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### **E-Government in the Czech Republic**

*“Access to government information in electronic form is essential to the realization of a civil society, democratization, and a rule of law.”* (Perritt, 1997)

Freedom of information is one of the core values of democracy, yet for countries like the Czech Republic that suffered under years of repressive Soviet rule, it is still a relatively new right. As the Internet Age has emerged and technology continues to advance at astonishing rates, the public almost expects to have access to information at their fingertips. The government, however, is slow to catch up. Though there are several examples of innovative uses of e-government in the Czech Republic, the government faces many challenges. Whether being criticized for lack of transparency, or trying to solve the pressing problem of the digital divide, the Czech government, like governments all over the world, has a long road ahead in building an effective e-government.

### **Freedom of Information**

It has been said that there are “four freedoms” enshrined in the EC Treaty (aka The Treaty of Rome, which officially established the European Economic Community in 1958), that serve as the foundation of the European project (eventually the European Union, of which the Czech Republic has been a member since 2004): the free movement of people, goods, services and capital. (Internal Market and Services Directorate General, 2014) However, freedom of information was not one of the founding principles of the EU.

In the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Article 42, any citizen of the European Union (as well as any person legally or naturally residing in a Member State) has a right of access to documents (whether in hard copies, or in electronic or other form) of the EU's institutions, bodies, offices and agencies. In the Information Age, the European Union emphasises transparency; that “members of civil society should be able to ascertain the factual and legal bases on which official decisions are being made.” (O'Neill)

However, despite the encouragement of the EU towards its Member States:

...The protection and promotion of freedom of information by and within the Member States remains a matter for Member States to regulate. European Union law does not yet extend to giving a right of access to documents held – in their own right rather than as agents for the EU – by public authorities of the Member States. (O'Neill)

In the mid-1990s, after traveling through several ex-communist countries, Henry H. Perritt, Jr., Dean, Vice President, and Professor of Law, IIT Chicago Kent College of Law argued that “the best means for building credibility and legitimacy for post-communist institutions was to ensure multiple sources of information where previously there had been a gap.” Perritt argued that open governments, where citizens could access specific types of information, was crucial for these new nations seeking legitimacy. (Perritt, 1997)

### **From Open Government to E-Government**

The concept of “open government” has myriad definitions, as well as different interpretations of how “open” the government should be when it comes to access to information. However, it is generally agreed that the definition of open government includes:

- Transparency - Information about the activities of public bodies is created and is available to the public, with limited exceptions, in a timely manner, in open data formats and without restrictions on reuse.
- Participation - The public can engage directly in the consideration of policy options and decision making which best serve society and broad democratic interests.
- Accountability - The government is answerable to the public, upholding standards of behavior and integrity, and both explains and takes responsibility for its decisions and actions.

(Access Info Europe, n.d.)

With the advent of the Information Age, the idea of open government goes hand in hand with the concept of e-government. Like open government, the term e-government has been interpreted many different ways. A basic online dictionary perhaps offers the most simple, and broad definition:

*e-government* (noun) - the provision of government information and services by means of the Internet and other computer resources (Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition, n.d.)

The United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN) takes the definition one step further, emphasizing that not only is the government information available on the Internet, but it is there to *deliver* information and services *to citizens*. (Evans, 2006)

The United Nations highlights the importance of e-government in the global debate as being "integral to sustainable development". The European Commission's Action Plan 2011-2015, has laid out a path for e-government development as a way to empower citizens and

businesses by providing greater access to public service information, greater transparency of governments, as well as effective measures to enable public participation in policy-making processes. (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2012)

In May 1999, the Czech Republic adopted their own Act on Free Access to Information (No. 106/1999). “It allows any natural or legal entities to access information held by State authorities, communal bodies and private institutions managing public funds. Requests can be made verbally or in writing.” (European Commission, November 2011)

The government of the Czech Republic amended the Act on Free Access to Information to account for the digitization of government information. The Amendment was adopted May 12, 2005, and sets out the obligation for Public Administrations to provide online access to information in open data formats (e.g. XML). (European Commission, November 2011)

