

Challenges of Administrative Reforms in Southern and Eastern Europe in the Era of Digitalization: A Comparative Study of Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Serbia

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Abstract: The process of digitalization of public administration represents one of the most important institutional transformations in contemporary Europe. However, the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe face specific challenges in implementing the administrative reforms necessary for the development of digital governance. Differences in institutional capacity, level of economic development, administrative culture and degree of European integration significantly influence the pace and efficiency of these reforms. The paper presents the results of the comparative analysis of the administrative reform and digitalization processes in Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia, highlighting the main institutional, technological and political challenges encountered in the process of modernizing public administration. The study uses a comparative methodology based on the analysis of strategic documents, European reports and indicators on digital governance. The results highlight the fact that, although digitalization is recognized as a strategic priority in all the countries analyzed, the implementation of administrative reforms remains influenced by factors such as institutional fragmentation, limited administrative capacity and the variable level of inter-institutional cooperation. The article contributes to understanding the dynamics of administrative reforms in Southern and Eastern Europe and highlights the importance of strengthening institutional capacity for the success of the digital transformation of public administration.

Keywords: Administrative Reform, Digitalization, E-Government, South-Eastern Europe, Institutional Capacity

1. Introduction

The transformation of public administrations in Southern and Eastern Europe is a central component of the process of modernizing the state in the era of digitalization. Over the past two decades, governments in this region have faced significant structural and institutional challenges, driven by their post-communist or post-authoritarian past, the varying levels of economic development and the need to adapt to European governance standards (European Commission, 2022). The digitalization of public administration has thus become a strategic tool, not only for making public services more efficient, but also for strengthening transparency, accountability and civic participation. In Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia, the digitalization process has been influenced by various factors.

Romania and Croatia, member states of the European Union, have benefited from the financial and technical support of the European Commission, implementing e-government programs and digital platforms aimed at increasing citizens' access to public services. Greece, faced with repeated economic crises, has tried to reconcile budgetary austerity with the need to modernize public administration, while Bulgaria and Serbia have encountered institutional challenges related to the fragmentation of the administration and the limited capacity of

public personnel to integrate digital technologies into administrative flows (OECD, 2021). However, digitalization is not just a technological process; it involves profound changes in organizational culture, employee skills, and decision-making mechanisms. In Southern and Eastern Europe, these dimensions become critical, as administrative reforms have to adapt to a socio-political framework marked by strong bureaucratic traditions, regional inequalities, and different levels of trust in institutions (Bulgaria Ministry of Administration, 2020a; Gkintidis, 2021). For example, in Serbia, the integration of e-government principles is influenced by the need to align with European standards, in parallel with the resilience of traditional bureaucratic structures. In Greece, the implementation of digital reforms has often been slowed down by budgetary constraints and difficulties in adopting a coherent legislative framework for e-services.

The comparative study of these five countries allows for the highlighting of both common patterns and specific differences in the adoption of digital administrative reforms. The central objective of the paper is to identify the main institutional, political and technological challenges that influence the success or failure of digitalization, as well as the lessons that can be applied at regional and international level. In this sense, the analysis focuses on institutional capacity, the degree of interoperability of digital systems, legislative strategies and public policies aimed at supporting the transition to e-government. Through this approach, the article not only documents the current state of administrative reforms in the five countries, but also provides a critical analysis of the factors that facilitate or inhibit the implementation of digitalization, contributing to a broader understanding of the challenges associated with the modernization of public administration in the region (European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2021). In conclusion, the digitalization of public administration in Southern and Eastern Europe cannot be perceived as an isolated technical process; it represents a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between institutional capacity, socio-political context and public policies. The comparative study of Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia allows the identification of critical success factors and the formulation of strategic recommendations to support the development of a modern, efficient and transparent administrative framework, adequate to the challenges of the digital age.

2. Research methodology

The paper adopts a comparative approach, specific to governance and public administration studies, aimed at highlighting both the similarities and differences in the process of administrative reform and digitalization in Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia. This methodology allows the identification of institutional, political and technological factors that influence the success or failure of the implementation of digital administrative reforms, as well as comparing the degree of integration of e-government within different national administrative systems (OECD, 2021).

