

«People from the regions look indifferently at digitalization, believing that this is only for city people. By bringing the infrastructure to each locality, it is necessary to make farmers, teachers and children feel the benefits of digitalization», - said Talant Sultanov - the Chairman of Kyrgyz Internet Society (ISOC Kyrgyzstan), former head of the National Institute for Strategic Studies of the Kyrgyz Republic (NISS KR) and former advisor to the Prime Minister of the Kyrgyz Republic, in an interview with the analytical platform CABAR.asia.

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**CABAR.asia: Kyrgyzstan has recently taken a ply on the country “digitalization”.
What is this process about?**

I have not read official documents yet; it is hard to say what the leadership of the country assumes. But I think that the effort will be on how new technologies, innovations and Internet will help our citizens, especially those who live in the regions and villages. In fact, in a country like Kyrgyzstan, we must recognize and realize that we are a small mountainous country, very far from the oceans. There are many geographic prerequisites that make it difficult for a country to build a traditional economy. But all these physical barriers no longer present a great difficulty for a country that builds an economy based on knowledge and new technologies. If you are very well connected with Internet cables with the whole world, then you will be able to produce online products and services, conduct business with the whole world.

Live in Kyrgyzstan and work with the whole world.

I really like the slogan of our activists - High-Tech Park creators, who say: "live in Kyrgyzstan and work with the whole world". As we all know, Kyrgyzstan has one big weakness now - many our citizens have over to look for economic opportunities abroad. If there are only six million of us and one million of them are abroad, this is actually a big question for the country. We must create opportunities for our citizens in the country, especially if our people will be able to program and work in a creative economy, then the income in this sector is very large in fact. It is pleasant that there are examples in Kyrgyzstan when young people start working in the field of high technologies and already find partners abroad, earning pretty well. If we put this on a mass flow, then the majority of our citizens will have the same opportunities.

However, it is not necessary for everyone to become a programmer. But we all need to be ready working in a new environment, where we are surrounded by new technologies, Internet access and to use all the opportunities it provides.

The current leadership of the country has adopted the "Digital Kyrgyzstan" program. Some people think that this is a continuation of the "Taza Koom" project. What makes "Digital Kyrgyzstan" different from "Taza Koom"? What happened to "Taza Koom"?

I have even more questions than answers in this regard. I just cannot say what is meant by "Digital Kyrgyzstan" so far. I hope that this is actually a continuation of the "Taza Koom" program, because a lot of effort was invested in the development of the "Taza Koom" strategy. The representatives of the public and private sectors, NGOs and experts participated in it. It was a great joint effort. I am very pleased that many guys, who helped writing "Taza Koom", continue working in the government now. There is some continuity for this strategy, and we should not forget that "Taza Koom" is also founded in our long-term "Strategy-2040". It has received the name "Digital Kyrgyzstan" at the present stage. I hope

that it will be published in the near future, so that we can discuss the issue in more detail. But it seems to me that at least three major components that we should take into account are needed there:

The first is infrastructure development. All localities, each citizen, what is called the “last mile” (*communication channel that connects the last net point of the provider with the client’s final equipment - editor’s note*) should have an internet access.

The second is the content. Even if we connect the village to the Internet, its content should be useful and necessary for the villagers, especially in Kyrgyz or in other languages that are in demand in the villages.

The third is skills. There will be connection and content, but people still need to be trained to use all these opportunities. We must train our citizens to be aware of the challenges and problems that Internet may present, because there are also threats. Our population is still innocent in this regard. Our citizens put all their personal data to the Internet; ranging from date of birth to passwords. All this can be very interesting for hackers.



International Conference “Taza Koom: Vision, Global Trends and Opportunities for Cooperation”, Bishkek, May 2017. Photo: vb.kg

Even if not hackers but all the companies in the world are collecting as many data as possible. The data is as new oil now; Facebook, Google, Apple and all companies collect all sorts of data to build their marketing and products. We, as Internet users, especially our children should be aware of these threats, so that we do not make them vulnerable to the bad aspects of Internet.

What guarantees can the state give to preserve the security of our personal data?

We have the most advanced data protection technology. I will try to explain this in understandable terms. First, our population is still gullible. People in different parts of the world have already “burned fingers” on this, their data or credit card numbers had been divulged. Fortunately, such big incidents did not occur in Kyrgyzstan yet, but still we must be vigilant. You should not post all your data on social networks. Sometimes robbers find out that a person is somewhere, because he is posting photos from a trip – a person is abroad, meaning the house is empty.

We must treat our computer and telephone the same way as our clothes.

We regularly clean our clothes. When was the last time you cleaned your phone of all the malicious viruses that you collect while visiting different sites? These things as cookies (*a text data file that is recorded in the browser by a server of the site you visit - editor's note*) are recorded on your phone and already track when you wake up and where you go. This is a global problem not only for Kyrgyzstan. Of course, the state is making a lot of efforts to protect citizens' data. If earlier we believed that in order to protect data, a separate cable should be installed between two ministries, now we are moving away from this. There is no longer need for a secured cable, but secured information. When information from one ministry moves to another, the “Tunduk” platform is used. This platform is based on the Estonian program, which is protected by advanced technologies like blockchain encryption (*a continuous sequential chain of blocks containing information built according to certain rules - editor's note*). Estonia is considered as one of the advanced countries in terms of data protection and has shared technologies with Kyrgyzstan completely free of charge. Therefore, we have the most advanced data protection technologies.