### **The Joint Czech and Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library**

In November 1989, when Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution peacefully kick-started the region’s transition to a democratic society, the country’s Library of the Federal Assembly was a grand library collection that was largely forgotten by the professional and public audience it was intended for. It contained almost 200,000 documents, but had a huge gap of modern political literature. With the new leadership, the library immediately began to take steps in April 1990 to modernize and change the situation, beginning with rejoining the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions after a lapse of many years, to gain foreign knowledge, and to begin the steps of planning modernization. (Sosna, 2009)

One of the first challenges arose when the Czechoslovak Federation collapsed on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1992, and, on the first day of 1993, became the two newly independent states of

the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. Because of the shared history of the region, the new Slovak Parliamentary Library, per a new federal law that divided federal property 2:1, was supposed to get one-third of the library collection. After handing over some 1,000 volumes that were specifically *Slovacica*, the two new Parliamentary Libraries came to a sharing agreement that gave the Slovak side priority to the other documents, without breaking up the library collection as a whole. (Sosna, 2009)

The digitization of the Czech Parliamentary Library began in the mid-1990s. Then in 2002, the Treaty on cooperation in the digitization of parliamentary documents between the National Council of the Slovak Republic and Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic Parliament was signed. This established the Joint Czech and Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library (<http://www.nrsr.sk/dl/?lang=en>), a website portal which offers electronic access to the often overlapping government history of the two states, that has the aim of being a single shared information system. (What is Digital Parliamentary Library, n.d.)

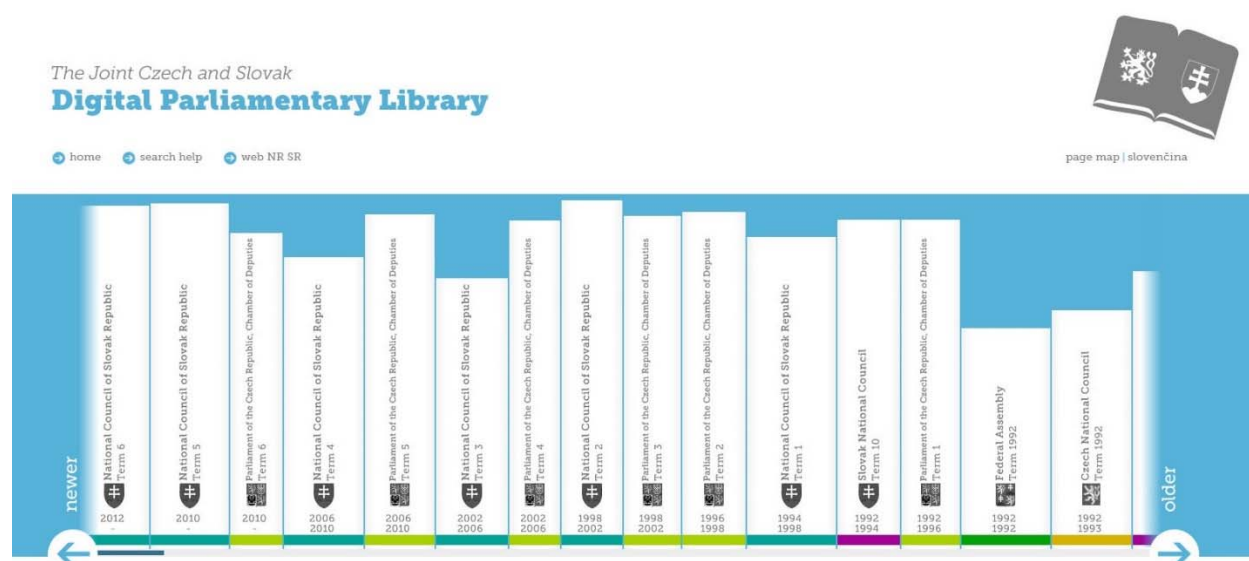


Figure 1: The Joint Czech and Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library home page (<http://www.nrsr.sk/dl/?lang=en>), accessed June 23, 2014.

The Joint Czech and Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library contains complete electronic parliamentary texts from both the Czech and Slovak legislatures going back to 1848. More specifically, 1848 through 1918 covers the Slovak National Council, the Imperial Council, and the Assembly of the Czech Kingdom; the years 1918 to 1992 includes the common legislative body of the Czechoslovak Republic; and 1993 to the present includes the activities of the legislative bodies of the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic.

