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**EVALUATION OF THE DIGITALIZATION OF PUBLIC SERVICES
AS A RESULT OF ADMINISTRATIVE SIMPLIFICATION**

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Paper Summary

Key words: Administrative Simplification, Digital Transformation, Life Events, Digital Divide, Romanian Public Administration, Administrative Simplification Tools.

Currently, digital transformation and the simplification of administrative procedures are essential elements in the efforts of central and local public authorities to modernize public administration and adapt public services to the real needs of citizens, as well as to technological changes. Both the digitalization of public services and administrative simplification are seen as solutions for making the public sector more efficient by reducing bureaucracy, shortening the duration of procedures, eliminating queues, improving transparency, and ensuring that citizens' access does not involve dealing with complex structures of the public administration.

Romania, like other countries (Poland, Bulgaria, etc.), faces challenges related to bureaucracy, corruption, and administrative inefficiency in dealing with citizens. In this context, digital transformation, administrative simplification, or the digitalization of public services are not just global trends, but immediate necessities to meet the real needs of citizens and their ever-changing expectations, as well as to ensure an efficient and effective public administration.

The aim of the thesis is to evaluate the digitalization of public services as a result of the simplification of administrative processes. To achieve this goal, eight specific objectives have been set as follows: (1) identifying the extent to which digital transformation of public services is based on the simplification of administrative procedures; (2) conducting a comparative analysis of life events whose administrative procedures have been digitalized between Romania and other European countries; (3) determining the extent to which administrative simplification is a fundamental condition for the success of the digital transformation process from the perspective of actors involved in digital transformation; (4) assessing the extent to which the lack of administrative simplification negatively affects the level of use of digital public services by citizens; (5) identifying citizens' perceptions of digital transformation and administrative simplification processes; (6) determining the extent to which citizens believe that the administrative procedures of digital public services have been simplified; (7) identifying the main obstacles citizens face in accessing and using existing digital public services; and (8) identifying the main administrative procedures that should be digitized and simplified from the citizens' perspective.

The utility of researching this subject is supported by DESI reports which rank Romania among the last places in Europe in terms of digital technology integration and digital public services. However, there are also positive aspects, such as internet speed, where Romania ranks 15th in Europe (DESI, 2022), which could serve as a catalyst for the development of digital public services.

The thesis is structured into seven chapters that theoretically and empirically evaluate the digitalization and simplification of administrative procedures in relation to various life events. Thus, Chapter I, *Conceptual Delimitations*, refers to the main concepts defined in the specialized literature: life events, digital transformation, digitalization, digitization, e-government, administrative simplification, digital divide.

Chapter II, *The Link between Administrative Simplification and Digital Transformation*, aims to identify and analyze the main tools and mechanisms of administrative simplification and digital transformation. This chapter also addresses the main barriers to the process of administrative simplification and digital transformation, their advantages and disadvantages, as well as the gaps between these two processes.

Despite efforts undertaken by central public authorities to modernize public administration in Romania, there is a statistical gap between the effects achieved and those of other European countries. This indicates that measures concerning the digitalization and simplification of administrative procedures are implemented chaotically and in a fragmented manner without a real assessment of what has already been undertaken. Before introducing other digital solutions, it is important to evaluate whether the already implemented digital platforms are functioning efficiently and effectively, whether they are being fully utilized, whether the current servers are adequate, if data security is ensured for users, if the language is easy for citizens to understand, if the platforms have a user-friendly and intuitive interface. One of the main problems in Romania is that many normative documents, draft laws, and strategies for developing new digital solutions are considered without improving the existing ones. Therefore, nationally, there are many underused platforms, or platforms where users encounter difficulties in navigating a procedure or in the process of connecting/registering, such as the mobile application ROeID where the authorization process is extremely cumbersome and time-consuming, or Ghişeu.ro, which crashes when making payments to certain services.

Moreover, digitalization is not just a technical issue but also a cultural one. Although statistics rank Romania last in Europe in terms of basic digital skills, there is still no strategy for digital

competencies, and only recently, through the National Recovery and Resilience Program, cross-cutting measures have been planned to develop the digital skills of 100,000 Romanian citizens within the C7 "Digital Transformation" component of the program.