The study is based on documentary analysis and secondary data. The main sources include official reports and strategies such as national documents on the digitalization of public administration and administrative reforms, as well as the European Commission's strategies for digital governance (European Commission 2022). International comparative indicators were added to the study - the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), the OECD index on the efficiency of public administrations and the level of digital interoperability (OECD, 2021). Of course, the research methodology included academic studies and public policy analyses, recent research on digital transformation in Southern and Eastern Europe, with a focus on institutional capacity, IT infrastructure and organizational culture of public administrations (Gkintidis, 2021; Bulgaria Ministry of Administration, 2020b). The comparative analysis focuses on five main dimensions:

- institutional capacity measured by the structure and efficiency of public administration, the number of staff trained in the digital field and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms;
- digitalization of public services resulting from the degree of implementation of online platforms, and from the interoperability of systems and the accessibility of services for citizens and businesses;
- legislative and strategic framework that took into account the existence of coherent legislation for digital governance, national digitalization plans and alignment with European standards;
- organizational culture and resistance to change that analyzes the extent to which administrative staff accept new technologies and processes;
- the impact of European policies and funding in supporting digital reforms.

This methodology allows for a multidimensional analysis, which is not limited to the technological assessment of digital platforms, but integrates institutional, cultural and political aspects. In addition, the study uses a critical comparative approach, highlighting good practices, common challenges and specific differences in each country analyzed. This perspective is essential for formulating recommendations that contribute to strengthening administrative capacity and streamlining the digitalization process across the region.

3. The context of administrative reforms and digitalization in Europe

In the last two decades, public administrations in Europe have undergone a broad transformation process, driven by technological developments and the need to adapt state institutions to the requirements of the digital society. The concept of digital government has become a central element of the modernization of public administration, being associated with the use of information technologies to improve the efficiency of public services, increase institutional transparency and facilitate interaction between the state and citizens. In this context, digitalization is no longer perceived exclusively as a technological tool, but as a complex process of institutional transformation that involves the reorganization of administrative structures, the development of digital skills and the reform of governance procedures (OECD, 2021). At the European level, administrative modernization initiatives are strongly influenced by the strategies promoted by the European Commission, which has developed policies and instruments aimed at supporting the digital transformation of public administrations in the Member States and candidate countries. Among the most important initiatives are the Digital Decade 2030 strategy, as well as the programs dedicated to the development of digital infrastructure and the interoperability of administrative systems. In this framework, the digitalization of public administration is seen as an essential element for strengthening the digital single market and improving the economic competitiveness of European states (European Commission, 2022).

An important tool for assessing the progress of digitalization in European countries is the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), which measures the performance of countries in areas such as digital connectivity, human capital, integration of digital technologies and digital public services. DESI analyses show that there are significant differences between countries in Western Europe and those in Southern and Eastern Europe, especially in terms of the degree of digitalization of public administration and the institutional capacity to implement digital reforms (European Commission, 2022). In Southern and Eastern Europe, administrative reforms are influenced by historical and institutional particularities that affect the pace of administrative modernization. Many of these countries have gone through complex processes of political and economic transition, and their public administrations are still in the process of adapting to the principles of modern governance, such as institutional efficiency, transparency and administrative accountability. In this context, digitalization represents both an opportunity for modernization and a major challenge for existing

administrative systems (World Bank, 2020). Another relevant element is the role of international organizations and regional cooperation programs in supporting administrative reforms. Organizations such as the OECD promote standards and good practices on digital governance, providing countries with assessment tools and recommendations to improve administrative capacity and the quality of public services (OECD, 2021).

At the same time, the digitalization of public administration involves significant challenges related to the interoperability of information systems, data protection, cybersecurity and the development of digital skills of civil servants. In many countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, these issues are complicated by institutional fragmentation, limited administrative resources and organizational resistance to change. From this perspective, the success of digital administrative reforms depends not only on technological investments, but also on the ability of governments to implement structural reforms and promote an institutional culture oriented towards innovation and efficiency (World Bank, 2020; OECD, 2021). Therefore, understanding the European context of digitalization of public administration is essential for the comparative analysis of administrative reforms in Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia. These countries face similar challenges in the process of administrative modernization, but differences in institutional capacity, economic resources and European integration significantly influence the pace and efficiency of digital transformation.

