates may be operational.

The National Center for Registration of Businesses is designed as a one-stop-shop for registration processes. An electronic registry is created for this purpose. It is supposed that this service would facilitate registration procedures for businesses.

Public procurements may be done electronically through the site of Agency for Public Procurement. The site offers a registration process for interested companies to become users of electronic procurement service, get tender information and give offers electronically.

Offices of Civil Status have created the new electronic civil status registry, and the issuing of certificates is done faster. Government is working to prepare smart identity cards and biometric passports. The address system in urban centers is planned for completion to match with great urban changes of last 15 years.

Tax and customs offices are using ICT for a long time. Tax office offers services for companies to download tax documents through Internet. But electronic payments remain a problem because few banks offer online payment systems. Albania has adopted the Automated SYstem for Customs Data (ASYCUDA) for customs services, and this is considered as important factor for emerging e-commerce.

Government started the initiative for e-schools (E-schools 2006) to introduce ICT and Internet connectivity in all schools of the country until the end of 2008. Funding for this project is evaluated at about 25 million USD. Management of the project is done by foreign experts working in the premises of Ministry of Education and Science. Already a considerable part of schools are equipped with computer laboratories, teaching curricula are under revision, and sustainability issues are discussed.

The Italian government had proposed a project for The National Research and Education Network, but its implementation was delayed for several years. Only in 2007 both governments ratified the agreement, and the Ministry of Education and Science has created the PIU for its implementation. The preparatory work is going on, but as usual the progress is slow because of bureaucracies. The problem of the connectivity of this national network with the pan-European Research and Education Network GEANT has not yet a solution.

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Government gives funds for research in the framework of the national programme for research and development in several important domains, including ICT. In the framework of this programme, relevant IT departments of main universities are involved in a regional project for the deployment of grid technologies and development of grid applications. This project complements and supports the participation of the country in the SEE_GRID initiative, funded by European Commission, for the creation of the South Eastern European Grid Infrastructure and its integration with the European Grid Infrastructure EGI.

Despite difficulties, all these actions promise a good step forward, in accord with regional and European political agendas. But the reality is more complex and problematic. These actions support more the e-bureaucracy, which is not "better governance" by default; and projects for education have questionable effectiveness and sustainability. The analysis and comments on both policies and actions are presented in the next section.

5. CONTRADICTIONARY POLICIES AND ACTIONS

Politics had no balanced approach for the implementation of ICT in the country. Sometime they do formal approvals of strategies but do not care for their implementation, in other cases they run for big projects without a clear and official strategy, without coordination or any basis for sustainability. In both cases politics may neglect other running projects and relevant organizations, negating all previous efforts and gained experience. They consider only positive aspects of their ideas, which formally may be quite good, and they neglect problematic aspects or consider them simply in theoretical plans without concrete solutions.

Politics used to justify its plans and actions with a lot of technical justifications and examples from other countries, without taking fully into account the reality and the needs of the country. Examples are used as precedence cases for justification instead of understanding possible risks and problems, and without counting differences between two realities – i.e. the difference of rationales. Our supposition is that technical argumentation is done by people who do not understand the technology and its impacts – the case of interactional expertise, or by people who want to manipulate and lead projects towards some specific goals that may not match real needs. The enthusiasm of policy-makers is result of blending of the cargo cult mentality – the fixed idea that computers will solve problems by default, with the hidden goal of manipulation of projects and processes. This complex of phenomena underlies in the ways different initiatives and projects are implemented.

In the domain of research, the government carried out a radical reorganization of the public research system that led to the downgrading and integration of research institutes within universities in Tirana. They planned that reform without consultations with the research community, without an implementation plan and not accounting for the final cost. In this turmoil the Institute of Informatics and Applied Mathematics – created in 1971 and seen by the public as a symbol of informatics in the country remained for several months neither dead nor alive, until at the end of 2007 when it was integrated as center of research within the Faculty of Information Technology.

Simultaneously with the dissolving of the Institute of Informatics, government created the National Agency for Information Society. Formally that was a positive step. In practice its creation was difficult because of missing qualified staff and lack of collaboration with the research and education community. But the old institute was created to serve the requests of public administration, it would play very well the role of that agency with little internal reorganization, and creation from the scratch of a new organization was not necessary. It seems that politics was more interested to erase what was already built and to say that "they did it" from the scratch.

All this reform was justified with some partial models from western countries – "research is done in universities" (western research centers were not counted). Western partial models were

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considered as the key for the success of the research system; and political, economical and social factors that shape that success were totally ignored.

In the direction of e-governance, the government put lot of efforts in big, important and problematic projects, as described in the previous section. Three cases are presented as examples how e-bureaucracy may complicate things instead of easing them, and showing how politics sticks on popular ideas while neglects the coordination of projects and the quality of services.

Creation of the National Center of Registration and of the electronic registry for businesses was considered as very important to simplify registration processes, following the logic of “one-stop-shop”. In practice a real confusion was created because by law all businesses had to deposit there their yearly financial balances – the same procedure they have to do in tax offices, and make sure that all their data was correct. They supported the wrong idea that “the computer solves the problems”, and there was no coordination between projects and offices.

