

Digitalization of Public Administration in Romania: The Way Towards Efficiency and Accessibility

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Abstract

The digitalization of Public Administration is a subject of great importance in the context of modern societies, both for the authorities and for the beneficiaries of public services, in this case, the citizens. This process involves the transition from traditional methods to the use of digital technologies to improve the efficiency, transparency and accessibility of public services. Romania's journey in the digitalization of the Public Sector has been a topic of interest in recent years. In general, our country has taken significant steps towards the modernization of Public Administration by introducing digital solutions. The Government and the Private Sector have invested in information technology to improve public services, education and the business environment. E-Government leads to the development of smart cities and contributes to increasing the quality of life, and when the processes are integrated correctly, multiple benefits can occur. However, there are also challenges for Public Administration, such as uneven access to technology between urban and rural environments. Digitalization continues to be a priority in many areas, with a focus on innovations such as artificial intelligence, cyber security and emerging technologies.

Keywords: public administration, digitalization, innovation, administrative phenomenon, public service, citizen, quality of life, e-government, digital education.

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1. Paradigms of public administration

The notion of Public Administration has known various meanings and interpretations over time, reflecting the changes in society and the evolving understanding of the state's role in managing resources and ensuring the well-being of citizens. From my point of view, one of the most relevant interpretations is that of André de Laubadère, according to which the Administration is defined as ‘an assembly of authorities, agencies and organisms in charge, under the impulse of the political power to ensure multiple interventions of the modern state’.²

A historical approach could highlight the different **paradigms** of Public Administration:

- classical public administration: In its initial period, Public Administration was often seen in a rigid and formal perspective. This model, also known as ‘Weberian Public Administration’, focused on hierarchy, efficiency and imperturbability in the application of laws.

- bureaucratic public administration: inspired by the works of Max Weber, this period emphasized bureaucracy, clear rules, specialization and neutrality. In theory, the bureaucracy aimed for efficiency, but in practice, it was criticized for its rigidity and lack of adaptability.

- post-bureaucratic public administration: with social and technological changes, criticisms of bureaucracy have emerged. The idea of ‘Post-Bureaucratic Public Administration’ highlights flexibility, decentralization and collaboration between the public and private sectors.

- new public management public administration: appeared in the ‘80s and ‘90s, based on the principles of efficiency and orientation towards results from the private sector. It promoted

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² André de Laubadère, *Traité de Droit Administratif*, 6th edition, vol. I, Paris, L.G.D.J., 1973, p. 86.

performance measurement, competition between public entities and privatization in certain areas.

- participatory public administration: a modern approach involves citizens in decision-making and in the management of public resources. The idea is to create an administration that is open, transparent and responsive to the needs of the community.

- digital public administration: with the technological advance, Public Administration has gone through a digital transformation. Governments use technology to deliver more efficient services, facilitate citizen participation, and improve communication and transparency.

These paradigms are not mutually exclusive and often coexist in practice. Changes in Public Administration approaches reflect the **evolution of society**, cultural values and technological transformations.

Professor Antonie Iorgovan defines Public Administration starting from the assumption that it is the type of administrative phenomenon that includes the administrative facts that result in the implementation of political values.

Regarding the **administrative phenomenon** mentioned above, Professor Iorgovan shows that 'this is a social phenomenon, which involves the organization of methods to achieve objectives set by a higher authority'.³

The administrative phenomenon is 'a form of organization and execution of interests dictated by one or more people, being a materialized will'.⁴

In modern society, there is no one who has not come into contact with the Administration, especially the Public one, and has not directly or indirectly felt its benefits or exaggerations. In this case I am referring to the over-dimensioning of bureaucracy and excessive formalism that can indeed create unnecessary obstacles in the relationship between citizens and Public Administration. In many cases, complicated processes and extensive documentation can create frustration and delays, affecting the efficiency of the system.

Certainly, Public Administration impacts our lives in various ways. It can be about public services, regulations or even personal interactions with public servants.

2. Innovation in the public sector

People generally want Public Administration to function on a rational, scientific basis so that it can serve the general interest.

In terms of relations with the public, the Administration will aim to resolve citizens' requests **as soon as possible**.

Nowadays innovation in the Public Sector has become a necessity, being absolutely necessary to improve the results and efficiency of the Public Sector and to provide quality public services.

