

Communication and Electronic Public Administration: Some Issues in the Context of the Czech System of Public Administration

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Abstract

Communication within the system of public administration is considered a crucial factor for achieving effective and economical functioning of the whole system of public administration as a specific institutional tool for the implementation of public policies. The quality of information relationships between individual subjects of public administration is determined by a number of factors, and it influences the overall systematic structure of the whole public administration organization. Further, it also affects the quality of information flows carried out within the whole system of public authority of the state, as well as the characteristics of external relationships of public administration. The quality of communication can be (however it not necessarily must be) significantly influenced by utilization of modern information and communication technologies (ICT).

The paper analyzes especially the relationship between electronic public administration and the present public administration model as developed within the reform of public administration in the Czech Republic, which has a significant impact on the information flows (communication) and certainly on the electronic public administration in the Czech context. The paper also deals with related issues that may arise in this “mixed” model of public administration in the Czech Republic, i.e. when both of the types of public administration activities - state administration and self-governmental activities - are carried out by the same bodies both at the regional and local levels, and not by bodies with separate competencies. The text below also analyzes possible assets of utilization of ICT for the improvement of communication within this particular system of public administration.

This paper is based also on the empirical research that focused on the critical analysis of the communication between the two youngest components of the Czech public administration: regional offices and municipality offices of municipalities with enlarged sphere of activities, particularly in the field of state administration activities. Results of this research contain recommendations for the whole communication system within the state administration in the Czech Republic.

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1) Public administration vs. electronic public administration

Public administration represents a significant social phenomenon that has been an object of the researches probably since its beginning and that will be as an object of the researches probably always topical. It can be considered to be a one of institutional instruments for fulfilling state functions or functions of self-governmental units. It is hard to stipulate a perfect definition of public administration, however the majority of definitions and approaches of various scientific disciplines agree that, in general, public administration is a specific kind of purpose-built activities.

Czech administrative law and administration science context differentiates public administration defined in so called material (functional) way and the public administration defined in so called formal (sometimes “institutional”/“organizational”) way.

a) In the *material way*, public administration is defined as a complex of all administrative activities that relates to governance on all of its levels (these activities are closely related to the so called “public interest” / “public affairs” content. This approach defines public administration as a specific type of social management activities.

b) In the *formal way*, public administration is understood to be a complex of concrete institutional subjects of public administration (authorities / offices / administrative bodies etc.), whose activities differ significantly from activities of legislature and judicature (the so called negative definition of public administration). These administrative subjects are furthermore separated into the group “state administration” and the group “self-government”.

Both of these ways of defining public administration are claimed not to be perfect, however they are mutually linked and cannot be strictly separated.

During the development of information and communication technologies, the ideas of their practical utilization for public administration purposes and more efficient and effective functioning have appeared. Nowadays, such ideas are covered especially by terms like *e-government* or *e-governance*. The usage of these terms is probably unified only within individual international organizations. However, it is possible to claim, that both of the terms are related to **attempts of information and communication technologies utilization for fulfillment of principles of modern public administration activities**, particularly by

a) simplification, speeding, reduction of costs ... (overall "improvement of quality") of the activities within the public administration - this aspect has two dimensions - it relates to the:

- inner world of a single administrative subject (individual authority etc.)
- interrelationships of multiple administrative subjects within public administration system.

b) simplification, speeding, reduction of costs ... (overall "improvement of quality") of (external) relationships between a subject of public administration and an addressee of its activities,

whereas such claims are based on following prerequisites that have not been all empirically verified yet:

- the electronic world facilitates that public administration can function in a cheaper, faster ... and more responsive way,
- new information and communication technologies may make transactions with information available wherever and whenever,
- new information and communication technologies may make the communication inside and outside public administration easier etc.

Also *functions of electronic forms of public administration* derive from functions of a state or a self-governmental unit. Electronic public administration is therefore supposed to function in accordance and for the objectives that have been stipulated by legal norms. Within the concretization of these norms, electronic public administration represents a one of possible choices of instruments. In the view of public economics, electronic public administration may be considered to be

- an instrument for reduction of public sector failures,
- a factor that improves the adaptability of public administration,
- an internal efficiency factor of public administration/public sector.

Electronic public administration relates especially to the mentioned material definition of public administration. However, it cannot be separated from the institutional definition because of accountability issues. Within the public administration, its electronic form is linked to a group of activities that facilitate the service for the citizenry on the non-profit basements. Between definitions of public administration in its classical as well as electronic form, analogies may be found - for example by the following modification of Stillman's generalization of public administration definitions: electronic public administration is (1) an important part of the executive branch of government (yet it is related in important ways to the legislative and judicial branches); (2) the result of a formulation and an implementation of public policies; (3) a part of the involvement in a considerable range of problems concerning human behavior and cooperative human effort; (4) a field that can be differentiated in several ways from private administration; (5) the production of public goods and services; and (6) rooted in the law as well as concerned with carrying out laws.¹

Besides the terms like *e-government/e-governance* „*e-democracy*“ is mentioned in relation with the ICTs utilization in the field of public administration. The term *e-democracy* is used in relation to miscellaneous attempts to democratize the democracy through the utilization of new information and communication technologies. Also in this area the terminology is not uniformed and the elements of these attempts can be found also in the usage of terms like *e-government / e-governance*. However, such a usage always expresses attempts to create a transparent (electronic) state that should serve as an intermediary of a dialogue between citizens and other social groups and subjects of public authority and to make the form of the representative democracy closer / mixed with the form of the direct democracy - it means the government by the people, that is an important prerequisite for the increase of a probability, that everything will result in the government for the people. The main aim of these new forms of democracy is to "to break down the virtual Berlin Wall which has traditionally existed in constitutional democracies between the represented and their representatives."² In this field, the research has started quite recently. For example the DEMO-net project is a very young part of it.³

¹ Stillman II, Richard J.: *Public Administration: Concepts and Cases*. Eighth edition. New York: Boston: Houghton Mifflin Compantyn 2005, p. 4.

