

Tiny IT titan Estonia to switch to e-billing

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Estonian Prime Minister Andrus Ansip tries out Internet voting in Tallinn as he casts his ballot from his office computer in 2005. Estonia, already one of the world's most cyber-focused nations, is to switch to online bill-processing at the state level in a move that will slash costs, its government said Wednesday.

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"The e-billing environment will make state accountancy more transparent and will also improve the work of state accountants, freeing them from the need to type all the data from bills into the system," Finance Minister Jurgen Ligi told reporters.

The finance and justice ministries are to lead the way, switching by March 1, with the entire administration to follow by the end of the year.

To start with the move will only apply to bills paid by the state, but institutions will also run pilot projects for those they issue.

"When e-billing will become common we might consider a total switch," finance ministry spokeswoman Sigrid Laev told AFP.

The reform should slash costs, Laev added.

"Estonian state institutions get around 520,000 bills annually and the e-system will help them make the handling of these bills 30 times cheaper. The cost of handling a paper bill is around 13 euros, while in the e-billing system it will cost only 40 cents," she explained.

After the end of five decades of Soviet rule in 1991, the minnow nation of 1.3 million opted to go hi-tech as fast as possible, winning the nickname "E-stonia".

Using encoded ID cards, Estonians can access virtually all public services via the Internet at a special portal, including e-voting in national and local elections, as well as checking their medical and police records.

Ninety-two percent of Estonian taxpayers filed their 2009 annual income tax returns via the Internet, while 79 percent do their banking online at least once a week, official data show.

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