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Summary

ARC Fund has just made public a study on municipal websites carried out with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Bulgaria. The study looks at the availability and quality of a total of 125 municipal websites in an attempt to determine the level of local e-government development in the country and identify positive examples which can be transferred as best practice to other municipalities.

Adapting a comprehensive **websites assessment methodology** developed and piloted in the EU in 2002 (**KEeLAN** - Key Elements for Electronic Local Authorities' Networks), the study ranks Bulgarian municipalities according to such criteria as: **usability** of their websites; **functionalities**, including availability of special features for people with disabilities; **feedback options** allowing citizens participation in local policy-making; **electronic services** available through the websites, etc.

In very broad terms, the study responds to three key questions:

1. Do Bulgarian municipalities have own, official websites?
2. When such websites are in place, how can users (e.g. citizens, economic agents, etc.) find them?
3. What can user do once they access a municipality's website?

The results show that:

1. **Forty-seven per cent** of Bulgarian municipalities (125 out of 264) have official websites, as of July 2004. Websites are more common among municipalities with population over 30,000 people.
2. There is no online registry of the official municipal websites to facilitate users. Not even the central government portal contains a full and up-to-date listing.
3. Only **37% of the existing municipal websites in Bulgaria have registered their own domain names**; the other 63% exist as sub-domains of other websites (e.g. Domino.bg). The lack of a proper domain name policy leads to confusion, lack of trust in the users, higher transaction costs and, ultimately, poor interaction between the users and municipal administrations.
4. A large share (47%) of municipal websites have registered their domain names outside the **.bg** Top Level Domain (TLD). Most are registered under **.org** and **.com** domains, and only a few use **.net**.
5. To facilitate the users' navigation and orientation through the websites, nearly **70%** provide structured menus, and only **5%** have site maps or alphabetical indexes.
6. **57%** of the surveyed websites are bi-lingual (i.e. maintain versions in Bulgarian and one foreign language), and only two sites are tri-lingual.
7. **None** (0%) of the surveyed websites offers special functionalities for people with disabilities. This observation is particularly worrying given the emphasis which EU puts on the 'web-accessibility for all' requirements, and the fact that Bulgarian public websites should be able to aligned to them.

Another set of indicators included in the study – called "*Policy-Making*" indicators, assess the extent to which the websites allow interaction between local government authorities and their clients (e.g. citizens, businesses, etc.), and more precisely, whether the websites provide ways for the clients to participate in local government policy-making. In a considerable number of cases, the survey has found a complete lack of even basic contact information on the municipal websites. For example:
• 27 websites provide no mailing address;
• 21 websites provide only one phone number;
• 29 website give no phone number at all;
• 33 websites give only one, standard email address for correspondence;
• 72 websites provide no email addresses of any municipal official;
• 19 website lack a simple description of the structure and functions of the local government administration.

The final sections of the study look at the availability, or absence of certain **online services** which the KEeLAN methodology presumes municipal websites should make available. These services are grouped in seven categories (with 19 indicators each), including: "Economic development", "Personal documents", "Social benefits", "Education", "Building permits", "Environment", and "Culture and leisure".

The results

The overall conclusion drawn in the study is that the level of local e-government development in Bulgarian municipalities is rather low. The websites are primarily of first generation (i.e. websites with mostly 'information' functions). The results look even worse when seen against the level of e-government development in the EU member states which participated in the KEeLAN project in 2002.

At the same time, some Bulgarian municipalities perform better than others, and can set positive examples for others to follow. Thus, for instance, the **municipality of Haskovo** (www.haskovo.bg) received the highest cumulative assessment. **Sofia municipality** (www.sofia.bg) ranked first in ease and convenience of use of its website, and **Rousse municipality** (www.rousse.bg) provides the most opportunities for citizens-administration interaction and citizens' feedback to municipal policy-making.

To allow any municipality to (self-)assess its web-presence and see how it performs against the best, the worst, and the average level for the country, ARC Fund has also developed an **interactive (Excel) tool** which is available online (http://www.bgrazvitie.net/bg/166/index1.php), together with the survey analysis.

The study itself was conducted by ARC Fund's **IT Group** with the assistance of a few external contributors. The results were widely consulted with some of the main e-government institutions and actors in the country. An expert **round table** was organized on November 4, 2004 to solicit critical feedback on an earlier draft of the analysis.

The study was highlighted during the 3rd international conference on *E-government, e-Region, e-Municipality* which opened November 19, 2004 at the Boyana government compound near Sofia.

DESIGN: