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Digital Czech Republic 2021

Policy Recommendations

Abstract

The aim of the Digital Czech Republic conference is to contribute to the development of the digitalization of society and public administration across Europe, on the example of Czechia. The digitalization of society enables closer contact between citizens and the state. This contributes to the more efficient functioning of the state, strengthens liberal values and their protection/development, leads to the establishment of new cooperation and enables the exchange of information and experience from abroad. Digitisation strengthens fundamental democratic principles such as freedom of expression or the right to information. On the other hand, digitisation brings new situations for which society is not prepared, such as the protection and processing of personal data, where we need to find solutions.

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Digital Czech Republic 2021: Policy Recommendations

Today, we live in a digital age – an age of information. It is a time where we can use computers and smartphones to access any information on the internet in a matter of seconds. Moreover, this digital revolution not only affects the economy, but also society, and the Czech Republic, together with the rest of the EU and world, is presented with an immense transformational opportunity. No state can afford to miss out.

However, the still ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has proven that, despite our best efforts, the level of digitalization in the Czech Republic and the other EU member states remains insufficient.¹

The 2021 Digital Czech Republic conference, organised by the Institute for Politics and Society and sponsored by the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Industry and Trade, Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Czech Republic, addressed some of the questions surrounding the digitalization of the Czech Republic. The 6th annual international conference took place on the 12th and 13th of May 2021. Subtitled “On the Edge of Tomorrow”, the event was held in a hybrid format.

The crisis as an Opportunity for Development of eHealth

Healthcare will have to undergo a process of digital transformation. This transformation is inevitable and will ensure the sector remains functional and effective, even during crises such as the recent pandemic.

The Czech Republic has taken its first step towards the digitalization of healthcare by introducing electronic subscriptions and sicknotes. However, for the digitalization of healthcare and development of eHealth as a whole, hospitals and other institutions must operate with the existing data in a safe and organised way in order to continue its effective transformation. To ensure this, there should be a standardized method of data storage at hospitals. It is recommended that there be a shared, uniform structure, which would make it ultimately easier to access data, share and operate with it as required. One way of achieving that could be the establishment of an institution similar to the US’ national public health agency – the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In the Czech Republic’s case, this could be achieved by combining the National Institute of Public Health and Institute of Health Information and Statistics. This would ensure maximum effectiveness in data processing, dealing with the resulting information, and making it public.²

1 Robert Plaga, International Conference Digital Czech Republic (2021)

2 Petr Smejkal, International Conference Digital Czech Republic (2021)

Estonia is a prime example of the successful implementation of eHealth services. The success of its healthcare e-solutions and implementation of compulsory electronic identity cards in the early 2000s offer evidence of this.³ The electronic IDs make it easier to verify and confirm the identities of patients, and do so remotely to ensure their safety and convenience.

As stated on the official website of the e-Estonia Briefing Centre: *“Each person in Estonia that has visited a doctor has an online e-Health record that can be tracked. Identified by the electronic ID-card, the health information is kept completely secure and at the same time accessible to authorised individuals. KSI Blockchain technology is being used for the system to ensure data integrity and mitigate internal threats to the data.”*⁴

While there are currently efforts in the Czech Republic to emulate the Estonian system, the implementation of the electronic IDs and their dissemination has been slow.⁵

To ensure that the systematic digitalization of Czech healthcare can be completed without unnecessary obstacles, there must be a suitable legal framework in place – appropriate protection of data is imperative for recovering citizens’ trust of government. While there is no eHealth Act (also known as the Act on Electronic Healthcare) in place in the Czech Republic, a similar bill is currently in the works. It should be in effect from 1st January 2022, with some of the provisions coming into force after a transition period.⁶ It is expected and recommended that for this bill to become a reality, the Ministry of Health will need to cooperate with other organisations and institutions, such as health insurance companies and the State Institute of Drug Control.⁷

What Lesson Did the Year of Digital Education Teach Us?