² Colemann, S.: *UK Citizens Online Democracy. An Experiment in Government - Supported Online Public Space*. Dostupný z WWW: <<http://www.ukonline.gov.uk>> or <<http://siyaset.bilkent.edu.tr/gol-democracy/uk.htm>>.

³ See <http://www.demo-net.org>.

2) Specifics of communication within public administration system - the theory

In general, the term communication is defined as a transmission of information between two or among more subjects within certain time and certain place, or as a transmission of various information contents within various communication systems by the utilization of various communication media, particularly through language.

Within the process of communication, it is important to answer the following questions:

- Who is the recipient of my information?
- What information does this recipient demand? What information may I / do I have to give him.
- Which way of the transmission does he or she prefer?
- What do I want to achieve by providing the recipient with the information?

Without any regards to the form of communication, the process of communication plays a very important role in public administration. Every member of an administrative organization needs certain information for making a decision. Characteristics of information flows determine features of the communication within public administration system. The above mentioned basic questions are applicable in the field of public administration, that is represented by a very large group of formal organization within which many formal and informal relationships do exist.

According to *Herbert A. Simon*, who is known for his theory of administrative behavior (bounded rationality concept), “without communication there can be no organization”⁴. In his concept, communication in organizations is a two-way process: it comprehends both the transmittal to a decisional center or orders, information, and advice; and the transmittal of the decisions reached from this center to other parts of the organization. It is a process that takes place upward, downward, and laterally throughout the organization. The organization provides channels of communication running in all directions through which information for decision-making flows. These channels are both formal and informal. The formal channels are partly based on, and partly separate from, the lines of formal authority, and the informal channels are closely related to the informal social organization. The communication must reason, plead, and persuade, as well as order, if it is to be *effective*.

Communication exists across the whole system of public administration. It is a sectional issue. It always relates to the called **intergovernmentalism**. According to the OECD’s document *Managing across levels of government* (OECD 1997) this phenomenon comes in response to the twin pressures of budgetary deficits and calls

for better quality democracy. In this context, the main concerns underpinning this work are to:

- facilitate the achievement of national objectives, e.g. fiscal strategy;
- remove unnecessary duplication and overlap;
- obtain better value for taxpayers’ money;
- make services more responsive to local needs; and
- empower citizens to participate more in decision-making.

The basic problem of complex organization (which is a case of public administration) relates to the *fact that not all information relevant to the decision-making are in hands of a subject of the decision-making*. That is why the communication is considered to be a necessary part of the more complex form of cooperative behavior - coordination. According to Simon, failures in communication result whenever it is forgotten that the behavior of individuals is the tool with which organization achieves its purposes. “The question to be asked of any administrative process is: How does it influence the decisions of these individuals? Without communication, the answer must always be: It does not influence them at all.”⁵ In the simplest situations, the individual participant can bring his activities into coordination with the activities of others through simple observation of what they are doing. In most situations, however, the successful performance of a task by a group of persons requires a slightly higher degree of coordination. According to Simon, the process of coordination in these more complicated situations consists of at least three steps: (1) the development of a plan of behavior for all the members of the group (not a set of individual plans for each member); (2) the communication of the relevant portions of this plan to each member; and (3) a willingness on the part of the individual members to permit their behavior to be

⁴ Simon, H. A. - *Administrative Behavior - A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administration Organization*. Second Edition, The Free Press, New York, Collier-Macmillan Limited, London; 1965, p. 154.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

guided by the plan.⁶ The mentioned requirements are applicable not only on individual behavior, but also on the organizational behavior as can be seen in many benchmarking-like analyses.

Máša says: “the importance of the efficient communication system of an organization is clear - of both, of the formal as well as informal. Particularly, it is necessary to prevent the overburden of a communication system and the consequent danger of information content distortion.”⁷ He distinguishes two forms of this distortion - intentional and unintentional. The *possibility to unintentionally distort information content* also exists due to the complexity of organizational relationships, especially within multilevel organizational structures. According to *Máša*, the non-intentional distortion of information content is also related to attempts of finding the optimal *spam of control*. In the situation when there are a lot of management layers, the central managing body has to refocus from its own mission - stipulation of perspective goals and objectives - on operational activities that should be exercised by lower units. In the multilayer system of management however, these lower units may not have enough remit to make a complex decision in the field of their competency. This may lead to reduction of initiatives and in a broader sense to a habit of comfortableness, routine and lack of innovation process development.

The *lateral character* of communication and its feedback aspect are often stressed in theory. According to *Garnett*, key functions of lateral communication include task coordination, information sharing, multidisciplinary problem solving, and mutual emotional support.⁸ The lateral character of communication is a prerequisite of the communication network - “process whereby decisional premises are transmitted from one member of an organization to another”. This network has a potential to be an integrating device for bringing together frequently conflicting elements of an organization to secure cooperative group effort. However, as crucial as it is to organizational health and performance, lateral communication has historically been undervalued, receiving less scholarly attention than have upward, and particularly downward communication.