3.1 General trends in the modernization of public administration

The process of modernizing public administration in Europe is characterized by a series of structural trends that reflect the adaptation of state institutions to the challenges of the digital economy and the information society. These transformations go beyond the strictly technological dimension and involve profound changes in the way public administration is organized and operated, in the relationship between the state and citizens, as well as in the mechanisms for formulating and implementing public policies. One of the most important trends is *the digitalization of public services*, which involves the integration of information technologies into administrative processes and the development of electronic platforms for the provision of services to citizens and the business environment. In many European countries, public administrations have developed unified digital portals that allow access to administrative services, online submission of documents and direct interaction with public institutions. These initiatives aim to simplify bureaucratic procedures and increase institutional efficiency, while also contributing to reducing administrative costs and improving government transparency (European Commission, 2022).

Another important trend is *the interoperability of administrative systems*, which involves the integration of different databases and IT platforms used by public institutions. By developing interoperable systems, public administrations can facilitate the exchange of information between institutions and reduce the redundancy of administrative procedures. At the European level, interoperability is promoted through policies and standards developed by the European Commission, designed to support the development of an integrated digital infrastructure at its level (European Commission, 2022). The modernization of public administration is also influenced by the development of the concept of open government, which promotes transparency, citizen participation and free access to public information. By using digital technologies, public administrations can facilitate the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes and strengthen institutional accountability mechanisms. This trend is supported by international organizations such as the OECD, which promote standards and good practices regarding transparency and public participation in the governance process (OECD, 2021).

The next defining element of administrative modernization is the development of digital skills in the public sector. The digital transformation of public administration requires not

only adequate technological infrastructure, but also human resources capable of managing and using new technologies effectively. In this regard, many European countries have implemented professional training programs for civil servants, designed to improve digital skills and facilitate adaptation to new administrative processes (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

Last but not least, the modernization of public administration is associated with *the simplification of administrative procedures and the reduction of bureaucracy*. Digitalization allows the automation of some administrative processes, the elimination of physical documents and the reduction of the number of direct interactions between citizens and public institutions. These changes contribute to increasing administrative efficiency and improving the public perception of the functioning of state institutions (World Bank 2020). These trends reflect a structural transformation of European public administrations, aimed at creating more efficient, more transparent institutions and better adapted to the requirements of the digital society. However, the implementation of these reforms is influenced by factors such as institutional capacity, economic resources and the organizational culture of public administration. Especially in the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe, these aspects determine significant differences in the pace and efficiency of the administrative modernization process.

4. Comparative analysis of administrative reforms

The comparative analysis of administrative reforms provides a relevant perspective on how the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe respond to the challenges generated by the digital transformation of public administration. Although these countries share certain common historical and institutional characteristics, such as political transition processes, structural reforms and efforts to align with European governance standards, the pace and efficiency of the implementation of administrative reforms differ significantly from one country to another. In this context, the comparative analysis of administrative reforms in Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia allows highlighting the main directions of modernizing public administration, as well as identifying common challenges and structural differences that influence the success of digitalization processes. At the same time, this approach highlights the role of institutional, economic and political factors in shaping national administrative reform strategies.

The research analyses each of these countries from the perspective of administrative reforms and digitalization initiatives, taking into account the legislative and strategic framework, the level of digitalization of public services, institutional capacity and the degree of integration of digital technologies into administrative processes. This analysis aims to highlight both the progress made and the obstacles that continue to limit the digital transformation of public administrations in the region, thus contributing to the formulation of comparative conclusions relevant for public policies in Southern and Eastern Europe.

The comparative analysis of administrative reforms and digitalization processes in Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia was carried out based on a set of indicators that reflect the main dimensions of public administration modernization and digital transformation. These indicators are frequently used in comparative analyses on digital governance and administrative capacity, being taken from reports of international organizations and from European strategic documents. The first indicator used is the status within the European Union, which allows for the assessment of the influence of the European integration process on administrative reforms and the digitalization of the public sector. The European Union Member States benefit from institutional and financial mechanisms dedicated to the modernization of public administration, including funding programs and monitoring tools developed by the European Commission (European Commission, 2022).

The second indicator analyzed is the existence of national digitalization strategies, which reflect the commitment of governments to promote the digital transformation of public administration. These strategies include objectives regarding the development of digital infrastructure, the interoperability of administrative systems and the expansion of online public services. Another important indicator is the level of digital public services, which refers to the degree of availability of online administrative services and their accessibility for citizens and businesses. This indicator is frequently assessed through digital governance reports published by organizations such as the OECD and through monitoring tools such as the DESI index (OECD, 2021; European Commission, 2022). The analysis also included the indicator on institutional interoperability, which reflects the capacity of public institutions to exchange information and integrate administrative IT systems. Interoperability is an essential element of digital governance, as it facilitates the simplification of administrative procedures and increases the efficiency of decision-making processes.

