

Reduced Bureaucracy? Accessing European Funds to Improve Public Administration Digitalisation in Romania

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Abstract

The digital transformation of public administration is a phenomenon that has gained momentum as a result of innovations in information and communication technology over the last few decades. Among other things, this progress has made it possible to reconceive the way citizens and businesses interact with public service organisations in a completely new space. Using a qualitative approach, the work analyses in real time the financial, administrative and technological perspective of the funds available at regional and national level, to identify convergent and divergent aspects that enable the development of digitalisation initiatives within public administration. The current framework reveals a preference by funding authorities for a “top-down” approach, supporting projects that bring clear added value in order to go beyond the stage of classic digitisation. However, the challenge for these authorities remains to ensure a real impact and effective use of digitalised public services, not just the formal fulfilment of certain indicators.

Keywords: *Digitalisation; Public Administration; European Funds; National and Regional Strategies; Efficiency*



INTRODUCTION

The European Commission's 2030 vision aims to continue efforts and policy objectives regarding the digitalisation of public administration [1]. A digital society requires significant investment in infrastructure, education and professional knowledge, as well as in the functional transformation of businesses and public sector organisations. This goal is also fuelled by the need to increase the European Union's overall productivity and competitiveness, and the digitalisation of public services plays an important role in this regard. The financing of digital priorities demonstrates the supranational level's commitment to supporting the digital transition of the economy and society, with a comprehensive investment vehicle. In this regard, a number of programmes, mechanisms and funds currently in place ensure the development of the digital society. Examples such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility with a total budget of 650 billion EUR, of which at least 20% of the funding in each national plan is earmarked for supporting the digital reform agenda [2], as well as the Digital Europe Programme, the first strategic European funding programme for advanced technologies with a budget of 7.58 billion EUR [3], are key initiatives that demonstrate the importance of harnessing technological progress for the benefit of society. Thus, analysing the potential for digitalisation in the middle of the current programming period represents a real-time assessment of how the programmes are working, allowing the identification of trends, barriers or inconsistencies, with the aim of formulating valuable judgements on their implementation.

The current state of research on the spectrum of digitalisation of public sector organisations shows that the field is in an early stage of development, with preliminary assessments of the pathways, implementation mechanisms and organisational changes that occur when public authorities and institutions are exposed to technological progress [4]. In other words, quantitative research focuses on political, economic, social, technological, legislative and environmental factors, as well as on the territorial impact of previous strategies and funding, while qualitative approaches [5] highlight specific funding mechanisms and particular cases in which the public sector has undergone technological changes [6].

From a methodological point of view, this study adopts a qualitative research methodology aimed at analysing the capacity of the Romanian public administration to develop digitalisation project proposals within the framework of non-reimbursable European funding for the 2021–2027 programming period. The methodological choice is justified by the need to identify and explain the current institutional, regulatory, and strategic dimensions that shape public sector digitalisation beyond purely quantitative indicators.

The programmes analysed were selected based on the existence of RSO1.2 specific policy dedicated to exploiting technological opportunities, their content and how relevant they are in implementing digitalisation projects on national and regional levels nowadays. More accurate, the selection of documents was guided by their formal relevance to the design and implementation of digitalisation projects in public administration, by their applicability to potential beneficiaries at central and local government level and their role in defining funding priorities, eligible actions, and implementation conditions within the current programming period. Furthermore, data referring to intervention measures in sectoral areas (e.g., justice, education, health, etc.) were excluded from the research, as each of these represent distinct research topics that should be analysed in-depth in future research.

The research analyses, in real time, the financial, administrative, and technological perspectives embedded in the available funding mechanisms. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis reveals a prevailing preference among funding authorities for a top-down approach to digitalisation, prioritising projects that demonstrate clear added value, systemic impact, and alignment with broader public sector reform objectives.



The main objective of this paper is to analyse the possibilities for the Romanian public administration to formulate digitalisation project proposals from the perspective of non-reimbursable funding within the current programming period. Therefore, we will seek to show how potential applicants, namely local and central government, can be encouraged, from a funding perspective, to embrace a process of fundamental change. This paper makes an important contribution to expanding knowledge in the field by analysing the architecture of intervention measures dedicated to digitalisation within regional and national programmes, specifically the Operational Programme for Smart Growth, Digitalisation and Financial Instruments (POCIDIF). Using a prospective approach, we will analyse how the eligibility criteria and the repertoire of available actions found in the application documentation contribute to the articulation of digitalisation initiatives.