In the public administration, the process of communication may be often blocked due to many circumstances. For example *Long* speaks about the following **critical types of communications blockages**: barriers of language, frames of reference, status distance, geographical distance, self-protection of the individual who reports actions, the pressures of work and censorship.⁹ It is also necessary not to forget what *Weber* already claimed - the modern communication (it means “written” in his context) was one of the factors of growth of the bureaucratization of society life.¹⁰

The following text will try to reflect the above mentioned theory in the practice of the communication process in the current public administration system of the Czech Republic.

3) Administrative system of the Czech Republic

3.1 System of public administration

Communication characteristics within the system of public administration always relate to an administrative model of a state. Legal reflections of this model prescribe competences of individual subjects of the communication process and determine the complexity of communication relationships (particularly the number of individual communication levels and the relevance of information of individual levels).

In the Czech Republic, the model that has been created during the public administration reform may be described (with a certain level of simplification) in the **scheme below**.

Within the **state administration** (“the transferred competence”), the legal norms define the basic vertical of central (ministerial) level - regional level - municipal level that determines the general trends of communication, but necessarily does not exclude concrete specifics in the form of horizontal communication within the level or skipping of a level of the vertical. Within the self-government (“self-reliant / **self-governmental competence**”) the vertical does not exist - according to the law, individual levels (units) of self-government are not in the relation of subordination. In practice, however, the situation may differ significantly. This different may also emerge from the fact that the same bodies of a region/municipality may exercise both of the groups of activities - the state as well as self-governmental administration (the called “mixed model of public administration”). This may lead to the complexity that is hard to coordinate and that also causes conflicts of roles inside such bodies.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 106 - 107.

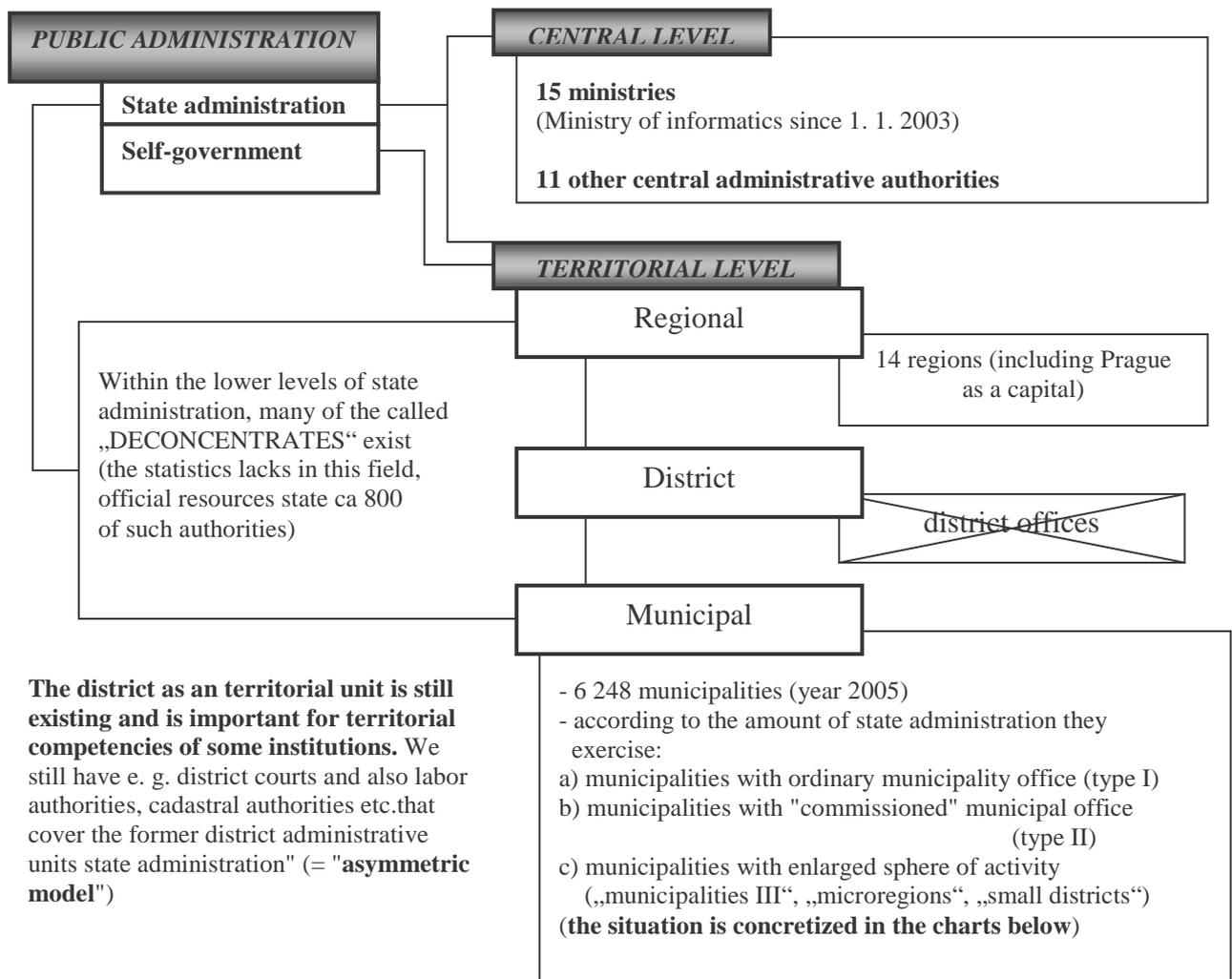
⁷ Máša, M. Efektivnost veřejné správy a správní věda (Vybrané kapitoly). Brno: MU 2001. (Účelový tisk), p.39.