Another relevant indicator is administrative capacity, which refers to the institutional and human resources available to implement administrative reforms and digitalization projects. This dimension includes the digital skills of civil servants, inter-institutional coordination mechanisms and the level of professionalization of public administration (World Bank 2020). Finally, the analysis took into account the level of use of digital services by citizens, which indicates the degree of adoption of digital administrative platforms and the level of trust of the population in online public services. This indicator reflects not only the availability of digital infrastructure, but also the efficiency and accessibility of services offered by public administrations.

By using these indicators, the comparative analysis allows for a multidimensional assessment of administrative reforms and digitalization processes in the analyzed countries, highlighting both the progress achieved and the challenges that continue to influence the modernization of public administration in Southern and Eastern Europe.

The comparative analysis highlights that all five countries analyzed have adopted national digitalization strategies and administrative reforms aimed at modernizing public administration, but the level of their implementation differs significantly. The European Union Member States - Romania, Greece, Bulgaria and Croatia - benefit from a more consolidated institutional and financial framework for the development of digital public services, while Serbia is in a gradual process of adapting to European standards in the context of European integration. At the same time, the table indicates that the main common challenges remain institutional fragmentation, limited administrative capacity and the need to develop digital skills in the public sector.

In order to synthetically illustrate the results of the comparative analysis and to highlight the main differences and similarities between the countries analyzed, the aforementioned indicators were integrated into a comparative framework applied to the five case studies: Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia. This approach allows for the simultaneous assessment of several dimensions relevant to the modernization of public administration, such as those listed above. By aggregating these indicators in a comparative format, regional trends and common challenges characterizing the digital transformation process of public administrations in Southern and Eastern Europe can be identified. At the same time, presenting the results in a tabular form facilitates highlighting the structural differences between the analyzed countries, providing a clear picture of the current state of administrative reforms and digitalization of the public sector. In this context, Table 1 summarizes the main results of the comparative analysis, highlighting the indicators used and the level of development of administrative reforms and digital governance in each of the analyzed countries.

Table 1. Comparative indicators of administrative reforms and digitalization in Southern and Eastern Europe

Indicator	Romania	Greece	Bulgaria	Croatia	Serbia
EU Status	EU Member State (since 2007)	EU Member State (since 1981)	EU Member State (since 2007)	EU Member State (since 2013)	EU Candidate Country
National Digitalization Strategies	Digital Agenda for Romania; Digital Transformation Strategies	Digital Transformation Bible Strategy	Digital Bulgaria Strategy	e-Croatia Strategy	Digital Serbia Strategy
Level of Digitalization of Public Services	Medium	Medium–High	Medium	Medium–High	Medium
Institutional Interoperability	Limited	Developing	Limited	Relatively consolidated	Developing
Administrative Capacity	Variable (central–local disparities)	Relatively consolidated	Moderate	Relatively stable	In the process of consolidation
Use of Digital Services by Citizens	Increasing	High	Moderate	Moderate	Increasing
Main Challenges	Institutional fragmentation, limited digital skills	Budget constraints and structural reforms	Limited administrative capacity	Institutional coordination	Institutional modernization and European integration
Main Sources	European Commission 2022; OECD 2021	European Commission 2022; Gkintidis 2021	European Commission 2022; Bulgaria Ministry of Administration 2020	European Commission 2022; World Bank 2020	World Bank 2020; OECD 2021

Source: Author's, based on reports from the European Commission, OECD, and World Bank (2020–2022)

Note: The data presented in the table were synthesized based on reports on digital governance and administrative reforms published by the European Commission, OECD and the World Bank, as well as the national digitalization strategies adopted by the analyzed countries.

In the context of the digital transformation of European public administrations, the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe have embarked on complex institutional modernization processes aimed at responding to the challenges of the information society and ensuring the efficiency and transparency of public services. This section provides a comparative overview of the administrative reforms and digitalization initiatives implemented in Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia. This analysis focuses on e-government strategies, digitalization of public services, institutional interoperability and administrative capacity, highlighting both the progress made and the obstacles limiting the efficiency of the reform process. Through a comparative approach, this section aims to identify common trends and structural differences between the countries, providing a solid basis for assessing the impact of digitalization on the modernization of public administrations in the region. The analysis sets the stage for the detailed presentation of each country, as well as for the comparative table summarizing the main results of the analysis.

