A hub for Open Source: the COKS centre in Slovenia

The Slovenian [COKS competence centre](#), launched in October 2007, provides information and support for Slovenian users of Open Source software. With the government's help, COKS assists the public sector in using Open Source to its advantage. COKS offers information, a call centre, paid support and a software repository. An effort by a consortium of private companies and academic institutions, the impulse for COKS came from the Slovenian Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology.

COKS logo

Introduction

Slovenia is among the fastest adopters of e-government in Europe. By using electronic methods to achieve an efficient administration, the country scores high on related benchmarks. Users of its electronic services report high satisfaction.

During the first half of 2008, Slovenia held the EU presidency. On this occasion the Slovenian government, together with IDABC, organised the international [eGovernment Days](#) in February 2008.

Most public bodies use some Open Source software, even if not all of them are aware that they do. Most of this software is used on servers, with no systematic deployment on the desktop. An important (but by no means the only) hurdle is that the collaboration software used by the government, Lotus Notes, has only recently become available for GNU/Linux platforms.

The Republic of Slovenia is located in southern Central Europe. The capital of Slovenia is Ljubljana, and the country has a population of just over two million people.

An Open Source competence centre

COKS is Slovenia's Open Source competence centre and software repository. Its establishment was financed by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (MVZT).

The letters COKS stand for "Center Odprte Kode Slovenije" - "Open Source Centre Slovenia". The

centre provides aid and support to users of Open Source software, both in the public and the private sector. It also cooperates with EU bodies on Open Source and e-governance policy.

The Centre's website offers news, information and services around Open Source software. The project consists of:

- a website offering information and news;
- a call centre where users of Open Source software receive support;
- a repository for public sector software;
- paid support services.

Run by a consortium of companies and academic institutes and backed by the Slovenian government, COKS went live in October 2007.

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State support, private effort

The idea for COKS came up when the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology held consultations between public sector IT departments and non-governmental organisations working on Open Source, says Robert Gustin, Undersecretary with the Information Society Directorate at the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology.

A consortium of private companies and academic institutions accepted the challenge to build COKS. It is led by a private company called Agenda, an SME with 15 employees that offers Open Source solutions.

"At Agenda, we had been thinking about establishing something like COKS for a long time", says Lejla Gusmirovic, who is responsible for marketing at the company. But the high initial costs prevented the firm from implementing the idea. The government's support was decisive to finally make the project a reality.

A plan for the information society

COKS is rooted in Slovenia's political strategy. In June 2007, the government published a plan called "si2010 – Strategy for the Development of the Information Society" (".si" being the country's top-level Internet domain). The sweeping document covers the challenges that Slovenia is facing in the digital realm. Among other things, it highlights a lack of interoperability and open standards in the public sector.

One vision of that plan is to "provide appropriate possibilities for development, introduction and application of open source solutions in all areas of public interest." This is why the document recommends focusing on interoperability and supporting the development of solutions based on Open Source software. The government wants to increase competitiveness, improve business results and reduce IT costs in the administration. Rather than being locked into proprietary technologies, public institutions can enjoy the advantages of adaptable and interoperable systems.

Map of Slovenia

The strategic plan emphasises open standards as a key element for the country's high ranking in e-government benchmarks, because they make sure that all citizens and companies can communicate with the government, regardless of the software they use. For the public administrations themselves, open standards are key to interoperability, making sure that different solutions can work together. The European Interoperability Framework (EIF), developed by IDABC, served as a reference for the plan.

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Making it real

With the government's backing based on the si2010 plan, COKS' mission is to connect users, vendors and developers of software, and stimulate cooperation between them. The Centre promotes the use of Open Source solutions, and pushes their development and localisation.

An important part of COKS' work is to spread knowledge of Open Source solutions and create models of good practice in the use of Open Source software for both the private and the public sector. It also provides assistance to end users.

"COKS is partly financed by the government, and the main end user group is the public sector - they have priority", Gusmirovic explains. "But every user of open source solutions can use the COKS services."

