

## **Summary of the Doctoral Thesis**

### **The Digitalization of Public Administration in Romania: Evolution, Specifics, and Perspectives**

This paper stems from the desire to evaluate the current stage of the digitalization process of public administration in Romania, to understand the main elements on which this reform depends, and to explore the theoretical frameworks that support the analysis of possible factors that slow down or even completely block this process in certain situations. Although based on a political science perspective, this paper has a multidisciplinary character, also incorporating elements from administrative sciences, sociological methodology, and even from the technological side, when it comes to analyzing the degree of digitalization of existing public services or organizations.

The first section of the paper establishes and explains the main theoretical frameworks used for formulating subsequent research hypotheses and objectives, combining the principles of institutionalism from political science with the theory of organizational change and subsequently with the New Digital Era. The institutionalist theory represents a fundamental pillar of this paper, given that it lays the explanatory foundations regarding the importance of institutions for human behavior, the ability of existing norms to block reforms and organizational changes that tend to contradict or at least affect them to some extent, and the role that sets of rules play in the functioning of any organization composed of rational individuals.

To begin, the paper presents a brief history of institutionalist theory, considering that it has itself undergone a series of changes from its inception to recent research on neo-institutionalism and has been branched into sociological, historical, normative institutionalism, etc., depending on the social sciences in which it has been used to explain various phenomena. Moreover, the paper specifically defines how the concept of institutions is used within this research, as a set of rather normative rules and values that have a vital role in the behavior of individuals and in the routines they develop in their social life and beyond. Also, their classification according to their regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive character is clarified, in order to analyze the type of institutions discussed later in the research part itself, for example, during the interviews with public officials.

One of the most important parts of the theoretical framework description is the explanation of normative institutionalism, which starts from the premise that rational individuals do not act solely based on the desire to maximize their utility regardless of the circumstances they find in real life, but constantly try to do so while also taking into account the social context in which they find themselves, the groups they are part of, the norms they have internalized over time and which establish certain behavioral limits, and implicitly significantly influence the way they end up making decisions in their daily lives.

Last but not least, once the importance of norms in human behavior and the connection that normative institutionalism has with the study of organizational reform phenomena, such as the case of public organizations undergoing digitalization, is clarified, the paper also describes how institutions can be formed as sets of rules and how certain normative social constraints can arise through the process of institutionalization, while also bringing a perspective on its opposite, namely the process of deinstitutionalization of certain norms, which is vital in any process of changing the way a certain organization has functioned for an extended period of time.

In the second part of the theoretical framework, in order to establish an even clearer link between the institutionalist principles from political science and the digitalization process of public administration in Romania, the paper uses the theoretical foundations of organizational change, which is much more pragmatic and applicable to real-life examples, but is closely related to the initial theoretical framework, given that any reform involves certain changes within the targeted organizations, which can be received with openness or resistance from its members.

The main purpose of including these theories was to understand the extent to which there are multiple types of organizational changes, whether they can be foreseen by certain factors, and especially how they affect not only the functioning of an organization but also its members and their daily activities. This section begins to increasingly highlight the role of the human factor when it comes to reform and change, a vital element in the research part implemented later, given that one of the main hypotheses of this thesis is precisely that the digitalization process of public administration is slowed down, in certain cases, by the human factor, specifically by public officials and their reluctance to change.

Thus, this theoretical section provides explanations regarding the main predictors of organizational change and the ways in which it can occur, either suddenly or gradually, either due to the desire of

the leadership or forced by elements external to the organization itself, and also makes the connection with the first theoretical framework by explaining the main institutionalist perspectives on organizational change.

Last but not least, the section on organizational change theories brings into discussion a theoretical element developed in more recent research, namely the concept of public service motivation, used later in formulating some of the questions in the interview part of the research and considered a key element in explaining deviations from normative institutionalism, as certain individuals in whom such a trait is identified prove to be much more open and willing to give up certain work habits in order to implement new ones that are visibly necessary or produce beneficial changes for the public sector.

To strengthen the theoretical basis of this paper, its final theoretical part explains and describes the main elements of the New Digital Era concepts, as a major reform of the bureaucracy that has remained almost unchanged since Weber, considered on the one hand to be the most recent Industrial Revolution and, at the same time, the most complex and long-lasting process of public sector reform, still ongoing in many countries around the world. Starting from a brief history of reform currents in the public sector and making an important link between Weberian principles, the problems to which the New Public Management responds, and the way in which digitalization can take beneficial elements from both, this theoretical part also describes how this major technological reform appeared in administration, its effects on governance and even political and administrative legitimacy for the citizenry, along with concepts such as e-democracy and e-bureaucracy.

Moreover, a discussion is opened regarding the ethics of digitalization and the way in which the increased accessibility of information can endanger the personal lives of citizens, the extent to which personal data is truly necessary in certain situations and can be protected by public organizations, and how legislative frameworks must be modified to accommodate digitalization while also protecting citizens against its inevitable negative elements.