Furthermore, the gap recorded by Romania in relation to other countries regarding administrative simplification and the digitalization of public services is also caused by the lack of citizen involvement in the process of developing digital transformation measures, despite the fact that they are the main pillars of public administration. They are best placed to indicate what works, what possible obstacles are encountered in the process of using electronic public services, how they perceive these changes, and what the main administrative procedures are that should be prioritized for digitalization. On the other hand, the digitalization of public services sometimes complicates their use, instead of easing it, as citizens are required to complete some procedures online and finish them offline due to the high level of digital sophistication required for many administrative procedures of life events.

The thesis aims to identify the barriers to this gap and to offer a comprehensive perspective on the process of digitalization and administrative simplification from both the citizens' and the specialists' perspectives in the field of digital transformation of central and local public administration.

The advantages of administrative simplification and digital transformation processes are more than evident: reduction in the number of documents, the time required to complete a procedure/operation, reduction of human errors, reduction of document flow, elimination of redundant bureaucratic steps, flexibility and accessibility, improvement of transparency, elimination of corruption, reduction of resource consumption which can contribute to sustainability, elimination of queues. However, the lack of a coherent legislative framework, insufficient or lack of digital skills, resistance to change, lack of or insufficient cybersecurity and interoperability, represent disadvantages of the administrative simplification and digital transformation process. To eliminate these, Romania needs to make significant efforts to meet the percentages required by European authorities and to eliminate the digital gap compared to other countries. This will not be achievable only by developing measures, as this has been done since 2001 with the adoption of the "Government Strategy for the Informatization of Public Administration", an approach that clearly does not lead to success when considering current statistics. It can be achieved through the effective implementation of the activities planned in legislative projects and programs and through periodic evaluation both during and after implementation. Only in this way can clear measures be conceived, focused on the addressed

problem, leading to performance, and ultimately reducing the gap recorded at the European level.

Chapter III, *Best Practice Examples in Administrative Simplification and Digital Transformation Based on Life Events*, refers to best practice examples of administrative simplification and digital transformation in relation to four life events: registration for tax and duty payments, issuance of identity documents, business registration, and vehicle registration. Denmark and Estonia are showcased as exemplary models for the digitalization of public services and administrative simplification, and their integration at the population level. In these countries, navigating the administrative procedures of the four life events analyzed is facilitated through a few digital platforms, with creating an account for payments to authorities via the NemKonto app being mandatory in Denmark. The process of going through administrative procedures is expedited through the use of a digital ID, the time required to navigate the procedures has been reduced, and interaction with public officials has been minimized to almost none, etc.

The success of these initiatives is also due to the strategic vision of Estonian and Danish authorities and the continuation of strategic objectives, the attention given to citizens by constantly collecting feedback, cross-sector collaboration, a clear legislative framework, a beneficiary-centered approach, etc. These examples highlight how a comprehensive approach involving strategic planning, legal frameworks, technology, and citizen engagement can lead to significant improvements in the efficiency and accessibility of public services, setting a standard for other countries to follow in the realm of digital transformation and administrative simplification.

Chapter IV, *Identification and Analysis of Simplified Administrative Procedures or Those Under Simplification in Romania*, aims to analyze the digital sophistication level of public services related to life events. Most digital public services associated with life events are at a level 2 of digital sophistication (53%), meaning that interaction with the citizen is one-way, with citizens only being able to download forms online. This is followed by level 3, which allows citizens to download, complete, and upload forms on the developed platforms.

Regarding the four life events in Romania, the situation is quite different from the best practice models analyzed. Out of the four administrative procedures examined, the registration for payments and taxes online has become simpler and easier to navigate following digitalization, indicating an orientation towards efficiency and effectiveness. However, the issuance of identity

documents and vehicle registration still require multiple interactions with public institutions. Compared to the digital transformation status of public administration in Denmark and Estonia, Romania still shows a significant gap. Although there are efforts to digitalize public services by the Romanian public authorities, these efforts do not necessarily translate into administrative simplification (for example, the procedure for starting a company can be done online, but still involves uploading at least 10 different documents. This situation underscores a discrepancy between the intention to digitally transform public administration and the reality of a digitalized bureaucracy).

The gap between Romania and the two aforementioned countries is determined by several factors such as the lack of digital signatures, interoperability, absence of a clear and sustained national vision, low emphasis on developing digital skills, and bureaucratic inertia which can be translated as "this is how we've always done it."