"I think the main reason [why the government wanted COKS to be set up] is the monopoly that is present on the IT market, which is very expensive, and also brings a vendor lock-in", she says. "The government is thinking, just as an economist would, that the IT market would be more efficient if there were more choices." Open Source can provide this choice, but needs some backing in order to do so: "Open Source solutions and applications are pretty new to the public sector in Slovenia. It is very important to inform the directors of agencies, the IT people and the end users about Open Source, so they can make informed choices in the future."

Answering the support question

According to Boris Šaletić, who is a senior consultant for the Ministry of Public Administration, an important motivation behind COKS was to set up a centre to offer support for Open Source software. "The Ministry for Higher Education, Science and Technology was supporting a lot of Open Source projects in Slovenia, but they realised that the Ministry's financial support was not crucial for the development to happen. So they decided to switch strategies and start to address the biggest problem of Open Source in Slovenia, which is the lack of organised support."

Andrej Arh , COKS project leader at Agenda, concurs: "Most people think that the weak side of Open Source is that you cannot get support. In the public sector, this is quite a big problem - nobody there wants to be 100% responsible if something goes wrong."

Šaletić explains that although there are a number of companies in Slovenia that offer support for Open Source software, lack of support is the most frequent reason for public bodies to reject this type of software in their IT procurement. "But when you have an Open Source support centre [like COKS], the 'lack of support' argument doesn't really hold water", he says.

This helps public administrations in procurement, Šaletić explains. "If a company says that they cannot offer us an Open Source solution due to lack of support, we can just dismiss that argument, without having to spend time and money on it."

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Open Source in Slovenia's public sector

When COKS was launched, the Centre, on behalf of the Ministry of Public Administration, conducted a survey among public sector institutions to find out about their use of Open Source software. The study revealed that almost 96.8% of public administrations in Slovenia use at least some Open Source software. However, about a third of them are unaware that the programs they use are Open Source. Only 3.2% did not use any Open Source software at all.

Since the survey was structured along the lines of UNU-MERIT's FLOSSPols study of 2005, its results can be compared with those of other European countries. FLOSSPols showed about the same percentage of public sector bodies who used Open Source, but were unaware of it. However, in Slovenia the share of "aware" users was significantly higher at 67% compared to the European average of 49.4%. A possible cause for this is that overall awareness of the Open Source phenomenon has greatly increased in recent years.
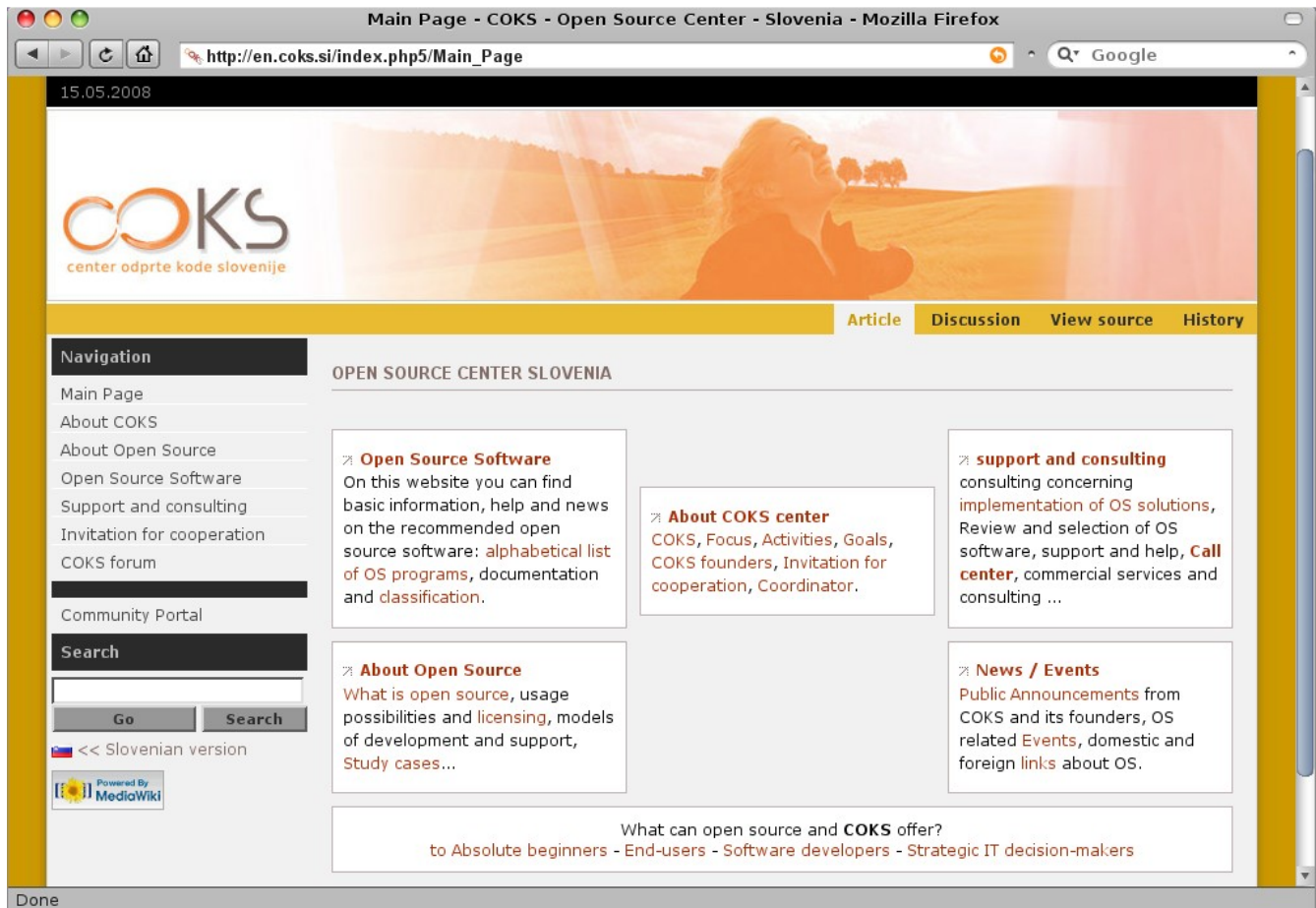
COKS homepage