Therefore, **innovation in the Public Sector** can bring significant benefits, from **increasing operational efficiency to improving the quality of services provided to citizens**. Modern technologies and innovative approaches can simplify processes, reducing bureaucracy and the time needed to solve problems.

In addition to automation, computerization, artificial intelligence, digitalization is a concept that plays a key role in Public Administration. Digitalization can be seen as an administrative phenomenon that manifests itself and influences innovation in the activity and action of Public Administrations.

3. Transformation and modernization of public services through the use of digital technology

Public Administration is constantly developing and changing and the desire of the State is to face new social needs and to offer citizens a better quality of life.

³ Antonie Iorgovan, *Administrative Law Treaty*, 3rd edition, vol. I, ALL Beck Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, p. 175.

⁴ Idem

The **digitalization of Public Administration** is an important topic in the context of European development and Romania is no exception.

This process aims to transform and modernize public services by using **digital technology to improve their efficiency, transparency and accessibility**.

In this context, I would like to highlight some European trends and relevant aspects:

- interoperability and common standards: to facilitate the exchange of information between different authorities and countries, common standards and interoperability are essential. Romania must adopt and implement these standards to align with the rest of Europe.

- E-ID and electronic signature: the use of electronic identity cards and electronic signatures is becoming more widespread in Europe. Romania should promote these technologies for the authentication and electronic signing of documents.

- unified platforms for public services: the creation of unified digital platforms where citizens can access a wide range of public services (e.g. health, tax, education) is an important trend. This would simplify citizens' lives and increase the efficiency of Public Administration.

- the E-Governance process: the implementation of E-Governance systems would help in effective data management and data-based decision-making in the Administration. In the Public Sector, digitization and digitalization are generally considered as extensions of E-Governance. Although E-Governance was initially considered a particular form of e-commerce consisting of the provision of documents and services online to citizens, its scope is now much broader and includes policy objectives such as institutional reforms, government modernization and the introduction of new democratic practices.

- data protection and cyber security: special attention must be paid to the security of personal data and the prevention of cyber threats, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and EU directives in the field of cyber security.

- public-private partnerships: collaboration with the private sector for the development and implementation of digital solutions can accelerate the digitalization process of Public Administration.

- digital education: Promoting digital literacy among civil servants and citizens is essential to ensure the successful adoption of digital technology.

- feedback and constant evaluation: collecting feedback from citizens and constantly evaluating digital services is important to continuously improve them.

- European funds: access to European funds and EU-funded projects can play a significant role in accelerating the digitalization of Public Administration.

- European cooperation: Romania should collaborate with other EU Member States and participate in European initiatives to share good practices and align with European standards in the field of digitalization of Public Administration.

Therefore, I assess that these are some of the key aspects that Romania should consider in its efforts to digitize Public Administration, in order to stay aligned with European trends and offer citizens more efficient and accessible public services.

Digitalization brings with it a number of advantages, from easier access to information to faster and more transparent processes. By transforming documents and processes into electronic format, paper dependence can be reduced, procedures can be simplified and queues at counters reduced, basically Digital Public Administration provides less stress factors.

Digital Public Administration is a significant transformation in the way governments manage public affairs, communicate with citizens and deliver services.

This evolution is based on the use of information and communication technology to streamline administrative processes and improve interaction between Administration and citizens. Here are some **key aspects** of Digital Public Administration:

- online services: Digital Public Administration facilitates the delivery of government services through online platforms. Citizens can access various services, such as obtaining identity documents, paying fees and taxes, or making appointments at various government institutions, with a simple click.

- efficiency and reduction of bureaucracy: the digitalization of administrative processes

reduces the amount of paperwork, the time needed to process information and the risk of human error. This leads to more efficient administration and faster interaction between citizens and public institutions.

- open data: Digital Public Administration promotes transparency by publishing open data. Governments provide citizens with information on budgets, political decisions, statistics etc. This data can be used and analyzed by citizens and organizations to better understand government processes and participate in decision-making.

- citizen participation: technology facilitates the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. Through online platforms or mobile applications, citizens can express their opinions, propose ideas or participate in public debates.

- data security: a major concern within Digital Public Administration is ensuring data security. Governments invest in technology solutions to protect citizens' sensitive information and prevent cyber-attacks.

