Theoretical Considerations on eGovernment in Romania and Bulgaria

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Abstract

Electronic public administration is one of the priorities of the EU Member States. The EU membership of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 represented the beginning of ensuring quality services to citizens in these two countries, following the same digital path as the rest of the Union. This sector of activity, which brings information and communications technology in the support of modernization, represents a challenge for both countries in terms of management of public service, but also a change of mentality for authorities and citizens.

This article aims at comparing the two Member States, Romania and Bulgaria, through indicators established by the European Commission, analyzing the main trends and identifying the present status in terms of eGovernment

Keywords: *e-administration, eGovernment, electronic services, performance management, digitalization.*

JEL classification: H83; O33.

Introduction

EU 2020 strategy adopted by the Council of Europe amid the crisis in 2010, sets out several criteria for smart economic development. One of the major initiatives taken by the Commission to support smart growth is the Digital Agenda for Europe, placing technology and Internet in the service of citizens, according to the specific internal context of each Member State.

The benefits of technology for modernizing public administrations and improving the management and offer of quality services to the citizen are broadly recognized. Yet, the steps undertaken by some Member States are quite small compared with the European Union average.

This article aims at presenting a clear and overall image of the developments in eGovernment of two Member States, namely Romania and Bulgaria. The two countries started together along the road of European Union integration. Each identified its own path and specificities with the purpose of economic growth, based on intelligent electronic services provided by the authorities in support of their citizens. This performance management applied to

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the organizational structures is divided into strategic, operational and individual components, a concept applied to public administration as well (Brudan, 2010).

1. The European Union Context

The new economic transformation at global level, which is linked to the new political vision of 2017 determined by changes in USA and EU, influences the direction and speed of the eGovernment process within public administrations, affecting the electronic services offered to citizens and companies. This study makes a comparative analysis of Romania and Bulgaria during the period starting with their common EU integration, aiming at analyzing and predicting the trends of the indicators that can influence the intelligent economic growth achieved using modern technology.

1.2. EU initiatives

Important initiatives the Commission's role in eGovernment program are written in IADBC (EC, 2017a), in its successor - ISA (EC, 2017b) and subsequently, in the action plans from i2010 (EC, 2017c) set in Lisbon, targeting the sustained growth of the economy and employment. The continuation of the *"EU Action Plan on eGovernment"* for the period 2016-2020 (EC, 2016d) is a positive consequence of the work performed by the European Commission influencing the quality of electronic services to citizens and enterprises (EC, 2010e) in all Member States (MS). These actions of the EU have sought to be a common starting point, unifying the processes in MS administrations, in order to place digital technologies in the service of the entire economy.

A major goal of eGovernment is improving the public services (Ministerial Declaration, 2009), which aims at correlating the citizens' expectations with a performant and transparent administration (EC, 2015a). The implementation of this plan at national level may give rise to new initiatives with positive results that can be subject to the Better Regulation requirements (EC, 2015b) proposed by the Commission (Popescu et all, 2016).

2.2 National initiatives

2.2.1 Romania

A structure called the Agency for Information Society Services (ASSI) is established in 2008 within the legal framework of Law 161/2003 and dealing with measures to ensure transparency in the exercise of public dignities, public functions and business environment, as well as prevention and correction of corruption cases. ASSI has an important role in implementing the National Electronic System (NES). One of ASSI’s main objectives is to promote the eGovernment and thus bring

benefits, transparency and reduce bureaucracy by implementing broad internet operation in administration services.

The initiative was courageous for the year 2010. In partnership with the responsible department, the idea of an exchange of information between citizens and authorities was brought forward. The project included digitalization of several processes in public administration, with access to the portal for electronic services offered by NES (Wikipedia, 2017), including systems such as administration and renewal of passports, driving licenses and car registration. However, as current reality confirms, these initiatives remained mainly on paper.

The quite significant transformations and political changes at top level resulted in a lack of continuity in addressing public policy, especially in the field of eGovernment. Therefore, last year, the new Government touched upon a very sensitive aspect of reducing bureaucracy when it decided to eliminate a number of taxes (Official Journal, 2017), influencing the flow of documents in public administration. It also continued the actions that targeted the administration of NES by the new structure - the Romanian Agency for Digital Agenda, www.aadr.ro/-, which included online platforms for e-government, e-auctions, car authorizations, online payments and edirect.e-guvernare.ro.

2.2.2 Bulgaria

The government in Sofia took the similar small steps as Romania towards digitalization of administration. Bulgaria also developed information technology infrastructure to support electronic services relevant to different portals.

At legislative level, Bulgaria implemented a series of laws and strategies for eGovernment in order to support a smart and more competitive economy, necessary to meet the requirements of the Bulgarian citizens and business environment. In 2011, the Bulgarian Government initiated administrative measures for digitalization of processes that gave faster access to documents. During the following year, it launched the project Digital Bulgaria 2015 (EC, 2015c), which sought to promote Internet access to 75% of the population within that year.