But those figures need to be put into perspective. Even if an administration uses a small Open Source program in a marginal role, it would have been counted as a user of this type of software, although it might rely on proprietary applications for all other purposes.

Awareness of Open Source is low amongst government IT staff, says Arh. "Everybody has heard about GNU/Linux and OpenOffice, but they might have seen it five years ago and think that it's still not usable." He argues that convincing people to migrate to Open Source is also very difficult, since a migration requires great effort, brings the risk of failure, and may face the resistance of the users.

According to Šaletić, when Open Source software gets used in the public sector, it runs mainly on servers. One problem regarding the introduction of Open Source on the desktop is that the collaboration software used by the government, Lotus Notes, is only just starting to become available on Open Source platforms.

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Help centre and consulting

"We have a vision that we share in COKS", says Arh. "We want to let everybody know about the importance of Open Source in the public sector. There are some 30,000 computers in the Slovenian public administration. It's everybody's money that goes for licences to proprietary software. We believe that the government should come up with a strategy to move towards Open Source in the future."

COKS offers news about Open Source software as well. The site has an explanation of the concept of

this type of software, and an extensive overview of available programs. This [overview](#) is available both following the [IDABC software taxonomy](#) as well as the sorting system used by [SourceForge](#).

At the heart of the operation is the help centre, where users can get assistance with their Open Source software both by phone and by email. Some of COKS services are free of charge, such as specific advice on downloading open source software. "If somebody wants help with implementing a complex solution, then we find a consortium partner who can do it, and make an offer", explains Gusmirovic.

In addition, COKS offers paid consulting and individual solutions; but these services have not been requested so far, says Andrej Arh.

In the future, public bodies will also have the option of uploading software that they have developed themselves into a repository.

One of the first jobs done by COKS - free of charge - was to build information points and a website for a nursing home in Maribor. According to Arh, these computer kiosks provide information for senior citizens about services such as advice on care, legal issues, or health.. The info points run MediaWiki on a GNU/Linux server, and use the Firefox web browser with a number of extensions. The operating system is OpenSuse 10.3.

Though only one of these info points has been implemented so far, Arh says that the project is still ongoing, and that further machines will be put up in other nursing homes.

