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ARCHIVING OF DIGITAL DOCUMENTS IN POLAND

Abstract

Purpose: *The research purpose was defined as tracing the history of digitising Polish authorities and the records they generated. These phenomena produced the natural consequence of a need to develop methods of archiving electronic records in Poland.*

Method/approach*: The historical – and, primarily, historical-and-political system-based – method was applied. Legislative acts and related commentary treatments were analysed.*

Results*: The history and circumstances of digitising the Polish administrative-and-office setting, a process begun in the 1990s, was reenacted. While parallel to similar efforts initiated in Western Europe, it was certainly slower and more chaotic. Only Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 would bring acceleration and certain order to action taken by Polish authorities and historical archives. These attempts were crowned with the 2020 opening of the Electronic Documents Archive for use.*

Conclusions/findings*: While the digital revolution may seem swift, its impact on Polish authorities was slow and evolutionary in nature, multiple solutions proving delayed, others failed. Some might have made the process of digitising authorities more difficult rather than easier. While historical archives seem to be well-prepared for the effort of archiving electronic records, many related uncertainties prevail. All the while, Polish authorities have only digitised a part of their operations – it remains unknown whether hard copy documents will ever go out of common use.*

Keywords: *digital documents, archiving, legal regulations, Electronic Documents Archive, digitization*

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ARCHIVIAZIONE DEI DOCUMENTI DIGITALI IN POLONIA

Abstract

Scopo: *Lo scopo della ricerca era quello di tracciare la storia della digitalizzazione delle autorità polacche e dei documenti da esse prodotti. Questi fenomeni hanno portato alla naturale conseguenza della necessità di sviluppare metodi di archiviazione dei documenti elettronici in Polonia.*

Metodo/approccio: *È stato applicato il metodo storico e, principalmente, storico-politico-sistemico. Sono stati analizzati gli atti legislativi e i relativi commenti.*

Risultati: *È stata ricostruita la storia e le circostanze della digitalizzazione dell›amministrazione e degli uffici polacchi, un processo iniziato negli anni ‹90. Sebbene parallelo a iniziative simili avviate nell›Europa occidentale, è stato certamente più lento e caotico. Solo l›adesione della Polonia all›Unione Europea nel 2004 avrebbe portato un›accelerazione e un certo ordine nelle azioni intraprese dalle autorità polacche e dagli archivi storici. Questi tentativi sono stati coronati dall›apertura nel 2020 dell›Archivio dei documenti elettronici.*

Conclusioni/risultati: *Sebbene la rivoluzione digitale possa sembrare rapida, il suo impatto sulle autorità polacche è stato lento ed evolutivo, con molte soluzioni che hanno subito ritardi e altre che hanno fallito. Alcune potrebbero aver reso il processo di digitalizzazione delle autorità più difficile anziché più facile. Sebbene gli archivi storici sembrino ben preparati per l'archiviazione dei documenti elettronici, permangono molte incertezze al riguardo. Nel frattempo, le autorità polacche hanno digitalizzato solo una parte delle loro operazioni e non è dato sapere se i documenti cartacei usciranno mai dall'uso comune.*

Parole chiave: *documenti digitali, archiviazione, normative legali, archivio dei documenti elettronici, digitalizzazione*

ARHIVIRANJE DIGITALNIH DOKUMENTOV NA POLJSKEM

Izvleček

Namen: *Namen raziskave je bil raziskati zgodovino digitalizacije poljskih oblasti in zapisov, ustvarjenih skozi digitalizacijo. Ti pojavi so naravno povzročili potrebo po razvoju metod arhiviranja elektronskih zapisov na Poljskem.*

Metodologija: *Uporabljena je bila zgodovinska metoda – predvsem metoda, utemeljena na zgodovinsko-političnem sistemu. Analizirani so bili zakonodajni akti in z njimi povezani komentarji.*

