

Why PEGS? – Two Examples to Answer this Question

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Pan-European eGovernment Services (PEGS)

Imagine a Europe in which citizens and businesses can deal with almost all affairs they can have with public administration in one (virtual) contact point. They could look up information, fill in tax forms, process transactions and check upon the status of requests for permissions or other official documents without extensive searching. The portal can instantly be reached via any computer with Internet connection, via digital television or even via your mobile phone 24 hours a day. No more waiting lines, no more being send from one desk to another and transparent and easy to access information on every life event that requires interaction with your public administration. For public administration, work and processes within such a framework can be organized in a way that bureaucratic burden and workload can be reduced.

Imagine a Europe where public administration is organized in large-scale cross-border networks in which each administrative unit can rely on other units when problems occur that go beyond national legislation so that difficult tasks can be performed more effectively, in shorter time and at lower cost.

PEGS are the best means to achieve such a win-win situation for citizens, businesses *and* governments in Europe:

- PEGS have a strong capacity to deal with administrative problems that go beyond national, bilateral or trilateral scope
- Their coordinating power allows public administration on lower levels to reduce administrative burden
- When designed in a way that network effects can be achieved they help to increase significantly the benefits that can be obtained from good eGovernment solutions on national level
- Since they are a new instrument they can more easily implement policy objectives like the EU Services Directive than existing PEGS

The EUReGOV project defines PEGS as follows:

Pan-European eGovernment services (PEGS) are digitally provided public sector services that significantly contribute to creating a pan-European dimension of public administration.

How PEGS evolve

The process of 'pan-Europeanization' of eGovernment is a dynamic process which has different forms, features and phases. PEGS therefore evolve along different pathways. One way of the evolution of PEGS is to grow from a regional or national level into an ever-growing regional scope by subsequently including more and more eGovernment services of more and more public administrations. This way, which we would like to call

the “grassrooting” way of PEGS evolution, European standards for eGovernment services can be established from national institutions and initiatives.

Another way of PEGS evolution is top-down implementation, i.e. PEGS can be established on European level right from the start and coordinate national organizations in the member states. This case usually requires an initiator on supra-national level, for instance the European Commission, and Member States must consider the service to be provided by the PEGS to fill a gap or improve the quality of services that are provided on national level.

In the following we provide two case studies of eGovernment services, one exemplifying the grassrooting way and the other one the top-down way, that illustrate the potential of PEGS to improve life and public administration in Europe. It must be noted that powerful eGovernment services that appear useful to “grassroot” across EU Member States have only recently been developed. Their adoption by other countries has just yet started and the success of the grassrooting process depends on many factors such as support by national and regional governments, the agreement on common standards (technical as well as procedural) and the like.

HELP.gv.at

HELP.gv.at, an initiative of the Federal Chancellery, is a virtual guide to the Austrian authorities, offices and institutions. The portal offers citizens information about official procedures, deadlines and fees. Based on the one-stop-principle, HELP provides quick single access to administrative procedures and, as an interface between local authorities, covers 12 federal ministries, 9 federal provinces, 80 local authorities and 2.359 municipalities. The portal is citizen-centred and categorizes over 200 life situations in which one could encounter the need to deal with a public institution and provides on each of them variety of services. An increasing number of administrative proceedings can be processed electronically through the portal.

Designing an eGovernment service as a network of different actors in public administration that deal with administrative tasks relating to hundreds of life events helps reducing administrative burden and facilitating work and procedures. This can be achieved because the portal centralizes knowledge that otherwise would cause a lot of search activities and cost if a public administration encounters requests that go beyond its usual scope of tasks and expertise. As in any network, its positive effects increase with growing size and number of users. PEGS therefore provide a powerful means to improve the efficiency of existing national eGovernment solutions, whereby at the same time workload of the service providers can be reduced.

An interesting component of help.gv.at that extends its scope towards European dimension is the possibility to find information for foreign citizens and businesses that are interested in living, working or doing business in Austria.

While translation is a necessary precondition for providing the service across boundaries, the most considerable Pan-European element here is that a national government puts itself in a foreigners’ or a foreign business’ place and designs its service from this point of view. In this way, everyday administrative work - provision of government services - helps a country to attract foreign experts and businesses.

The life-event approach makes it easy for citizens to understand how information is organized and so they can easily access and use information and services – and also easily and swiftly provide all information public administrations need for performing their service with a good quality. Since life events are the same and understandable for everyone (birth is the same in Vienna as in Cologne or London), a national eGovernment service that is organized along this concept can easily be transferred to other regions and countries; or it can include services from other regions and countries. This way, a

national eGovernment service can become a standard application for administration in Europe. The advantage of this would be that administrative procedures aligned with European citizens migrating from one country to another or with businesses performing their activities across borders could be eased and accelerated a lot.