The research question aims to capture the idea that the calls for projects aimed at digitalising the public sector that are currently underway have a high potential for national recovery from organisational and operational deficiencies, as follows: *To what extent do European programmes, more specifically the 2021-2027 budget implementation, allow for the development of digitalisation initiatives within the Romanian public administration?* An answer to this question is particularly necessary given that Romania's performance in terms of the digitalisation of public services is below the EU average in terms of the availability and quality of public services, pre-filled forms and the degree of use of e-government facilities by the population.

DIGITALISATION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION – A PRIORITY OBJECTIVE?

The current digitalisation effort is focused on establishing the Digital Single Market, where the goal is economic growth through information and communication technology, as highlighted by the Bangemann Working Group [7]. In this sense, economic development is influenced, on the one hand, by private actors, who are the main innovators and consumers of technology, and, on the other hand, by the public sector, which must identify and implement tools to facilitate information flows. Thus, in the context of public administration, digitalisation is treated from the perspective of digital governance, which represents the next stage in the integration project and whose aims are to use information and communication technology to increase internal efficiency and the transparency of governance in relation to citizens [8]. In pragmatic terms, digital governance is a new tool for managing society, which allows for an in-depth approach to how different institutional actors interact, paying particular attention to how resources are allocated within the system [8].

The implementation of digital governance in the European Union is based on a multidimensional approach that includes financing infrastructure development initiatives, creating regulatory frameworks, encouraging citizen participation, digitalisation and automating services, and increasing digital capacity and literacy [8]. The European Commission's "Digital Compass 2030" is the main strategic document setting out the objectives for digitalisation, including in the public sector. It sets out a transformational vision of how public services are delivered, moving from a conventional approach, such as filling in forms digitally, to creating new ways of accessing public services, where governments are seen as platforms acting for the benefit of businesses and citizens, by ensuring a high degree of institutional interoperability between all levels of government [9].

In practice, the European Union's main instrument for the current multiannual financial framework is the Digital Europe Programme, which supports efforts to implement the most advanced technologies and practices, digitalise businesses, and promote digital literacy among citizens and the public sector, with the aim of providing an economic boost [10]. In addition,



there are temporary financing instruments (e.g. the Recovery and Resilience Facility) or instruments managed jointly with Member States (e.g. the European Regional Development Fund), financed through multiannual financial programming. Currently, seven European programmes [10] support digitalisation to varying degrees, covering areas such as physical and virtual infrastructure, supercomputing, artificial intelligence, digital skills development, etc., which span all spheres of the economy and, more broadly, society. In order to capture the current research context on the phenomenon, the following section summarises the main contributions in the literature on the digitalisation of the public sector.

Digitalisation has a significant impact, with the main area concerned by this phenomenon being the economy (16.12%), which has the highest share of the research areas in which analyses have been identified. *Big data* technologies contribute to this by making decision-makers more efficient, as they encourage citizen participation and improve the transparency of the management process across the government spectrum. In legislative terms, the transposition of knowledge into digital data contributes to facilitating the flow of information, and from an ecological point of view, measures favourable to digitalisation are assimilated into sustainable development objectives, as they contribute to increasing innovation and the responsible use of technologies by the public sector [11].

In order to capitalise on technological potential, training staff within the organisation is also important for improving institutional quality and serving citizens effectively. Thus, employee behaviour, ICT skills, the organisation's knowledge base, job satisfaction, etc., play an important role in human capital development, with improved results in relation to digital transformation initiatives, as civil servants acquire important skills that contribute to the exploitation of technologies in the provision of public services. In other words, the digital transformation of public administration does not only involve addressing technological challenges, but must also take cultural and social aspects into account. Institutional norms, values and expectations, both from a purely internal administrative perspective and in relation to the citizens served, must be aligned with digitalisation initiatives [12].

