Project: Public Sector Future podcast

Detail: Episode XX - Digital Transformation in Ukraine

Talent: Olivia Neal (host), Gulsanna Mamediieva (guest)

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** Hello and welcome to Public Sector Future. This is a show for anyone who cares about using digital approaches in the public sector to deliver better outcomes. I’m your host, Olivia Neal, and together we explore stories from around the world, where public servants have been successful at delivering change. I’m delighted to be back with you following our recent episodes focused on digital transformation in Defense with our guest host AT Ball. We’ll be hearing more from him in weeks to come.

Today I’m joined by Gulsanna Mamediieva, of the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine. Like many countries Ukraine had been making progress on government digital transformation, and when President Zelensky was elected in 2019, the digital transformation agenda took front seat. In our conversation Gulsanna shares some of the foundations that enabled this, and the creation of Diia (spelled DIIA), their government digital approach – how political support galvanized activity, and the introduction of digital identity across the country and digital signatures, and the legislation that supported that. And she also shares how this concerted action, while designed to improve services and drive economic growth, has enabled the Government to provide support to its citizens during the war and this time of crisis. Without further ado, let’s meet Gulsanna.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, thank you so much for joining us today. And can I start by asking you to introduce yourself and what your role is?

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Yes, thank you for having me. And I’m happy to be here. My name is Gulsanna Mamediieva, and I’m Director General for Directorate of European and NATO Integration at Minister of Digital Transformation Office, such a long title.

What I’m doing in the ministry and in Ukrainian government that I’m responsible for everything we’re doing in digital sector are in line with European Union and NATO policy, innovation policy, digital policy, and in digital sphere, and also kind of actually accelerating our relationship and getting Ukraine closer and integrating Ukraine into European Digital single market.

I’m leading directorate in the ministry. And the Minister of Digital Transformation itself, it’s actually the central body in Ukrainian government,

**OLIVIA NEAL:** We’re so pleased that you’ve been able to join us today to share some information and – and insights into how Ukraine has moved in such a short space of time to become a really digital government with some very strong digital foundations in place.

And thinking back to 2019 when President Zelenskyy came to power, how digital was the Ukrainian government at that point? Was that a point of change where there was extra drive to become digital?

[01:42]

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Yeah, definitely. When President Zelenskyy came, become president, he had in his program actually an idea, I guess, the state in a smartphone. This was like one of the main, his thesis in his program.

But we didn’t start from scratch because in Ukraine at that time, the functioning agency, e-government, they were actually doing work. And they did a lot of great stuff on public e-services, actually e-governance.

But what President Zelenskyy did, he really boosted on the political, highest political level, the digital agenda, created the Minister of Digital Transformation. We were granted a lot of necessary capability and capacity and powers to perform really meaningful reforms.

And it’s actually the Minister of Digital Transformation was granted status with the Prime Minister, it’s actually, it’s basically like Deputy Prime Minister, which means on practice that he has in every ministry, the Deputy Minister on Digital Transformation. For example, Minister of Education has the Deputy Minister on Digital Transformation, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Infrastructure, and so on.

So this is actually works on central level and on the regional level. So this is really kind of wide, wide network of digital transformation ambassadors across the country on all the levels.

They also created the Parliament Committee on Digital Transformation in-house company, IT company. It’s called Diia, which is acronym that has the same name as our flagship product, Diia, mobile application and web portal. It’s a brand of digital government and it means from Ukrainian action. And it’s also acronym, which means state and me, like translated state and me, and it’s kind of reconsideration of how citizens and governments should interact.

We did not start from scratch. There was a good solid basis done before, but really highest political attention to this and support was – you know, actually was started from 2019.

[04:17]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** That’s really interesting because we hear that from a lot of countries. often there are teams of people who are working on digital projects and programs, but you have to have the political drive and support to get traction across different agencies. So having those levers in a central agency really helps to kind of establish push that program forward.

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:**

Usually, I have never faith in like any civil servants, like from any country who said like, “Oh, it was – it was simple in our country.” Like you usually face constraint, reluctance, like reluctancy to change and etcetera. So this is definitely I think it’s inevitably and absolutely necessary to have a political support for what is like, doing what we’re doing on the ground.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Did you find resistance to making this – these types of changes within the civil service? Were there people who were understood and were comfortable with the way that things were being delivered previously, and – and had concerns about using more digital approach?