⁸ Garnett, J. L. Administrative Communication (Or How to Make All the Rest Work): The Concept of Its Professional Centrality. In Stillman, R. J.: Opus citatum, p 262..

⁹ Stillman, R. J.: Opus citatum, p. 255.

¹⁰ Weber, M.: Autorita, etika a společnost (Pohled sociologie dějin). Praha: Mladá fronta 1997, p. 76.

Scheme 1 - Administrative model of the Czech Republic



Communication within the public administration system that is described by the scheme¹¹ above refers to the very large set of administrative activities. The perfect definition of this set is hard to make even in the case of state administration. The concretization of possible objects of administrative communication in the Czech Republic may be depicted by Table 1. This table is based on the analysis of organizational structures of "commissioned" municipal offices (municipality II) and municipal offices of municipalities with enlarged sphere of activity (municipality III). The amount of state administration both of these types of municipal offices exercise do not itself reflect significantly in the form of an organizational structure. The main areas of depicted processes may be found also within the regional level of state administration that is exercised especially by the regional offices.

¹¹ The scheme draws on information from

http://www.statnisprava.cz/ebe/redakce.nsf/i/ustredni_organy_statni_spravy and from the data of Czech Statistical Office - <http://www2.czso.cz/csu/edicniplan.nsf/p/1302-05>. **Municipality office** municipality body is one of bodies of a municipality that should exercise the state administration deconcentrated from the central level of state administration (however it has also the competences in the self-governmental activities). **Municipalities with enlarged sphere of activity** is a youngest category of municipalities that has been created in relation to the abolishment of district authorities and the transfer of their competencies to municipal level). Categories of municipalities in b) and c) are specified in act 314/2002 that has come in force since 1. 1. 2003.

Table 1 - Examples of typical areas of activities within the two brunches of public administration in the Czech Republic

a) SELF-GOVERNMENTAL ACTIVITIES	b) STATE ADMINISTRATION ACTIVITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • investments and building-up (including territorial planning and territorial development) • administration of municipal properties • local fees • education • culture and care of historical monuments • healthcare • sport • tourism and municipality promotion • local social affairs (including local library, domiciliary services, rest home for elderly people, cemetery etc.) • legal documents of municipalities in the self-governmental area • municipal police and public order • cooperation with other municipalities • cooperation with regional authorities • over-frontier cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • registry office and register of inhabitants • personal IDs and travelling documents • construction authority and the registry of allotments • Trades Licensing Office • state administration in the area of social allowances • social and legal protection of children • offences • road and traffic authority office • environmental protection • legal documents of municipalities in the state-administration area
c) AREAS OF INTERDIGITATION	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • economy and finance (budgeting) • accounting • human resources management • legal advices • archive of the municipal office • informatics (including municipal web pages) • control • management of crisis 	

Activities in a) - self-governmental activities - are those fields of activities where a municipality may significantly adapt the way of their management to local specifics.

Activities in b) - state administration activities - are those fields of administrative activities where the adaptation to local specifics is in contrary with the concern of the State to ensure the unification within the territory of the State (a certain level of centralization can always be found here).

It is sometimes not easy to separate activities into the two groups. Activities, where such separation is difficult, or activities where interdigitation of the groups occurs are listed in c).

The following text will refer to the group b) - state administration, where it is necessary to ensure the systematicness - particularly mutual consistency - of individual levels.

Within the state administration system of the Czech Republic, the communication process includes both the transmission of information towards the decision-making centre and the transmission of a consequent decision from this decision-making centre to other parts of the system. As it is shown in the above mentioned scheme and in the description of administrative system, in the area of state administration **the Czech legislation creates more centers that are important for state administration activities exercised by the lowest level of the system** - in the case of municipalities the situation is as follows: responsible ministries and other central administrative authorities, regions and sometimes the called deconcentrates in the territory of districts (or different) (if we abstract from the mentioned types of municipal offices that can be also in relationship of subordination). This fact predestines the **complexity and comprehensibility** of the communication processes and may significantly influence the **information distortion** (intentional or unintentional). It also determines the effectiveness and efficiency of the communication process and may lead to duplications in the system. Also the

mentioned **blockages** are relevant in the Czech context (particularly the frames of reference, status distance and geographical distance).

The existing system of state administration may face the basic problem of the complex formal organizations: not all information relevant to the decision-making may be in hands of a subject of the decision-making. In the context of the Czech Republic, the failures of communication may result from the situation when it is forgotten that the behavior of lower levels (particularly those from the lowest) is the tool with which the whole system achieves its purposes (*the principle of subsidiarity*). Empirical research that has been realized within the period from June to September 2005 and that confirmed the existence of some of the above mentioned negatives is described briefly in the text below (Point 4 of this paper).

3.2 Communication as an instrument for coordination: competences of central and regional public administration of the Czech Republic

In the text below the most important competences of the central and regional public administration that are relevant for the communication issue may be found. Because the way of transmission of a decision from the centre to an individual lower or horizontally equal part of the system plays a significant role, the text below comprises also the competences related to electronic means of communication that may be covered by e-government / e-governance terms. It is necessary to underline the fragmentation of these competences particularly among the three following authorities. This fragmentation may determine the quality of the communication process within the public administration system of the Czech Republic.

3.2.1 Competences of central public administration

a) Ministry of interior

For organization and functioning of central state administration of the Czech Republic, the act no. 2/1969, on establishment of ministries and other central state administration authorities (with amendments) is vital. This act gives the Ministry of Interior the power to act in the field of *general coordination of public administration*. In accordance with the article 2 § 12 of this act, the Ministry of Interior has also a duty to secure the communication networks for territorial state administration authorities.