In February the “Safe City” project was launched in our country. How much is the current “Safe City” different from the original version when you were an advisor to the former prime minister? Why did the authorities forget about the “Smart City” project, a component of which was the “Safe City”?

We can say that this is not a “Safe City”, but a safe intersection.

You have correctly noted that the “Safe City” was a component of the “Smart City” project. The “Smart City” concept assumed a lot of different components and it was not just one city. It was assumed that these would be Bishkek and Osh, as well as all major highways Bishkek-Osh, Bishkek - Issyk-Kul, Manas Airport. It means not just traffic safety, but also smart lighting, smart traffic lights, smart parking and cables that are now hanging on wires and underground. The approach was to make a great effort at once.

Now the approach is slightly different – start small. We can say that this is not a “Safe City”,

but a safe intersection. So far it starts from the fact that people should follow the traffic rules at intersections and maybe we gradually will come to other components that were supposed to be in the "Smart City". Now people are more or less accustomed to drive in a disciplined way.

What conditions are needed for a successful development of digital transformation? For example, a legal framework, an appropriate infrastructure, human capital.

What direction should Kyrgyzstan develop in priority?

All together; you basically outlined all the main components needed for digitalization. There will be often a situation similar to the question, what is primary - an egg or a chicken? Do we need to develop laws before we implement infrastructure projects or do we need to develop skills before we develop any content?

It seems to me that everything should go in parallel and one does not interfere with another. However, first of all, a real political will is needed, not just in words. The will, which will show that we are serious and we will create all the conditions for our digitalization to develop. The government has to accomplish what it promises. People will believe when they feel the first results.

The second is infrastructure, of course. Mostly people from the village look at digitalization and say that it is only for city people. Many are indifferent as villagers. Having brought the infrastructure to every locality, it is necessary to ensure that farmers, teachers and children who live in villages feel the benefits from digitalization.

The third is skills. A lot of things need to be reconsidered in the education system. Great focus has to be done on critical thinking. For example, now we will look at some news on one website or TV channel. We will look at the same news on another channel, it will look completely different. Therefore, a person should have a critical eye; he should compare these two pictures. If this does not happen, then our society will be very strongly divided in the era of *fake news and hate news*.

What is the percentage of internet connectivity in Kyrgyzstan? Does digitalization require a broadband internet?

When there is a discussion about the statistics of Internet data, it needs to be understood what standards and indicators we use. There are national indicators and compliant with global ones. The national indicator will be often very positive, both in Kyrgyzstan and in neighboring countries. Everyone has Internet and measurements are being made. When international organizations arrive, they give completely different data. This is just a difference in methodologies. According to international researches, more than half of the world's population is Internet users now. Have an Internet access and using it are two different indicators. You may have an access and not be a user. Perhaps, it is either very expensive or poor quality, or you do not know what it is for. More than half of the world's population uses internet. In Kyrgyzstan it is only a third of the population. Even in Africa,

more than half are Internet users. Our leadership always says – “are we Africa”? Yes, in fact we lag behind even Africa.



More than half of the world's population uses Internet. In Kyrgyzstan it is only a third of the population. Photo: sputniknews.kg

Only 3-4% of the country's population has broadband Internet. There are different methods and technologies for Internet access, but no technology can yet compete with broadband Internet access. Because broadband Internet is a fiber optic; a glass cable through which the signal travels at almost the speed of light. It is very expensive and often can be economically unprofitable to bring fiber optic to remote villages and mountain areas. Therefore, other technologies: Wi-Fi and satellite technologies will be used. All of them represent an alternative if there is no possibility to install broadband Internet.

If we compare the digitalization rate with neighboring or EEU countries, in which areas has Kyrgyzstan gone ahead, in which areas it is lagging behind?

When we were launching the “Taza Koom” program, we looked at and were guided by international experience. We looked mostly at the experience of the former Soviet Union countries. That is, the experience of countries where the initial parameters were similar to ours. Some things that we want to do now, Estonia and Moldova did 10 and 5 years ago. First of all, we did not want to reinvent the wheel, but to learn from other countries. There are areas where Kyrgyzstan can also boast something. I think first of all it is thanks to a freer regime, holding elections, freedom of speech for the media and entrepreneurship. The private sector has started to more actively develop in this regard. The initiatives from

business and population were quickly implemented. When we say that Kyrgyzstan does not have such mineral resources as gas and oil, sometimes it is advantageous, because the public sector presses the private business in those countries that have rich resources, i.e. there is a top down approach. More initiatives come from the bottom-upwards in countries like ours. People are more flexible and entrepreneurial. It seems to me that this is why we have such initiatives as well-developed online trading platforms and High-Tech parks.

What recommendations would you give on digitalization of the republic?

My only recommendation or request would be addressed more to the government so that they work openly and transparently, because, I see more of a declaration. We say “Year of the country’s digitalization”, but we do not know what is meant by this. Even if you now try to search, there are no documents in public access. Although in the autumn of last year it was stated that some kind of strategy was adopted. If the information is given in a limited format, of course, many conjectures will arise. People start assuming what is meant and, unfortunately, various wrong judgments can be born.

Kyrgyzstan is the first country in the region that joined the international “Open Government Partnership” initiative. It was expected that government would work openly.

If the data is provided in an open format, then civil community and business will be able to develop some products based on this data and help the government in its work. The officials do not have to do everything on their own.

Many things can be outsourced, and I think the private and public sectors are ready to pick it up with joy. Suppose that the statistical committee, the ministry of education and the ministry of health share their big data. In general, it will be very important for the country to see these trends. We should understand a clear picture of what is happening.

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