GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2009

Focus on access to online information and knowledge – advancing human rights and democracy

Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
and Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2009

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Dedicated to A.K. Mahan - an activist who valued intellectual rigour and concrete outcomes.

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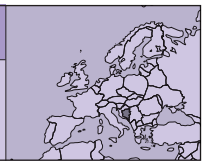

Introduction

Freedom of information, as a right, is not stated expressly in the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but it is protected indirectly. A Freedom of Access to Information Act (FOIA) was passed in 2000, with Bosnia and Herzegovina the first state of the Western Balkan countries to adopt it. One year later the FOIA had been passed by both entities.[1] However, by 2006, according to a survey done by the Centre for Free Access to Information, the FOIA was one of those acts that existed on paper, but had never actually been implemented.[2]

Today most institutions have appointed information officers and prepared a guidebook where citizens are informed of their rights and the necessary procedures to obtain information. An information ombudsman has been appointed within the Ombudsman Institution of Bosnia and Herzegovina to "examine the activities of public authorities in relation to this Act, either upon receiving an application or ex officio."[3]

Still, considering the fragmentation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, its several government and administration levels, and its inefficient and non-responsive public administration, with no state network and common infrastructure, it is not easy for a citizen to understand the structure of administration, or how to get information from a public institution.

Policy and legislative environment

Sometimes it feels as if laws in Bosnia and Herzegovina are passed simply to comply with the European Union (EU) obligations and road map, without a serious plan to implement them, or without proper tools for their implementation. Meanwhile, the country lacks a law that will establish the Agency for the Information Society (AIS) that should oversee the development of the information society across the country.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has several key legal instruments and frameworks at its disposal that affect access to online information. Their status is as follows:

- A law on personal data protection was adopted in 2001
- A legal framework on e-signatures was passed in September 2006
- A law on cyber crime was signed in 2006
- A law on electronic legal and business operations was passed in 2007
- Draft e-commerce legislation is currently before Parliament.

Besides these, intellectual property rights contained in an EU-supported information and communications technology (ICT) strategic research agenda called SCORE[4] are unclear regarding ICT products. The effect of this is a lack of support and incentives for local ICT enterprises to develop local products. Only recently the state regulatory agency for communication (RAK) started working on online media regulation and registration.

In the general context of education, it is important to mention that the educational system in Bosnia and Herzegovina is passing through a structural change in order to harmonise its system and curricula to the EU general standard. The key document is represented by the Bologna Declaration which marks a turning point in the development of European higher education.[5] A document entitled *Education Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina* was presented to the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) in Brussels on 21 November 2002. This document was endorsed by both entities in the country. It focuses on the implementation of education reforms, and contains clear guidelines for these reforms.[6]

The academic and research network

There is a word in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *polako*, that is used whenever someone makes haste. *Polako* means that things will happen without the need to be in a hurry. The academic and research network in the country, BIHARNET, carries the flavour of this word. In the last nine years, since 2000, it has not fulfilled its mandate: there is no connectivity between the eight public universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the universities still face high ICT costs.

During these dormant years, universities have continued to try to integrate ICTs into their work. Thanks to the implementation of another EU-supported project called SEEREN2 in December 2006, the University of Banja Luka was connected through SARNET, the academic network

1 Bosnia and Herzegovina encompasses two entities with their own governments and parliaments: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. There is also one internationally supervised district, the Brcko District. This system of government was established by the Dayton Agreement to guarantee the representation of the country's three major groups (Muslims, Serbs and Croats), with each having a veto on anything that goes against what is defined as "the vital interest of the constituent people."

2 From September 2005 to September 2006, a project called the Full Implementation of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in Bosnia and Herzegovina was implemented, aiming to increase the transparency and responsibility of all public organs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. See: www.cspi.ba

3 Freedom of Access to Information Act for Bosnia and Herzegovina, published in the *Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Number 28/2000, 17 November 2000.