[05:25]

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Definitely. You know, it could be maybe divided, like what kind of constraints we face like on the government level – I mean, the parliament and the government, yes, and some agencies, also citizen level because it’s like it’s new things and we have to acquaint people, citizens how to use it, to convince that you can trust, and also on the kind of business level and maybe also NGO level. So any sector have their own concerns that the government should work with, and really communicate a lot in the clear, very simple, efficient way.

This is our bible, I would say, to communicate really simple, in a humane way that everyone would understand what we are doing, and what is important for us. And one of our measurement of our work, like KPI, is the level of trust with citizens, yes, because if you create something but people don’t try this or are afraid to use, then it’s absolutely not necessary.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** You say you have a KPI which is how much do citizens trust using these digital services and that’s something you get feedback on or you measure?

[06:45]

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Actually, yeah, you know speaking about KPI, we set up like really clear for one from the beginning. In the ministry, it’s like having 100 public services online. 95% of Ukraine territory, controlled run, covered with high speed internet, 6 million Ukrainian citizens teach and have basic digital skills and IT sector consists 10% of Ukraine’s, of country’s GDP.

And speaking about trust, what is important is we usually – we have like different practices, how to involve citizens and how to make them feel actually like they participate in creation of services.

For example, when we prepare working on introducing new public services, we have several design types, yes, and we just show and make a pool and the citizen is able to vote what they like more. And then yeah, this engagement and participation helps us to build trust.

We also, every time when we’re piloting or testing new services, we make an open call, and everyone can actually come and help and test and communicate with the developers team directly. This is also very important, like to show the hard feedback, yes, but also people and citizens see that who is working on this and have clear kind of faces, this – the minister and the government have human faces, which work to make their lives better.

So we also, for example, in the application, we have such features as citizens can, as I said, like polls, yes, for example, how to rename some street in the city, how to like select jury on the Song Contest Eurovision is really popular in Ukraine, and so on.

[08:48]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, it sounds like you had some good foundations in place. You had people in government who had been already working on improving digital delivery. And then you had the opportunity of a political leader coming in and really saying, this is core to the success of our country, and this is about not just digital service delivery, but the skills of our population, the connectivity of our country and our wider economy and our GDP as well.

So from the government perspective, where did you start? What were the types of foundations that were important to help you then move forward quickly to deliver more digital services? Were there projects that you had to approach first, so that you would be able to take these next steps?

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** The first of all, of course, the foundation is a structure. So I would say, there was a basis, yes, people who worked in the government before President Zelenskyy come, but then the minister was created bigger and many people, what is important, from businesses joined. For example, me, I was working in the business before, and I joined the government in 2019. And I think most of our people, our ministery are these kind of, you know, profile.

We started – actually, what was done is creating a brand, a recognizable brand of digital state. Diia was created. As I said before, Diia means action. It’s also state and me. And it’s a name of mobile application, flagship product, and also of our portal, which is mainly about public services, online services.

Also, we introduced other projects, Diia education. It’s actually a platform for teaching Ukrainians literate – digital literacy and digital skills, Diia business, the projects help – that help SMEs to, you know, pass this digital transformation way to become more effective and competitive in digital era. We have the Diia City. It’s a legal and tax regime for IT companies, which creates a proper condition to establish and run it business in Ukraine. So this is kind of, you know, ecosystem.

And coming back to what was foundation, yes, and in terms of public services, let’s focus on this. We started from a digital driver license. I think this is the case in many countries. And also with registration of business. Now, in Ukraine, for example, this is actually the fastest registration of business in the world.

One of the also first services was e-baby. It’s a registration of baby, yes, but actually a combination of nine services in one.

So we actually focus, like we have digital documents and services, yes, and in digital documents, digital driver’s license was first and e-baby and business registration.

During the pandemic we started this really fast speed even faster, and now even more because actually from the, you know, the idea that – and realization it could have like several days because we already cracked the logic, we understand how it’s working, the reengineering, deploying, testing and go – go live.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, you are now in a position where you can go from understanding a need for a service, or the idea for a service through that testing, the engineering, the iteration to an initial release or something in just a few days.

[12:43]

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Yes, actually, but, you know, for example, the payments, the benefits payments, we introduced during pandemic.

Actually, how it’s worked, the people who got two vaccines, they were – like, they had the opportunity to receive payment from the government. When the war started, we say that we need to pay, there is actually kind of assistance, yes, cash assistance to people who internally displaced from the – who lost their jobs from the areas where the combat actions are going on.