Therefore, establishing a trajectory of how technologies influence the organisational context allows for the creation of an overall perspective. The current direction at Union level shows that it seeks to leverage information and communication technologies for the benefit of economic growth, with public administration being the main facilitator through public services. After analysing the literature, limitations can be observed in terms of evaluating funding programmes from a qualitative perspective. On the one hand, quantitative research argues for the importance of addressing the phenomenon at its root, as certain aspects cannot be captured numerically (e.g. the quality of programme documents and the processes through which implementation is achieved), while qualitative analyses suggest the need to supplement research by addressing multiple facets of the subject under discussion. As noted above, digitalisation is not a technological end-state but a tool for continuous public administration alignment to changing institutional norms and social values. Therefore, this research aims to establish the state of public administration in Romania from the perspective of calls for digitalisation projects, namely what are its main policy implementation characteristics, in terms of opportunities and obstacles, in stimulating projects dedicated to the digitalisation of the public sector.

Currently, the outlook for 2030 is structured around four cardinal points, one of which is reserved for continuing efforts and political objectives regarding the digitalisation of public administration. The first reference line concerns the foundation of digital development in terms of infrastructure, education and skills acquisition, while the second central element supports the functional aspects of a society undergoing digitalisation, namely the digital transformation of businesses and public services. In other words, the development of the digital skills of the



workforce and the increase in the number of digital experts is driven by the need to increase citizens' trust in digital products and services, but also to manage emerging technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence, quantum technologies). On the other hand, in order to strengthen the digital infrastructure, investments are needed in European semiconductor production facilities and in equipment designed to increase the accessibility of communications technology for real-time data processing [9].

The strategic nature of the digitalisation of public administration in Romania aims to align with the main initiatives on the European agenda in response to social and economic challenges. In other words, at national level, two key strategic benchmarks can be identified that correspond to e-government objectives. On the one hand, the "National Strategy on the Digital Agenda for Romania", formulated following the European Commission's Communication on the implementation of the first Digital Agenda for Europe, proposed a centralised approach to the modernisation of public administration and the priority implementation of digital public services for life events, establishing a cycle of services that citizens and businesses can benefit from during major events. In order to implement this process, legislation needed to be constantly reviewed and updated to overcome institutional and legislative barriers [13].

On the other hand, the "National Action Plan for the Digital Decade for Romania," linked to the vision for 2030, reiterates the need to increase the efficiency and accessibility of administrative processes in the public sector, as public authorities and institutions do not benefit from digital public services that are at an advanced stage of development. The main obstacles to completing this process are related to the need to transform the way digital technologies are used in the public sector, in the context of IT architectures with different levels of digital maturity and the lack of knowledge of digital tools that can be used by national public authorities and institutions. Increasing the capacity to absorb and use European non-reimbursable funds, together with improving the organisational culture regarding transparency and the use of participatory governance formulas in decision-making processes, are facilitating factors in achieving the objective of providing essential public services entirely by electronic means [14]. However, it should be noted that Romania does not currently have a national strategy for digitalisation [15], which may exacerbate the difficulties already encountered.

Last but not least, it is important to understand the national position in relation to the European e-government map. The data provided by the annual Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) is an important source for analysing Romania's position at European level, the tool being created by the European Commission in 2014 to assess the performance of Member States in terms of the digitalisation process, which was subsequently linked to the EU-level trajectory for achieving the aspirations by 2030 [16]. In line with the four points monitored, this paper focuses on analysing the digitalisation process of public services, according to data from the most recent published report, which provides relevant values for 2023. Romania's performance in terms of the digitalisation of public services is below the EU average in terms of the availability, quality of public services, pre-filled forms, and the degree of use of e-government services by the population [17], as follows:

- 52.18% availability of public services for citizens, compared to the EU average of 79.44% and the value reported by Malta (100%);
- 50.03% availability of public services for businesses, compared to the EU average of 85.42% and the value reported by Finland, Ireland and Malta (100%);
- 42.60% in transparency of service provision, design and personal data (quality of public services), compared to the EU average of 66.98% and the value reported by Malta (98.27%);



- 39.58% pre-filled forms, compared to the EU average of 70.82% and the value reported by Malta (93.97%);
- 24.64% users of e-government services, compared to the EU average of 75.01% and the value reported by Denmark (98.68%). [18]

An analysis of the current state of digitalisation of public services in Romania shows that it has a significant gap to close compared to the European average. The only area in which the Romanian public administration does not score below the European minimum is the quality of public services, where Cyprus reported 32.89% [18]. However, the report notes that the country is experiencing a dynamic growth rate (10-12%) compared to European averages, which could enable the public sector to meet the target of 100% availability of digital public services by 2030 [17].

