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# Public Administration in the Digital Age: between Vision and Reality

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**Abstract:** In the context of global digital transformations, public administration in Romania is faced with the need for a profound reconstruction, aimed at meeting modern requirements for efficiency, transparency and adaptability. The study proposes an integrated approach to the concept of smart governance, based on the digitalization of public services, the use of artificial intelligence in decision-making processes and administrative-territorial restructuring. The limitations of the current constitutional and organizational framework are analyzed, as well as the economic impact of maintaining inefficient administrative structures. The role of technology in optimizing resource allocation, automating workflows and implementing a real-time monitoring system for public spending is highlighted. Based on examples of European good practices and private sector experience, the research argues that digital transformation and territorial reorganization must be complementary and supported by a coherent strategic vision. By defining clear directions for reform – including constitutional amendments, centralization of support services, standardization of procedures, and the use of advanced data analysis – the premises of a public administration oriented towards performance and sustainability are outlined

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## 1. Introduction

Public administration is at an inflection point, where the bureaucratic tradition conflicts with the imperative of digitalization. In Romania, this transition is proceeding slowly, despite the pressures generated by the international context, the demands of citizens and the budgetary constraints. Classic governance models are proving increasingly inadequate in the face of contemporary demands, which require fast, transparent and adaptable services.

Romanian society is facing a profound transformation, influenced by globalization, international mobility, the digitalization of the labor market and changing citizen expectations towards the administration. The modern citizen demands access to information in real time, problem solving through intuitive digital platforms and a state that acts proactively, not reactively. At the same time, the level of

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tolerance towards inefficiency, lack of transparency or administrative delays is decreasing, reflecting a maturation of civicism and an increase in democratic demands.

Globally, public administrations in developed countries have initiated systematic processes of digitalization, aimed at transforming both the state-citizen relationship and the internal functioning mechanisms of institutions. Digitalization is no longer an option, but a fundamental condition for state competitiveness, for administrative resilience and for the capacity to react to crises – be they pandemic, economic or climate (Ivascu et al., 2024, p. 1). Romania, however, seems to lag behind these trends, being blocked by a combination of factors: institutional reluctance, decision-making fragmentation, lack of a coherent strategic vision and unevenly developed digital infrastructure.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need to modernize the administrative apparatus and highlighted the structural limits of the current public system. While many European countries have rapidly implemented e-government and workflow automation solutions, Romania has continued to rely on physical documents, counter presence, and laborious procedures. This difference in speed has generated a growing gap between what citizens expect and what the administration can deliver (Ris & Puvača, 2024, p. 9).

## 2. Administration of the Future: Artificial Intelligence and Digitalization in the Public Service

Digital transformation involves more than computerizing existing procedures: it is about redefining the organizational architecture and the way of relating to citizens. According to recent studies, effective digitalization integrates big data, AI, blockchain and cloud services solutions for decision-making and operational optimization of public institutions (Ivascu et al., 2024, p. 1).

A key element in this vision is the ability of the administration to collect, process and analyze in real time massive amounts of data from interactions with citizens and internal processes. This capability allows for faster and more informed decision-making, based on predictive algorithms and dynamic indicators, instead of traditional reactive indicators (Ris & Puvača, 2024, p. 13).

Furthermore, by integrating artificial intelligence into administrative processes, it is possible to automate repetitive and time-consuming tasks – such as analyzing requests, validating documents or managing complaints. Thus, human resources can be redirected to value-added activities, such as communicating with the public or developing policies (Goga, 2025, p. 3).

AI can also help eliminate human errors, standardize institutional responses, and create a proactive administration that is able to anticipate citizens' needs. For example, intelligent systems can automatically notify citizens of tax obligations, administrative deadlines, or relevant legislative changes (Scherling, 2024, p. 13).

Another key aspect of this vision is the interoperability of digital systems between public institutions. The lack of a unified IT ecosystem has led to redundancies, delays and difficulties in providing integrated services. The creation of a single digital platform for interaction with citizens – a one-stop-shop – would streamline the interaction between the state and the taxpayer, reducing bureaucracy and administrative costs (Gildehaus et al., 2023, p. 2).

Last but not least, digitalization brings with it the need for an organizational culture open to innovation. Public institutions must encourage continuous learning, flexibility in thinking and inter-institutional collaboration, abandoning resistance to change and rigid hierarchies. Only in this way can the real potential of new technologies in the service of the citizen be achieved (Ris & Puvača, 2024, p. 15).

## 3. Reality: Structural and Constitutional Constraints

Romania maintains a rigid administrative-territorial structure, enshrined in art. 3 par. (3) of the Constitution, which provides for organization into communes, cities and counties. This framework blocks the possibility of rapid adaptation to current socio-economic realities, in which many ATUs are no longer economically viable.