The specific status of this Ministry is also stipulated by the act on regions (act no. 129/2000). Particularly following competences are relevant for the issue of communication in the public administration system - according to act on regions, the Ministry of Interior

- a) coordinates the passing of directives of ministries and other central administrative authorities that refer to the state administration activities of regions and municipalities (a special bulletin of Government is published for this reason);
- b) controls the compliance of activities of responsible bodies of regions and compliance of expert help provided by regional offices for municipalities with governmental rulings and provisions;
- c) organizes deliberations of directors of regional offices;
- d) with a cooperation of responsible central administrative authorities, the Ministry organizes the realization of controls in the selected fields of activities of regional bodies, it evaluate results of these controls and prepares proposals for Government,
- e) manages and in cooperation with responsible ministries also coordinates the building and the realization of information systems of regions.

The *Department for public administration informatization* plays a significant role in the field of electronic public administration.

b) Ministry of informatics

This ministry is a central state administration authority in the field of information and communication technologies, telecommunication and postal services. According to the web pages of this ministry (<http://www.micr.cz>) this ministry is (besides all) a coordinator of electronic public administration in the Czech Republic. This ministry has taken over the competences of the former Office for public information system, the division of communications of the Ministry of transport and communications and competences in the field of electronic signatures that were in hands of the Office for personal data protection. This ministry is responsible for the Portal of public administration that may be found here: <http://www.portal.gov.cz>.

c) *The Office of Government*

Since 2004, this Office has gained the competences in the field of „reform and modernization“ of central state administration. This body performs professional, organizational and technical tasks necessary to support activities of the Government of the Czech Republic and its bodies. The Department for regulatory and central state administration may play the most significant role in the field of electronic public administration.

3.2.2 Communication and competences of regional state administration

In the public administration system, regions represent the important intermediary-type level. On the basis of foreign and Czech experience, for example Grospič defines the following *general functions* of this middle component of the territorial public administration:

- a) *integrating function* in relation to other institutions, including the civil society, that exist in the region, especially in the area of policy-making;
- b) *coordinating function* in relation to public administration institutions, both at the horizontal (towards another region) and at the vertical direction (towards the basic level of territorial administrative institution);
- c) *supervising function*, particularly the service supervision and expert supervision;
- d) *advisory function* that is related to the expert end methodical help for the basic level of territorial public administration;
- f) *function of financial resources allocating or distributing*;
- g) *legal advisory function* as an very important part of advisory function;
- h) *regional planning and large territorial units planning function*;
- i) *regional management of crises function*;
- j) function of *coordination of environmental protection* in a region.¹²

Within the communication system, the regional office¹³ plays the most important part. In reference to the aims of this paper, the following competences of this body appear to be most relevant - the regional office

- a) reviews the decisions made by municipal bodies in a certain fields of activities,
- b) stipulate sanctions,
- c) provide expert and methodical help for municipalities,
- d) secure the coordination of building and maintenance if information system that is compatible with the public administration information systems;
- e) organizes the realization of controls in the selected fields of activities of regional bodies, it evaluate results of these controls and prepares solution proposals for responsible ministry or the Government;
- f) controls activities of municipal bodies in the field of state administration,
- g) in accordance with special act, it exercises the supervision upon the state administration as well as self-governmental activities of municipalities.

3.2.3 Communication and coordination: the character of the municipal level of public administration

The number of individual levels of public administration system is one of the most important determinants of communication quality. The public administration processes that are described by the Table 1 are the object of communication both in its classical and in its electronic form. Communication functions here as vital instrument for coordination. In the Czech Republic, the size structure of the municipal level of public administration that is depicted in the Table 2 determines the effectiveness of coordination attempts within the state administration system.

The **problem of a large number of small municipalities** is apparent. It also brings **the question about the capacities of small municipalities** (particularly the knowledge and financial capacities) **necessary for the access to the information and communication technologies**.

¹² Grospič, J. Úloha krajů v územní reformě veřejné správy. In Grospič, J., Vostrá, L.: Reforma veřejné správy v teorii a praxi (Sborník z mezinárodní konference). Aleš Čeněk, s. r. o., 2004, pp 29 - 30.

¹³ „Krajští úřad“ in Czech language.

Table 2 - The size structure of municipalities in the Czech Republic

Region	Number of municipalities according to the following size structure (number of inhabitants)										Total
	to 199	200 - 499	500 - 999	1000 - 1999	2000 - 4999	5000 - 9999	10000 - 19999	20000 - 49999	50000 - 99999	over 100000	
Praha	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Středočeský	290	414	254	106	48	16	13	4	1	0	1 146
Jihočeský	243	204	80	46	30	13	2	4	1	0	623
Plzeňský	196	145	73	45	28	8	4	1	0	1	501
Karlovarský	20	39	30	17	13	6	4	2	1	0	132
Ústecký	63	127	75	39	25	8	9	3	5	0	354
Liberecký	37	62	58	28	15	10	2	2	1	0	215
Královehradecký	123	162	88	32	21	13	6	2	1	0	448
Pardubický	118	171	89	42	15	8	7	1	1	0	452
Vysočina	339	209	91	34	13	10	4	4	0	0	704
Jihomoravský	122	200	179	92	56	14	3	5	0	1	672
Olomoucký	51	130	99	71	33	3	6	3	0	1	397
Zlínský	17	88	99	48	32	11	4	4	1	0	304
Moravskoslezský	14	61	78	74	39	17	4	7	4	1	299
Czech Republic (n)	1633	2012	1293	674	368	137	68	42	16	5	6248
Czech Republic (%)	26,14	32,20	20,69	10,79	5,89	2,19	1,09	0,67	0,26	0,08	100