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ROKS: The repository

In its [repository section](#), the COKS site offers an overview of a wide range of Open Source software for public bodies. The software on offer runs from common programs like [OpenOffice](#) to more specific tools such as [egroupware](#), a groupware solution.

For each program, the site offers a short description. A table lists the essentials, such as which license the program uses, and if there is a localised Slovene version. The user can also see which of the COKS partners offers support for the program. In addition, COKS provides links to important websites, e.g. a blog dedicated to the program.

Importantly, the page shows where in Slovenia's public sector the software is used. It also links to external case studies about the program's use in other countries.

Users can browse the repository using two common taxonomies. One is that used by [SourceForge](#), the other is the [IDABC software taxonomy](#).

The Slovenian government believes that the repository promotes the use and reuse of Open Source software, and helps Slovenia's public sector to build its own Open Source community.

A collaborative platform will be added if developers are interested, says Boris Šaletić. The administration also needs to resolve a debate about the licence that should be used for software that is uploaded by public bodies themselves.

Now taking calls

Slovenians are already making use of the support centre. Arh says that most requests for help come from end users, and some from the public sector. Arh hopes that this balance might change in the future: "COKS wants to push forward the Open Source usage in the public sector."

According to Arh, COKS currently receives about 20 emails and 5 phone calls per week. Interest in the website is growing, with up to 1000 visits per week.
Frequent questions are answered in publications such as "How to use Open Source for small businesses" or "Open Source alternatives to major business applications".

Gusmirovic says that public sector IT decision makers ask COKS how Open Source applications compare to proprietary ones, and what the benefits of the Open Source solutions are in both the short and the long term.

According to Arh, the requests that come in from the general public usually deal with desktop products. They range from "Can I play games on GNU/Linux?" to one question from a teacher who had difficulties in setting up a [Joomla](#) server for his school. The COKS consortium was able to help him out as well.
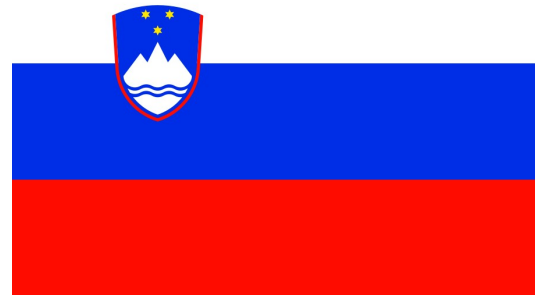
Flag of Slovenia

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Promoting COKS

Making COKS known across Slovenia is vital to the centre's success. With a limited marketing budget, the COKS consortium opted for an online advertising campaign, which ran for three weeks in December 2007. In order to reach IT and businesspeople, advertisements were placed on the websites of Slovenian IT magazines and general-interest publications, including daily newspapers. Gusmirovic says that this led to a significant increase in visits to the COKS site.

Members of the COKS consortium are present at most IT events in Slovenia, whether they're organised by the government or by one of the larger companies. They also make sure to publicise the project whenever they hold an event of their own. In addition, the consortium regularly sends out press releases.

Live presentations of the Centre at conferences and IT information days are "very important to the COKS, and there's a huge interest from the listeners", says Gusmirovic. Many people hear about COKS for the first time at such conferences. "This is why we plan more presentations at different events such as IT conferences organised by the government and the public sector", she explains. "Obviously, live presentations are more effective at promoting COKS, though they're more expensive and also slower [than online advertising]."

But she also thinks that COKS needs to work harder on getting the message out: "We have concluded that only a part of the end users know about COKS operations and what COKS has to offer. We think that more attention needs to be directed to what COKS can do for end users", says Gusmirovic.

COKS has already received some attention from other countries, says Andrej Kositer, Agenda's CEO. He is looking forward to exchanging information and experiences with colleagues from across Europe at a meeting of national Open Source reference centres later this year in Spain. The consortium invites others with "interest and passion" in Open Source to join them: "All our communication channels are open", says Kositer.

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Putting the public sector first

Gustin describes the current relation between COKS and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science

and Technology: "Our ministry is financing COKS, along with other projects on Open Source that are starting up. We define the activities for the public sector, and then COKS works on these projects."

