

Oldřich Vlasák

speech to delegates of the conference EUROCITIES Knowledge Society Forum – TeleCities, Prague, 14 October 2005

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have the pleasure of greeting you on the final day of the conference marathon, which began on Thursday as a meeting of Czech and Slovak towns to discuss eGovernment.

I very much regret that my duties as member of the European Parliament did not make it possible for me to come earlier to attend the conference, in the preparation of which the Association of Towns and Municipalities of the CR and the Capital Prague participated. From the rich programme and the familiar faces I have noticed among the participants I can see that there must have been an interesting exchange of expert experiences and discussions, and am certain that the exchange will continue.

Co-operation between the Association and Prague, which is, after all, its largest member, in the area focused on the development of information society and international activity has been intensifying for a number of years. This conference is a certain culmination of efforts pursued in co-operation with other partners. Let me mention co-operation in the international part of the ISSS/LORIS (Internet in Public Administration/Local and Regional Information Society) conference in Hradec Králové, a city of which I was Mayor for several years. Already in the year 2000, the historically first seminar of the TeleCities network in the Czech Republic was arranged at that conference, and if I am not mistaken, it was the first to be held in countries, which at that time were still candidates for admission to the EU. Linked with the conference is the LORIS Declaration formulated in 2004, with the participation of the Association and Prague. I would also like to mention co-operation with networks, such as Elanet and Global Cities Dialogue, with which the Association, and Hradec Králové, co-operated and continues to co-operate in collaboration with Prague.

Let me now briefly introduce the Association of Towns and Municipalities. After 1989, the Association resumed the traditions dating from the beginning of the 20th century, which were later severed. The basic aim of the Association is to defend the common interests and rights of municipalities. Currently, the organization associates 2474 communities, i.e. about 39 per cent. There are more than 7 million people living in the member municipalities, accounting for nearly 73 per cent of people living in the Czech Republic. Both large cities, headed by Prague, with more than one million inhabitants, and communities with just a few dozen people are members of the Association.

The Association is a constructive partner to the Government and Parliament of the Czech Republic. It makes comments on bills concerning local administration debated in Parliament. Working in the Association are especially mayors, who do this work in addition to their responsibilities in their communities. The Association of towns and municipalities of the Czech Republic also creates conditions for co-operation with municipalities and their associations in Europe and in other parts of the world.

The Association forms working commissions as consultative bodies of the board. One of them is the Commission for the Information Systems of Towns and Municipalities (ISMO),

which helps promote the use of information and communication technologies by municipal offices. It also co-operates with the ministries on projects and the preparation of standards for local authorities, organizes technical conferences and makes comments on legislation in the area of informatics. It co-operates closely with a similar commission set up by the Association of Regions of the Czech Republic, and supports the Golden Coat-of-Arms competition of the web sites of towns and municipalities.

Promotion of the use of ITC is one of the Union of Towns and Municipalities priorities. We cooperate with the Ministry of Informatics, which is our reliable partner; we are members of the EU networks such as CEMR, where we pursue our goals and lobby in this area.

We promote use of new technologies and implementation of internet into Town Halls, schools and libraries. And I must say that Czech local governments are very open to communicate with their citizens and other stakeholders also in electronic way. Due to their openness we can see small children in kindergartens working with computers. We can also see projects like in Hradec Králové, Jihlava and České Budějovice, where in cooperation with firms Oracle and Microsoft school pupils teach older people how to use computers. I am proud of my town Hradec where 150 elderly learnt in such a way that computer can become an excellent information source and can help them to communicate with friends and families. The internet is also a very important mean of communication between the SMO CR and its members. Our members get email alert or look at our website when an interesting event is taking place or when there is important news they should acknowledge. The SMO CR Board often uses internet voting.

The internet is an irreplaceable working tool for SMO CR staff and representatives. Commenting on legislation and politics must be done very quickly which means that email is the only possibility. Use of the internet is also the only way how to survey the EU legislation that is being prepared in the EU institutions and how to quickly exchange opinion on its risk and opportunities with our partner association in majority of 25 member states.

The subject of this conference, among other things, is “interoperability”, which also covers the organizational aspects of co-operation of local authorities in the development of information society. Obviously, at the meeting of an organization associating European towns there is no need to emphasize what importance we attach to mutual co-operation, the exchange of experience, propagation of “good practices” and the common solutions and attitudes to national governments and European structures. I would like to illustrate the fact that we also apply these principles in the area of information society by mentioning the LORIS Declaration. Its full version can be found at the end of the publication Czech Cities Towards Information Society, which is part of the conference materials. In comparison with the document eRights Charter, the Declaration is more closely focused on commitments of mutual co-operation; otherwise, the principles of the targeted development of information society in local government are common to both documents. This covers, for example, the availability and improvement of online services, efforts to raise the people’s commitment, support of education, development of the infrastructure, ensuring the safety and protection of information, and other subjects. On the other hand the documents formulate commitments to keep the other parties informed, to co-operate on concepts, seek common priorities and solve them, with the use of common and European financial sources.

As I have said before, the Declaration came into being at the beginning of 2004, and in the first phase focused on communication with partners from the new EU member states. After one year, at the ISSS/LORIS conference held in Hradec Králové in April 2005, 13 towns and 14 local government associations attached their signatures to it. Later, in co-operation with Prague, more partners signed it. At random I would like to mention Vienna, Stockholm, Helsinki, Berlin, Bremen, as well as Bratislava, Brno and Ostrava. At the meeting of the Global Cities Dialogue steering committee in Prague on 1 April of this year, this organization and the individual representatives of towns and organizations, members of the committee, also subscribed to the ideas of the Declaration.

The publication Czech Cities Towards Information Society, which is largely based on the results of surveys and assessments linking up with the LORIS Declaration and the TeleCities eCitizenship for All project reveal how interesting is the information we have managed to prepare about 13 Czech towns in mutual co-operation. Concrete figures are the subject of other presentations, and therefore I would like to point out that the main asset of this and other such activities in the area of benchmarking should be seen in efforts to orientate further steps on this road in the correct direction, with the required degree of “interoperability” that will also lead to “cost-effectiveness”.

In conclusion, allow me to emphasize, from the point of view of the local government association, that we are sensibly perceiving the important role of modern technologies, not only in providing services to citizens by the administration, or in ensuring the competitiveness of towns and municipalities on the global scale, but also in ensuring the overall development of the life of the community, involvement of citizens and ensuring e-Democracy.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish that the conference may continue successfully and that you may enjoy the rest of your stay in Prague and in the Czech Republic. Thank you for your attention.