Source: Based on data from the Czech Statistical Office (8. 4. 2006)

The following Table 3 may serve as a concretization of municipal level of public administration in the Czech Republic as it is described in the scheme and tables above. It shows the number of individual types of municipalities (according to the level of state administration they exercise - see Scheme above):

Table 3 - Number of municipalities I, II and III in the Czech Republic¹⁴

Region	Municipalities I	Municipalities II	Municipalities III
Praha	1 specific municipality with 22 administrative territories		
Jihočeský	623	37	17
Jihomoravský	672	34	21
Karlovarský	132	14	7
Královehradecký	448	34	15
Liberecký	215	21	10
Moravskoslezský	299	30	22
Olomoucký	397	20	13
Pardubický	452	26	15
Plzeňský	501	35	15
Středočeský	1 146	55	26
Ústecký	354	30	16
Vysočina	704	26	15
Zlínský	304	25	13
Total	6248	387	205

Source: Information from the Czech Statistical Office and from the act no. 314/2002 Sb.

¹⁴ Municipalities of type III are simultaneously municipalities of type II and of type I. The status of Prague (Praha) that is a capital of the Czech Republic stipulated in the special act no. 131/2000 (with amendments).

4) Electronic public administration as an instrument of quality communication: selected results of the empirical research

During the last 15 years, public administration of the Czech Republic has changed significantly. The creation of regions - a middle level that exercises both the state administration and the self-governmental activities - can be considered to be the latest most significant change in the public administration system. This level has been functioning since November 2001. It is undoubted that the starting position of new established regions was somewhat different than the position of new municipalities at the beginning of 1990's. The regional level was perceived to be a redundant component of public administration system by the public and also by many officials. At their beginning, regions had been functioning simultaneously with district offices. After the abolishment of district offices at the end of 2002, the opinions that the regions have replaced them insufficiently could be heard.¹⁵

That is why our research focused on analysis of current position of regions, particularly on one of their bodies - the regional office, within the public administration system. The research analyzed the communication process between the regional offices and similar offices on the lower municipal level - municipal offices of municipalities with enlarged sphere of activity (municipalities III) and was a part of the preparatory work on the communication strategy. The aim of the research was to discover possible negatives of communication relationships within the mention part of the public administration and to propose recommendations if needed. The analysis of possibilities of modern information and communication technologies to solve potential problems was comprised.

The empirical research that was based on questionnaire method was a point of departure of the critical analysis. Questionnaires were prepared in order to gain answers to the following *questions*:

- How is the overall quality of mutual communication perceived by municipal and regional senior civil servants?
- With whom do they communicate most often?
- What is the most frequent object of the communication and on what should the communication focus?
- What barriers and negatives do the regional and municipal senior civil servants perceive in the communication process?
- What are their concrete proposals for solving the problems of the communication (between the municipal and regional level, but also with the references to communication with the central level)?

On the basement of the questionnaires the **following selected conclusions** may be stated:¹⁶

Officials of the both component of public administration system perceive the mutual communication as beneficial, conductive and they are generally **satisfied** with the overall communication quality. The regional office serves as the main source of information for the municipal officials. The ministerial level is the main source for information of the regional offices. Both components search necessary information within the higher (and for the state administration also the superordinate) level.

Among the *ways of communication and possible instruments*, the officials from both of the levels identically prefer the modern forms like e-mail or web pages. This conclusion was also confirmed by results of a different research that concentrated on the opinions of mayors and secretaries of municipalities within the region of South-Moravian region ("Jihomoravský").

¹⁵ Districts as „decentralized bodies of state administration with general competence“ (act 425/1990) or later as „administrative authorities that exercise state administration within administrative territories that are called districts“ have been abolished by 31. 12. 2002.

¹⁶ Because we gathered 499 questionnaires with answers from the municipal level and only 45 questionnaires from the regional level, especially the answers from the municipal level were more relevant for the consequent generalization and possible recommendations.

Table 4 - What communication means do the municipal officials prefer for gaining information of the regional office (%)

	methodical help	expert consultation	educational programmes	grant schemes	general information	EU policy	project realization
telephone	41,6	37,1	3,7	5,7	3,2	2,9	39,6
fax	1,2		0,4	0,4	0,4	0,4	1,6
post office	20,4	11,0	21,1	13,8	41,1	18,1	8,6
e-mail	80,0	55,9	77,6	58,7	89,1	56,4	44,9
web pages of „Jihomoravský“ region	51,2	19,6	44,3	68,4	16,5	61,7	18,4
personal appointment with the concrete official	36,8	65,7	3,3	15,4	1,6	17,7	81,2

Operational contact is the *prevailing purpose* of the communication in both of the selected components of public administration of the Czech Republic. Further, municipal officials search for and consult information related to legislation in force with the regional level. In accordance with this conclusion is another conclusion that the regional officials state the receiving of questions and remarks on the second place within the communication purposes.

It is possible to find the answer to the question “*What information does the recipient of information require?*” in gathered data. According to the preferences of respondents, particularly methodical help, expert consultation and information about legislation in force should be the object of communication.