He says that the ministry supported COKS with EUR 100,000 in 2007, and is making the same amount available again in 2008. But "we plan to reduce the support amount every year. COKS must become able to keep itself alive in the marketplace", says Gustin.

In 2007, the Slovenian Ministry of Higher Education and Technology provided about 80% of the financing for setting up COKS, according to Gusmirovic. The remaining 20% of cost were borne by the consortium.

Though the government financed the setting-up of COKS, it does not intend to keep paying for the centre itself. "In the long term, we see COKS transforming into an agency for Open Source software and support that is open to anybody", says Gustin. From the Ministry of Public Administration, Šaletić comments: "The Ministry of Higher Education wanted a business company to do this, which has to survive on the market. They will probably co-finance it for a couple of years, but then expect it to be self-sustaining."

There are currently about 30 people who actively contribute to COKS, though only a few of them work on the project full-time. Most of them are employed by the consortium partners. Of these, two (including Arh) work at the call centre at Agenda, and also answer incoming mail. Inquiries are then dispatched to the consortium partners according to their expertise.

Gusmirovic hopes that government funding in 2008 will eventually cover 50% of the running costs of COKS. "We have received a lot of interest and positive feedback from the users, and we think that it is important to have [an organisation like COKS]", says Gusmirovic. "In case we don't get any money from the government, we will still keep on going, though perhaps at a smaller scale."

If the government decides to support COKS, that money will go into promotional activities for the centre, she adds. "Otherwise we will do it step by step, with direct promotion at events rather than through a web advertising campaign. But our call centre will stay, and the website will continue to be updated." Gusmirovic thinks it will take three to five years for COKS to become self-sustaining: "Until then, we'll need the help of others."

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Running on standard Open Source technology

Naturally, COKS relies on Open Source Software for its operations. The website uses the MediaWiki content management system. The call centre runs on the Asterisk telephony platform, and uses the OTRS Open Ticket Request System to assign tasks to people within the consortium. The site was built by Agenda, with the other consortium partners supplying material.

Arh says that there weren't any technical difficulties around setting up the software used for COKS: "Everything went very smoothly, no problem."

In the legal clear

The COKS website offers information on the basic legal aspects of Open Source software. Arh says that the call centre occasionally receives questions about Open Source licenses.

There were no legal issues that would have complicated the setting up of COKS. The only debate is about which license public bodies should use when they publish software that they have developed themselves.

Šaletić says that the choice is between the European Commission's EUPL, and a yet-to-be-created

Slovenian Public License (SIPL). The latter would let the government update the license whenever it might feel the need to do so. The downside is that each new license brings compatibility problems and adds uncertainty for developers. The EUPL, itself relatively recent, has official versions in the languages of all EU member states, including Slovene.

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A central place for Open Source

Gustin highlights various fields in which COKS adds value for the Slovenian public sector. Public bodies can receive technical support, as well as help with the development of applications and projects. He sees the call centre as particularly beneficial in helping public organisations to learn about Open Source software, and in encouraging them to start using this type of software.

Šaletić agrees: "The users of Open Source inside the government could really benefit, especially in a pilot environment where they can just test Open Source solutions. They now have a partly government-financed organisation they can talk to."

Being the hub for Open Source at all levels of government gives COKS a shot building unique expertise in supporting public sector IT, and could eventually turn it into a hub for Slovenia's Open Source scene and its IT landscape at large. The fact that there is a government-backed centre that offers support, both to organisations and individual users, puts to rest the assumption that there is no support for this type of software.

COKS is also a proof of the importance that Slovenia's government puts on Open Source software and interoperability. This can help CIOs and other IT staff in public administrations (as well as the private sector) that want to move all or part of their operations to Open Source to argue their case to their superiors.

From a policy point of view, COKS is an important element in the government's si2010 strategy, since it functions as an enabler for Open Source and open standards. The project needs this policy as the framework in which it can function. The more vigorously the si2010 plan is implemented, the better COKS will fare.

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In a challenging spot

So far, the impact of COKS on the public sector has been limited. Open Source does not yet have a prominent role in the Slovenian public sector.