The digital library includes two basic types of documents: stenographic reports (stenographic protocols), which are verbatim transcripts of the recordings of all the speeches given in the Parliament; and parliamentary publications, which are documents discussed at the sessions of the parliament. There is a clear, easy to use advanced search interface on the main page of the portal that allows the user to search by Legislature (including historical names), Chamber (if applicable), Term, Bill Number, Category (like Session or Committee), Document type (like Minutes or Decision), a "From/To" Date filter, plus an overall text search.

As the user clicks through the various historical sections, the information is clearly organized (with basic navigation in both Slovak and English), with branches of information. There is a Session branch divided into subsections like Bill, Resolution, and Debate, as well as a branch of activity by Committee, such as Committee on Agriculture, Committee on Public Administration, etc. and finally a branch of Parliament Speaker decisions.



The screenshot displays the website of The Joint Czech and Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library. The header includes the library's name and navigation links: home, search help, and web NR SR. A logo of an open book with crests is in the top right. The main content area is titled 'National Council of Slovak Republic 2 (1998 - 2002)'. On the left, a sidebar lists navigation options: Session, Bill, Resolution, Debate, Other document, Time-sheet, Invitation for Session, Debate - Contents, Questions Hour, and Committees. The Committees list includes: Constitutional and Legal Affairs Committee, Committee on Finance, Budget and Currency, Committee on Economy, Privatisation and Business, Committee on Agriculture, Committee on Public Administration, and Committee on Social Affairs and Housing. The main list shows resolutions 666 through 671, each with a brief description and the word 'Resolution' below it.

Figure 2: A detailed screen sample from The Joint Czech and Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library.  
(<http://www.nrsr.sk/dl/Browser/Default?legId=13&termNr=2>)

As the digital library is organized by individual electoral term, it was found that documents from the most current electoral term were the ones being utilized the most by users. (Sosna, 2009) The navigation links for the Parliament of the Czech Republic, Chamber of Deputies Term 5 (2006-2010), as well as Term 6 (2010- ) actually redirect to the website for the Chamber of Deputies, Parliament of the Czech Republic (<http://www.psp.cz/en/sqw/hp.sqw>), where the most current session information can now be found. The Chamber of Deputies site includes links to Sessions, Draft Laws, information about The Chamber of Deputies, Members and Chamber Bodies, Agenda and Documents, as well as other links for the public, like information on visiting the Chamber, links to educational seminars, and a clear link to an Information Request form.

Early on, the joint Parliamentary digitization projects received great recognition at home and abroad. They offer a rich historical perspective on the region, as well as the parliaments and laws of the two states. The Joint project has also been used as an example of international

cooperation between the parliaments of countries who have a shared past. As early as 1998 (when it was still the Czech Parliament Digital Library), the project received recognition from the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation for being one of the best parliamentary digitization projects that successfully connected history to the present. (Sosna, 2009)

The Joint Czech and Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library was, and still is, an influential example of a successful e-government project. In fact, its influence was so great, that neighboring countries in the region took notice and decided to team up for a similar joint project.

### **Visegrad Digital Parliamentary Libraries+**

Countries that were emerging from their post-communist pasts were eager to integrate into the European Union. The Visegrad Group emerged from a summit in February 1991 of the heads of state of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. The fledgling democracies agreed to work together to work on common interests, while furthering integration into modern Europe. When Czechoslovakia broke into the Czech Republic, the group also became known as the "Visegrad Four" or "V4". (International Visegrad Fund, n.d.) The Visegrad Group countries attained their goal of joining the European Union in 2004.