The eGovernment strategy was fulfilled in 2014 as part of Bulgaria's EU commitments and the country's efforts to increase the absorption of EU funds in the 2014-2020 financial year. The Government in Sofia announced the completion of the project eGovernment, containing the eDelivery system designed for document sharing and part of the end-to-end solutions at the end of 2015.

At the beginning of 2016, the Government proposed a draft law for amending and completing the electronic documents system in accordance with Regulation 910/2014. Thus, a series of initiatives at central and local level were implemented through the direct involvement of the Ministry of Transport, Information Technologies and Communications, leading to the modernization of public administration.

One relevant action developed was the eGovernment portal - https://egov.bg/wps/portal, which allows for online access to documents such as

driving licenses, birth certificates, civil status certificates etc. Other significant measures takes were the creation of the portal for online payment ePayment - https://pay.egov.bg/, offering online payment arrangements between citizens or businesses and the public administration, such as registers, e-services, taxes, fees and fines, judiciary payments etc.

2. Comparative Analysis

After presenting the broader European and the specific national context, this section of the study runs a comparative analysis between the relevant indicators of digitalization status in the public administration of the two countries, with significant consequences for improvement of electronic governance. Using the group indicator representative for electronic administration identified by the European Commission, respectively, the eGovernment, the following graphs will present relevant data for both MS as compared with the EU average (EC, Digital Scoreboard a), based on figures published by Eurostat (Eurostat, 2017). With the purpose of better understanding the roots of the problems and the actual status of both countries, we will analyze each of the four components of the eGovernment: interacting with public authorities, obtaining information, downloading forms and submitting information. The following figures compare the situation for each of these subcategories.

The percentage of Internet users who interact with public authorities, an indicator promoted by the European Commission and represented graphically below, illustrates the gap between the two newer MS and the EU average, as well as the better results obtained by Bulgaria compared to Romania (as shown in Figure 1).

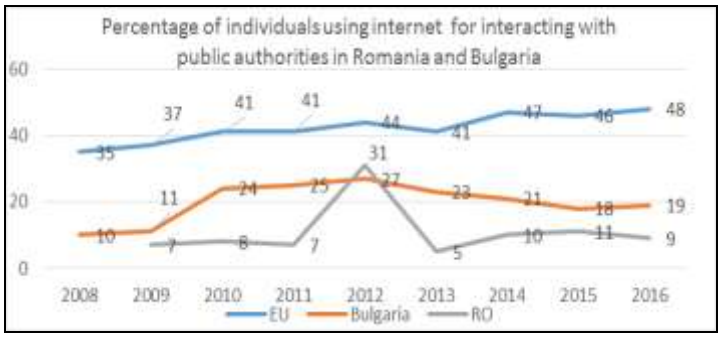

Figure 1. Comparison of MS and the EU average on the number of users interacting with public authorities using Internet

Source: Based on data from EC, Digital Scoreboard

If we analyze the percentage of individuals using the websites of public authorities for obtaining useful information, the situation illustrated in the figure below follows the same trend as the first indicator, described by a decrease in the use of digital information in the MS since 2012 and a widening gab compared to

the ever more digital Europe. It is also interesting to notice that the pick in digitalization of the public services in 2012 in Romania (Figure 1) relates to the higher rate of obtaining online information from public authorities the same year (as shown in Figure 2).

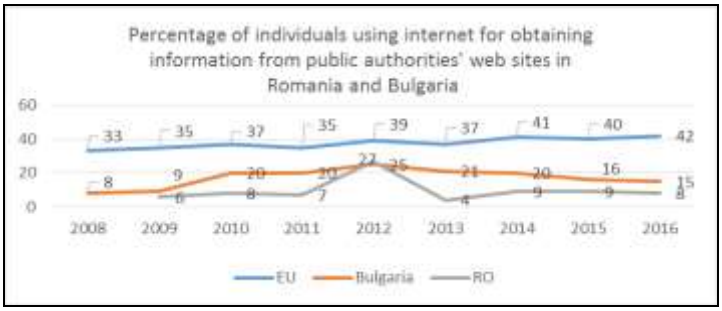

Figure 2. Comparison of MS and the EU average of the number of users who obtained information from public authorities using the Internet

Source: Based on data from Eurostat, 2017

Analyzing further the interaction between citizens and public authorities in the two countries at a slightly higher level, by considering the percentage of individual using the internet for downloading official forms from public authorities web sites in the figure below, it is surprising to notice the downwards trend in both MB, compared to the positive EU development (as shown in Figure 3).

