POLICY: THEORY AND PRACTICE

COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN EU AND GREECE: A CATALYST FOR GOVERNMENT TRANSFORMATION?

Nikolaos Vaiou[1], Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a transformative event, reshaping governance, society, and economies worldwide. Its unprecedented challenges accelerated the adoption of digital technologies, profoundly affecting the way governments operate, businesses function, and individuals interact. Across the European Union and Greece, the crisis acted as a catalyst, hastening digital transformation in public administration, education, healthcare, and various other sectors. This paper explores the pandemic's role in driving governmental innovation and adaptability, highlighting how these changes have reshaped public service delivery, enhanced e-governance, and fostered resilience in the face of adversity. The analysis seeks to illuminate the extent of this transformation and its implications for the future of governance in a digitally dependent world.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic; Government transformation; resilience; digital innovation in Greece.*

THE COVID CRISIS: HOW GOVERNMENTS HAVE RESPONDED

The successive lockdowns and containment measures implemented globally by governments for the elimination of COVID-19 accelerate the digital transformation as information and communication technology to maintain the daily life and business continuity support. Internet traffic has increased as people were searching online for work, communication, socialization, consumption and entertainment. Companies and industries are also adapting to the trend, accelerating the digitization of their product portfolio, key internal functions (for example back-office, processes production and research/development) and interactions with the supply chain by three to four years (McKinsey and Company, 2020). The rapid digital transformation has managed to accelerate during the pandemic, leading to the widening of opportunities for digital inclusion. Specifically, the increase of e-commerce has created new jobs and acquisition opportunities for income, which have the potential to boost household income and increase the resilience of rural communities worldwide.

[1] Nikolaos Vaiou is a PhD student at the Public Administration Department of the Faculty of Philosophy at the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Restrictive contact measures in response to the crisis have accelerated the digitalization of the provision of essential public services. Over 90% of Ministries of Education have adopted policies to provide digital distance learning to address the needs of nearly 1.6 billion students (more than 91% of students worldwide) affected by the COVID-19 crisis (UN, 2020a).

Indicative of the rapid increase in the use of new technologies during the duration of COVID-19, is the United Nations research on the development of E-Government, on the 193 government portals of the Member States. The survey showed that by 25 March 2020 only 57% of countries had put in implementing some kind of COVID-19 information, until 8 April 2020 this percentage had reached about 86%, while on May 13th, 2020, almost the 97.5% (188 countries) had information about COVID-19 on their national portal (UN, 2020).

However, the comparison with the pre-Covid era is impressive in terms of significant increase of distant work. In Greece, 26.2% of employees joined teleworking as a result of the pandemic crisis. Except for the design of E-government and national strategy, became visible the urgent and immediate need for data protection and people's rights, security, equality, as well as universal digital integration. The pandemic forces the Greek government to shift towards digital technologies, to develop at a very fast pace technological solutions, to act directly and organized, in multiple sectors, to be able to respond to the crisis, recover and resolve the problems that arose. In this environment of unprecedented challenges, Greece made her own "digital leap", which was a very great opportunity for the country to evolve into a modern digital state. From the beginning of the pandemic,

Greece is experienced in a digital transformation with electronic governance to have the central role in communication and cooperation between institutions and society. The country's digital leaps are the key to accelerating digitalization and a significant legacy for the future. The limited technological content of most professions, but also the digital lag of businesses and employees makes Greece a vulnerable society. The pandemic has highlighted the need to confront the digital learning poverty and accelerate the digital transformation of economy and society (Ioannou, 2020).

WHAT DO THESE DVELEOPMENTS SIGNIFY OR SUGGEST?

The pandemic crisis has accelerated changes in the workplace, the education, communication, networking and personal social life. At the same time, it created conditions for actions to enhance E-Government. The new Ministry of Digital Governance has acquired a strategic role and is now responsible for providing digital services to citizens and businesses, based on simplified administrative procedures. In Greece one of the most important projects was the digital service of citizens through the single digital gateway of the State gov.gr. The main goal of the portal is to be the only a digital contact point between citizens, businesses and public administrations. Documents issued by the gov.gr must be accepted by the public bodies, as well as other natural or legal persons.