4 Final ICT Strategic Research Agenda for Bosnia and Herzegovina, SCORE: www.score-project.eu

5 ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf

6 www.untz.ba/bolonjski_proces/bolnatreport-fbh.pdf

in Republika Srpska, to a GÉANT2[7] point of presence in Sabac, Serbia. This opened up a whole set of opportunities for the university. The connection goes through Doboj in northern Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the service provided by Telekom Srpske, a telecommunications company based in Banja Luka, and the second largest in the country.

This has had the effect of an alarm bell, given the political geography of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its rigid national-ethnic lines. It meant that in 2007 SARNET could serve the University of Banja Luka with a high-standard connection at a very good price. The Universities of Sarajevo, Tuzla and Zenica, which are all in the Federation, tried for more than two years to do the same thing,[8] but BH Telecom, the largest telecommunications company in Bosnia and Herzegovina, declined citing technical reasons.

To connect all eight universities, according to the cost assessment of the SEEREN2 project, would require EUR 450,000 for the first year and EUR 370,000 for maintenance. However, the Ministry of Civil Affairs at the country level, responsible for coordinating policies on education and science, has no budget for an academic network, while the Ministry of Education and Science in the Federation, the ten Ministries of Education at cantonal level in the Federation, and the Ministry of Science and Technology in Republika Srpska have financial resources.

After a year, in 2008, five universities in the Federation – Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zenica, Bihac and (east) Mostar – were connected and operating through FARNET, a network using a 100 megabits per second (Mbps) multi-protocol label switching (MPLS)-based virtual private network (VPN). There was also a proposal to revive BIHARNET, under the responsibility of the minister of civil affairs, but still no decision has been taken in this regard.

Despite universities now being connected, problems remain. FARNET has no governance or management structure. This is the result of several stakeholders working on a single project. All the issues faced by BIHARNET persist. Political manipulation is ready to be used, while universities try to link Bosnia and Herzegovina with neighbouring universities to gain knowledge, to develop services and to have the means for their own sustainability by providing new services.

Libraries

The Library Electronic Information Consortium of Bosnia and Herzegovina (EICBIH) was established in March 2004. Its goals included sharing bibliographic records in libraries throughout the country and offering access to educational materials useful to students such as books, journals, etc., and other electronic information. Today EICBIH offers access to global databases such as SCOPUS, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald and the EBSCO research database. Although EICBIH was active from 2004 to 2006, there has been no news about its activities in recent years.

A different system, the Co-operative Online Bibliographic System and Services (COBISS), is the platform for the national library information system (or virtual library) for Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. The system provides basic information about books accessible in specific libraries as well as their availability. It is possible to exchange books between libraries through a book request.

The National University Library in Sarajevo implemented COBISS in 2005, in cooperation with the Slovenian company IZUM. Twelve libraries signed the contract with COBISS.BH (the COBISS system in Bosnia and Herzegovina), and became members of COBISS.Net the same year. Since then, about six libraries join the network every year.

In June 2009 COBISS had 278,377 records from 33 libraries,[9] mostly from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with only one from Republika Srspka. However, there is no online information available about the usage of this system by the general public or academia.

The National University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina offers a few online services, such as searching all the records in the library through the COBISS.BH network, access to the Registry of Scientific and Research Work in Sarajevo Canton and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to global databases such as EBSCO, Web of Science, ScienceDirect and Emerald.

The European Library's new FUMAGABA project offers access to digital paintings, books, films and the archives of the National Libraries of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ukraine, Moldova, Albania, Georgia, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Azerbaijan. The project should be completed in July 2009. The goal of the project is to provide information about lesser-known works of art for European researchers. The records from the National University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina were integrated into the European Library database in June 2008, thanks to this project.

The Registry of Scientific and Research Work in Sarajevo Canton and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina[10] provides general information about researchers, research organisations, research projects and investments

7 GÉANT2 is the high-bandwidth academic internet network serving Europe's research and education community (www.geant2.net).

