

Supporting the digitalisation of public services in Serbia during the Covid-19 crisis

July 2021



European Bank
for Reconstruction and Development

Overview

During the Covid-19 pandemic, digitalisation has become key to ensuring the normal functioning of public services and the economy at large. Lockdowns and social-distancing measures have underscored the need to enhance our digital services. Among the most pressing issues that governments need to address is ensuring the electronic delivery (e-delivery) of interactions and services between citizens/businesses and government (e-government). Serbia had already put e-government high on the political agenda prior to the pandemic. In this note, we present the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's (EBRD) policy engagement with the government of Serbia to: (i) enhance the regulatory framework to enable widespread e-delivery and (ii) to increase the nationwide use of e-delivery. This policy support is part of the EBRD's Investment Climate and Governance Initiative, aimed at improving investment conditions and enhancing governance in the economies where the Bank invests.

Policy engagement context

The Serbian government has made notable progress on developing its e-government services. In 2017, it established an Office for Information Technology (IT) and e-Government, tasked with developing e-government and online information systems. Most of the legislation necessary to enable the digitalisation of public services has been adopted, including laws on e-government, e-documents, electronic identification and trust services for electronic business. The Government Service Bus, the information system linking several major databases, was launched in mid-2017, enabling secure electronic data exchange between public authorities. The action plan of Serbia's new e-government development programme for 2020-22 foresees the introduction of 300 new electronic

services. A new e-government portal went into operation in February 2020 and has attracted more than 1 million registered users so far.

The Covid-19 crisis has intensified the need for more e-government services. At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Serbian authorities recognised that, to ensure resilient public service delivery, they would need to speed up the introduction of as many electronic services for businesses and citizens as possible. Contactless e-delivery of public services would decrease significantly the number of face-to-face interactions needed and help to prevent the further spread of the virus.

Why this policy engagement is needed

Serbia's current regulatory framework is preventing further e-delivery development. Despite the authorities' goal to digitalise public services and the considerable progress made so far, many services cannot be optimised or digitalised because of legal restrictions and a lack of legislative alignment. Moreover, in some rural areas, local authorities remain conservative and continue to require all official undertakings and requests to be paper based.

Both users and public servants have to be sufficiently equipped to ensure smooth e-delivery. Another constraint on the uptake of e-government is civil servants and end

users' limited awareness and knowledge of using online services. An enhanced and aligned regulatory framework and a public administration fully prepared to develop and implement the services are not, in and of themselves, sufficient to ensure a widely used e-delivery system. It is, therefore, critical to ensure that both end-users and civil servants are "educated" in the use of such services. In this context, the government of Serbia approached the EBRD for support in boosting e-delivery as a direct contribution to government efforts to respond to the Covid-19 crisis, as well as to enhance e-governance in the long run.

The main components of the EBRD's policy support

The EBRD is helping the Office for IT and e-Government to enhance the e-delivery of documents between businesses/citizens and the government, as well as the wider use of electronic services in times of crisis. Technical assistance started in October 2020 and consists of two advisory services aimed at enhancing e-delivery and increasing the use of e-services by businesses and citizens. The Serbian authorities have welcomed the EBRD's advice, which is much needed in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The first part of the Bank's assistance focuses on regulatory framework enhancement, with a view to enhancing both government-to-business/citizens (G2B and G2C) and business/citizens-to-government (B2G and C2G) documentation delivery. The EBRD consultant has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the regulatory framework, which foresees the delivery of various acts and documents, prepared recommendations for compliance and drafted changes to a total of 15 laws and by-laws to enable the development of new e-delivered public services. The Serbian authorities have accepted seven of these proposals for further processing. These changes would facilitate the electronic delivery of administrative and legal processes, such as business registration, construction permitting, criminal proceedings, civil proceedings and

enforcement proceedings. In late 2020, a new e-delivery service was launched for cadastral/land registry acts.

The second element of the EBRD's work focuses on increasing the use of e-services. The Bank aims to encourage the wider use of electronic services by conducting training for civil servants in the use of e-services and providing direct support for businesses (small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurs), as well as citizens in all of Serbia's municipalities. An extensive awareness-raising and promotional campaign has been conducted, with 15 training sessions and workshops organized for 850 civil servants from 135 local authorities. Tailored e-guide materials for civil servants have been developed and distributed. The consultant has further developed guides for citizens and businesses on how to register on the e-government portal and use the e-services, as well as information sheets listing the e-services available. These were followed by the official launch of e-counters in more than 140 Serbian cities and municipalities, where trained civil servants help users to register and use the online services. A promotional and educational video is being prepared to highlight the benefits of e-services and to support users in registering on the e-government portal.

Lessons learned and achievements

An important lesson of this policy initiative is that full digitalisation depends greatly on having the right regulatory framework and outreach, including support for end users. The right framework can facilitate seamless e-government, as long as users are well prepared and educated. This policy engagement successfully identified and addressed these two preconditions to a mature digital society. This, in turn, enabled the project to accelerate the process of digitalising public services in Serbia, while ensuring the widespread use of those services across the country. Some of the results of the EBRD's policy engagement are already evident, with a majority of Serbian municipalities now well prepared and providing help to

current and future end users of e-services. The country's e-delivery landscape will be further enhanced near term, with the Serbian parliament's adoption of three legislative amendments (proposed under this policy engagement) that will enable the launch of e-delivery for several public services for businesses and citizens. With the adoption of these amendments to company law, it is likely to become mandatory for businesses and sole traders to register on the e-government portal. This is particularly important, as the government is preparing to launch and e-invoicing – two new breakthrough services for business.

Acknowledgements

This note was produced by Jelena Cirkovic of the EBRD's Governance and Political Affairs team, part of the Economics, Policy and Governance (EPG) department. Valuable contributions were made by Radu Cracan, Ana Kresic and Peter Sanfey (EPG).

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