So we just like, you know, transformed what had been done before, the basis was already there. So it took like several days, weeks to deploy this new service, and we receive in the first day, we receive 1 million application the first day of the service deploying, like on – on the payment of financial assistance for those who are in need because of the war.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** When I heard you talk before, one of the things that you talked about was the digital identity approach that Ukraine has put in place, which allows citizens to be able to authenticate, and so that you are sure of who is applying for benefits or who is accessing services.

And I remember you saying, as well, that a digital passport in Ukraine now is – is the first in the world to be given equal status to a physical copy of a passport. And I wondered if you could tell us a bit more about that digital identity approach and what it is that Ukraine has put in place for citizens?

[14:24]

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Yes, actually, how Diia works as mobile application, yes, where all the electronic documents, they are not saved there. So Diia not storing data. It’s actually the request to the respective register, where the whole data is stored. So it’s absolutely also secure application and electronic document.

And digital passport was introduced, I think a little bit more than a year after we were creating the Ministry of Digital Transformation. And to make it, it was more difficult not to create it like from technical side, yes, but to implement the usage and the circulation of digital ID in their, yeah, government life. Because all the policies, regulations everywhere and like was written that someone needs to provide paper or plastic, for example, opening a bank account, yes, or buying alcohol in supermarket and etcetera.

So we really need to actually change a lot of policy and regulations. And we went through there, we chose another way. We went through the parliament and adopted the law, which actually say that there is in Ukraine like introducing the – introduced a digital ID as paper or the same, was equal rights to the plastic or paper one, and it’s illegal not to accept a digital ID. And now people can actually travel, take the airplane, like now not because they’re not functioning in Ukraine because of the war, but for example, train, actually do whatever transaction in Ukraine with digital ID. And it’s also like opening a bank account and – or what is important you – it’s possible to share digital ID, digital passport, and verified it also.

How it’s work, You want to open the bank account. You just like actually have show a QR code, you show it, and the people, other person who have – has the Diia, scan QR code and receive a copy of your digital ID. And then that person can request to receive digital copy of your digital ID and you from your phone just accept and like confirm that you agree. And in this way, you share your digital copy of digital ID and it’s also like verified digital ID.

So this is really convenient, and it’s used for example – so in Ukraine, there is regulation that hotel need to store, have a copy of passport of those who are residing in their apartments. And yeah, people just are using this. They don’t need to bring a passport, a paper passport. They just show QR code, the hotel reception is scan it and store the copy in digital way.

[17:29]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So I think this is really interesting as well, because it’s a digital identity, which is used not just by government for verifying benefits applications or paying taxes; it’s part of an ecosystem, which is available for private companies to use and for banks to use. So it becomes a part of people’s trusted lives on a day-to-day basis. It’s more than just a government system and interaction.

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Absolutely. And what is the purpose, is to simplify life for citizens and business, and how they interact between each other and with the government. So this is really like how to optimize and make processes simpler for businesses as well, and for the person.

[18:15]

 **OLIVIA NEAL:** And then thinking about the digital services that government offers to citizens, you said earlier that there was originally a target for having 100 government services available online. Is that a target that you’ve reached? Do you have a new target? It sounds like there’s been a lot of progress made in terms of moving things online, and people’s expectations rise. And then as soon as these things start to work, they expect that every service operates online as well.

[18:45]

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Yeah, definitely. And this sounds really ambitious, 100 public services online, but generally be going like from the most priority public services, they all might be online. and it’s not just like digitalize the process that’s already there. It just, it’s also reengineering, reconsideration, eliminating human when it’s possible to make it automatic, and reduce the actual levels and the scope of information that we take from citizen as possible, like where we can retrieve information ourselves from registries, yes, we do, which we have access. It’s also possible, so it’s kind of pre-filled application and person just check if it’s correct, and press the button, submit.

So speaking about what is possible, the war actually gives us – it’s a horrible things itself, but, you know, it’s as I said before, yes, it gives us an opportunity to move even faster, because it’s easier to find a consensus inside the government and introduce really revolutionary things. So this goal is possible to reach, we estimate, by the end of 2024 to have all the services, priority one, priority services online.

[20:13]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** The impetus of crisis has helped move some of these things forward in a way that might – might not have been possible or might have happened over a longer time otherwise.

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Because the digital transformation was on highest political agenda in Ukraine, it’s hard to say. Like the war definitely boosted, but we were doing the great progress before. And yeah, this is just also – and digital helps us recovery and be more resilient in this war as well.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And you mentioned earlier as well, that there’s some services, like people being able to apply for assistance if they’re having to flee their town or city or their country, which really can only be offered digitally, and rely on those digital foundations that you’ve put in place, having that digital method of authentication, of identity assurance. That has been really crucial in allowing you to move quickly to meet people’s needs during the wars.

