

# INTERNATIONAL Herald Tribune

## E-government helps transform Macedonia

**By David Perera**

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SKOPJE, Macedonia: A lucrative annual permit to haul freight across the border between this Balkan country and Greece used to cost Macedonian truckers as much as €2,500 in bribes per vehicle.

But that changed two years ago, when the Ministry of Transport and Communications adopted a computer system to electronically assign licenses. Now truckers pay only about €100, or about \$127, in application fees for a cross-border license. And the annual two-week period for license applications closed in October with no sign of the angry crowds of truckers who used to picket outside government offices here.

"We trust the system - we trust the computer," Blagoja Voinov, who owns a dozen 40-ton trucks, said through a translator.

Tiny and poor even by Balkan standards, Macedonia nonetheless has big ambitions when it comes to putting government processes online.

Jump-starting the country's electronic government, or e-government, has been a longstanding goal of the local U.S. Agency for International Development mission, which began a \$4.9 million, five-year e-government development effort in 2004. The Macedonian government has added about \$1.5 million in matching funds, according to project officials.

"This is a country very enamored with the potential of information and communications technology," said Marsha Wong, USAID economic development director in Macedonia. "By no means have we gone from A to Z in four years, but I do feel strongly that we've laid a solid foundation."

USAID has been in Macedonia since 1993, when the United Nations recognized the country's secession from Yugoslavia. Since then it has tried to make Macedonia a "case study" in the development of e-government, Wong said.

USAID has since administered an e-government project in Albania and facilitated its introduction into local government in Croatia. In a region where corruption is rife, e-government can be a means for governments to improve their reputations, Wong said. "We didn't have to blow down too many doors," she added. "It's in our interest, your interest, to be competitive."

In Macedonia, a recently created Ministry of Information Society has pledged to spend \$3 million on e-government programs next year. "It will change society," said Ivo Ivanovski, who was appointed in July as the ministry's first head. "Whenever there is a human factor that has to decide something, there is a potential for corruption. So, eliminate the human factor."

One challenge has been limited access to communications technology. Only 29 percent of the Macedonian population can connect to the Internet from home, according to government statistics.

Biljana Muratovska, general secretary of Makamtrans, an organization representing transport companies, helped organize trucker protests that persuaded the government to investigate fraud. But she said she was at first skeptical of plans to computerize license applications.

Truck owners had little idea how to use fax machines, much less computers, she said. During the system's first year, truckers submitted paper forms for electronic processing. But since 2007, the entire process has been online.

Today she is an enthusiast. Makamtrans makes computers available to members and, given an incentive, they have learned to use them, she said.

The system fights fraud by cross-checking license applications against multiple databases housing trucking data, making it harder for any single agency to falsify information. The newfound transparency has given Macedonian truck owners confidence to update their fleets by hundreds of new vehicles per year, whereas before they bought just tens of new trucks annually, she added.

Not all e-government projects have been unqualified successes. A project for Macedonians to contact municipal elected officials and comment on proposed city projects online, for example, is not widely used.

"They can only be catalysts," said Gordana Toseva, director of the Macedonia office of Internews, an international nongovernmental organization hired by USAID as the e-government projects manager. "They cannot change the democratic capacity of the people just like that."

But projects that have succeeded have sometimes gone far beyond initial expectations, perhaps to most effect with a system for civil servant job applications.

Before the system came online in December 2005, applying for a state job was a slow and less-than-transparent process, with candidates at times being hired according to political affiliation.

On average, only seven people per job opening applied, said Aleksandar Ugrinoski, a state adviser in the civil service agency who set up the online system. Today, 43 people, on average, submit applications for every opening. Most applicants, 93 percent of them in 2007, use the online system. The potential for unqualified hires has been greatly reduced by a computerized candidate testing system. By law, ministries can hire only from a pool of the top five scorers.

Ugrinoski said he took advantage of 2005 legislative changes to the civil service law to institutionalize the USAID-financed system. Parts of the government resisted. "They lose their power," he said. "Of course, they try to tell us that the software is no good. But it was too late."

An engineer by training, Ugrinoski might have been more willing than others to search for a technological solution. And skeptics indeed told him it could not work in Macedonia, an argument he today banishes with his usage figures.

"History shows us that if a service is well designed and useful for citizens," he said, "they will find out a way to find out how to use technology."

*Correction:*