Public access to budgets in the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic: Guest Post by Michal Kubáň

Submitted on 29 May 2013 by Michal Kuban

At the end of May, the Ministry of Finance launched a basic version of the long-awaited portal that will publish data on the national treasury. It is called the MONITOR which allows free public access to budget and accounting information from all levels of state and local governments.

Presented information comes from the State Treasury (IISSP - Integrated Information System of the Treasury) and is regularly updated. Data updates every quarter of a central system of accounting information for state and one month from the financial information system.

From the published data citizens can find out how tax collection is taking place or how the ministry is managed. Access to the portal is not authorized and the data in it will be updated automatically.

"This portal is just an another step to increase the transparency of public budgets. Everyone can find out detailed information on managing at all levels of state and local governments," said Minister of Finance Miroslav Kalousek.

Implementation of the portal MONITOR is divided into two phases. The basic version of the portal was launched in May 2013. In the course of 2013, it will gradually add other tools for users, such as the possibility of dynamic data analysis using advanced tools for reporting, automatic export to third-party systems, more detailed duel of municipalities, etc.The final version of MONITOR will be officially launched 31 December 2013.

Although, it seems that the Ministry of Finance finally has its own portal which transparently publishes data from its central offices, local authorities and municipalities, however, it does not bring anything original and new into to sphere of open data in the Czech Republic. For instance, the similar projects to the MONITOR have been already created by Czech non-governmental organization. A similar project BudovaniStatu.cz (price 100 000CZK) covers Czech national budget. The economical insight into the budget of Czech municipalities provides RozpočetObce.cz (price: 100 000CZK). Other applications which are comparable to MONITOR, such as the Rozpočet Praha (150 000CZK) and the new new super budget application for Nové město na Moravě (50 000CZK).

The tricky point is that MONITOR costs 1.8 millions CZK and thus it was paid for by the Czech taxpayers. Regarding prices, it is important to mention that the MONITOR extracts data directly from itself (the Ministry of Finance), so the purchase is actually free. It is surprising that the

Ministry of Finance did not contact any of the authors of the four applications that already have been operating in the Czech Republic and who have already experience and whose applications have been significantly cheaper. Of course other similar application are always cheaper thanks to the fact of the know-how based on the experience of a previous application.

Another feature which makes MONITOR coherent and plausible to the public is the fact that used terms are hard to understand for non-experts and the public. Hence, the portal lacks a glossary which could make a portal more understandable for its visitors and also for experts who hardly could work with figures which are not clearly explained and may be used in a biased way.

According to the agreement stated on MONITOR, during the year 2013 should be released new "advanced" and "analytical" tool with the addition of "OLAP analysis". In reality, it is a common and simple thing you can add and filter sources and information. For instance,: OLAP analysis is what can be a small Microsoft Excel or Open Office and pivot tables. The work with big numbers can be done for free or very cheaply by Google Fusion Tables. At the end of the year it will be little surprise to see what has finally come up from the OLAP analysis.

What MONITOR should be able to do to be considered as "transparent accounting of government"? As a great sample serves the municipality budget of Nové město na Moravě which integrates the city budget with public contracts and all in one it is able to clearly present to its own citizens for the price of 2000 CZK.

What about Slovakak Republic? In the comparison with the Czech Republic, 21 cities have already published their budget within the framework of the initiative OpenSpending.org. Furthermore, the Slovak Republic is way ahead of regarding register of public contracts thanks to OtvoreneZmluvy.sk. On the contrary, In the Czech Republic there is still small amount of the cities and municipalities which publish their budget, for example: city Písek, Most, Semily as well as Nové Město na Moravě. However, we can find the register of public contracts on the website of Ministry of Finance which is little promising for the future.

To sum up, it is more than obvious that Czech non-governmental organisations (KohoVolit.EU, RozpočetObce.cz) are more active in the case of transparency of budgets of Czech offices and institutions. Projects such as RozpočetObce.cz, BudovaniStatu.cz are proficient and comparable to MONITOR However, the creation of these projects costed several times less than state Monitor.cz. The good thing is that MONITOR is in progress and will be fully working by the end of year 2013.