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** I would say even more, that during the war we created like just like a few, you know, like part of the list what we created in services in mobile application: it’s possible to buy military bond, just a few clicks. And in this way, we attract money to – to help army and support army; actually a program on financial assistance to entrepreneurs and employees from regions where hostilities took place, assistance service, it’s another one for displaced people, just like it’s some of the like for business and for entrepreneurs; another one, which is, for example, for the families with three kids. So it’s a different services, and we see ourselves who is eligible on what and the all information is already there and pre-filled.

We – also it’s possible to submit an application for compensation for damage property. We have a registry for damaged property.

They also have actually TV and radio with access to new smartphones, so that the Ukrainians can get accurate information, because what first things Russians do when they invaded Ukraine, they really targeted digital infrastructure, TV towers, internet cables destroyed, and it’s really important for us to now have the connection with our people.

So TV and radio really like plays important role in it, just like in government publication. E-document for identification for those who left home without any document. And pension certificate, this is currently on beta testing.

So this is, as you see, much more. What we do it just like we react really quickly and flexibly on what is going on and what is our citizens’ need?

[23:10]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** It sounds like there’s a set of prioritized services, which you’re moving through the roadmap of making digital and then having to respond quickly to new needs as they emerge. Are there any areas or new technologies or new approaches, that you’re thinking will help you in that journey as you go forward?

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Definitely, this is AI, artificial intelligence, and we are on it. And we announced the Digital Future Initiative by the President of Ukraine, and initially the core, the idea of this is Ukraine is open for any bold and ideas, and invites tech company startups to pilot their solutions in Ukraine.

So we actually offer as the sandbox. to try the solution. So actually what is going in Ukraine now in terms of digital is we’re trying really pretty much everything that we can do, and that can help us win the war.

[24:18]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Maybe one final question for me, because I think you’ve shared so much already. I think a lot of people will be looking to the work that you and the team you work with are doing. But are there any countries that you look to, any other governments who you look to for inspiration, or ideas, or design patterns, or code, or ways to move forward with digital transformation? Any inspirations for you?

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Definitely, we have a great network of our friends, I would say, of the digital ministries across the Europe and UK. We are, I would say what is important in this sphere is always you have what to share and you have what to learn.

For example, it’s a great, like showcase what was done with Estonia, some – I think it was 2019. They shared – or even maybe earlier – the x-road solution was shared with Ukraine. They teach us and helped us to move in this interoperability sector. And now we are sharing the code of Diia application with Estonia and help them to build their mobile government applications. So it’s actually, you know, the student become a teacher and vice versa. It’s always it’s a good thing in this sphere that we always have from where to learn and what to share.

And of course, Ukraine now, I would say, on creating top-notch products, and we’re eager and want to share this because what is happening in Ukraine, it’s, you know, we’re responding. We’re forming the way how to respond to the crisis, and there’s so many lessons to learn.

So actually, yes, we learn much and we always kind of try to follow up what is going on the new developments. But now we feel the strong position we are creating really great things, and we definitely want to share them and to bring them to make our input to the like democratic part of the world.

Because Ukraine, it’s not only country, you know, in the war; it’s also kind of European digital tiger, and our expertise and reforms that we are doing really can make changes in not only in Ukraine.

[26:51]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, I think this has been a fantastic insight for people who may not have been aware of some of the progress that has already happened. If people want to learn more about what Ukraine are doing in this space, is there somewhere they can go to learn more?

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Absolutely, yeah. We have, like really wide presence in social media. Actually, Mykhailo Fedorov, our minister, it’s good to follow him for following all the news in Ukraine. Also, you can find me and I’m always open to share.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, thank you so much for – for joining us. Thank you so much for sharing your insights and the hard work that you and all of your colleagues have been doing. I know it will be an inspiration to all of the people who are listening to this. Thank you.

**GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA:** Thank you.

[27:40]

Thank you to our guest, Gulsanna Mamediieva, for joining us today. The progress on putting in place the foundations for digital government within Ukraine have moved quickly since 2019, and I hope her lessons are of use to you. Check out our show page to links to all of what we discussed today. And visit us at wwps.microsoft.com. Please do reach out send us your questions and your feedback. You can find me on Twitter @LivNeal or on LinkedIn, or you can email us at ask-ps@microsoft.com. Thank you and see you next time.

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