CONVERGENCE OF GUIDELINES WITH PROGRAMME DOCUMENTS

At national level, the Smart Growth, Digitalisation and Financial Instruments Programme (POCIDIF) is an important benchmark in assessing the potential for advancing digitalisation efforts in public administration, which includes the policy objective of harnessing technological opportunities for the benefit of citizens and businesses. The actions under RSO1.2 aim to address digitalisation from a specific perspective, whether it be general public services, education, culture, the adoption of advanced technologies or support for the private sector through digital innovation centres. More specifically, action 221 focuses on general aspects of the digitalisation of public administration, aiming to support a wide range of services for citizens and businesses, systemic interoperability and the promotion of open data. Actions 222 and 223 are sectoral, dedicated to digitalisation in education (school management and digital management of the educational portfolio dedicated to students) and culture (creation of a national platform dedicated to heritage management), respectively. Action 231 aims to digitally transform public administration by developing and testing digital products that incorporate emerging technologies, while the last two actions (232 and 2.4) focus strictly on developing advanced solutions for cybersecurity and supporting the public and private sectors through digital innovation centres [19]. The priorities, particularly those under specific objective 2.2, aim to deliver technological benefits to citizens and businesses, either through more efficient and accessible public services or by facilitating access to digital resources. In this regard, the main focus of the actions envisaged is the creation, development or modernisation of digital applications, IT platforms, databases or, more broadly, software systems, for which central public entities play an important role in coordinating and implementing key actions. Thus, in line with the objective set out in this paper, actions 221 and 231 will be discussed *in extenso* in terms of how they enable the development of digitalisation initiatives within the central public administration.

The actions supported under POCIDIF and subject to the present analysis focus on the implementation of specific e-government technologies, with an emphasis on cloud computing solutions and the management of large volumes of data through the use of interoperability mechanisms and open data platforms. In this regard, the restriction on the limited share of physical infrastructure (hardware) compared to software is explicitly mentioned as a general principle in the operationalisation of measures under component 2.2. Similar to the perspective noted in the Regional Programmes (RP), this suggests a priority given to the development of software solutions necessary for public services, rather than the purchase of equipment necessary to strengthen physical infrastructure. For example, the South-East RP [20] and the West RP explicitly stipulate the exclusion of funding for the general purchase of ICT equipment, allowing for its procurement only within the limits of the development, testing and/or piloting stages of the proposed e-government solutions [21]. Similarly, the use of non-

reimbursable financial assistance is also the central mechanism for supporting digital transformation initiatives within this programme. Digital transformation is a complex process involving profound organisational changes that can bring technological and operational risks, and there is a high risk that the expected benefits will not materialise fully or within the estimated timeframe. POCIDIF evokes the possible occurrence of "syncopations in the production process" [19], which indicates likely disruptions to current activity during the transition. In such a costly and risky context, funding through grants is essential to encourage public administrations to embark on these necessary transformations without placing an additional financial burden on beneficiaries. The recitals therefore take into account the nature of the projects, whose main purpose is not to generate direct financial profit for the institutions concerned and, even if, exceptionally, the digitalised public services were to generate revenue (e.g. administrative fees), this would be reinvested to ensure the long-term functioning of the digitalisation solution or to improve and extend access to it for a larger number of citizens and businesses.

The Regional Programmes (RP) implemented during the current budget period (2021-2027) provide important recognition of the need to digitalise public administration, with the aim of improving the capacity of public authorities and institutions to serve the needs of citizens and businesses through e-government solutions and smart city initiatives. Thus, in the common aspect of regional funding instruments, the creation or modernisation of digital public services, the development, testing and/or piloting of e-government-specific applications and software solutions, or the support of smart city initiatives, namely the development of digital platforms, are priorities that fall within the scope of exploiting technological opportunities in the public sector. In each of these approaches, in order to simplify access to public services and information, the basic principle used is to focus on the needs of citizens and the business environment [20], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25], [26], [27]. As shown in the table below, the South-Muntenia and North-West regions are among the regions with substantial allocations, namely 26.54% and 17.05% of the total available funds, taking into account that they are simultaneously implementing operations related to the creation of regional data centres under the priority. In contrast, the South-East and South-West regions are characterised by a minimum level of fund allocation, with 8.31% and 3.78% of the total amount at regional level.

