

Principles of Estonian Information Policy

I. Introduction

1. Information policy is an integral part of public policy. It reflects the principles of the actions of the state in the creation of an information society – areas of interest and regulation mechanisms - in an era of rapid technological change. Government information policy takes into account the goals set up in regulating different spheres of social life and introduces opportunities for presenting innovative solutions.

2. The current principles serve as a basis for an action plan for establishing an information society. The action plan in turn is basis for all Government agencies to present specific proposals to the Cabinet every year together with schedules, sources of finances and responsibilities for implementation of information policy programmes.

3. Principles of Estonian Information Policy is a document describing shared societal values that serve as a basis to make public policy decisions in supporting the rise of the information society. Supported by different political forces, these principles ensure sustained movement towards the information society.

II. Information Society and Areas of State Intervention

4. The information society is a comprehensive concept. It covers social reality in its totality. Development of information and communication technologies has changed, and is continuing to change today's world remarkably, even though we are not aware of all upcoming changes.

5. An information society redefines our geographic location, decreasing distances both within and between states, eliminating peripheries. It also helps regions to develop and being more competitive. Dealing actively with establishing an information society, we also keep pace with European developments.

6. Because of the global importance of information societies and coming changes, all states have taken an explicit role in the formation of information societies. Taking into account the limited economic opportunities and overall decentralised approach in Estonia, the role of the Estonian State is to introduce the central principles of information societies and facilitate their interpretations through practical actions.

7. Similar to the concept of establishing an information society approved by European Union, the interest of the State covers both public and private sectors. There will be four main areas in developing an Information Policy Action Plan:

- Modernisation of legislation;
- Supporting the development of the private sector;
- Shaping the interaction between the State and citizens;
- Raising awareness of problems concerning the information society.

III. Goals to Achieve; Problems to Avoid

8. The overall goal of the information policy actions of the Government of the Republic is to help in the formation of a society and a state that serves citizens, promotes their participation and cares for their well being.

9. For that purpose the Government foresees the development of information policy that:

- Promotes and ensures democracy in the Republic of Estonia;
- Supports the development of an information infrastructure;
- Supports the creation of a competitive economy, especially through demonopolisation, speeding up the restitution of property, the development of electronic commerce and electronic banking;
- Supports the development of Estonian culture and language, considering also values deriving from the cultural diversity;
- Supports the modernisation and improvement of State defence as a result of developments in information technology.

10. The implementation of the information policy supports the creation of a stable economic environment that, in turn, supports the creation of new forms of enterprises, and diminishes bureaucratic barriers and separation lines. The ultimate goal of the information policy is a rise in the overall welfare of society.

11. The Government of the Republic follows the principle that in such a small state as Estonia, it is possible and advisable to avoid the creation of "information have" and "information have-nots" social groups and regions.

12. The Government of the Republic develops its information policy based on the needs of the Estonian nation and from the experience of other countries. One of its goals is to co-ordinate Estonian development with that of other states, supporting thus the integration of Estonia into the family of developed nations.

IV. Developments in the Private Sector

13. The real information society can develop only from the initiative at the grassroots level. Supporting this initiative, the State has to deal seriously with modernising legislation in accordance with the needs of the information society.

14. Attention must be paid to applications of information technologies, since the opportunities offered by information technologies are much wider than their present use. In developing applications of information technologies, the main emphasis is on the use of Estonian human resources.

15. In the context of a market economy and diminishing state intervention, the State has two main tools to influence society's activities: legislation and taxation. To reduce the risks to private enterprise and to motivate investments into infrastructure, the State may also use other economic policy instruments approved by the Government.

V. Legislation

16. According to the principles of state based on the rule of law, the governing of the state and regulation of different spheres of a society is conducted through legislative acts. As the concept of the information society is still developing, it is not possible to make up a totally inclusive list of legislative acts. However, it is possible to outline the legislative acts that must be prepared or harmonised in preparation for Estonia's possible integration into the European Union.

17. At the same time there is a need to create an effective mechanism to solve those legal problems that Estonia will face in the near future. It is important that the vacuum created by shortcomings in legislation will be filled as quickly as possible. This would increase the speed of Estonia's development towards an information society, ensure the competitive position of the Estonian economy, and finally lead to an overall increase in welfare.