The lack of significant impact so far, Šaletić thinks, can also partly be blamed on the fact that during the first half of 2008, Slovenia held the rotating EU presidency. This was a great task to shoulder for the government of a small country, and absorbed the attention of most public sector staff.

Yet COKS is facing a catch-22 situation: Open Source adoption in the public sector is low, so there is little demand for the consortium's commercial services. This keeps the centre from expanding its operations, which can lead public bodies to think that it is not reliable enough as a long-term support partner. This will in turn make them more hesitant to rely on Open Source software.

By way of example, Šaletić explains that the Ministry of Public Administrations thought about asking COKS to provide support to the Ministry regarding a number of Open Source applications, but that this request never went ahead because the Ministry was not sure if COKS was sustainable enough. Once COKS is more established, he says the Ministry is willing to reconsider: "We'll wait and see if they survive the first year."

On Agenda's side, Andrej Arh is similarly cautious. "Our main objective now is to exist, and to promote the project. We want to let the public know about our existence, and about the importance of Open Source in the public sector".

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Policy backing required

Breaking this deadlock is only partly in COKS' power. In the end, its success will mostly depend on whether Open Source gains greater acceptance in Slovenia's public sector before the government's support runs out, or before the consortium partners conclude that the effort is not worthwhile.

The most likely route to success is to promote COKS to public sector IT people and decision-makers. Šaletić emphasises the importance of publicity for the project: "Every software user in the government should be aware of COKS, and I'm not sure they are right now."

Recognising this, Agenda's CEO Andrej Kositer says that COKS has initiated an inter-ministry working body, with the goal of establishing information flows and exchanging experiences between various public bodies. By forming a network of people in the public sector who are aware of the benefits of interoperability and Open Source, this might do a great deal to speed the adoption of this type of software in Slovenia's public sector.

As what is essentially a top-down approach, COKS needs the government to stand behind it for now. Besides allocating the right level of resources to the project, the centre would be greatly supported by a policy push that enables it to break the catch-22 situation of limited Open Source deployment leading to little demand for services, which in turn makes life hard for commercial and semi-commercial offerings like those of COKS. In fact, COKS would stand a better chance of success if it were scaled up, in combination with a national push towards the deployment Open Source software; but this would require a greater commitment by the government.

The current top-down approach could be usefully complemented by bottom-up activities such as encouraging Open Source-based businesses to form networks to promote their products and services. Another useful activity would be for COKS and its backers in the government to actively work on building links to Open Source communities in Slovenia, and to explore avenues for cooperation.

Together, these efforts would give rise to an Open Source ecosystem in the country. The scope of the current approach of COKS might be too limited to succeed.

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Conclusions

In the European landscape, COKS stands out as a project that does not only facilitate cooperation between public bodies, but actively offers support to them. In effect, it offers public administrations the option of outsourcing some of the IT work that is usually done in-house.

COKS is also unique in being run by a private consortium. Other countries in the EU and beyond have set up national coordinating bodies for Open Source, but they are usually attached to ministries or other public bodies.

On the whole, Gustin says that COKS is being received very well. "It's a good solution, and it was a good decision to set it up", he declares. In his view, COKS has created opportunities for new Open Source projects and applications for the public sector. It has enabled new research and development, and offers the public sector a chance to reduce its ICT budgets. He concludes: "The project has very good prospects".

The idea of putting COKS fully into private hands is ambitious, and the future will show whether it can succeed. Similar efforts in other European countries usually depend on government for their funding. It remains to be seen whether this route is viable in the long term, but both the government and the consortium should certainly be commended for trying.

The government is certainly right to put a limit on the time for which it will fund COKS. But the centre can only be one in a whole range of instruments to help the government reach the objectives of the strategic si2010 plan.

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Links

- COKS
- COKS consortium
- Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology
- Ministry of Public Administration
- Wikipedia: Slovenia
- European Union Public License (EUPL)
- IDABC's European Interoperability Framework
- IDABC software taxonomy
- eGovernment Days: http://www.egov2008.gov.si/
- FLOSSPols study by UNU-MERIT
- MediaWiki content management system
- Asterisk telephony platform
- OTRS Open Ticket Request System

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