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only profoundly impacted all parts of our lives, but has also altered our view on education. The innovation efforts in this field are on an unprecedented scale. One of the priorities for the government of the Czech Republic, as well as other EU member states, should be equity and inclusion. In this regard, there should be assistance for the EU member states to address gaps in digital connectivity equipment, both inside and outside education and training institutions.⁸

3 Florian Marcus, International Conference Digital Czech Republic (2021)

4 e-Estonia Briefing Centre (2019)

5 Daniel Klimeš, International Conference Digital Czech Republic (2021)

6 bnt attorneys in Central and Eastern Europe (2021)

7 Martin Zeman, International Conference Digital Czech Republic (2021); CEE Legal Matters (2020)

8 Mariya Gabriel, International Conference Digital Czech Republic (2021)

In this case, the numbers speak clearly. Before the pandemic, only 39% of teachers in the EU felt adequately prepared to use digital technologies for teaching, and 32% of students in EU member states did not have adequate access to internet connection and other important digital tools during the Spring 2020 lockdown.⁹

Digitalization of education could increase educators' audiences and make education more accessible to those who cannot partake in person. Online education should be combined with standard classroom instruction, creating a form of hybrid education, ensuring maximum flexibility.

Furthermore, together with other EU member states, the Czech Republic must take the necessary steps to improve the digitalization of education and the teachers' and students' access to the means. Moreover, the epidemic showcased the need for educators to strengthen their overall digital competencies, which every EU member state should focus on. Therefore, the way forward in improving the digitalization of education lies in enhancing the already existing digital opportunities and more effectively offering distanced education.

How to minimise the Impact of Coronavirus on the Digital Economy?

As the Covid-19 pandemic showed, we need to rebuild the economy to be stronger, more resilient, and generally better equipped to handle global crises. In this regard, technology was one of the main factors that held the economy together and protected more jobs than would be possible a few years ago.

What is essential in addressing and minimising the impact of the pandemic on the digital economy is adapting to a hybrid working style – both remote and in person. Studies show that in the United States, the percentage of people unwilling to transition from remote to in-person work after the pandemic is approximately 20%.¹⁰ In places like India, however, digital infrastructure is an acute problem. Therefore, the impact of the pandemic on the digital economy can be tackled by investing in places in desperate need of infrastructure; otherwise, the digital divide between countries will worsen.

9 Ibid.

10 Rebecca Christie, International Conference Digital Czech Republic (2021)

Intelligent Urban Mobility for the 21st Century

A sustainable and smart mobility strategy is another essential aspect of digitalization of the Czech Republic, and the country is making deliberate steps towards this goal. However, for smart urban transport to be as effective as possible, the demand for transport needs to be well mapped and researched by, for example, using activity-based modules to identify the true needs of people in terms of transport, its type, and frequency.¹¹

The Czech Republic is a founding member of the European C-Roads Platform, a joint endeavour between the authorities and road operators to develop and improve activities of the cooperative intelligent transport systems (C-ITS).¹² According to the C-Roads website:

“Implemented C-ITS services provide warning messages to drivers about road works, slow and stationary vehicles and hazardous locations or approaching emergency vehicle thus driver can adapt the driving. [...] The Brno urban road operator has managed to bring together several public & private stakeholders to form a complex C-ITS system which is already being utilized by the public transport vehicles, vehicles of Fire Rescue Services, as well as the urban road operator itself.”¹³

The digital connectivity between vehicles themselves as well as between vehicles and transportation infrastructure will improve road safety, traffic efficiency, and comfort of driving. All of that will be done by assisting drivers in adapting to new road infrastructure and, therefore, helping them make well-informed decisions.¹⁴

However, there is always the question of large-scale implementation of smart urban mobility, as automated vehicles seem better suited for different areas and niche situations. Nevertheless, they can be, at the very least, complementary to the overall transportation system.

11 Miroslav Svítek, International Conference Digital Czech Republic (2021)

12 C-Roads Czech Republic (2016)

13 Ibid.

14 European Commission (2020)

Conclusion

For the European Society, continuing the path for an effective process of digitalization is one of the important priorities. And it was highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic even more. But for the EU there are still many challenges connected with the move to the digital world such as strategic autonomy and new rules to protect citizens from counterfeit products, cybertheft, and disinformation.

As the European Commission stated in The Digital Compass: *"... over the next decade – the digital decade – the EU's vision is for a digital world that empowers people and businesses, and that is shaped around a human-centred, sustainable and more prosperous approach."*¹⁵

The EU's vision for the digital future sets out four areas to reach the main goals for the decade: A digitally skilled population and highly skilled digital professionals, secure and substantial digital infrastructures, digital transformation of businesses, and digitisation of public sectors.

15 European Commission (2021)

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