Nr. Crt.	Region Name	Achievement Indicators	Result Indicators	Total Allocation (Eur)	Ratio Allocated Amount (Eur) / Number Public Institutions Supported (2029)	Of	Ratio Of Amount (Eur) / Number Of Annual Users (2029)
		TARGET 2029 RCO14	TARGET 2029 RCR11		Of		
1	South Muntenia	10.00	295,413	79,847,970	7,984,797		270.29
2	North-West	33	60,434.00	51,282,941	1,554,028.52		848.58
3	Centre	30	96,000.00	41,579,459.00	1,385,981.97		433.12
4	North-East	20	193,761.00	32,829,964	1,641,498.20		169.44
5	Bucharest-Ilfov	7	220,000.00	30,000,000	4,285,714.29		136.36
6	West	22	320,000.00	28,927,500	1,314,886.36		90.40
7	South-East	12	195,480.00	25,000,000	2,083,333.33		127.89
8	South-West	28	79,346.00	11,356,965	405,605.89		143.13
TOTAL				300,824,799.00			

Table 1. Financial distribution for calls for projects at regional level [20], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25], [26], [27]



The output and result indicators targeted in public sector digitalisation operations set important targets for the number of public institutions that can benefit from support (RCO14) and the number of annual users of new or significantly improved digital public services, as well as the related digital products and processes developed (RCR11). Reporting the total funds allocated for the digitalisation of the public sector in the target region against the target number of public institutions supported and the annual number of users who can benefit from digital services provides a deep understanding of the phenomenon under consideration. In other words, the South Muntenia Region is among the leading regions in terms of supporting a smaller number of institutions, with the aim of achieving substantial results in terms of more complex digital transformations, while the South-West Region aims to support a large number of beneficiaries through a comparative budget, with the aim of implementing affordable solutions that ensure the widespread dissemination of the digital capabilities of public organisations. On the other hand, a high average of funds allocated per annual user of digital public services, as observed in the North-West Region, indicates that the level of development costs is high in relation to the expected user base, while in the case of the West Region, where the ratio is lower, it shows that the expected investments aim to support as many citizens as possible and, implicitly, a better return on investment in terms of the impact on the public for the widespread adoption of services. Tracking the number of institutions and users only measures formal fulfillment, and it fails to capture the real effectiveness or societal value of the digitalised services. However, although the regional programmes suggest an urgent need for digitalisation, they do not set mid-term targets (2024) to accelerate digitalisation processes among public organisations, but rather performance targets to be achieved by the end of the financial framework (2029).

Thus, in order to reduce the risk of adopting isolated solutions whose profitability could be questionable, it is essential to promote integrated approaches, for which regions such as Bucharest-Ilfov and West encourage the use of phased financing formulas [22] and tailored to the type of locality [21], such as addressing urgent issues related, first and foremost, to the migration of analogue services to digital platforms, followed by digital literacy training for human resources and, last but not least, the launch and use of smart city solutions.

In other words, the process of accessing European funds for the digitalisation of public administration in Romania under POCIDIF is guided by a series of administrative and eligibility requirements set out in the Applicant's Guides. The realism of these requirements in relation to the administrative capacity of potential beneficiaries, together with the quality of the methodological support provided, are determining factors for the success and scope of digitalisation initiatives. In the case of calls launched at national level, the typology of eligible applicants is balanced, with actions 221-1 [28] and 221-3 [29] being dedicated to public (central) authorities and institutions, while measures 221-2 [30] and 231 [31] designate the Romanian Digitalisation Authority (RDA) as the sole applicant and beneficiary of project proposals. At the same time, the administrative side of the documents illustrates a consistency in requirements from the perspective of general and specific eligible activities (drafting project proposals, carrying out the necessary hardware and software purchases, development, configuration, installation, maintenance, integration, etc.), elements highlighted in the project proposals, as well as the categories of accepted expenses.

Notable divergences in the guidelines relate to the maximum project implementation period and the ceilings for eligible expenditure categories. Compared to the situation at regional level, POCIDIF conditions the implementation of projects to 36 months, with an exception of 48 months in the case of action 231 [31], due to its complexity, with the possibility of extending the implementation periods until the end of the programming period (31.12.2029). On the other hand, the percentage applied to ICT equipment expenditure (20% ceiling for 221-1 and 221-2,



and 30% in the case of 231) and cybersecurity solutions (minimum 7% in the case of 211-1 and a fixed percentage in the case of 221-2 and 211-3) varies, indicating a different approach to the financing of these components.