- smart cities: some Digital Public Administration initiatives aim to transform cities into 'smart cities', where technology is used to improve infrastructure, transport, health services and other aspects of urban life.

Digital Public Administration has the potential to make governments more transparent, efficient and citizen-oriented⁵. Nevertheless, it is important to also address issues related to digital accessibility to ensure that no category of citizens is excluded from the benefits of digital transformation.

A particularly important aspect that I will refer to is Digital Education, where I believe there is still work to be done.

As early as 2014, Romania defined a national strategy regarding digitalization, but most of the measures taken were not started or were in an incipient phase of implementation. Today the technological revolution, but also the continuous and rapid change, definitely influences the governance systems.

Romania's accession to the European Union on January 1st, 2007 established the most important change that the Romanian socio-political system has known since 1989 until today. The process of European integration is a factor of change that was and continues to be a complex and far-reaching one, aiming at meeting European standards and mobilizing all the administrative, economic, political and social capacities of Romania in the direction of optimizing the Europeanization process.

4. Europeanization of public administration. Digital transformation

The **Europeanization of public administration in Romania** has had a sinuous path up to this point, the tangible effects being relatively little visible despite some administrative reform projects and a legislation in the field that sought and continues to seek to align itself with the standards of the European Community Space.

In 2020, the **Authority for the Digitalization of Romania (ADR)** was established, an institution founded with the aim of achieving the objectives of the Romanian Government in the field of digital transformation of Romanian society.

The introduction of Digital Education in the Romanian Public Administration could be a relevant step to ensure that civil servants are prepared to manage the changes brought by technology. This could include:

1. continuous digital training: ensuring continuous training programs for civil servants in the field of technology and digitalization. These programs could cover issues such as cyber security, effective use of digital tools and adaptation to technological change.

2. promoting digital skills: encouraging the development of digital skills among civil servants, including understanding the basic concepts of technology, effective use of software and digital data

⁵ Alexandru-Sorin Ciobanu, Irina Suătean, *Administrative Law – Part I. Seminar Book*, Universul Juridic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2022, p. 132.

management.

3. collaboration with educational institutions: collaboration between Public Administration and Educational Institutions to develop educational programs that meet the specific needs of Public Administration in the digital age.

4. innovation and adaptation: fostering an innovative mindset and the ability to adapt to rapid technological change. This could involve creating an environment that supports new ideas and implementing innovative solutions in administration.

5. participation in digital communities: supporting civil servants to get involved in digital communities, attend conferences and events to keep up to date with the latest trends and practices in the digital field.

By adopting these measures, I believe that the Public Administration in Romania could be better prepared to use technology to the advantage of citizens and adapt to the changes of the digital age.

One of the major challenges for Public Administration is the uneven access to technology between urban and rural environments.

In some cases, access to technology and the Internet is more limited in rural areas compared to urban environment. This phenomenon of 'digital disparity' has brought with it the risk that certain communities would be excluded from the opportunities offered by the digital revolution.

Public Administration is faced with the challenge of ensuring that all citizens benefit from the advantages of information technology. Efforts have been made to expand Internet infrastructure in rural areas and provide access to digital devices and resources in schools and public institutions in these regions.

These are the obstacles occurred in the process of digitalization of the Public Administration in Romania, thus showing the causes that prevent the consolidation of an authentic IT system adequate to the needs of a modern society of the 21st century, with a direct impact on the quality of the provision of public services offered to citizens, but also on the possible solutions that generate real benefits to Public Administration activity through the proper implementation of the E-Administration concept⁶.

The proper implementation of the E-Administration concept requires a comprehensive approach and cooperation between various stakeholders to overcome obstacles and bring significant benefits to the quality of Public Services⁷.

It is noteworthy that projects and programs have been implemented to develop digital skills among the population, so that all citizens can take advantage of online services and participate in the growing digital economy.

These endeavors are an important aspect of the transition to a digital and egalitarian society.

The **Lisbon Strategy** is the document adopted by the states of the European Union which has as its conceptual foundation the fact that 'the transition to a digital economy, based on knowledge, will be a strong motivator for increasing competitiveness, improving both the quality of the environment and the lives of European citizens'.⁸

Digital transformation is not only about implementing digital services for citizens, but also about creating a more efficient and satisfying work environment for civil servants. Such changes should take into account the needs and expectations of employees in the Administration, such as:

- automating repetitive processes: implementing technologies to take over repetitive and administrative tasks can free up civil servants' time for more valuable and elaborate activities.