During the pandemic, the public sector adopted the provision of remote work (teleworking) and videoconferencing applications, impacting and rapidly changing the level of industrial relations, economy and society. Transacting citizens are asked to use the telephones communication and e-mail addresses of public services for their service. In addition, the

program for distance learning was launched serving citizens through the "digital appointments" service for several organisations, such as Centres of Citizens' Services (myKEPlive).

At the same time, in the field of education and training, the modern (e-learning) and asynchronous teachin started through special platforms (eclass, moodle, webex, e-me) and educational tools, distance learning training and retraining of civil servants, the online submission of applications enrolment in primary education and kindergartens, the online application "myschool" and the issuance of digital verifications, certificates or bachelor's degree of schools (Kanellopoulou 2022).

Characteristic interventions were also made in the health sector, where at the beginning of 2020, the service of prescription of medicines was made available (www.e-syntagografisi.gr), the COVID-19 Patient Registry was created and measures to comply with traffic restrictions were supported (sending sms, movement certificates). In 2021, the "myHealthApp application was launched by IDIKA (E-Governance of Social Security), available for Android and iOS mobile devices, which offers access to the prescription, on examination referrals issued since 1/1/2020 onwards, as well as in electronic medical certificates issued by Doctors.

The tourism sector has been given a boost, with the use of the "Green Pass", the EU Digital COVID-19 Certificate, available from the Single Digital Portal gov.gr. Citizens were also given the opportunity to issue by themselves certificates of birth, marital status and nationality, as well as civil status documents of birth, death, marriage and civil partnership from the computer or their mobile (www.reg.services.gov.gr) (Kanellopoulou 2022).

In Europe, though:

- new support mechanisms have been set up by Member States initially the European Financial Stability Fund (EFSF), today the European Stability Mechanism.
- Fiscal Compact is adopted.
- Economic cooperation (and mutual surveillance) was stepped up in general economic policy issues (Euro-Plus-Pact and Macroeconomic imbalance surveillance procedure).
- Two-pack surveillance of national budgets were strengthened.
- The Structural Funds regulations have been amended to be settled with the new logic, (Liargovas, 2020).

In relation to their financial policy all EU Member States have made high public expenditure to support the production, employment and economic recovery. The European Commission, now having the experience of the economic crisis called upon to cope, include in its long-term budget for the period 2021-2027 a new recovery instrument, Next Generation EU to strengthen Recovery actions to address the consequences of the pandemic. So, on the 21st of July 2020 EU leaders reach agreement on plan recovery and the multiannual financial framework for 2021-2027.

A prerequisite for the implementation of the Next Generation EU Recovery Instrument, is the adoption of the EU decision on own resources in the Member States in accordance with their constitutional requirements, since the decision empowers the Commission to borrow on the capital markets to address the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. Due to the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Member States will have the potential to cope with the socio-economic

consequences of COVID-19 pandemic, while at the same time their economies will move towards the green and digital transitions to become more sustainable and resilient, reinforcing the objectives of the multiannual financial framework in this direction (Magiropoulou, 2021).

POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER GOVERNMENT TRANSFORMATION

Digital transformation is defined as the upcoming digitization, the innovation and other most advanced technological changes. In other words, the concept of digital transformation is a subject to the description of the corresponding changes which are directly related to applications as well as the use of digital technology systems in all sectors that consist of society and daily life. This digital transformation format is defined as a set of organizational changes caused by the use of existing digital technology systems, and often innovative business models that contributes significantly optimizing the effectiveness of each business department, and further expansion and improvement of the quality of its activities (Zaharia & Gibert 2005).