18. The whole regulative framework must be clear and logical, in order to guarantee the stability of legislative development. The focus of the State is on balancing freedom of information with the protection of public and private interests, and consumer protection.

19. The direction of the development of legislation concerning the information society are divided into the following two groups:

19.1. Creation of an economic environment open to competition, including:

- Breaking down monopolies and avoiding the emergence of new ones through the implementation of Article 65 of the Treaty of European Union and the 6th Joint Declaration in accordance to the laid down time scale;

- Promotion of competition;
- Promotion of sustainable economic development;
- Promotion of standardisation;
- Guaranteeing protection of intellectual property, especially in the area of cable television and avoiding of the selling, distributing and use of pirate copies of data and multimedia.

19.1.1. The private sector, as the leading economic force and source of expertise, must be actively involved in the process of preparation of legislation and standardisation. At the same time, Estonia must utilise its special situation as a transitional society.

19.2. Regulation of social relationships:

19.2.1. One of the central social issues is the acceptance and gradual implementation of principles of universal information services, in order to guarantee:

- Equal and affordable access to communication facilities to everyone, independent of geographic location;
- Continuous high quality communication services to everyone.

19.2.2. Due to continuous expansion of possibilities of the use of information technology, the privacy of individual and the safety of data must always be on the agenda. A self-improving mechanism must be developed to guarantee security.

19.2.3. Legislation must be constantly modernised, in order to reduce paper work in favour of electronic office management.

VI. Taxation

20. One of the instruments of the Estonian government in shaping the information society and directing its development will be the use tax credits and tax deductions.

21. The purpose of these tax benefits is to support economic and social development through the development of information processing and exchange.

22. Enterprises must be encouraged to invest in research and development activities emphasising support to applied research and the use of information and communication technologies.

23. The state should promote further education in electronic literacy, including support to publications of relevant literature, by lowering effective tax rates.

VII. Developments in the Public Sector

24. The development of the public sector, and the government machinery itself is the integral part of the creation of information society. The Estonian Government plays the central role in

this field. This is expressed by purposeful and co-ordinated activities focused on shaping the information society, analysing the development perspectives of the State and using the results of these analyses in preparing future development plans.

25. The State constitutionally guarantees the principle of the openness of information. The direct responsibility of the Government is to guarantee the free movement of information, implying that public organisations must without delay disseminate information about their operations as soon as practical. Provision of such information must be compatible with the following requirements:

- Every applicant must be guaranteed equal opportunity to access information;
- Information must be provided actively and systematically and, as a whole, be easy to comprehend;
- Responsibilities for the correctness of public information must be determined in order to increase its trustworthiness.

26. The government promotes the establishment of information access points for guaranteeing access to information.

27. The recipient of public information created by the public sector must only pay for the direct costs of its duplication.

VIII. The Elements of Implementation of Information Policy

28. Increasing awareness

28.1. The most important element of the implementation of the government's information policy is to increase awareness of opportunities and needs of every member of society during the transition to an information society.

28.2. The State increases the awareness of citizens about the general development of the information society, as well as about the government's activities directing this development. This is a continuous process that is co-ordinated by the State Chancellery with the assistance of the Estonian Informatics Council.

28.3. The Estonian Informatics Centre prepares the Digital Information Forum that allows every interested individual to join in a discussion for to shape the information society.

28.4. The State is actively interested in all kinds of co-operation in this process and promotes the work of non-governmental organisations supporting its general goals.

29. Co-ordination

29.1. In order to make a better use of the opportunities provided by the international and domestic programs that are directed at the creation of information societies, the government

expands the activities of its existing institutions that deal directly with information policy. A co-ordination unit in the Estonian Informatics Centre will be formed. This unit serves the public and private sector, and also helps to find the solutions to citizens' problems.

30. Support programs

30.1. Certain pilot projects that are clearly focused on the creation of an information society will be supported from the Estonian State Budget. The State has two priority fields for developing information technology: education in the native language, and public administration. Currently, the following programs are being implemented or envisioned:

- Programs for educational development (e.g. "Tiger Leap");
- Programs for developing public administration and promoting public management according to the requirements of the information society;
- Programs that grow out from the regional policy initiatives and create equal development opportunities everywhere in Estonia;
- Research and development programmes necessary for the information society.

30.2. In addition to above-mentioned priorities, the framework for concrete action plans will be determined.