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Building an information society is a must

Peter Pellegrini

Digital Leader & State Secretary of the Ministry of Finance of Slovak Republic

Dear readers,

It has already been a few years since Slovakia was labeled the automotive heart of Europe. In general, the automotive industry is considered to be the driving force of the Slovak economy, while the importance and position of the information and communication technology (ICT) industry is neglected. This is despite the fact that ICT is a sector that has enjoyed continuous growth in recent years - whether looking at sales, employment figures, or wages.

We should therefore realize how the structure of the global economy is changing and how this transformation impacts the Slovak economy and labor market. These changes should also be reflected in government policies, and no single sector should be artificially given preferential treatment to the detriment of the other.

My goal as the Digital Leader is, in cooperation with my Advisory Team, to assist the information and communication technology sector provide the greatest possible benefit to the citizens of Slovakia as well as to businesses, and to help eliminate the obstacles and barriers in using ICT. In collaboration with the members of my Advisory Team, we attempt to identify measures and make efforts that boost the development of the Slovak ICT sector and digital economy as such, and thus contribute to the process of shaping the future of our digital society.

The state should be the initiator and facilitator of new and interesting projects that accelerate the informatization process. Since launching the Digital Agenda for Europe, much progress has been made in Slovakia, a fact also reflected in the evaluation report by the European Commission from 2012.

One of the key priorities for the country is to set up conditions that will enable the government to react more flexibly to the latest trends in ICT and not to just chase the tail of the informatization standards common in the private sector. Slovakia has the ambition to build an information society that reaches the level of the most advanced countries. Therefore, based also on our stimulus plan, progressive policies were adopted for projects reflecting trends in building an information society, such as m-government, open data, and cloud computing. These measures create space for the further evolution of eGovernment.

I am convinced that thanks to applied technology solutions and new legislation, we will see decreasing levels of the bureaucratic burden imposed by the civil administration. Simultaneously, we must not forget that user security in the online environment must be guaranteed. Failure to provide data and information security may lead to serious consequences in the form of financial loss, loss of trust in institutions or even the state as such. Just like in the physical world, crime must not be tolerated in the online environment either. We still have a lot of room for improvement in the field of digital security and it is our duty to pay as much attention to these matters as required by the current situation.

The revision of the Digital Agenda in December 2012 in the form of a digital checklist also puts emphasis on the acquisition of ICT skills by the population. Digital skills in the 21st century are gradually gaining the same significance as literacy or basic math. I am convinced that it is vital for the further development of education that pupils have state-of-the-art IT technology at schools so that they can learn how to work with it, regardless of the region or social level they come from. This was one of the reasons that we initiated a nationwide pilot project to bring new technology closer to pupils. This project distributed 20,000 tablets to the whole network of kindergartens, elementary, and secondary schools. Moreover, schools should be equipped with interactive boards and other technical equipment to enable effective use of the tablets. However, tablets or interactive boards are not the key to achieving digital literacy – they represent an essential prerequisite. It is their meaningful usage and application that is of key significance here.

The major challenge we face now is to create a functional model combining schools, educational institutions, IT companies, and students themselves in order to breed suitable workers for the ICT sector, workers who would possess the appropriate knowledge and work competencies. Creation of a Digital Future platform that was inspired by the Great Coalition should result in increasing the level of digital skills of the young generation and their overall employment prospects. Goals are new job creation, provision of internships, establishment of new educational schemes, financing of start-ups and young entrepreneurs, supporting free study programs, and other actions.

There is a great amount of work to be done in the near future, specifically in relation to the fact that we are entering the period of project finalization within the Operational Program Informatization of Society for the 2007 to 2013 programming period, and also finalizing preparation of the strategic documents for the 2014 to 2020 programming period. Building the information society must be a priority for all of us. I am truly convinced that there is no other way to achieve improvements in this sphere than by joint actions made by the public, private, as well as the non-governmental sectors.