In general, due to revolutionary changes in the technological system, the rapid development of technology has led to a new technological and economic system, the impact of which has spread throughout the economy and society, leading to the emergence of many innovations and new systems. In fact, each of the four different types of changes set different limits at source profit for each business unit. Below are commented descriptively and detailed the possible changes (Bondarouk et al., 2011):

- Fundamental changes. If all significant activities of the business unit and all of its top properties face the threat of devaluation, need to be turned into changes. Business units operate in industries that are expected to experience huge changes in the future, so it is necessary to anticipate these conditions in time to adapt to the corresponding their business strategies. However, in many cases, companies choose permanently to leave the market, thereby increasing the profitability of rest of the companies.
- Mediation changes. This is a more common type of change than the previous one. Both buyers and suppliers can choose new parameters, because they can easily and quickly obtain new information so that they can notice this change. At this point, the main activities of various departments have been particularly threatened. However, the key elements identifying these industries will not be underestimated, such as know-how, patents, reliability, branding. Only when used in different and innovative ways can their value to be preserved. In fact, managing a business unit that operates in an industry undergoing mediation its changes are not particularly easy. The reason is the fact that, on the one hand, some economic sectors are needed to maintain the value of their assets elements and, on the other hand, redefine the basic relationship between them.
- Creative changes. In industries, individual relationships with respective customers and their suppliers remain stable. However, their assets are constantly changing.
- Progressive changes. This type of change is no different from previous changes with many ways, such as creative changes, especially when third parties are interested in

the business unit, such as suppliers and customers, and have the necessary motivation to maintain the status quo. Emerging progress and technological development may be in high level, but the overall change occurs in the internal environment of the company. Those entities that are considered successful and operate in an ever-changing industry are usually considered cases of low risk to investors and can deliver particularly high incomes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has served as a powerful catalyst for digital transformation within governments across the European Union and Greece. By compelling rapid adaptation and innovation, the crisis demonstrated the potential of technology to enhance efficiency, inclusivity, and resilience in public services. The Greek government's digital leap, particularly through initiatives such as gov.gr and e-prescriptions, underscores the importance of embracing technological advancements for societal progress. As the global community continues to recover, these lessons underline the necessity for sustained investment in digital infrastructure and strategic governance to ensure future preparedness and equitable access to digital opportunities. This period of transformation not only redefined governance but also set the stage for a more connected and adaptive future.

REFERENCES

Bondarouk, T., Ruël, H., Looise, J.K. (2011) Electronic HRM in Theory and Practice, Vol.8, 55-68.

Ioannou, C. (2020) Analysis: Covid-19 and digital learning poverty. The Weekday. Recovery from https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/1079050/analysi-o-covid-19-kai-i-psifiakimathisiaki-ftocheia/

Kanellopoulou, A. (2022) The degree and factors influencing the acceptance, satisfaction and familiarity of citizens with the new technologies and innovations currently applied in E-Government.

Liargovas, P. (2020) Ten years of crisis, three memoranda and one pandemic. Athens: Patakis

Magiropoulou, A., Bita, E. (2021) Comparative investigation of the policies of the European Union and Greece to address the debt crisis and the COVID-19 health crisis.

Mamounas, D. (2022) The digital transformation of organizations and its impact on human resource management.

McKinsey and Company (2020) How COVID-19 has pushed companies over the technology tipping point—and transformed business forever. 5 October 2020, Recovery from: https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/ourinsights/how-covid-19-has-pushed-companies-over-the-technology-tipping-point-and-transformedbusiness-forever.

UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2020) E-GOVERNMENT SURVEY 2020: Digital Government in the Decade of Action for Sustainable Development, With addendum on COVID-19 Response. Recovery from: https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government Survey-2020.

UN (2020a) Policy Brief: Education During COVID-19 and Beyond, August 2020.

Voskakis, M. (2022) E-Government and the role of leadership in the new digital challenges in Local Government in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic: a case study of the First Degree Local Government Citizens' Service Centers.

Zaharia S., Gibert E. (2005) The Entrepreneurial University in the Knowledge Society, Higher Education in Europe, Vol.30, No.1.