However, the content of the documents suggests a top-down approach, whereby the funding authority imposes a uniform set of rules and procedures to simplify administration and monitoring, but at the risk of not sufficiently capturing the specificity of each funding line. In the case of non-competitive calls (221-2 and 231, where the RDA is the sole applicant), the application of eligibility criteria or documentation structures, including sections dedicated to project scoring (which are more specific to a competitive call), suggests a redundancy that generates an unnecessary administrative burden for the predefined applicant. In a non-competitive call with a single applicant, the focus should be on the intrinsic quality of the technical proposal and the feasibility of achieving the objectives within the set deadline, as is the case with regional strategic operations. At the same time, in the case of competitive calls, the inclusion of very similar elements from a general template, without sufficiently detailing the specific selection criteria for the distinct objectives of each call (services for citizens and businesses in the case of action 221-1 and open data in the case of operation 221-3) the selection process may not be optimised to select projects that are indicative of each objective. In other words, a generic scoring grid may lead to the selection of projects that score well on general criteria but do not excel in the specific call, while in the case of the sole applicant under actions 222-2 and 231, a high degree of similarity leads to the collection and completion of documents that do not add value.

The technological dimension of national calls demonstrates that none of the interventions analysed are limited to supporting traditional digitisation, understood as the simple transposition of existing processes into electronic format. All of them point to a focus on modernisation and the use of technologies or approaches that can bring added value. While measure 221-1 explicitly mentions the optimisation of public services through the processing of large volumes of data and the use of cloud computing solutions [28], action 231 has as its central objective the development of products that incorporate emerging technologies [31]. Interoperability is a firm requirement in the implementation of action 221-2 [30], while adjacent measures treat interoperability as an implicit and functional requirement, as in the case of measure 231, in the sense of "ease of replication in other public institutions" [31]. Closely linked to intervention 231, innovation is the focus of the call, targeting the development of new products and processes incorporating advanced technologies through a process of research and testing the feasibility of software solutions. At the same time, in the case of calls specifically targeting either interoperability, high-volume data processing or the digitalisation of public services, the concept of innovation involves establishing a different way of applying technologies to bring about systemic and significant improvements to the national infrastructure.

The strategic objectives proposed in relation to the configuration and financial constraints of national calls have important implications for the potential to capitalise on digitalisation opportunities within central public authorities and institutions. Firstly, the removal of financial barriers in the case of central public administration, through full support from the ERDF and the state budget, represents a major facility and a strong incentive for entities with limited budgets to participate in and implement digitalisation projects. In addition, the project submission periods of approximately 22 months for operation 221-1 and 13 months for operations 221-2 and 231 provided sufficient time for a larger number of potential applicants to prepare project proposals, particularly in the case of competitive calls. Compared to the situation observed at regional level, at central level POCIDIF sought to prepare and launch calls for projects aimed at digitalisation from the outset of the current programming



period in order to ensure a longer implementation period for projects. At the same time, the lack of minimum and maximum values available per project or the linking of the maximum non-refundable value to the total budget allocated to projects, in the case of non-competitive calls, ensures the concentration of resources for the implementation of projects with a systemic impact. On the one hand, applicants benefit from considerable flexibility in sizing projects according to specific needs and encourage smaller, one-off initiatives as well as complex, large-scale projects. However, this can create uncertainty for applicants, especially for competitive calls, in terms of the chances of project funding.

CONCLUSIONS

This study analysed from an evaluative standpoint the possibilities available through which the current architecture of regional and national programmes, in particular the Operational Programme for Smart Growth, Digitalisation and Financial Instruments, can stimulate the formulation of digitalisation project proposals by the public administration. The findings are aimed to contribute to the conceptualization of digital governance as a management tool for society, where, as seen, a top-down one-size-fits-all rule contradicts the internal efficiency and transparency goals aimed through a shift in the public administration digital landscape.

The challenges and opportunities identified in this research can be divided into elements that are deeply rooted in Romania's institutional framework, as well as elements that may reflect broader trends relevant to the European context. Romania faces, among other things, an acute lack of articulation of a national digitalisation strategy, while also placing additional administrative burden on the applicants. The findings underscore a significant imperative for EU Member States, namely to align financing mechanisms for digital transformation with concrete established strategies, rather than pursuing top-down initiatives in a strategic vacuum. Also, the desire of national and regional authorities to stimulate the transition from simple digitization to a digital transformation of the administrative space should further be enhanced by the European strategic compass.