Rezultati: *Ponovno je bila prikazana zgodovina in okoliščine digitalizacije poljskega upravno-uradniškega okolja, ki se je začela v devetdesetih letih. Čeprav je potekala vzporedno s podobnimi prizadevanji v Zahodni Evropi, je bila zagotovo počasnejša in bolj kaotična. Šele vstop Poljske v Evropsko unijo leta 2004 je prinesel pospešek in določeno urejenost v ukrepih poljskih oblasti ter zgodovinskih arhivov. Ta prizadevanja so bila kronana z odprtjem Arhiva elektronskih dokumentov leta 2020.*

Zaključki/ugotovitve: *Čeprav se lahko digitalna revolucija zdi hitra, je bil njen vpliv na poljske oblasti počasen in evolucijske narave, pri čemer so bile številne rešitve zamujene, druge neuspešne. Nekatere so morda celo otežile proces digitalizacije oblasti namesto da bi ga olajšale. Medtem ko se zgodovinski arhivi zdijo dobro pripravljeni na nalogo arhiviranja elektronskih zapisov, ostaja veliko negotovosti. Obenem so poljske oblasti digitalizirale le del svojega poslovanja – vendar nihče ne ve, ali bodo papirni dokumenti kdaj popolnoma prenehali biti v uporabi.*

Ključne besede: *digitalni dokumenti, arhiviranje, pravne ureditve, Arhiv elektronskih dokumentov, digitalizacija.*

We should start with discussing the Polish archival terminology, which sometimes is not very precise, difficult to translate and – if not explained at the onset – perhaps difficult to understand by foreign readers. When it comes to appraising documentation, certain documentation is considered worthy of perpetual retention already at the time of creation. Such documentation is referred to as "archival materials" and is marked an "A" symbol. The remaining documentation, that will be destroyed at some point, is referred to as "non-archival documentation", marked with a "B" symbol. In both cases the carrier is irrelevant – which is a very important factor in this discussion. Archival materials include conventional documents (parchment, paper), photographs, audio and video recordings as well as electronic documentation. Another irrelevant factor is the stage of "life" of the document. Archival materials can be found in both historical archives as well as in archives of institutions and their registries, only that they are not yet archived (ANARA, 1983).

All archival materials are referred to as the "national archival resource", which is divided into state and non-state resource. The state archival resource is created in administrative and local government bodies. In principle, it is the only one to which Polish regulations on electronic documentation apply and therefore is discussed in this article. Non-state archival resource is produced by church institutions, political parties, associations and organisations as well as private individuals. Although electronic documentation may be a part of that resource, the handling of it is not regulated by the Polish state (ANARA, 1983).

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Although Poland joined the EU on 1 May 2004, preparations for accession took 10 years. Thus, the digitisation of our country and the building of an information society – at least formally – ran parallel to that in Western Europe. At the end of 1999, European Commission President Romano Prodi announced the creation of eEurope – *An Information Society for All*, an initiative aimed at achieving European economic growth through – following the U.S. model – the implementation of modern technologies. The result of the months of work on this initiative, undertaken by the European Commission and expert groups, was a special summit of the European Union on 23–24 March 2000, and the announcement of the Lisbon Strategy. Its goal was to create in just a decade: "the most competitive

and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (Demchuk, 2016; Baracz, 2013). One way to achieve this was to provide effective and easy online access to public administration. The digitisation of commerce, science, health care, payments and transportation were also considered. Low-cost access to the Internet and financial support for small and medium-sized enterprises developing and implementing modern technologies was to the way for these activities to have a real impact on the lives of the general public (Demczuk, 2016; Baracz, 2013; Ura, 2019).

2001 saw the announcement of the eEurope+ 2003 plan: *A co-operative effort to implement the Information Society in Europe – Action Plan prepared by the Candidate Countries with the assistance of the European Commission*, which was to accelerate the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy in Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries (Demczuk, 2016).

However, this encounter between Polish lawmakers (let alone academics) and European visions and standards was not a revolutionary one. As early as in 1998, Polish basic requirements for ICT security were published. They define technical features as well as procedures and behaviours that guarantee the security of personal data collected in ICT systems (Robótka, 2020).