The analysis of the financial sustainability of the counties reveals major discrepancies between administrative capacity and available resources: for example, Giurgiu, Teleorman and Covasna counties record very high per capita administrative expenses in relation to the services provided.

At the level of small communes, the problem becomes even more acute. Many administrative-territorial units with a population of less than 1,500 inhabitants maintain complete administrative apparatuses, which generates high fixed costs and an inefficient allocation of public funds. The lack of economies of scale and a coherent digital infrastructure accentuates the already existing imbalances (Goga, 2025, p. 4).

This situation is aggravated by the fact that territorial reorganization is blocked not only by the lack of a strategic vision, but also by constitutional constraints. In the absence of an amendment to art. 3 and a redefinition of the concepts of administrative organization, any attempt at regional merger or restructuring runs into an outdated legal framework (Goga, 2025, p. 5).

In parallel, the lack of performance and economic sustainability criteria for ATUs perpetuates inefficient resource allocations. There are no clear mechanisms to assess whether an administrative unit provides quality public services in relation to the budget managed. Thus, a system is created in which inefficiency is tolerated or even encouraged through politicized allocations (Ivașcu et al., 2024, p. 6).

Moreover, the excessive fragmentation of the administrative apparatus limits the state's capacity to implement coherent public policies at the macro level. Without an integrated vision and functional regional structures, the coordination of development programs, the attraction of European funds and the provision of digital services become cumbersome and fragmented processes (Ris & Puvača, 2024, p. 31).

## 4. European Models and Good Practices

Countries such as Denmark and Sweden have gone through deep administrative reorganization processes, in parallel with the digitalization of services. The key to success has been the integrated approach – reducing territorial fragmentation, merging support services and sustained investments in digital infrastructure (Goga, 2025, p. 5).

In Denmark, the 2007 reform reduced the number of municipalities from 271 to 98 and replaced the 13 regions with 5 large administrative regions. This restructuring allowed not only to reduce administrative costs, but also to better coordinate public services, especially in critical areas such as health and education. Digitalization was used as a central tool to support this transition, through the introduction of a unified national e-government system (Ivascu et al., 2024, p. 22).

Sweden has opted for a digital decentralization strategy, with an emphasis on local autonomy within a common digital framework. The Swedish state has provided resources and clear standards for the digitalization of services, but has left local governments free to adapt their processes to the needs of their communities. This model has led to a significant increase in

citizen satisfaction and the development of innovative solutions in education, health and social protection (Ris & Puvača, 2024, p. 34).

Another notable example is Estonia, considered a model of e-government in Europe. By introducing mandatory electronic identity, institutional interoperability and online voting, Estonia has managed to transform citizen-state interaction into a fast, efficient and fully digitalized process. The result: annual savings estimated at 2% of GDP and a high degree of trust in public institutions (Gildehaus et al., 2023, p. 5).

In all these cases, success was determined not only by the technical solutions implemented, but also by strong political will, the active involvement of civil society and the establishment of clear and measurable objectives. These models emphasize that effective digitalization is only possible in the context of a restructured, professional and results-oriented administration (Scherling, 2024, p. 79).

## 5. Technology as a Driver of Efficiency

The literature highlights that successful digital transformation requires not only technology, but also an organizational culture oriented towards innovation, continuous learning and interdepartmental collaboration (Ris & Puvača, 2024, pp. 12–17). Transformation is not limited to the implementation of IT platforms, but involves a profound rethinking of the way public institutions operate, decision-making processes and relationships between administrative actors.

A relevant example is the concept of the flywheel operating model, proposed by Gildehaus and his collaborators, which describes an administrative system in which technology generates a continuous cycle of learning and adaptation. In this model, every digital interaction generates data, this data is analyzed in real time, and the results are used to improve processes and the citizen experience (Gildehaus et al., 2023, pp. 1–2). Therefore, the administration becomes a living organism, capable of dynamically adapting to the demands of society.

Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, cloud computing, robotic process automation (RPA) or predictive analytics, offer enormous potential for increasing administrative efficiency. For example, by using predictive algorithms, the administration can anticipate recurring requests (such as requests for personal documents or subsidies) and proactively redistribute resources, avoiding bottlenecks or delays.

Another essential aspect is interoperability. The IT systems of public institutions must communicate with each other fluidly, so that the citizen is not forced to become an "administrative courier", transporting documents between offices. Integrating databases and creating a coherent digital ecosystem are fundamental steps to eliminate redundancies, errors and waste of time and money.

