

THE IMPACT OF E-GOVERNMENT ON MODERNIZING GREEK PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

E-government in the Greek public administration is constantly evolving. At the same time, however, its development presents significant delays, mainly due to the long-term entanglements of the public administration. In addition, the initial suspicion and limited public confidence in the public administration should be addressed. Many citizens do not have the necessary digital skills to benefit from the use of ICT. The coronavirus pandemic accelerated the process of digital transformation of the Greek State, as it showed that this choice is one way. The Greek state proceeded to the drafting of the National Plan for Recovery and Sustainability "Greece 2.0", creating a new productive model, which will help the country, the economy and society itself to enter a new era leaving behind problems and delays created by the long economic crisis and the pandemic. It should be emphasized, however, that although the pandemic is a lever for the reform of the public administration and a driving force for the restart of the country's economy, unfortunately significant weaknesses in the Greek e-government remain and costly and time-consuming processes still exist. The consequence of these structural features is that the procedures of the public administration are reconstructed, as the pre-existing procedures are re-evaluated, abolished or restructured and are interconnected in hierarchical and sequential relations.

Keywords: *E-government; Greek public administration reform; coronavirus pandemic; National Plan for Recovery and Sustainability "Greece 2.0".*

INTRODUCTION

Public Administration is a term with a double meaning. On the one hand, it describes the function that aims at the effective implementation of political decisions and laws enacted by the competent state bodies, on the other hand, it concerns the academic field, which studies the public administrative function and contributes in various ways with scientific research in its development (Marini, 2000).

The Greek state and especially the public administration have been consistently integrating e-government and information technologies in the reform programs of the modernization of the public administration, since the 90's. The use of new technologies has already been applied to almost all functions of public bodies and is also used for secure and fast communication and cooperation (interoperability) between more and more public services (Asprides, 2013). At

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the same time, however, in most of the public sector bodies, electronic services have been put into operation for the remote service of citizens and businesses.

E-government in the Greek public administration is constantly evolving. At the same time, however, its development presents significant delays, mainly due to the long-term entanglements of the public administration, such as the fragmentation of responsibilities, the discontinuity in the implemented policies, the lack of a single mechanism for controlling, evaluating and updating the implemented policies, the design of e-government policies, the absence of a human resource management mechanism, with the result that the trained executives are not utilized in similar positions (Pelagidis, 2005).

The COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the many negative effects it has had on everyone's lives, has given impetus and accelerated processes that under normal circumstances would take a long time to take place. There were changes that were planned to take place and the pandemic, due to the special and extraordinary conditions that formed in the market, significantly accelerated their implementation. An important area that was strengthened during the pandemic period was the digital transformation of the country. For Greece, improving and strengthening digital governance is a clear strategic choice, which has been intensified and expanded further due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Nitsi, Anastasatou & Katsikas, 2018). Thus, in recent years there have been significant changes that are directly related to the upgrade of electronic services offered by the state to citizens and businesses (Apostolakis, Loukis & Halaris, 2008). Of course, the country still has a long way to go, but everything shows that it is moving in the right direction, and that e-government is now a reality.

THE CONCEPT OF E-GOVERNMENT

The term e-government means the transformation of the state and public administration, which is activated through the significant advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (Danos, 2014). This transformation of the state and public administration as a whole is accomplished through networked functions in public services and agencies, synchronized information and online services to citizens and through interactive communications, which in turn lead to increased citizen participation in public life.

E-government is one of the greatest challenges of our time for governments. With the help of e-government, government expenditures can be reduced and transactions between the central government and the people who do business with it can be facilitated (Lazakidou, 2015). E-government can help make the public sector more transparent, credible and efficient.

In particular, with e-government:

- There will be simplification of procedures related to the operation of the wider public sector, using communication and information technologies. This will improve the quality of life of citizens while increasing the efficiency of the public sector. Not only will the efficiency of the public sector increase but its operating costs will also decrease, as less staff may be required due to the electronic processing of some services.

