Balkan cities become e-municipalities with open source

The Bulgarian city of Kardjali serves as a pilot within the framework of the project "Support to e-government initiatives at local level through free and open source software in South East Europe". This project, which started in June 2004, is supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Internet Society of Bulgaria (ISOC-Bulgaria) and implemented by the Internet Society Bulgaria. Initially launched in Bulgaria, the project has already extended to Macedonia and Kosovo, and will soon expand to include Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro.

The project aims to help municipal governments in South Eastern Europe to better respond to citizens' needs. It is the first e-government project in the region to use Free Open Source Software (FOSS) applications.

Under this project, which will last 18 months in its first phase, several Balkan cities will benefit from the creation of e-municipalities. By the end of January 2005, six Bulgarian municipalities have started active migration to free and open source software – Kardjali, Peshtera, Vratza, Kostenec, Dryanovo and Belovo. Besides these municipalities in Bulgaria, the project activities towards migration to free and open source software started also in Macedonia (municipality of Gevgelija, December 2004) and in Kosovo (municipality of Klina). The project will soon expand to include Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and more countries from the region.

Motivation

All of the municipalities that participate in the project chose to migrate to free and open source software due to both a political decision and expected costs savings. The city of Kardjali was selected to be the pilot because of the support provided by a member of the parliament and the city's mayor Hasan Azis.

Most of the municipalities opted for open source primarily because of the costs reduction, the fact that it is legal (unlike pirated software) and the trainings provided to the municipal employees by the Internet Society project. The e-services website launched in the beginning of January in Kardjali is expected to be replicated in the rest of the participating municipalities. This case study focuses on Kardjali as the pilot, but the migration is being executed in the other local government authorities following the same plan.

With open source solutions, the city above all wants to save costs avoiding paying licences for certain software, increase the level of security and raise the level of IT skills of the employees.

The city of Kardjali, which is one of the 28 regional cities in Bulgaria and has around 69,000 citizens, a mixture of Bulgarian and ethnic Turks is a pilot of the project launched by UNDP and ISOC-Bulgaria. After the first project results, 16 Bulgarian municipalities demonstrated high interest regarding the project activities, and several sent letters of intent to participate in the project.

Multi-stage migration

In the first two stages of the migration, the local government authority's computers switched from Microsoft Office and Internet Explorer to OpenOffice.org and Mozilla

Firefox. Training programmes for personnel have been conducted. For a number of the computers on the desktop, GNU/Linux was installed as a client (a distribution based on Debian with GNOME as the graphical interface) and additional training programmes were conducted.

The municipality of Kardjali has officially launched a new web site completely developed with open source technology. With its e-services web site, the city wants to improve the communication between citizens and the local authority. The web site makes available for all electronic services, like submission of letters, complaints or requests. As everybody can use services, citizens do not need to have a digital signature.

Entirely developed on the basis of free and open source software, this web site acts as the first major stage of the project.

The website provides several services for users, related to: Cadastre services; Business activities; Municipal property (shown in the image above); Accomodation; Environmental protection; Administrative information services; Financial - accounting services; as well as Tender documents. In addition, the website also provides the ability to submit requests for formal documents, complaints and registered letters. In order to facilitate and encourage e-government take-up by citizens, the website will also foster a secure on-line environment through its promotion of e-Signature services.

Future steps

"We see the implementation of this project as a continuation of the work we do in Kurdjali with the non-governmental sector – the municipality has developed a fund to the city budget for co-financing of common projects", says Mr. Azis, Mayor of Kurdjali. "In the last 6 months we have managed to upgrade our existing computer network and have changed fully about 40% of old computers with new ones. They will fit precisely with the project, and we hope to see results relatively fast."

Among the recent project achievements is also the inclusion of training courses on Linux in the Bulgarian Institute for Public Administration and European Integration of which the

primary mission is to provide training of civil servants from the administration, so as to contribute to the building up of a modern administrative system in the country.

UNDP sees the success of the project in Kardjali as important as the result from the pilot in Kardjali will be the replication of the program in other municipalities. The UNDP program that funds the creation of e-municipalities started in 2001 in Brazil, South Africa and Egypt.

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Further information:

[Internet Society Bulgaria](#)
[South-East Europe FOSS E-government Project](#)
[UNDP notice on the project](#)
[Kardjali e-services portal](#) (Bulgarian)
[City of Kardjali website](#)