The Visegrad Group, along with the Visegrad Fund, has taken an important role in other joint efforts across the region, including information technologies. The other V4 countries were so impressed with the Joint Czech and Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library, that in 2008 the group (along with Austria) decided on a cooperative approach to digitizing all of the Visegrad Group's parliamentary libraries. Among the plans were to have an English interface for navigation, a common portal to access parliamentary documents of common history, have

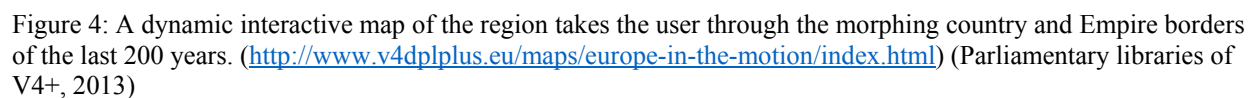


structured links to other national web pages, and have additional information, like maps, history, and other links. (Kelemen)



Figure 3: The Visegrad Digital Parliamentary Library+ portal website. (<http://www.v4dplplus.eu/> accessed on 6/22/2014)

Some of the original goals and challenges of the Visegrad Digital Parliamentary Library+ (as the portal is named) included keeping the information up to date, offering a multilingual dictionary of parliamentary expressions, featuring dynamic maps on the history of the region, and hosting a multimedia presentation of important national historic milestones for the featured countries. (Kelemen)



Via the Czech Republic page of the V4+ portal, one can be taken to the following external sites in English:

- The Constitution (<http://www.psp.cz/cgi-bin/eng/docs/laws/1993/1.html>)
- Rules of Procedure (The Chamber of Deputies)  
(<http://www.psp.cz/cgi-bin/eng/docs/laws/1995/90.html>)
- Standing Rules (The Senate) (<http://www.senat.cz/index-eng.php?>)

Though their URL paths are on the current redesigned website (<http://www.psp.cz/sqw/hp.sqw>), both the Constitution page and the Rules and Procedures landing pages appear to be buried on older, obsolete branches of the host site, using old style sheets and out-of-date design. The Senate link defaults to the (updated) English home page, but it is up to the V4+ user to navigate to the Standing Rules.

Finally, the Czech Republic portion of the V4+ site links to an older, text-heavy website of the Joint Czech and Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library, hosted at the Parliament of the Czech Republic Digital Repository (<http://www.psp.cz/cgi-bin/eng/eknih.htm>). Looking at the stenographic notes for various representatives from this web access point, it is unclear if this Digital Repository has been maintained after 2012.

Compared to the sleek, modern design of the current Joint Czech and Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library landing page, the V4+ may be best served in re-evaluating the portal site and comparing it (again) to its original inspiration which has, in the meantime, leapt ahead, keeping current with modern website functionality and design.

## **Czech POINT**

Another example of the Czech Republic's foray into e-government is the Czech POINT project. One of the most popular aspects of e-government is what is called "G2C" or "government to citizen". The goal of G2C is to offer citizens a "one-stop shop" online to access information and services for individuals. (IGI Global, 2014) One of the most popular benefits of G2C is simply posting online forms and registrations that were previously only available to those who were willing to wait in long lines or wait for forms to be mailed to them. (Evans, 2006)

Czech POINT (an acronym meaning Czech Filling and Verification Information National Terminal) was established as a network of one-stop access points where citizens can access e-government services, rather than having to visit several different offices—both easier for citizens, but also less of an administrative burden. Officially launched in 2008, these Czech POINTs provide certified documents of some of the most frequently requested public records.

Around the same time as the introduction of Czech POINTs, the "Act on Electronic Actions and Authorised Document Conversion" (also known as the "Czech E-Government Act") came into force July 1, 2009. This act authorizes hard-copy to digital conversion, rendering electronic and hard-copy documents legally equivalent. In other words, the digital copy of a document is a legal equivalent of an officially stamped hard-copy version. Numbers quickly showed this proved to be a popular and convenient option for citizens needing official documents. (European Commission, November 2011)

The Czech POINTs are primarily located at post offices, registry offices, municipal authority offices, and Czech embassies. (European Commission, November 2011) According to the website of The Ministry of the Interior (who, since 2007, handles all national e-government initiatives), a citizen can retrieve the following from a Czech POINT terminal:



- A verified copy of an entry in the Land Register
- A verified copy of an entry in the Commercial Register
- A verified copy of an entry in the Register of Trades
- A verified copy of Criminal Records

(The Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, n.d.)