Although the general satisfaction prevails in the answers to beginning questions of the questionnaires, answers to other questions discovered some *problems of systemic character*. The *higher reliability of central (especially ministerial) information than the regional information* is perceived to be the dominant barrier of effective communication within the state administration (this was mentioned in 35 per cent of answers from the municipal level).

Both components of public administration consider the effort to find a solution and the effort to communicate to be the biggest *positive* of mutual communication. Operativeness, speed and up-to-dateness of information is also perceived very positively (this probably refers to the dominant usage of e-mail as an communication instrument).

From our research, some recommendations that document the possibility of ICT utilization in public administration and that are stated bellow follow. They should be considered as groundwork for the potential conception of communication improvement, not as the conception itself.

a) Ensuring of quality communication based on the needs of officials

The first conclusion and recommendation comes directly from the empirical research. On the basis of the above summarized opinions of regional and municipal officials it is possible to claim, that officials (especially from the municipal offices of municipalities III) recognize the importance of communication, because they often say that there is no communication that can be redundant. In the gathered answers it is possible to discover general characteristics that officials assign to quality communication process in the public administration. These characteristics should be taken into account when preparing the communication strategy. Namely, the officials emphasize the importance of the following characteristics of information they require:

- speed/ timeliness of communication,
- comprehensibility,
- up-to-dateness,
- proficiency,
- relevance in relation to the needs.

b) Methodical help enhancement and unification

The insufficient methodical help and its heterogeneity are one of the most mentioned and criticized deficits within the communication in the field of state administration in the Czech Republic (not only within the relationships between regions and municipalities, but within the whole of the above mentioned vertical).

Municipal officials often face the disunited, sometimes contrary interpretation of the methodical issues that is provided by the regional or central state administration. This situation is caused by non-coordinated information flows within the state administration system and by the fragmented competences in the field of methodical help. Due to this fact there is no official single source where officials may find comprehensive and particularly binding information required for exercising state administration activities in the Czech Republic, even in the concrete administrative activities - it means according to individual resorts of administrative activities. Especially here the **potential of modern information and communication technologies** should be underlined and can be utilized.

That is why it appeared to us that **it is necessary to create infrastructure that would unify the methodical procedures employed**. Such infrastructure can be represented in the first step by the **Internet application of portal- and discussion-forum-type**, where each step of individual state administration activities on each level of state administration (for example in the form of questions and answers) would be described. The creator of the methodical help should be logically the primary source of information of this application - according to the municipal officials the responsible ministry. The decisions of administrative courts should be also the part of such an infrastructure. The target situation is the factual ensuring of the principle when the creator of methodical procedures is simultaneously informed about their realization and is able to flexibly solve the potential problems. It would be unquestionably suitable to link such infrastructure (advice centre) with the existing institutions and also with the academic environment.

c) Unified visual appearance of web pages of central state administration authorities

In reference with the above mentioned recommendations, the possible benefits of visual appearance unification of web pages of central state administration institutions are visible. We recognize the difficulty to achieve such recommendation. However, it can be built on foreign experience in this field.¹⁷ The present state of heterogeneity of central state administration Internet presentations brings the costs particularly related to users' (the significant percentage is represented by the officials themselves) comfort decrease.

d) Unification of communication management by utilization of existing institutions of central state administration

From the above mentioned, it is apparent that it is necessary to coordinate somehow the communication in the state administration system (in its classical as well as electronic form) - to harmonize the communication of individual parts of the system in the way that facilitates the maximal contribution of state administration functions. These functions should be clearly defined. The aspect of positive cooperation - when individual parts of thy system mutually cooperates and help each other and do not do harms to others - (that are in contrary with actual "resortism" of state administration) must be stressed here as well as the important link to communication (in its classical and electronic form) and feedback issues. In order to improve the coordination of the system, officials were clearly against establishment of a new institution. They demanded the utilization of existing institutions (particularly the Ministry of Interior).

e) Ensuring of continual monitoring and evaluation of results

Monitoring of the real practice and the process of control - comparison of the real practice with the intended / planned results - are necessary parts of every management activities. The recommendation to ensure continual monitoring and evaluation of results is interlinked to the recommendation mentioned above. The utilization of ICTs may improve the transparency of an institution that is controlled and also the transparency of the control process itself. In relation to the mentioned principle of positive cooperation, the appointment of special commission appears to be suitable. This commission would comprise the members from all levels of the administrative system. The utilization of ICT (for example e-consultation, e-discussion etc.) may be beneficial here and may enlarge the space for the external control of public administration.

f) Ensuring the information/computer literacy of officials

Acceptable **information/computer literacy** of officials is an important prerequisite for effective attempts in the field of electronic administration. Analysis of this issue was also a part of the mentioned research project that concentrates on the situation within the "Jihomoravský" region. The results can be understood to be a bit

¹⁷ Similar projects have been launched in Canada, Great Britain and Ireland within the government on-line activities.

distorted because of the probable propensity of officials to overestimate (or underestimate) their skills. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the continual increase of ICTs in public administration of the Czech Republic is positively perceived also by the civil servants side.

