The incorporation of ICT innovation in Greek political discourse: The case of TAXIS

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ICT innovation and public administrations: The IS agenda

- Large sections of government operations become increasingly ‘wired’
- Tracing the encounter between large technological systems and institutional frameworks and codes of society (Lanzarra, 2009)
Shifts in the IS agenda

- Transcendence from micro-actions to macro-phenomena
  - More intricate description of context
  - Joint articulation of micro-macro levels
- Need to conceive the relations between government, politics and technology: ‘political machines’ (Barry, 2001)
  - Focus on government politics – going beyond public political rhetoric
ICT innovation as a political project

- ICT innovation is an imbroglio (Sassen, 2004) of powerful political ideals for economic progress, managerial fads on efficiency and the modeling of public organizations to the operational logic of private ones and last but not least on beliefs on the deterministic course of technology.

- How visions for an “electronic state, agile, transparent and accountable” (Ciborra, 2005) are embedded in the political discourse of local hosting contexts?
Setting the context of research

- The Greek TAXation Information System (TAXIS)
- TAXIS was designed to provide IT support to the central tax authorities, located in Athens, and to the local tax agencies for:
  - Tax calculation and monitoring
  - Payment transactions with citizens and businesses
- Remedy to tax maladministration plaguing MoEF: obsolete procedures, delays in data entry and processing, static view of state finances, inability to cross-check data
The contingent rise of ICT innovation in the political agenda – The macro level

- TAXIS implementation coincides with a period during which modernization (eksynchronismos) gained center stage in Greek political scene - TAXIS linked to the need for public sector reform
- System implementation propelled by political circumstances - Accession to the Maastricht treaty
- ICT innovation becomes the carrier of specific values of modernity (i.e. order, efficiency, control)
The contingent rise of ICT innovation in the political agenda – The micro level

- Technological momentum for TAXIS’ implementation – at the micro level (i.e. MoEF)
- Organization and technical maturity after a string of semi-finished implementations mainly obstructing instead of improving administrative practices
ICT innovation in Greek politics: 1978-1996

- Instrumental understanding of ICTs
  - Low priority item in the political agenda
  - Internal issue to each public ministry/agency

- Limited political rhetoric on the role of ICT for administrative restructuring
The technological discourse of Greek political parties

☐ Public rhetoric:
  ■ Public endorsement of technological innovation
  ■ Visionary claims on ICT as the solution to corruption and bureaucracy
  ■ TAXIS as the vehicle for fiscal reform towards equity and fairness

☐ Discussions/ debates in the Greek Parliament
The discursive choices of Greek political parties (1996-2000)

- Solidification and legitimization of their role in the process of ICT innovation in public administration
- Alignment of ICT innovation with pre-existing political debates
- Debating on procedural issues

Why such discursive choices?
- Greek political culture
- Fear of the reformatory potential of ICT innovation
Legitimizing the role of political parties in ICT innovation

- Need to establish a narrative of ICT innovation stressing the decisive role of political parties in the process
- Legitimation of the involvement of political parties in ICT innovation
- They also maintained their role as dominant collective actors in public administration – eliminating counter-discourses by various expert groups (e.g. TEE, EPY)
The old/new system debate

- Is TAXIS a new system?

- Two main positions:
  - The system is a great departure from the installed base and introduces new practices to the Ministry of Finance
  - The system is the cumulative result of 20 years of computerization efforts

- As the storyline evolves it is apparent that political parties are projected as the triggering agents for ICT innovation
Establishing ICT innovation as a vehicle for tax reform

- A series of questions never made:
  - How was TAXIS envisaged to contribute to an equitable fiscal policy?
  - How is equitable fiscal policy understood by the Greek Ministry of Economics and Finance?
  - How were fiscal imperatives embedded in TAXIS’ design?
  - What sort of internal data controls were in place to ensure implementation of the principles guiding fiscal policy and trace tax evasion?

- Instead, political parties aligned ICT innovation to long established veto points on fiscal policy
Impute incomes

☐ Impute incomes: temporary measure causing significant distortions in market operations

☐ How imputed methods were to be abolished?

☐ TAXIS as the ‘magic bullet’ solution

☐ Instead, political parties aligned ICT innovation to long established veto points on fiscal policy
Debating on procedural issues

- Parliamentary control dominated by legal and procedural issues
- First signs of the understanding political parties have built regarding ICT innovation:
  - contribution to fiscal reform
  - remedy of tax maladministration
Register of tax payers

- Single authentication number for TAXIS
  - necessary for system implementation
  - decisive measure against tax evasion
- During the Parliament discussion political parties focus on purely procedural issues of Parliamentary control
- Political parties express fears on personal data protection – populist reactions/initial contestations of modernization
The dislocation of political discourse to technical issues

- Aftermath of TAXIS implementation > shift in parliamentary debates
- Political parties become engaged in long and heated debates on purely technical issues (e.g. types of servers, Windows version)
- Initial signs of dislocation of political discourse on ICT innovation
System evaluation: From flagship project to flagrant failure

- Absence of tangible results on tax evasion and limited tax compliance
- No changes in the distribution of fiscal burdens
  - impute methods for income estimation still in place
  - strong imbalances in the vertical and horizontal equity of the taxable groups
- Political parties attribute their results to technical aspects of the system:
  - lack of proper design to foster changes in the fiscal system – software applications
  - hardware is already obsolete by the time of system operation
ICT innovation as an object of political discourse: An initial evaluation

- A strongly deterministic conception of the role of ICT innovation in public administration
- Inability to adjust ICT policy to local needs – Strong focus on technological solutions
- Absence of communication channels between micro and macro levels (e.g. policy making, system’s design & implementation)
Insights for IS research

- Acknowledgement of the ideas, visions and assumptions accompanying technological innovation and of potential misfittings with local contexts
- Sensitization to potential contradictions between public discourses and practices at the macro-level
Next steps

- Disjointment of political discourse (macro-level) with actions at the micro-level (TAXIS implementation by GSIS)
- Tracing several barriers in the communication of political discourse and the formulation of ICT policies
- Tracing counter-discourses that ran in parallel to the dominant political one during TAXIS implementation