In addition to direct benefits for the administration, technology also brings advantages for citizens: 24/7 access to public services, intuitive interfaces, traceability of requests and reduction of costs associated with moving or printing documents. Thus, efficiency becomes not only a technical objective, but also a dimension of democratic quality – a more efficient state is a more transparent, more accountable and closer to citizens' state.

Technology is not just a tool for modernization, but an essential condition for reinventing public administration. But for this engine of efficiency to function at full capacity, investments are needed not only in digital infrastructure, but also in human capital, in adaptive leadership and in creating an organizational climate that supports change and encourages experimentation.

## 6. Strategic Directions for Romania

Based on the analysis of the current situation and successful European models, several essential strategic directions are outlined for transforming the Romanian public administration into an efficient, digitalized and sustainable structure.

Amending the Constitution to introduce the concept of administrative regions and make the territorial structure more flexible is a necessary first step to allow for profound reforms. In its current form, the Romanian Constitution blocks administrative reorganization by expressly maintaining the traditional territorial levels – commune, city and county. By introducing administrative regions as the main level of organization, the legal framework would be created for the merger of unviable ATUs and for the implementation of unitary public policies at a regional scale (Goga, 2025, p. 5).

Centralizing support services (such as human resources, IT and accounting) at regional level would bring major benefits in terms of efficiency and cost reduction. Many small ATUs do not have qualified staff or adequate infrastructure to manage these functions. The creation of regional shared service centres would allow for the professionalization of resource management and eliminate redundancies that currently affect local budgets. Such a model has been successfully applied in Finland, where support services have been outsourced to autonomous regional units.

The development of a single, interoperable e-government platform between institutions is vital for the modernization of the citizen-state relationship. This would allow access to all public services through a single digital interface, reducing bureaucracy and eliminating the need for repetitive physical interactions. Such a platform must comply with common technical standards, allow for the automatic exchange of data between institutions, and be developed with the participation of all relevant actors (Scherling, 2024, p. 13).

Real-time monitoring of public spending using AI and blockchain would contribute to transparency and efficient budgetary control. Blockchain technologies can ensure the traceability of each public transaction, while artificial intelligence can automatically detect deviations from spending rules or administrative fraud. This type of digital control would allow audit authorities and civil society to oversee how public money is used, in an objective and continuous manner (Ivascu et al., 2024, p. 18).

Continuous professional training of civil servants in digital skills is essential for the success of any digitalization initiative. In the absence of qualified human resources, even the most performing platforms risk being underutilized or incorrectly implemented. A national program of digital upskilling and reskilling in the administration is needed, with clear certifications, periodic evaluations and salary incentives. These initiatives could be integrated into the human resources policies of each institution and correlated with performance objectives.

Overall, these directions cannot be implemented in isolation or sequentially. They require an integrated vision, a favorable legislative framework, sustainable financing (including from European funds) and, above all, real political will. The digital transformation of the Romanian administration must be a national priority project, which will fundamentally reconfigure the way the state interacts with citizens and manages public resources.

## 4. Conclusion

The public administration of the future cannot function according to the paradigms of the past. Rigid bureaucratic structures, territorial fragmentation, lack of digital interoperability and conservative organizational culture represent major obstacles to modern, efficient and citizen-oriented governance. Romania needs a courageous reform that puts the citizen at the center of the administrative process and harnesses the full potential of digital technology.

Digitalization is not an end in itself, but a means by which the state can become more transparent, accountable and agile. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain or cloud platforms allow the administration to make data-driven decisions, automate repetitive processes and drastically reduce response times to citizen requests. Moreover, they can become powerful tools in combating corruption and increasing public trust in institutions (Ivascu et al., 2024, p. 18).

However, technology is not enough if it is not accompanied by a profound structural change. Territorial reorganization, professionalization of civil servants, establishment of unique performance standards and adaptation of the Constitution to the realities of the 21st century are essential elements of a new social contract between the state and the citizen. Without a flexible and coherent normative basis, any digital reform risks being superficial and ineffective (Goga, 2025, p. 5).

International experiences demonstrate that the digital transformation of administration is possible and produces visible results when there is vision, leadership and institutional coherence. The models from Denmark, Estonia or Sweden offer concrete examples of well-planned public policies, with clear, measurable objectives and adapted to the realities of each state. Romania can and should learn from these good practices, adapting them to its institutional and cultural specifics (Ris & Puvača, 2024, p. 28).

Ultimately, a performing public administration is not only a condition for attracting investments or absorbing European funds, but a guarantee of the democratic functioning of the state. Without an efficient, digitalized and results-oriented administration, any sustainable development effort is doomed to failure. Therefore, public administration reform must become a national strategic priority, supported by political will, technical competence and civic involvement.

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