- Digitization of many documents is envisaged. This will help in the existence of transparency, in the reduction of the cost, but also of the time of sending and receiving documents between the public bodies and between the citizens and the public.
- Unified management of relations between the state and citizens and / or enterprises is required.
- Certification and authentication of citizens is achieved. Only in this way will the different authentication codes be able to be interconnected, with the result that citizens will have faster and more secure access to personalized online services, with comfort and security.
- Citizens should be involved in public administration through the participatory process, either by criticizing or taking part in consultation and decision-making.
- The interconnection between the basic registers of the public administration will help the citizens not to submit documents and information that already exist in another service. The services will be able to extract documents and information from the interconnected services. The information will already be verified and cross-referenced and can be utilized immediately by limiting the time required (Delitheou, Maraki & Trasanidis, 2019).

Of course, for the implementation of the above, the cost in the beginning will be quite high, as the acquisition and maintenance of technological infrastructure is costly. There is also the need for people properly trained in new technologies. Especially in the beginning there will be reactions and delays as the staff will not have the necessary skills. So, it will be necessary to train the staff. In addition, the initial suspicion and limited public confidence in the public administration should be addressed. Many citizens do not have the necessary digital skills to benefit from the use of ICT (Fragouli, 2012).

VALUES PROMOTED BY E-GOVERNMRNT

E-government is one of the most important tools of the new public management. A key value ensured through e-government is open access for all to public documents and transparency. Transparency is an important element of the functioning of public administration and self-government. It is very important for the existence of transparency to have an open disposition of administrative acts and decisions as they are critical factors for the proper functioning of the administration and need proper coding of administrative procedures to ensure the smooth operation of the control mechanism with the ultimate goal of accountability (Lazakidou, 2015).

An important step in this direction is the establishment of the clarity page <https://diavgeia.gov.gr>. The existence of the transparency website was established by law 3861/2010 and aims at the greatest possible publicity of government and administrative activity in order to ensure transparency and to make accountable in case of irregularities on the part of public authorities (diavgeia, 2021).

One of the major advantages of e-government is that e-government enables more citizens to participate in public and decision-making. In order for there to be open governance, there must be proper information, cooperation and consent of the citizens and all the bodies involved (www.opengov.gr, 2021). Through e-government, open communication with

citizens and direct management of citizens' affairs are developed and promoted. On the page www.opengov.gr, citizens can, through the completion of the necessary form, contact the administration, post comments, opinions, suggestions and express their complaints about services provided through public services. A special mechanism then transfers all the data collected to the competent ministry and more generally to the public body that is responsible (Nitsi et al., 2018).

Also, a great advantage of e-government is the accessibility that all citizens have to it, any time and day they want, if they have a computer and internet connection. People with disabilities can be treated on an equal footing with other citizens as technology helps them overcome physical barriers. Information and communication technologies offer many options and facilities to people with disabilities (Trasanidis, 2018).

The main goals and values promoted through e-government are:

- The immediate service of citizens and businesses, through the use of electronic services.
- Reduction of bureaucracy through the full utilization of Information and Communication Technologies.
- The simplification of public procedures that will then lead to a reduction of the burdens that citizens and businesses suffer when dealing with public sector bodies.
- Establishing relationships of trust between citizens, businesses and public services through the reduction of corruption and the publication of government decisions.
- Improving the working conditions of employees in the public sector while increasing their efficiency.
- Increasing flexibility, speed and quality, while protecting security in the internal communication and operation of public bodies (Delitheou et al., 2019).

E-government addresses issues related to electronic communication and data exchange between administrations and public bodies. E-government handles information in the public sector in such a way that it becomes a subject of processing that will be useful and exploitable in order to facilitate citizens and businesses (Spinellis et al., 2018).

PANDEMIC AND GREEK E-GOVERNMENT

The coronavirus pandemic accelerated the process of digital transformation of the Greek State, as it showed that this choice is one way. Helped the Greek Public Administration to bypass its anchorages (Spinellis et al., 2021), to use the experience of foreign states and finally to bring changes in its organization and operation in order to face the pandemic immediately and with the least possible human losses and on the other hand to offer the best possible service to the citizens.