On 14 July 2000, the Polish Parliament adopted a Resolution on building the foundations of the information society in Poland (MP, 2000). According to it the Polish state had not, up to that point, created the right conditions to take full advantage of the opportunities for the development of the information society. The Parliament called on the government to urgently address the issue and present (by the end of September, i.e. two and a half months later) the assumptions of a strategy for the development of the information society in Poland. The following directions were identified: full access to the Internet, development of ICT systems in administration (which, as it was anticipated, would promote the rationalisation of spending as well as facilitate citizen contact with the government and the building of local self-governance). The Parliament called for the earliest possible preparation of the legal basis for the development of electronic economy, including laws regulating issues such as electronic signatures, information security and the principles for contracts concluded online. In response, on 28 November 2000, the Government of the Republic of Poland presented *Objectives and*

Directions of development of the information society in Poland, prepared by the Scientific Research Committee together with the Ministry of Communications. The Council of Ministers also pledged to develop a *Strategy for the development of the information society in Poland for 2001–2006 – ePolska*, which was based on the EU's eEurope initiative. It was adopted on 11 September 2001, and, of course, involved the process of the country's integration into the structures of the European Union, and thus the adaptation of Polish standards to the vision of a modern information-based society (Ura, 2019).

Soon after Polish legislation was brought into line with the Directive of the European Parliament and Council on a Community framework for electronic signatures, which accelerated national efforts to computerise records management: on 18 September 2001 the electronic signature Act was passed, setting out the rules for obtaining and conditions for using this modern and convenient form of electronic document authentication. Poland was not a member of the European Union at that time, but within its capabilities – limited and piecemeal – it tried to follow EU directives in the legislative process, although in this case it initially concerned few citizens only ((AES, 2001; Robótka, 2020).

However, this evolutionary process, sequentially described above, has not been so harmonious. The Polish authorities of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries tried to please EU observers with chaotic and sham actions, the effect of which were absurd and "dead" regulations. As early as 1999, the Code of Administrative Procedure introduced the possibility of submitting applications to offices by e-mail. However, the status of electronic documentation was not regulated, hence in practice it was not possible to use e-mails without breaching procedures for handling had-copy documents and handwritten signatures. The Polish legal system was unable to adapt to the galloping technological progress. On the other hand, it was ahead of the capabilities of the rather conservative offices, lagging in digitisation. Poland's 2001 electronic signature concept, which was to solve this problem, seems to have been a contradiction of the Western European capitalist idea of de-nationalising ICT services. A commercial model was selected, but also, given the potential benefits and losses (such as rare need of the average citizen interact with offices or authorities), costly and therefore rarely used (Rybinska & Prasal, 2012).

The provisions of the Act on access to public information were also criticised, as Polish offices were unable to notify the status of submitted cases. This was not foreseen in the office instructions of the time but was also not possible because of the state of implementation and advancement of ICT tools (Rybinska & Prasal, 2012; AAPI, 2001).

The acceleration of legislation, but also of real implementations in digitisation of Polish administration could only be seen after the country's accession to the European Union, which was also associated with the possibility of obtaining EU funds. On 17 February 2005, a act was passed, imposing the requirement on all state and local government institutions to computerise their activities. And – importantly – it is those institutions that produce the state archival resource. Until 2005 this resource was conventional. Later – also digital (ACAEPPT, 2005; Robótka, 2006).