**MINISTERSTVO VNITRA  
ČESKÉ REPUBLIKY**

KDE JE Czech POINT | O PROJEKTU | PRO KONTAKTNÍ MÍSTA | KONVERZE DOKUMENTŮ | KONTAKTY | STATISTIKY

**CZECHPOINT** 22.6.2014 [E-SHOP](#) [Czech POINT](#)  
[Czech POINT@office](#)

hledat

**NOVINKY**

10.6.2014  
[Ukončení podpory Microsoft Windows XP ve vztahu ke službám Czech POINT](#)

30.5.2014  
[11 milionů výpisů](#)

21.5.2014  
[Seminář o sdílených službách](#)

2.4.2014  
[Czech POINTu je 7 let](#)

14.3.2014  
[Rozšíření nabídky CzechPOINT@office](#)

3.2.2014  
[Leden opět rekordní](#)

15.1.2014  
[Ztotožnění uživatelů Czech POINT](#)

12.12.2013  
[10 milionů výpisů](#)

14.10.2013  
[100 000 uživatelů v JIPu](#)

9.10.2013  
[Czech POINT se nedívá do dat](#)

[Archiv novinek](#)

**ZÍSKÁTE HO NA MÍSTECH  
CZECH POINT.**

Registřík cestů  
Obchodní rejstřík  
Katastr nemovitostí  
Živnostenský rejstřík

**CzechPOINT@home**

Občané, kteří dávají přednost elektronické komunikaci, mají konečně možnost získat výpis z Obchodního rejstříku, Živnostenského rejstříku a dalších rejstříků ISVS v elektronické podobě. Již nebude nutné chodit pro požadovaný výpis na kontaktní místo Czech POINT. Postačí mít aktivní datovou schránku a výpis Vám do ní bude doručen.

Přístup ke službě [zde](#).

Nabídka výpisů bude postupně doplňována v závislosti na změnách v legislativě ČR.  
[Více informací](#)

Pokud nemáte datovou schránku dosud zřízenou, můžete o ni požádat pomocí [následujícího postupu](#).

**Czech POINT a základní registry**

Czech POINT pokračuje v přibližování výkonu státní správy občanům. Potvrzuje, že je nejpohodlnějším způsobem, jak z jediného místa komunikovat s úřady a institucemi. Kromě standardní škály služeb, rozšiřuje od 1.7.2012 svoji nabídku o výpisy ze základních registrů podle zákona č.111/2009 Sb., o základních registrech.

Občané tak mají možnost ověřit si údaje, které jsou o nich v registrech vedeny, úředníci pak mají prostřednictvím formulářů v části CzechPOINT@office přístup k referenčním údajům ze základních registrů.

Více se dočtete v článku [zde](#).

Figure 5: The Czech POINT Internet home page. (<http://www.czechpoint.cz/web/>) (Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky, n.d.)

As of April 2011 (the most recent data available), the network is comprised of over 6500 physical contact points and is continuously being expanded. The Czech POINT website (<http://www.czechpoint.cz/web/>) includes an interactive map on where to find the terminal locations. As of mid-April 2011, 4.9 million public register extract printouts have been obtained from Czech POINT terminals. (European Commission, November 2011)

The future of Czech POINT includes plans to have the service accessible via the Internet, enabling citizens to download official documents at home. However, it is unclear (at least for a non-Czech speaker) whether the future is actually “now”. The Public Relations statement on the Ministry’s website, trumpeting future plans, is dated 2007, and the European Commission’s report summarizing the state of e-government in the Czech Republic includes data most recently from 2011.

### **The Future of E-government in the Czech Republic**

*“E-government initiatives, however sophisticated, are unlikely to contribute significantly to development if they reach only the privileged few.”*

(Division for Public Administration and Development Management (DPADM) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA))

In March 2008, the then Government Council for the Information Society published the "Strategy for the development of Information Society services for the period 2008-2012" which outlined goals for a national e-government strategy. The document set out a vision that would have the Czech Republic become one of the top five European Union countries in terms of e-government development. (European Commission, November 2011) By 2012, however, the Czech Republic languished at 23rd in the EU rankings, below Greece and Latvia, and just above

Poland. (Division for Public Administration and Development Management (DPADM) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA))