8 "In fact, as of June 2007, most universities in the country were connected via 2 Mb/s symmetric DSL connections offered by the incumbent operators via a standard educational package for a price of approximately EUR 4,500/month. The two exceptions were the universities of Banja Luka (dark fibre) and East Sarajevo (ISDN). The University of Mostar has a connection to CARNET, the Croatian NREN, which is… only connected to a local node (and does not give access to GÉANT2) and only used for video-conferencing." TERENA (2008) *Annual Report on Activities to Support Research Networking in Less Advanced Regions*. www.terena.org/activities/development-support/GN2-08-033-DN4-0-3-3_Annual_report_to_support_research_networking_in_less_advanced_areas_20080129105949.pdf

9 www.cobiss.ba/scripts/cobiss?ukaz=GETID&lani=ba

10 registar.nub.ba

in research in Sarajevo Canton and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although not complete, the database provides information about the educational background of researchers along with information about books and scientific articles that the researchers have published. However, this information is not regularly updated, and the procedure for updating is not known. Most likely it is done through a written request to the National University Library in Sarajevo,[11] which is a slow and ineffective process.

Educational materials for different faculties are published with the help of open source publishing software such as Moodle, or software developed in-house that is not shared among other universities. Each faculty has its own system of publishing course material, which means it is not openly and easily accessible outside of that faculty.

New trends

Looking at the priorities that emerged from the SCORE agenda, Bosnia and Herzegovina has a high level of readiness to offer e-learning services. Distance learning is already offered in Sarajevo at the ICT, economic and electro-technical faculties at Mostar. It is important to continue and to develop consistent services, and essential to find an adequate technical framework that can be scaled up across universities, as well as to secure finances from BIHARNET.

With the creation of FARNET and SARNET we now have two parallel institutions, one in each of the two entities, instead of the single network, BIHARNET. What is vital now is to avoid the parallel development of the two structures without any collaboration. It is well known that the dynamics of public institutions, unfortunately, follow a sort of national-ethnic divide. Institutions collaborate with neighbouring countries instead of internally. At the same time, in view of the vacuum that has existed in the past, there is a need to continue to look for a flexible and viable solution, and to avoid getting trapped in a vicious discourse which has no other intention than to divert public attention and divide public opinion.

An interesting development, offering a relatively neutral space to develop an effective strategy, could be provided by the country's e-government agenda. The fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina should comply with the EU interoperability framework for administration holds promise for libraries and academic institutions. This framework could help to attract the interest of citizens and private stakeholders which could support the efforts of universities such as Tuzla and Zenica.

Action steps

After studying all these projects and initiatives, especially with reference to the EU-supported projects such as SCORE and SEEREN2, what emerges is the absence of civil society actors – advocates for ICTs for human rights engaged in this field. Advocacy is necessary to support the findings of research, and to support the efforts of so many individuals working with a contemporary concept of what "access" entails.

As a country, Bosnia and Herzegovina has through its institutions shown an interest in recognising ICTs as a critical component for economic development, and the development of society in general. There is a need for sharing information online, but a lack of ICT support and the virtual non-existence of BIHARNET limit these possibilities.

Following the implementation of the Bologna education system, the result of the Bologna Declaration, progress has been made in publishing educational material and other information online in the past four years in academia, but this progress would be much greater if it were coordinated by a national academic research network. This would mean new projects, more scientific papers, an exchange of ideas, and greater mobility for students. But as long as the issues raised in this report remain trapped in the musty rooms of academia, and echo through the hundreds of halls found in ministries and public institutions, none of this will be possible. ■

11 www.nub.ba

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2009

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH (GISWatch) 2009 is the third in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society *from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.*

GISWatch has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of the field of information and communications technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels
- **Encouraging** critical debate
- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2009** focuses on *access to online information and knowledge – advancing human rights and democracy.* It includes several thematic reports dealing with key issues in the field, as well as an institutional overview and a reflection on indicators that track access to information and knowledge. There is also an innovative section on visual mapping of global rights and political crises.

In addition, 48 country reports analyse the status of access to online information and knowledge in countries as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico, Switzerland and Kazakhstan, while six regional overviews offer a bird's eye perspective on regional trends.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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