By far the most important part of this thesis chapter is that it is closely linked to the creation of the research design and, moreover, with the description of the main models for analyzing the stages of digitalization, a first element brought by this paper to support the improvement of the existing theoretical framework emerges. Initially, the main analysis models are discussed, such as those

proposed by Moon, Layne and Lee, Gartner, or the United Nations, and the stages they propose when it comes to establishing how advanced an administration is in terms of digitalizing existing public services and what the next steps should be. However, the conclusion is reached that, in certain specific situations such as Romania's case, when it comes to digitalization, the steps it follows happen in a different order than that proposed in functional models for other states, which is why the need arises to propose a hybrid model, created as a combination of the existing ones and tested later in the research part of the paper.

The highly applicative part of the thesis begins with the second chapter, in which a transition is made from theoretical elements to the main analysis framework of the paper, namely the public sector in Romania, from the perspective of the digitalization of its operating methods and the services offered. To begin with, the main existing national documents regarding the government's plan for the coming years are mentioned, such as the National Action Plan for the Digital Decade for Romania, so that they can be weighed against the reality observed in the applied analyses. Subsequently, a descriptive analysis of the main authority responsible for this reform, namely the Authority for the Digitalization of Romania, is presented, both from a functional and organizational point of view, legislative when it comes to attributions, but also applied in terms of a detailed study of its online presence, implicitly of the information available on the official website and the extent to which it is updated and functional.

Continuing the practical analysis, the paper presents a detailed study of the main digital platforms subordinated to the Authority for the Digitalization of Romania, such as Ghișeul.ro, SEAP, ROeID, or even SEN, along with an attempt by the author to use them in order to understand the extent to which they are functional, easily accessible to citizens, and intuitive, without requiring initial assistance for their understanding.

The third part of the paper presents the methodological framework used in the research part, both for document-based analyses (in the case of this paper, digital documents in the form of websites), and for the interviews conducted as the final point of the research itself. This section describes the main reasons for choosing these research instruments, along with the argument that, in the case of studying the digitalization process of public administration in Romania, qualitative research methods were by far the most suitable for the chosen topic, given that the general phenomenon can be easily evaluated with the help of existing statistics at national and European level, but

requires a deep and detailed analysis of the particularities of the process itself and the elements that can slow it down or even block it, unlike the experience of other states.

Within the data analysis, as the first extended part of the applied research, an analysis grid of the digitalization stages of public services was applied, based on the hybrid model proposed in the theoretical part of the paper and strictly following the steps indicated by it, in order to test the extent to which it is usable and sufficiently clear and well-defined to be applied in reality. In order to have a clear time frame and a predetermined number of analyzed organizations, the research proposed the extraction and analysis of data sets concerning a single public organization existing in each county of Romania, subordinated to the Ministry of Labor, with which almost all social and age categories in Romania interact, namely the County Pension House. This data was strictly collected by analyzing the official websites of the organizations (where they exist and are functional) and was classified in the analysis grid and discussed later in the results section, in order to create a clear picture of the level of digitalization existing in this sector.

The second and most valuable part of the research in terms of the amount of information accumulated was that of the interviews, conducted with the main human factor of digitalization, namely local public officials, directly involved in this reform process and also directly affected by its effects and implementation procedure. To ensure a representative sampling at the level of the administration itself, this part of the research involved female and male individuals, aged between 30 and 65, who volunteered to participate in the research and who were part of completely different organizations, without communicating with each other or knowing each other, from the financial, pensions, health, or city hall domains, as well as from state-owned companies, such as postal services, in turn holding different positions, both involving interaction with the public and related to the IT field or the management of the organizations themselves.

During the interviews, the questions were formulated to clarify the position that employees have, first of all, towards digitalization itself, as well as the extent to which they understand the dimension of this process or have been affected by it in the last 10 years of activity, either positively or negatively. Also, one of the purposes of the interviews was to identify the extent to which the principles of digitalization contradict existing norms in public organizations and cause reluctance for this reason, and, last but not least, the extent to which the staff is notified in advance about the

upcoming reforms, assisted in their implementation, and supported through training programs and explanatory documents regarding the new technologies they should use.

The answers regarding each interview question were described and analyzed in the results presentation section, with the aim of supporting the confirmation and refutation of the research hypotheses, observing the extent to which the objectives themselves were achieved, and contributing to the development of possible recommendations regarding future projects implemented in the public sector in Romania, with the aim of its digitalization.

The paper concludes with the main conclusions resulting from the research and especially with the clarified information regarding the necessary next steps in researching the digitalization of public administration in Romania, along with some recommendations regarding the improvement of the digitalization process itself and the impediments encountered during the research process.