Administrative reforms and digitalization in Romania have been strongly influenced by the institutional modernization objectives associated with European integration and the need to align public administration with the governance standards promoted at the European

Union level. In this context, the digitalization of public administration has become one of the main strategic directions of reform, being considered an essential tool for increasing institutional efficiency, reducing bureaucracy and improving citizens' access to public services. The e-government strategies adopted in Romania have aimed at developing digital infrastructure and integrating information technologies into administrative processes. Relevant strategic documents include the Digital Agenda programs and recent initiatives for the digital transformation of public administration, developed in cooperation with the European Commission. These strategies set objectives regarding the interoperability of information systems, the development of digital public services and the increase in the use of digital technologies in the public sector (European Commission, 2022). The digitalization of public services in Romania has made significant progress in recent years, especially in areas such as taxation, public procurement and the relationship between the administration and the business environment. The implementation of electronic platforms for filing tax returns, managing administrative procedures and accessing public information has contributed to simplifying the interaction between citizens and state institutions. However, the digitalization process is still influenced by challenges such as the fragmentation of IT systems, the variable level of administrative capacity at local level and the deficit of digital skills in the public sector (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

Administrative reforms and digitalization in Greece were significantly influenced by the economic and financial crisis that hit the country between 2008 and 2015. In this context, the modernization of public administration became a strategic priority for successive governments, being considered essential for increasing institutional efficiency and strengthening the state's capacity to implement effective public policies. After the economic crisis, Greece implemented a comprehensive set of administrative reforms aimed at reducing bureaucracy, improving institutional transparency and strengthening administrative capacity. These reforms were supported by institutional cooperation and financial support programs coordinated by the European Commission and other international organizations, which supported the restructuring of public administration and the modernization of administrative procedures (OECD, 2021). A central element of the administrative reforms in Greece is the digitalization of public services and the development of e-government platforms. The Greek government has implemented integrated digital portals for the provision of administrative services and for facilitating the interaction between citizens and public institutions. These initiatives have contributed to **simplifying** administrative procedures and increasing the efficiency of public services, although the modernization process continues to be influenced by challenges such as budgetary constraints and the complexity of the administrative structure (European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2021).

In Bulgaria, the administrative modernization process was influenced by the accession to the European Union in 2007 and the need to align public institutions with European standards on governance and digitalization. Despite the progress made, Bulgaria still faces a number of structural and institutional challenges that affect the effectiveness of the reform process. The main institutional challenges to the modernization of public administration include institutional fragmentation, limited administrative capacity at local level and organizational resistance to change. These issues affect the interoperability of IT systems and the coherent implementation of reforms at national level. Regional differences in digital infrastructure and civil servants' skills also exacerbate difficulties in standardizing digital public services (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2020). Despite the institutional challenges, Bulgaria has implemented a number of programs to digitalize public administration, including the development of electronic portals for tax services, public procurement and administrative document management. E-government projects aimed to reduce bureaucracy, increase transparency and facilitate citizens' access to public services, contributing to increasing the

adoption of digital services, especially in urban areas (European Commission, 2022; Bulgaria Ministry of Administration 2020a,b).

Administrative reforms and digitalization in Croatia intensified after joining the European Union in 2013, when it implemented administrative reforms aimed at strengthening institutional capacity and promoting the digitalization of public services. Accession provided a favorable institutional and financial framework, as well as mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating progress in modernizing public administration. The reforms aimed at strengthening inter-institutional coordination, simplifying administrative procedures, and developing digital infrastructure. Croatia invested in creating integrated electronic platforms for public services, facilitating citizens' and businesses' access to public administration. Digitalization efforts also aimed at increasing the transparency and efficiency of public institutions, reducing bureaucracy, and simplifying administrative flows (World Bank, 2020; European Commission, 2022).