The Greek administration reacted relatively quickly under the fear of a pandemic. The State took measures, several Government Decisions and Acts of Legislative Content were issued. The following are the most important of the state interventions that took place in the Greek public administration during a pandemic:

- The National Program for Simplification of Procedures was established through the digitization of administrative procedures.
- The Unified digital portal of DD, gov.gr, was created and given to the public, where both citizens and businesses are given the opportunity to issue certificates from a single platform and to issue authorizations and responsible statements without physical presence in KEP.
- It has become possible to submit applications electronically.
- Remote citizen service was supported.
- The measure of teleworking was strengthened.
- The intangible prescription service has been developed.
- The online platform for the coronavirus vaccine was implemented (emvolio.gov.gr).
- A patient registry was set up.
- Courses began with modern distance education.
- The distance training and retraining of public administration executives began (Spinellis et al., 2021).

The Greek state proceeded to the drafting of the National Plan for Recovery and Sustainability "Greece 2.0", creating a new productive model, which will help the country, the economy and society itself to enter a new era leaving behind problems and delays created by the long economic crisis and the pandemic. The plan is fully in line with EU objectives and will help the Greek economy move faster to a green and digital growth model. It consists of 4 pillars: one green, one digital, one social and one that concerns the economic and institutional transformation (Spinellis et al., 2021),

The second pillar, the digital one, seeks digital transition with infrastructure projects and digital governance. The Greek State, understanding the necessity and importance of digital transformation, went one step further by drafting the Book of Digital Transformation 2020 - 2025 (Ministry of Digital Governance, 2020), adopting modern, flexible, more efficient application systems. With the passage of the Bible, he compiled and updated the relevant institutional framework of digital governance, which was scattered. A vision is the prosperity of society through economic development, which will bring about the opportunities of the digital revolution. Objectives are: the further upgrade of Digital Governance, in order to become more democratic due to the active participation of citizens, the increase of productivity, the more efficient operation of the Public Administration with proper and transparent use of resources (Ministry of Digital Governance, 2020).

It should be emphasized, however, that although the pandemic is a lever for the reform of the public administration and a driving force for the restart of the country's economy, unfortunately significant weaknesses in the Greek e-government remain and costly and time-consuming processes still exist (Spinellis et al., 2021).

E-GOVERNMENT SERVING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM

According to the above-mentioned, the structural characteristics of e-government are:

- a) e-government is a dynamic and constantly evolving process.
- b) its applications are politic-centric in nature, ie they are designed to serve situations related to human events.
- c) the electronic services are divided into internal, including those that serve the functions of the organizations themselves and extroverts, which concern the communication of the Administration with the citizens and with the enterprises.
- d) based on their extroverted functions, e-government systems provide only information, or provide one- or two-way interaction services, or are limited to targeted tasks.
- e) Also, its functions are divided into fully or partially automated or individualized.
- f) e-government makes public information easily accessible to both citizens and the administration, strengthening the principles of good governance, interoperability in public administration and citizen participation in political decision-making.
- g) e-government restructures the pre-existing bureaucratic procedures of the public administration, according to a new logic that is partly indicated by the technical peculiarities of ICT, contributing to the redesign of the procedures (Nitsi et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the consequence of these structural features is that the procedures of the public administration are reconstructed, as the pre-existing procedures are re-evaluated, abolished or restructured and are interconnected in hierarchical and sequential relations. In addition, the relations between the administration and the citizens are changed through the new procedures and the bureaucratic procedures are replaced by new digital procedures, which simplify the functions of the Administration, reduce its operational costs, strengthen the communication and cooperation of public organizations and improve the provided services to the citizens (Trasanidis, 2018). The consequence of these drastic changes is the transition of the public administration from its bureaucratic form to the digital one, which implies a more flexible and efficient way of operating it.

CONCLUSION

Today, Greece has the necessary infrastructure to further utilize the potential of ICT. The majority of the executive staff is now familiar with the handling of electronic services and also includes specialized technological staff with many years of know-how. At the same time, Greek society, citizens and businesses have realized and are gradually using more and more electronic public services, although many more steps will have to be taken to address digital illiteracy and the inability to access electronic services by a large percentage of the population.

Greece has taken many important steps to take advantage of the opportunities and services offered by e-government (Trasanidis, 2018). However, the shortages and needs of public administration, citizens and businesses that can be served by e-government services are still many, especially in the current times of national and global economic crisis, as undoubtedly the new information technologies and of communications are offered as a lever for economic growth and modernization of the state and enterprises.

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