The other problem was missing of procedures to solve cases of errors on electronic databases, and justification for the errors of administration because "the computer did it". It happened with the Energetic Corporation, they use an electronic database to store bills for all clients, and in order to "fight corruption" they do not permit any modification of this database even in case of evident errors. Reading of energy counters is done manually. It happened in a public institution when the worker read wrongly the counter and the wrong value was inserted in the database, on which basis a huge bill was issued. The error was identified, but it was "in the computer" and the solution was to send bills of zero value for two years to the client, until the actual reading of the counter reached the wrong value in the database. For two years the client used electricity without paying it, and at the end it had the same huge bill to pay.

Public procurement is considered as one of the sources of corruption of public administration. Use of ICT is considered by many political agendas as a good solution for this purpose. In such context the preparation of electronic procurement procedures was considered a big step forward. Nevertheless, procurement itself is a complex process. ICT may improve the transparency and speed up the process. But there are many other crucial factors as terms of references, the size of tender, and the ability to follow contractual obligations. Neutrality of terms of reference may force people to accept known bad solutions. Size of tenders is related with experiments of governments to concentrate all procurements of the administration in one hand. As result, premises for lobbies, risks for failures, delays for many months, monopolization of the market, degradation of services, and shadowing of local companies, all these increase proportionally. Electronic certificates are not used and the integrity of the database formally is questionable.

In education, the government is investing for the huge project of introducing ICT in schools. The main objective is quite good and, if fully realized, it would improve considerably the teaching. Government instances neglected the suggestion to implement the initiative gradually through pilot projects and learn by doing, they decided on the basis of pure political arguments. Missing of necessary conditions in different parts of the country – technicians, local funding, electricity shortcuts – all is considered only in a theoretical plan. Distribution of equipment is delayed for many months even for stupid reasons. While a lot of money is spent for the equipment, conditions for their correct usage and the long term sustainability of the project are still in discussion.

At the same time public universities are lacking behind. Government considered as important the connection of the academic community with the pan-European research and education network GEANT. People from government, being ignorant of related projects in the country, asked directly the European Commission for help to connect Albania with the GEANT. At the same time ICT departments from universities had tried to achieve this objective and they participated in the regional initiative SEEREN for GEANT connectivity in the Balkans area. Participation in this initiative requested a co-financing from local funds for leasing of international lines, a total of 50 k€. Government instances did not gave the requested local fund and the participation in the project

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remained pure formal. The interest expressed by the government was something impulsive – said and forgotten.

Always in this framework, the project-idea SEELIGHT was launched in Balkans area, with objective to assure optical fibers for a long term period up to 15 years, which would solve the problem in regional scale. Leasing of international telecommunications lines has high cost in the area and does not permit national networks, having a limited budget, to get gigabit links. The project is funded in framework of the Hellenic Plan for the Economic Reconstruction of the Balkans, and relevant ministries from each country must negotiate for participation. Involvement in SEELIGHT requires a co-financing of 550 k€ from local sources. Relevant people in government have verbally agreed to give this funding and arrange formalities for participation, nevertheless years are passing without any concrete step.

In all cases crucial but unsolved problems remains – effectiveness and sustainability of implemented systems. Public institutions suffer from the lack of good IT technicians because of low salaries and negligence of decision-making. In some other cases IT people are charged with many tasks and as result the maintenance may become the lowest priority. Public-private partnership is seen as a solution for sustainability. Typical case is the initiative of government to introduce ICT and Internet in all schools of the country. The initiative is a good one, with condition to have necessary support for sustainability – maintenance of equipment and continuation of Internet connectivity. The idea was to promote public-private partnerships between schools and local companies as a solution for the sustainability, but nothing concrete to attract the private was planned.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Government is trying to follow agendas of international forums as eSEE and Stability Pact. But it is necessary to understand their weak points and not to wait for problems to re-emerge after wasting lot of time and efforts, and to rediscover that "we cannot solve institutional problems using computers" [eSEE 2003]. Politics works to build up things in its own way without considering the reality. This is reflected in attitudes toward strategies and ways of their drafting, distorted balances and lack of collaboration between sectors, exaggerated impact of non-experts in technical decision making.

For a small country the good coordination of all local resources is of vital importance. A strategy for implementation and deployment of ICT country-wide would be a tool to organize the collaboration between different actors and to exploit capacities of research community and of universities. Missing of this chance may lead to serious consequences slowing down the development and creating unexpected situations.

Learning from other countries is a “must” in order to avoid errors and get hints to solve local problems. But the impact of projects will be uncertain if alien experiences are blindly applied. At the same time neglecting alien experiences will lead to repetition of errors and uncertain results.

Much attention for the e-bureaucracy will not make the governance better, in a country that needs to reform itself radically. To increase the effectiveness of public administration it is necessary to work with people in all levels, making them to feel the responsibility of their public actions. This is an issue of human interaction and not of the technology.

An important resource for development is left out because of little institutional collaboration between government and universities. It is important for universities to integrate their work with each other, but first of all they must contribute for the country dealing with local problems. In a developing country the government practically plays the role of a champion, leading the process of implementation of ICT beside the private sector. When collaboration with universities is low, pseudo-expertise and cargo cult becomes dominant for the immediate pleasure of politics but with long term consequences.

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International actors and local politicians must take into account the complex of negative phenomena identified in the process of implementation of ICT in developing context. This will improve the impact of ICT. It is not easy, and easier ways are not always the best ones. The process of deployment of ICT has a long way to go, and it is necessary to analyze and compare continuously the actions of political decision making and their impact in the terrain, in order to improve the understanding of political impact and the ways of evolution of politics itself in ICT-related national and international plans.

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