The next key legal acts included three regulations of 2006 by the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration: on the necessary elements of the structure of electronic documents, on the detailed manner of handling electronic documents and on technical requirements of recording formats and computer data carriers on which archival materials transferred to state archives are recorded (RNESED, 2006; RDMHED, 2006, RTRRFCDC, 2006). These acts, which are still in effect today, have determined how such documentation is to be produced, recorded, stored, classified and qualified. An important issue was the introduction of mandatory metadata for each document, or a set of systematised information describing the document, facilitating its identification, retrieval, control, understanding, management and long-term storage. The method of destroying non-archival documentation and transferring archival materials to historical archives was also determined. As per these regulations, electronic documents must be transferred after 10 years from their date of creation (while traditional paper documents must be transferred after 25 years). They also introduced the possibility of transmitting such documents on data carriers or sending by electronic communication means. Introduced was the concept of the so-called recorded electronic document, thus emphasizing that the relevant procedure should not apply to all electronic documents produced or collected by a unit, but only to those that reflect the course of handling and resolving cases and are subject to registration in the ICT system, which is defined in this regulation. Also technical requirements of recording for-

mats and computer data carriers on which archival materials transferred to state archives are recorded were specified.

In 2008, the central Archives of Audiovisual Records (created in the 1950s and collecting documentation other than written, primarily audio and video recordings) was transformed into the National Digital Archives. The National Digital Archives was mainly engaged in digitising traditional archival materials, primarily by scanning them. Contrary to original declarations, *born-digital* documents have become less important. However, it was very important to create the Central Digital Repository of the State Archives (hereafter: CRC AP). It is a centralised server room, where backup and shareable copies of conventional archival materials are stored, as well as a space to collect *born digital* documents (NAC, 2025).

It was CRC AP that became the repository for the Electronic Documents Archive (hereinafter: ADE). As early as in 2005 the State Archives Head Office began work on creating ADE. In 2005–2006 the Research and Academic Computer Network (NASK) implemented a prototype of the system. At this stage, the main objective was to test the process of transferring archival materials from their creators to historical archives. Crucially, the widespread release of the prototype was intended to point the way forward for the development of ICT tools used in central and local governments. Developers of electronic records management (hereinafter: EZD) systems were required to design their solutions so that when *born digital* documents were archived, they would supported by the ADE prototype. A new concept was introduced: the archival package. It was the proper creation and transmission of such a digital package to ADE that software developers and users were able to test between 2006 and 2017 (Makowski, 2021).

The culmination of legislative processes aimed at digitising Poland's public sector bureaucracy was to be the Prime Minister's Regulation of 18 January 2011 on new office and archival standards for Polish central and local government bodies (ROIUML, 2011; Robótka, 2013; Czerniak & Orszulak, 2017).

This legislation defined the term "EZD system" for the first time and introduced electronic records management as an optional system. To this day, most offices failed to implement it, still using the so-called traditional system. The terms "chronological repository" and "repository of computer storage media" first appeared (Drzewiecka, 2021; ROIUML, 2011).

Therefore, if an office chooses to manage records in the traditional manner, all documentation produced should be in conventional, hard copy form (even if work is facilitated by different types of software/applications). Electronic documents filed with the office are simply printed. However, if the office chooses to implement the EZD system as the primary means for managing records then all work is performed in the system, and case files (and other documentation) are in electronic form[3]. When a conventional (hard copy) document is filed with the office, a so-called digital reproduction (scan) must be created. Amid discussions, held for years, on destroying hard copy documentation already reproduced digitally, to this day Polish law does not provide for it.

So, what kind of data can be found in EZD systems? First, these are *born digital* documents and digital reproductions – created for the purpose of handling a case in the system and compiling complete electronic case files. Then metadata – of cases and documents. The third group of data are documented office activities - case assignments, approvals, signatures. EZD systems also hold specific registers – of inbound or outbound mail, register of complaints and requests, and special records. And last but not least, technical information about on hard copy documents in chronological repositories, history of access to documents or records on subsequent versions (Wlezień, 2020).

Which types of data are archived? Documents *born digital* and digital reproductions along with metadata of cases and document. At the same time, their counterparts from the chronological repository or from the repository of computer storage media are transferred to historical archives (ROIUML, 2011).

It should be added that the 2011 Regulation also introduced new clerical aids for qualifying documentation (lists of files) in which – considering the increasing prevalence of electronic documentation – the vast majority of the documentation produced in offices has been re-categorised to an A category (from about 25% to 80% of subject headings).