According to the “2012 UN E-government Readiness Index Rankings” the Czech Republic is ranked 46th out of 190 countries in the world in 2012, dropping 13 places from 2010. (Division for Public Administration and Development Management (DPADM) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)). (Though it should be noted that Eastern European countries overall have improved their e-government development by an average of 16 percent, even though their rankings may have shuffled.) (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2012)

The Ministry of the Interior, which is the main stakeholder in the creation of e-Government on a national level, has been characterized as secretive, with a lack of transparency. (Špaček, Trends of E-government in Czech Municipal and Regional Self -Government, 2012)

The Ministry has published few, if any evaluations of the effectiveness of the e-government initiatives thus far. Case in point, the most recent “News” on the Ministry’s website regarding the success and usage statistics of Czech POINT is from 2007, when the service first started. (Malíková, n.d.) Information on the progress, successes, and challenges of the e-government movement has to be garnered from other sources, like the media, journals, or EU publications.

According to a 2013 report by the European Commission, there are still many issues facing the Czech Republic’s widespread adoption of e-government services. The Czech Republic has three basic levels of public administration—central, regional, and municipal—or the so-called “top-down” style of de-centralized government. There are 14 regions, and more than 6200 municipalities, most of which have less than 500 inhabitants. As each of these municipalities is considered as a self-government unit, regional and municipal authorities are responsible for

defining e-government policies and strategies within their respective jurisdictions. (European Commission, November 2011)

Deployment of e-government initiatives on such a vast scale will involve a huge amount of coordination. The evaluations and reports published by the Ministry of the Interior have been very limited in scope, raising questions on the capacities of the central level to manage and coordinate the public policy. (Špaček, Coordination Practice: E-Government in the Czech Republic, 2013)

Like in many other countries, the digital divide continues to be a problem. While 91% of businesses or other enterprises had a broadband connection in 2013, only 68% of Czech households had high speed connectivity. (European Commission, 2013) Defined as “the gap between those who have computers with Internet access and those who do not, as well as the gap between those who are computer literate and those who are not” (Dictionary.com's 21st Century Lexicon, n.d.), this technology gap is a huge hurdle for the implementation of a useful e-government.

The State Policy in Electronic Communications (“Digital Czech Republic”) was adopted in early-2011 with the aim to assess the overall status of accessibility and development in selected areas of electronic communications. One of the major objectives of this new policy is to reduce this digital divide in high-speed Internet access between rural communities and cities. (European Commission, November 2011)

The National Policy 'Digital Czech Republic' (adopted in 2011) considers it essential to continue in the digitization of state administration. As these e-government applications require high-speed Internet access, the strategy also aspires to the following goals:



- Ensure by 2013 high-speed Internet access in all populated localities of the Czech Republic with a minimum transmission speed of at least 2 Mbit/s (download) and in cities of at least 10 Mbit/s;
- Ensure by 2015 high-speed Internet access in rural communities with a transmission speed of at least 50% of the average transmission speed achieved in cities. At the same time, 30 % of e-government in the Czech Republic households and businesses in cities should have access to connections with transmission speeds of at least 30 Mbit/s.

(European Commission, November 2011)

In a survey sample of 1,000 Czech Internet users, some of the top frustrations for not using or avoiding existing e-government services were not necessarily because of technical issues or difficulties in using an e-government portal. Those surveyed weren't entirely convinced the system was more efficient, plus they still preferred human interaction.

Among the top reasons for not using e-government services:

- Expected to have things done more easily by using other channels – 23%
- Services will require personal visits/paper submission anyway – 45%
- Preferred to have personal contact – 68%

(European Commission, 2013)

To improve its relationship with the public, the Ministry of the Interior introduced a friendlier face for e-government named eGON (short for “**e**GOVERNMENT”), an orange character whose body parts represent various parts of the system:

- Heart - E-government Act
- Brain - Public administration basic registers

- Circulatory system - Public administration communication infrastructure
- Fingers - Public administration contact points

(Felix)

The Ministry even emphasized that the character of eGON stands for “electronization and accessibility” and has been “modeled as a **living organism**” (emphasis theirs). (The Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic)