Chapter V, *The Covid-19 Pandemic – An Accelerating Factor for Digital Transformation*, explores the extent to which the process of administrative simplification and digital transformation was propelled by the Covid-19 pandemic. Specialized studies confirm the statement that the pandemic has accelerated the process of transforming public administration, highlighting the importance of administrative simplification. Nationally, central and local public authorities were forced to quickly adapt to the pandemic situation and continue ensuring access to public services, thus facilitating access to online forms, public interest information, online tax and duty payments, etc.

The Covid-19 pandemic also acted as an accelerator of digital transformation for other European countries, such as Croatia, where during the pandemic, 24 new public services were developed in the e-Citizens application. There was also an observed increase in the number of citizens using digital public services, namely the submission of applications online with or even without an electronic signature. Slovenia recorded the highest score (4.55 out of a maximum of 5), followed by Germany (4.28), while Romania obtained a score of 4.02 (Aristovnik et al, 2021). This result clearly highlights the pandemic's contribution to changing citizens' behavior towards digital public services and the degree of digitalization of public services worldwide.

Chapter VI, *Research Design*, represents the first empirical part of the thesis. In conducting the empirical part, a mixed approach was used, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative research methods employed included document analysis, which involved reviewing reports on the "Digital Economy and Society Index" (DESI) from

2018-2022. This allowed for the analysis of possible changes triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, activity reports from the National Trade Register Office for the years 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021, which enabled the examination of the evolution of requests for online business registration, as well as a series of articles and specialized studies that formed the basis of the theoretical part of the work. The analysis of DESI reports facilitated the identification of Romania's digital progress, as well as that of countries considered as best practice examples, namely Denmark and Estonia, across five dimensions (connectivity, human capital, use of internet services, integration of technology by businesses, and digital public services). Comparative analysis was used to examine the current state of digital transformation and administrative simplification processes for four life events (issuance of identity documents, business registration, registration for tax and duty payments, and vehicle registration) between Romania, Denmark, and Estonia. In this regard, websites and available platforms that citizens can use to navigate the administrative procedure for the four analyzed life events online were examined. Additionally, through opinion surveys, the goal was to identify citizens' attitudes and perceptions regarding the digitalization of public services and administrative simplification.

The opinion survey was conducted from April to June 2023, with 591 individuals interested in public administration providing valid responses. Of these, 351 questionnaires were completed online, while 240 were filled out in paper form, covering 27 counties. The polling technique was online for 59.4% of the administered questionnaires, and 40.6% were conducted in person.

The use of exploratory qualitative research helped in understanding the perceptions and attitudes of the actors involved regarding digital transformation and administrative simplification processes, serving as a complement to the quantitative research. In this context, the interview allowed for the identification of the extent to which administrative simplification is a fundamental condition for ensuring the success of the digital transformation process from the perspective of those involved in the digital transformation process. The research tool used was the semi-structured interview guide.

The interviews were conducted online via the ZOOM platform in May 2023 and included participants such as the president of the Digitalization Authority of Romania (ADR), the president of the Information Technology and Communications Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, the mayor of Ciugud commune in Alba county, the executive director of the non-governmental organization Code4Romania, the head of the "Information Strategies" Service within the Cluj-Napoca city hall, the deputy general director of the National Directorate of Cyber Security, and two public officials in leadership positions from the Cluj-Napoca city hall.

The chapter also addressed the research limitations, such as social desirability, the non-response of actors involved in the digital transformation process of public administration at both central and local levels to official requests sent, the lack of citizen interest in participating in the study—a disinterest that could be explained either by a lack of interest in public administration or by prejudices against political leaders and the acceptance that their opinion would not lead to major changes—and the underrepresentation of some counties.

The final chapter, *Research Results*, presents the analysis and interpretation of the data collected from the opinion survey and interviews, along with the testing of research hypotheses. The quantitative data analysis was performed using the SPSS statistical analysis program, which facilitated frequency and mean response analyses, as well as hypothesis testing through associations.

The empirical part of the thesis also included qualitative research. The first research question aimed to determine to what extent administrative simplification is a basic condition for the success of digital transformation. It was noted that to ensure the success of the digital transformation of public administration, administrative procedures must be simplified so that the user can complete a procedure in the shortest possible time and obtain the requested document without having to go through an infinite number of steps or upload a series of documents.