Another advantage of eGovernment services that are organised along life events and that operate on a cross-border dimension is that it is easier for citizens to get in touch with public administration and with each other *through* the eGovernment service. The more countries and services are integrated in an eGovernment solution the stronger become these effects. Citizens do not need to understand the complexity of administrative procedures when something is unclear to them. They find an opportunity to ask questions about more specific cases on which no information is provided. The huge scope of the HELP.gv.at-network makes it easier for public administrations to find the right person(s) to answer these questions.

Certainly, this requires that there is a place within the network that is responsible and capable to deal with all the requests that go beyond the capacities of single public administrations. However, with growing demand for such “crossover” information within a network organisation, such a place usually evolves naturally and gradually from the sharing of knowledge of the network members.

Moreover, HELP.gv.at obviously encourages and enables citizens using eGovernment services through the portal to get in touch with each other and to interact. In some cases questions are starting to be answered by other citizens who had experience with certain procedures. This way, administrative burden can be reduced, and at the same time citizen may develop a better understanding of administrative work and procedures because they transform themselves from pure consumers to “prosumers” of eGovernment services. Again, the more countries and services are integrated in an eGovernment solution the stronger become these effects.

SOLVIT

SOLVIT is an on-line problem-solving network, provided by the European Commission (DG Internal Market), in which EU Member States work together to solve problems caused by the misapplication of Internal Market law by public authorities. While the Internal Market generally works well, mistakes are sometimes made. For example, you might have problems with getting a residence permit, getting your professional qualifications recognized or registering a car. Your employment, social security or tax rights might be denied. You might have trouble getting the right to vote in European and local elections in the Member State to which you have moved. Your business could be faced with administrative obstacles, unjustified refusal of access to a national market or problems in getting reimbursement of VAT. SOLVIT deals with cross-border problems between a business or a citizen on the one hand and a national public authority on the other. There is a SOLVIT centre in every European Union Member State. SOLVIT Centres are part of the national administration and are committed to providing real solutions to problems free of charge. The European Commission coordinates the network, which is operated by the Member States.

When all complaints, such as described above, would directly be addressed to EU Member States, each state would have to rely on its own legal experts, probably develop a more or less specific view on and interpretation of certain laws and regulations, and find solutions for problems that other Member States may have found earlier. A PEGS like SOLVIT mitigates these problems, coordinates *informally* the work of different experts at different places in European public administration and thus resolves a significant number of conflicts (467 in 2006) in a very effective way: SOLVIT commits itself to solve problems within a period of 10 weeks (70 calendar days, but on average cases are handled within 54 days), and many national SOLVIT centres are capable to resolve more

than 90% of all problems submitted to them. SOLVIT makes thereby sure that citizens and businesses can submit their complains in their country's language.

The strength of SOLVIT is its cross-border team-building capacities that result in unbureaucratic problem resolution: Employees of the SOLVIT centre at the European Commission and of the national SOLVIT centres meet personally 2-3 times a year on workshops where case handling and legal developments are discussed. As a consequence, the understanding between the different SOLVIT centres is so good that hierarchical and bureaucratic lines and time consuming formal procedures are not necessary.

PEGS like SOLVIT thus help to reduce bureaucracy and cost.

Furthermore, SOLVIT also contributes significantly to get national legislation or guidelines changed to comply with EU rules, which helps to prevent similar problems in the future.

The SOLVIT database helps to make public administration more transparent and to assure good quality of European eGovernment services.

SOLVIT centres even help to solve problems that do not fall into the responsibilities of this eGovernment service, as 60% of the centres report that they spend 40% of their time on non-SOLVIT cases. In these cases SOLVIT tries to help the complainers to find the right institution.

The need for a service like SOLVIT is immense. Any publication of a SOLVIT contact detail on the Internet results not only in a multitude of cases suitable to SOLVIT but also in many non-SOLVIT cases.

Performing SOLVIT tasks so effectively does not require much personnel: SOLVIT centres spent on average 16.5 person months on SOLVIT tasks in 2006. However, half of the national SOLVIT centres are understaffed.

Lessons to be learned from PEGS

- Organising eGovernment services along citizens' and businesses' needs (e.g. by choosing a life-event approach) helps significantly to increase acceptance and use of these services; in the case of PEGS acceptance grows on European scope
- Bundling services results in greater use and improved efficiency
- Bundling public administrations on a large scale increases network effects of eGovernment and helps to organize citizens' self-help
- Designing relevant eGovernment services from the viewpoint of foreigners helps to reduce administrative effort and improves the attractiveness of a country for foreign experts and businesses
- Centralising knowledge reduces workload and administrative burden in many public administrations
- Cross-border networks of public administrations facilitate to overcome the language barrier for citizens and businesses
- Coordinating PEGS help to resolve conflicts in an informal manner more effective than traditional eGovernment services based on formal hierarchies and procedures
- Coordinating PEGS help to resolve problems that do not fall in their specific responsibility and help thus to increase the efficiency of European and national public administration as a whole
- Establishing effective PEGS does not result in more bureaucracy and more personnel but in less bureaucracy and improved efficiency