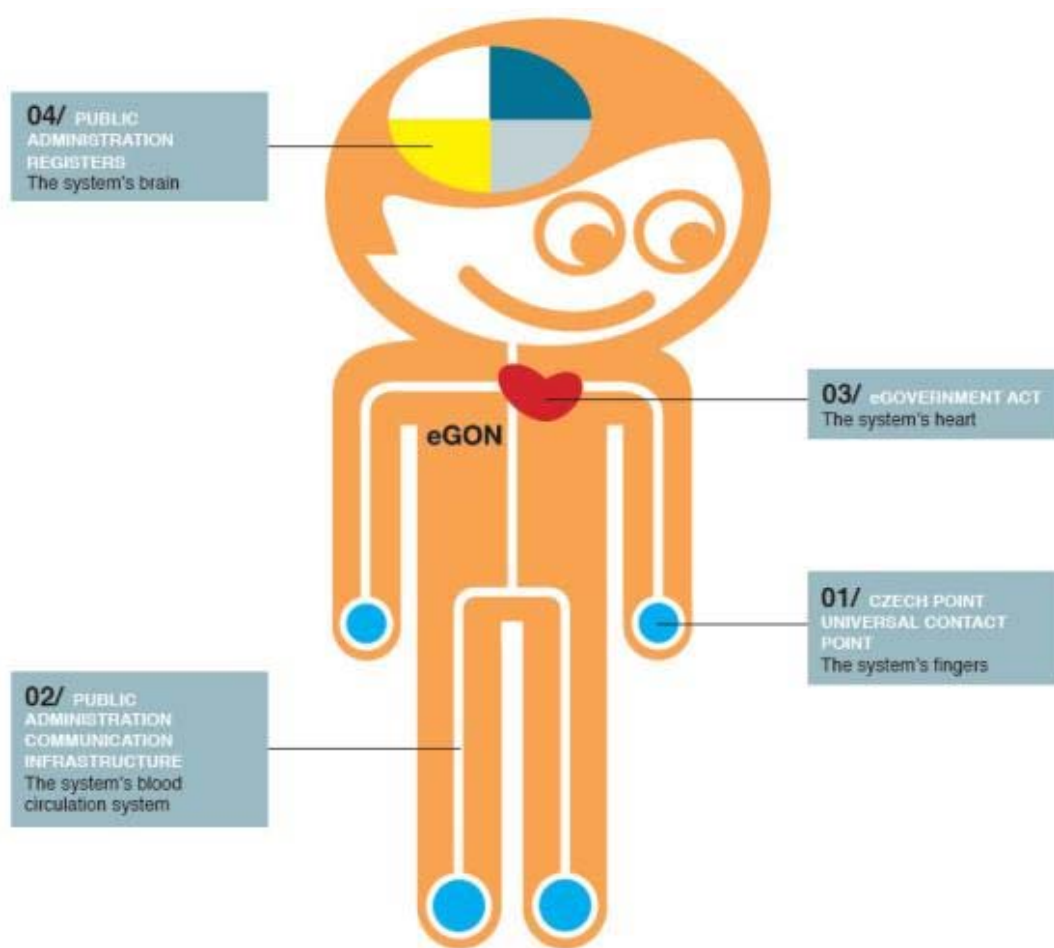


Figure 6: Meet eGON, who appears on the Czech POINT website, among other places. (The Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic)

Though the "Strategy for the development of Information Society services for the period 2008-2012" may not have hit its goals, the main ideas behind it are still sound:

“The fundamental goal is to transform and to simplify the public services processes so as to use modern ICT [Information and Communication Technology] in a way that is similar to that of the commercial sector. As far as citizens are concerned, the aim of the strategy is to provide comfortable, secure and reliable electronic communication across all levels of Government, for as many life events as possible.”

As the Czech Republic, Central Europe, the European Union, and the world continue to move toward the goal of accessible e-government information for the people, the challenges will continue. Regional partnerships, whether it be across country borders like the V4+ countries, or between municipalities in a top-down government, have had successes like the Joint Czech and Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library. Government entities could learn from these collaborative efforts and from one another as they push forward in their e-government initiatives.

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