Graph 1 – Perceived level of skills related to the use of PC

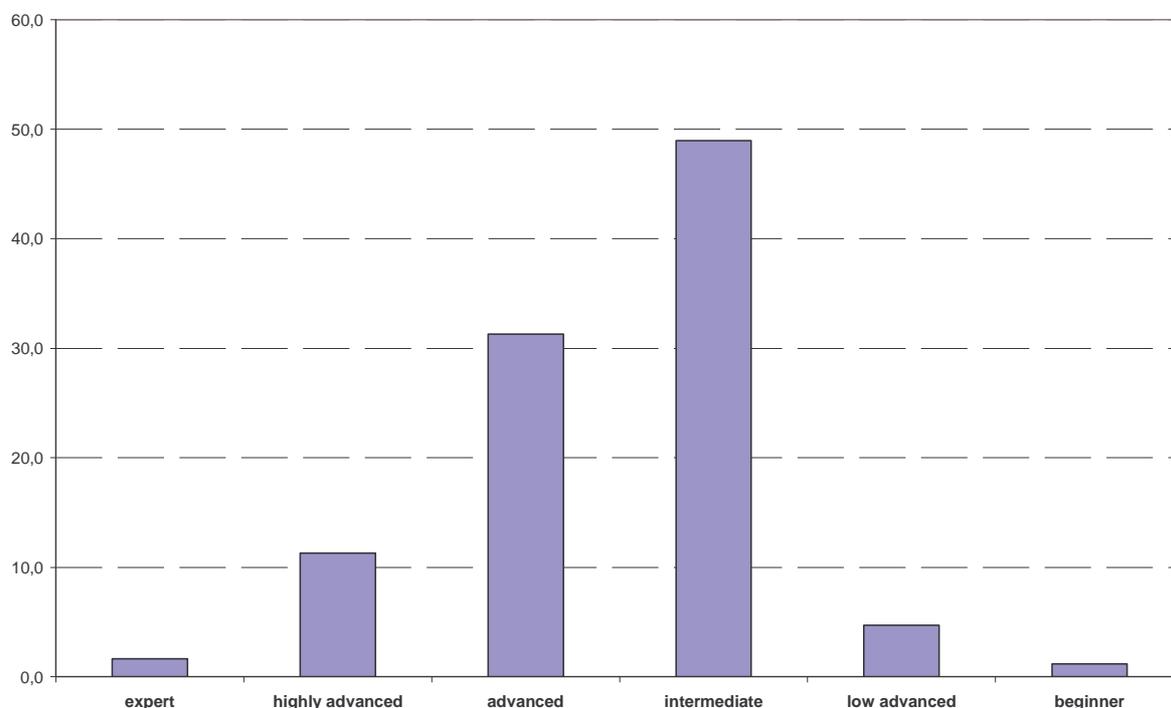


Table 5 - Some characteristics of (perceived) computer literacy of municipal offices officials

	certainly	quite certainly	half-and-half	more likely not	certainly not
a) I can find information that I need for my work within a municipality body on the Internet.	53,3	33,3	9,5	3,2	0,5
b) I can send an e-mail with an attachment.	90,6	5,2	2,6	0,9	0,5
c) I can open the attachment of received e-mail.	92,7	4,0	0,5	1,9	0,7
d) I can save a received attachment of e-mail on the hard-drive of the PC.	83,4	7,8	4,8	1,9	1,7
e) I can find the saved attachment on the hard-drive of the PC.	81,1	10,0	4,1	2,2	1,9
f) I can fill in and send the web form.	75,4	12,2	4,5	4,3	1,4

As it is shown in the following Table 6, personal computer is a basic work equipment almost for every official. They use it daily (95 % of answers). It is also hard to imagine the communication of officials with citizens or elected representatives of a region without using e-mail (almost the half of officials uses the e-mail several times during the week). Also the intranet plays an important role. However, the research confirms the slow utilization of “purely” electronic communication that is based particularly on the use of **electronic signature** (80 % of respondents from the municipal level of the “Jihomoravský” region have not used the electronic signature yet). The present project of the Ministry of informatics that offers the free usage of electronic signature for one year to municipalities may change this situation.¹⁸

¹⁸ This project was launched in 2004. The act on electronic signature was passed in the year 2000.

Table 6 - The rate of modern communication instruments usage

	daily	not daily, but several times a week	not often than once a week	rarely, less than once a week	never
PC	95,4	3,1	0,5	0,5	0,5
e-mail for the communication with citizens	29,3	21,5	15,9	27,6	4,2
e-mail for the communication with officials/elected representatives of municipalities within the „Jihomoravský“ region	20,2	23,9	26,3	26,3	2,7
e-mail for the communication with officials / elected representatives of other regions	8,4	16,9	20,6	35,5	15,9
e-mail for the communication with officials of corresponding department	3,7	4,7	11,0	54,9	22,3
information on the corresponding department web page	7,9	26,2	29,6	31,5	4,1
information on the web page of other municipalities	2,7	11,7	26,0	49,0	7,5
information on the „Jihomoravský“ region web page	6,1	16,8	35,5	35,3	4,6
internal information system	44,0	24,1	12,2	9,5	5,8
electronic signature	1,7	1,5	3,2	9,2	79,1
Portal of public administration (www.portal.gov.cz)	4,6	11,8	21,8	45,3	13,7

Conclusions

This paper tried to analyze the utilization of ICT within public administration. This analyze is placed in the broader context than in the traditional texts. Practical usage of the potential of ICT is always significantly limited by the form of the public administration system of a state and by characteristics of this system. These circumstances may be omitted by creators of communication strategies and information policy strategies, although such analysis should be a part of the preparatory phase of these documents, that means *ex ante*. The importance of demand for electronic public administration from the side of citizens, but also from the side of officials should be stressed. During public administration reforms in the post-communist countries that were sometimes characterized by the speed, fashion and the transfer of foreign experience without deeper analysis of national context, such requirements might not have been fulfilled. Reformers on the central, regional or municipal level thus look for ways of adaptation their activities *ex post*. The description of the Czech case may be partly described in this paper.

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