The research confirmed that a higher perception of administrative procedure simplification in the digitalization process is positively associated with a higher degree of satisfaction with the quality of citizens' lives. Furthermore, a higher perception of increased efficiency and speed of request processing as an advantage of digitalizing public services is significantly associated with the perception of a greater necessity for simplifying administrative procedures for the main public services. Additionally, the research results showed that the need for developing digital skills among citizens is not perceived differently by age, but that it is imperative to implement and develop more digital literacy tools so that the level of usage of digital public services can be improved. Moreover, employed individuals tend to believe to a greater extent that administrative simplification contributes to improving their quality of life, compared to those who are not active in the labor market.

The empirical part of the thesis also involved qualitative research, which sought to determine the extent to which administrative simplification is a fundamental condition for the success of digital transformation. It was noted that, to ensure the success of the digital transformation of

public administration, it is necessary to simplify administrative procedures so that users can complete a process in the shortest possible time and obtain the requested document without having to navigate through an infinite number of steps or upload numerous documents.

Among the main challenges encountered in the process of administrative simplification and the digital transformation of public services are the following: lack of interoperability, absence of a government Cloud, the mentality of public servants, resistance to change, citizens' reluctance to use digital public services and their lack of trust in data security, cumbersome and constantly changing legislative framework, lack/shortage of IT specialists, complacency, lack of responsibility, initiative, and creativity among leaders, as well as the absence of continuous monitoring and coordination of the implementation of measures regarding administrative simplification and digital transformation.

In addressing the research question on how the process of administrative simplification can contribute to the digital transformation of public administration, it is assessed that there is an interdependence between these processes. To ensure digital transformation, it is necessary to simplify administrative procedures based on life events before the digitalization of public services; otherwise, we will contribute only to a digitalization of bureaucracy rather than to a true digital transformation.

In Romania, the digitalization of public services and the simplification of administrative procedures have made progress, a progression that was also accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the country still ranks at the bottom of European indexes regarding digital public services. To maximize the benefits of these processes, it's essential to adapt the principles of public administration to the digital society, to the real needs of the citizens, and to their expectations. This can be achieved by rethinking the administrative system and creating an integrated vision, a more unified national strategy that defines objectives, deadlines, etc. In addition to measures for improving the level of digitalization of public services and administrative simplification proposed by respondents, the implementation of tools for evaluating and monitoring these processes is added to measure progress or identify potential obstacles. Also important is facilitating interoperability through the adoption of a national interoperability framework that sets principles and standards for all institutions and public authorities, as well as improving data security.

Based on the research objectives and obtained results, a system for monitoring and evaluating the process of administrative simplification has been proposed. This system consists of 10

indicators, both quantitative and qualitative, according to which basic aspects of the administrative simplification process are measured, including: the number of simplified administrative procedures; the cost of processing requests; the perceived cost by the citizen for going through the procedure; the processing time of requests after simplification; the response time to requests following the simplification of the procedure; the number of necessary documents; the number of steps required to complete a procedure; the number of institutions involved; the usage rate of public services whose procedure has been simplified; and the level of user satisfaction regarding simplified administrative procedures. These indicators can be measured through self-evaluation on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, and based on them, a monitoring and evaluation index will be constructed that will be proposed to central public institutions.

Given that one of the main predictors of the administrative simplification process is, among others, the lack of its monitoring and evaluation, this monitoring and evaluation system could be applied through a partnership between a non-governmental organization, the FSPAC Research Center, and Babeş-Bolyai University. Through the Associations of Municipalities and Communes of Romania, this partnership could ensure the annual evaluation of the administrative simplification process at the level of local urban and rural public authorities and institutions. An annual evaluation of the administrative simplification process can encourage the development and implementation of new local public policies for administrative simplification.

Furthermore, aspects that should receive more attention when seeking the digital transformation of Romanian public administration include improving platforms that provide access to existing digital public services before developing new ones, and integrating cybersecurity systems that align with the real needs of citizens. To ensure a high level of responsiveness and usage of digital public services by citizens, broader information dissemination about how to use platforms for accessing online public services, as well as the advantages of digitalizing public services, is necessary. This action could be further developed through online information campaigns via mass media, as well as offline, and by introducing mechanisms to encourage or mandate the use of existing digital public services, following the Danish model, where, for example, making payments to public authorities online is mandatory.

In conclusion, the thesis facilitates a deeper understanding of the digitalization and administrative simplification process by offering perspectives from both citizens, as users and beneficiaries of public services, and specialists involved in the administrative simplification

and digital transformation process. By combining these two perspectives, new actions can be reconsidered to facilitate the digital transformation process and meet citizens' expectations

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