In 2011 ICT tools already existed, or were in the implementation phase, to facilitate citizens' communication with offices: electronic delivery boxes, the Elec-

3 With the exception of multi-page, large-format documentation and documentation which under a separate law must be produced in conventional form. Exceptions to the basic system are possible (defined by specific entries in the list of files, or implemented as so-called domain systems), but this is not the subject of the article.

tronic Platform for Public Administration Services, and the central repository of electronic document templates, or CDR (Robótka, 2016).

Given the rushing and ubiquitous civilisation changes, the fundamental Polish legal act on the functioning of archives, the 1983 archival Act – already very outdated – needed to be amended. The amendment was passed in 2015 along with the indication of the electronic records management as a way of fulfilling the obligation to ensure that ever growing documentation is recorded, stored and protected against damage, destruction or loss. These tasks were to be performed in an ICT system, which is a system for performing clerical activities, documenting the course of handling and resolving cases, collecting and creating documentation in electronic form (Poland, 2015).

Finally, in 2018, a decision was made to put an end to the temporary nature of ADE. On 11 May of that year, the Centre for Digital Poland Projects and the State Archives Head Office concluded an agreement on co-financing the "Electronic Documents Archive" project, being a part of the Operational Programme Digital Poland for 2014–2020. The total value of the project was almost PLN 8.4 million (or €2 million at the time), and European funds covered nearly 85% of the that amount. Less than two years later, in April 2020, a training platform for state archives employees was shared. Employees used it to learn how the new system works – remotely, of course, because a month earlier we all switched to remote work, since it was the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two months later the training was extended to state administration and local government employees. On 30 June 2020 work on the project was completed. The final conclusion and documentation confirming the achievement of each milestone have been submitted to the Centre for Digital Poland Projects. On 11 September 2020 the project was presented during a meeting of the Committee of the Council of Ministers for Digitisation, where the final report on the project's implementation received a positive opinion. The system works and collects archival materials from their creators (Makowski, 2021; NDAP, 2025).

One of the fundamental processes in the ADE system is the transfer of archival materials by their creators to relevant state archives. The process is divided into several stages:

– submission by the unit of an application for the transfer of archival materials,
– verification of the application by the state archives and feedback on the outcome of examination of the application,

– receipt of archival materials in the system,
– initial formal verification of archival materials and confirmation of their acceptance for detailed verification.

The unit is still required to store this documentation, as it may be necessary to properly organise or update it during verification (ADE, 2020).

Formal transfer of electronic archival materials is possible only after the related hard copy documents (that is documents mainly stored in chronological repositories) are submitted by the unit. Only after the state archives confirms the formal transfer of archival materials in the ADE system can these materials be disposed of at their originator or creator (ADE, 2020).

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Despite the advances in the computerisation of public administration, the lack of precise, complete and consistent regulations on the handling of documentation produced using different types of ICT tools, state registers and domain systems has been and continues to be a great concern.

The Polish Road to the digitisation of offices and to the universality of electronic documents, although bumpy and with many twists and turns, was a bit chaotic, but nevertheless seems to be evolving in the right direction. Although technological progress and even the expectations and preparation of citizens are outpacing the adaptation of Polish offices to the situation, it is probably necessary to accept this, because it will most likely always be so. No doubt however – when looking at it from a longer perspective, progress can be clearly seen. A lot of our interactions with offices take place digitally, and their range is growing every month.

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Summary

The text describes the development of the digitisation of Polish state administration and local government as well as the documentation produced by the offices, which is subject to archiving. Since the 1990s, Poland has gradually brought the law into line with EU standards, although the process has sometimes been chaotic. Key moments include the legal sanctioning of the use of electronic documents in 2006, allowing the use of EZD (electronic records management) systems in Polish offices in 2011 and the creation of the final version of the Electronic Documents Archive in 2020. The process of digitisation of the Polish office administration continues to progress, although it is evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

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