- access to technological resources and continuous training: ensuring that all employees have access to modern technologies and benefit from continuous training programs to improve their digital

⁶ Cezar Corneliu Manda, *Digitalization of Public Administration in Romania – Between the Needs and Aspirations of a Modern Society of the 21st Century*, Smart Cities Journal vol. 9, 2021, p. 41-61.

⁷ Alexandru-Sorin Ciobanu, *op. cit.*, p.133.

⁸ The Lisbon Strategy was adopted by the Extraordinary European Council in Lisbon on 23-24 March 2000 and revised by the European Council in Brussels on 22-23 March 2005. The document is available at the link: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:184E:0030:0038:RO:PDF>.

skills.

- effective collaboration and communication: using digital platforms for communication and collaboration between departments can improve efficiency and transparency within the organization.
- work flexibility: providing options for remote working or flexible hours can increase satisfaction and productivity of civil servants.
- participation in the decision process: the involvement of employees in the decision-making process regarding the implementation of digital solutions, so that these better meet organizational needs.
- efficient data management: ensuring a technological infrastructure that allows efficient data management, with adequate security measures.
- innovative organizational culture: promoting an organizational culture that encourages innovation and adaptability to technological changes.

5. Conclusions

By considering these aspects, the Administration can create a conducive digital work environment that not only optimizes processes, but also supports the development and well-being of civil servants⁹.

At the same time, digital transformation should not be perceived as a threat to work places, but rather as an opportunity to improve the way people work and interact within organizations. By rethinking internal flows and integrating digital tools, significant advantages can be achieved.

Rather than replacing people, digital transformation offers the opportunity to allow them to focus on activities that require creativity, empathy and complex decision-making, while more routine tasks are handled efficiently by technology. It is an approach that should benefit both civil servants and citizens.

Digital transformation entails change, it must be communicated correctly, transparently and above all be oriented towards the understanding of all those involved.

The **goal of digital transformation** in terms of modernizing the Administration¹⁰ for a well-developed Romania is the ultimate objective. Moreover, how this transformation is approached and implemented is crucial to its long-term success.

Romania has certainly made **important steps** 'on the path to the **digitalization of public services** provided by the Public Administration and, despite this, the progress is rated by the EU institutions as insufficient, in relation to the average registered among European States'.¹¹

I think an important aspect in this evolution is the involvement of citizens and the private sector. Creating a partnership between the Administration, the Private Sector and civil society can bring together additional resources and expertise to accelerate the digital transformation process and better respond to the needs of the population.

Therefore, the way ahead is still long until the moment of '**climbing on the big bandwagon of the quasi-generalized computerization of public services**. Step by step and with consistent efforts, change can become a reality, to the extent that Romania will demonstrate, as a matter of priority, the **will to change** an outdated system through innovation and intelligence.

Political will, appropriate allocation of resources and learning from successful examples can significantly contribute to accelerating this process. Each country has its own needs, resources and cultural peculiarities, and the innovative approach should take all these aspects into account to ensure a sustainable success.

⁹ Verginia Vedinaş, *Administrative Law*, 13th edition, Bucharest, Universul Juridic Publishing House, 2022, p. 212.

¹⁰ Dana Apostol Tofan, *Administrative Law*, Volume 2, C.H. Beck, Bucharest, 2020, p. 98; Cătălin-Silviu Săraru, *Administrative law. University course*, vol. I, Ed. Universul Juridic, Bucharest, 2023, p. 133-145; Cătălin-Silviu Săraru, *Administrative law. Fundamental problems of public law*, Ed. C.H. Beck, Bucharest, 2016, p. 653-664; Dan Constantin Măţă, *Administrative Law Vol.1*, 4th ed. Universul Juridic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2022, p. 152; Ovidiu Podaru, *Administrative Law. Vol. I. Administrative Act (I). Landmarks for a Different Theory*, Hamangiu Publishing House, Bucharest, 2022, p. 89.

¹¹ Cezar Corneliu Manda, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

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