In Serbia, the administrative modernization process is taking place in the context of preparing for European integration and aligning with European Union standards. Serbia is implementing administrative reforms and digitalization projects with the aim of increasing institutional efficiency and improving citizens' access to public services. The reforms aim to strengthen institutional capacity, develop digital skills in the public sector, and modernize the IT infrastructure. The implementation of electronic platforms for administrative services and the development of digital governance strategies aim to simplify procedures, increase transparency, and prepare public administration for alignment with European standards. However, Serbia faces challenges related to limited resources, institutional fragmentation, and the need to develop a coherent legislative and organizational framework for digitalization (World Bank, 2020; OECD, 2021). The visual interpretation of the graph resulting from the comparisons of indicators resulting from the European Commission's *Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2022*, shows us that Greece and Croatia appear higher in the total score, indicating more advanced digitalization compared to Romania and Bulgaria; human capital represents a clear point of difference between the states, highlighting the importance of digital skills for the success of reforms, and digital public services show a significant gap between Bulgaria and the other states, indicating areas with development potential (European Commission, 2022).

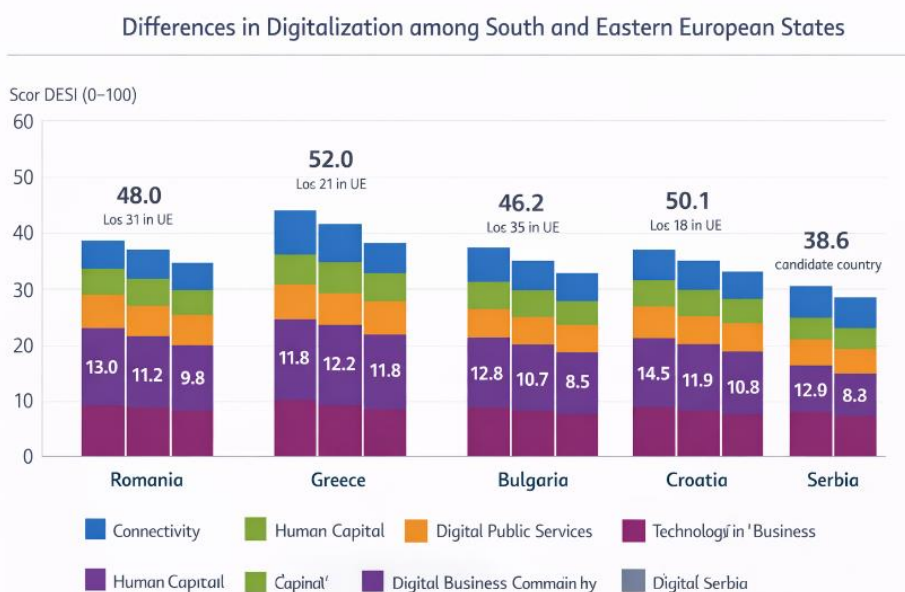


Figure 1. Differences in Digitalization Levels among Selected Southern and Eastern European Countries (European Commission, 2022).

5. General conclusions

The comparative analysis of administrative reforms and digitalization in Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia shows that, although the countries have made significant progress in developing digital public services, there are common structural challenges that limit the impact and efficiency of the modernization process. Limited administrative capacity, institutional fragmentation, insufficiently integrated digital infrastructure and organizational resistance to change represent major obstacles to the coherent implementation of reforms. DESI data highlights important differences between countries: Greece and Croatia score higher and have more advanced digitalization, while Romania and Bulgaria face gaps and Serbia, in the process of European integration, has slower modernization rates. These results have significant implications for public policies. They highlight the need for coherent and coordinated strategies that combine investments in digital infrastructure with strengthening institutional capacity and developing the digital skills of civil servants. Policies must aim to reduce institutional fragmentation, increase system interoperability, and promote the adoption of digital services by citizens and businesses, so that technology becomes an effective tool for governance, transparency, and administrative efficiency.

Future directions of reform focus on several strategic priorities. First, strengthening administrative capacity at local and national level, through training programs and developing digital skills. Second, harmonizing digital infrastructure and integrating institutional systems for interoperable public services. Third, promoting an organizational culture responsive to change, reducing institutional resistance and encouraging innovation in the public sector. Finally, aligning reforms and digitalization projects with European and international best practices will be essential for strengthening effective governance and for the resilience of public administrations in the digital era. In conclusion, the success of modernizing public administrations in Southern and Eastern Europe depends not only on technology, but also on institutional capacity, inter-institutional coordination and the adoption of an integrated strategic vision that combines digital reforms with the cultural and organizational transformation of the public sector. This is the key to building efficient, transparent and 21st-century-adapted administrations.

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