In the absence of a clear national strategic direction on capitalising on the advantages of digitalisation, an effort can be seen on the part of regional management authorities to use territorial planning tools to address the shortcomings faced by administrative-territorial units. Also, another notable aspect in compensating for national strategic voids is the capacity of regional authorities to act as managing authorities within the 2021-2027 programming. With the capacity to better direct funds towards targeted interventions that reflect territorial needs, this article can stand as a contribution to the broader literature on decentralized governance by highlighting the measures taken by the regional funding authorities in the digitalisation of local public administrations. The project proposals that are encouraged are those that can demonstrate clear added value, i.e. those that aim to create new or substantially modernised digital public services by introducing innovative elements that encourage users to take advantage of them. From the perspective of regional fund distribution, there are divergent trends that oscillate between supporting a small number of institutions with the aim of achieving substantial results in terms of more complex digital transformations, and supporting a large number of beneficiaries, but with a considerably reduced budget, but which ensures the implementation of more accessible solutions that can be disseminated to other public organisations. This may have an impact on the expected return on investment, with fluctuations also identified in the development costs of solutions relative to the expected number of users of digitalised public services. The highly competitive nature of calls for projects prompts regional funding authorities to articulate applicant guidelines as coherently as possible, imposing rigorous qualification and selection criteria on the one hand, but offering significant



flexibility in defining digitalisation solutions and how they will be implemented on the other. A common feature of the interventions analysed in this regard is the clear intention to go beyond the stage of traditional digitisation. However, in terms of the expected impact, the Regional Programmes do not set mid-term milestones for the implementation of the programmes, indicating a need to speed up the process. At the same time, although the calls aim to promote mature project proposals, whose quality is demonstrated by comprehensive documentation, no indicators have been set to measure the subsequent impact of digital transformations in terms of quality.

While the regional and national programmes establish clear targets for the number of institutions supported (RCO14) and the volume of annual users (RCR11), these metrics remain strictly quantitative. As such, a significant limitation of the current framework is the absence of qualitative indicators capable of capturing the real effectiveness and societal value brought through digitalised public services. In the absence of such metrics, programme success risks being interpreted solely through the lens of formal compliance and technical deployment of ICT infrastructure, rather than the actual improvement of administrative efficiency or citizen satisfaction. Consequently, while the projects may meet their administrative milestones by the end of 2029, the lack of quality-based indicators creates a challenge for funding authorities to ensure that these digital transformations result in a fundamental change in how the public administration functions, rather than just a digital transposition of existing analogue processes.

On another note, the national digitalisation perspective analysed reveals a top-down approach, whereby the funding authority imposes a uniform set of rules and procedures to simplify administration and monitoring, but with the risk of not sufficiently capturing the specificity of each funding line. In other words, there is no clear distinction between competitive and non-competitive calls in terms of eligibility and selection criteria, with scoring requirements that suggest redundancy and an unnecessary administrative burden on the predefined applicant. Although POCIDIF has been preparing and launching calls for the digitalisation of public administration since the beginning of the programming period, the lack of minimum and maximum values available per project, which could suggest considerable flexibility in the sizing of digitalisation solutions, may create uncertainty in terms of the funding opportunities for applicants participating in competitive calls. These findings contribute to the importance of institutional quality debate by demonstrating how administrative architecture can inadvertently hinder digital transformation in the public administration.

While this study provides an in-depth, real-time assessment of the funding mechanisms for digitalisation in Romania, it is important to acknowledge the inherent limits of generalization specific of a qualitative, document-based analysis. The findings are deeply rooted in a particular strategic and institutional context, namely the Romanian public administration and the 2021-2027 programming period. Consequently, while the identified challenges may resonate with other EU Member States exhibiting comparable levels of digital and administrative maturity, they cannot be universally applied to different national frameworks without further empirical testing.

Looking ahead, with a view to completing the current programming period, the challenge for the funding authorities is to ensure a real impact and effective use of the new digitalised services, not just the formal fulfilment of indicators. Linking the maximum duration for completion of investments to the end of 2029 creates a major risk of delays accumulating, both in terms of launching all project calls that are not currently specified in a guide and in terms of projects that are currently in the implementation stage.



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