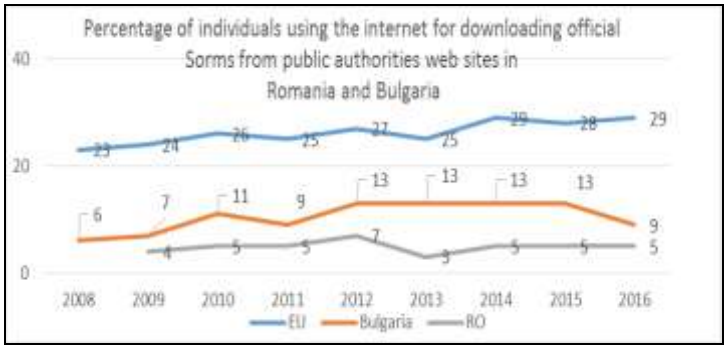

Figure 3. Comparison of MS and the EU average relative to individual using the internet for downloading official forms from public authorities

Source: Based on data from EC, Digital Scoreboard

The same divergent evolution is also observed in the last form of e-administration, the submission of online information by citizens. As the graph below illustrates, the EU public administration registered a higher level of digitalization since 2013, while the two eastern MS seem to lag behind starting with the same year (as shown in Figure 4).

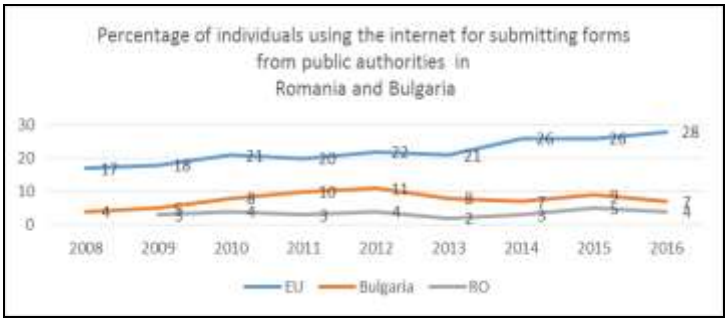

Figure 4. Comparison of MS and the EU average relative to individual using the internet for submitting forms from public authorities

Source: Based on data from EC, Digital Scoreboard

As illustrated by the graphs above, the global eGovernment indicator is composed by the percentage of users for each of the four steps necessary for obtaining a complete online service. In all four stages, the two newer MS, Romania and Bulgaria, obtained scores much lower than the EU average, placing them among the least advanced countries in EU on the use of electronic public services. During the analyzed period, 2008-2016, Romania was surpassed by Bulgaria, with small exceptions in 2012. Furthermore, while the two MS had a common started in 2007, the statistics presented in the graphs above show that more Bulgarians are interested in the electronic services offered by public authorities than Romanians, a situation related to the fact that there are more Internet users in Bulgaria (57.9% of the total population) than in Romania (56.3%) in 2016 (EC, Digital Scoreboard b).

The causes of this difference in both status and trends between the two MS and the EU can be identified in the historic legacy of the countries. The 2007 membership obliged both MS to align their public administration management to the EU directives, those relating to eGovernment being a priority for these new members. This approach could not be done without the involvement of technology as a binder for optimizing processes in public administration. The eGovernment process started quite frail at first, because the concepts related information technology represented a novelty for a part of the human resources. Another cause for the difficult readjustment of public services management was also the low interoperability of the systems, the existing hardware and software at that time, with the new technological approach. Technology is continuously changing and this dynamics surprised both MS, that lost ground compared to other more experienced countries that managed to take bureaucracy to much lower levels. In the same time, this development triggered social changes through the fact that the staff of the public administration had to cope with the transition from traditional to electronic governance, and more recently to the adoption of the eGovernment 2.0. This new concept, called eGov2.0 focuses less on technology and considers that the

most important pillar is the citizen, who contributes to the eGov (Meijer et all, 2012).

EGovernment involves creativity, transparency, less bureaucracy as well as investments, particularly from European funds for the two MS, features that Romania and Bulgaria took into consideration. The adoption of EU regulations requires the two MS to invest in information technology, acquisition of software and hardware, human resource training, both as users and as specialists. The common objective is fulfilling the national strategies of the two countries, including the implementation of the eGov 2.0 system through successful utilization of technology in the best interest of the population.

Conclusions

Although Romania and Bulgaria went through a decade of EU integration and continuous economic development, the chosen path might not exactly be the best one for the two countries, not to mention the fact that the new concept of intelligent economy remains far from the reach of the two countries. Both MS have good human resource specialists and investments were quick to appear, resulting in several projects in the IT field meant to increase the quality of services to citizens. However, the year 2016 registered a downwards trend compared with the rest of the MS.

We appreciate that the existence of specialized human resources and high quality technology is not necessarily the only determining characteristics to outline the successful recipe for offering favorable public services. The citizens' needs are certainly directed towards quality, transparency and less bureaucracy. Moreover, complicated systems do not necessarily represent a positive element, their value being given only by the degree in which they improve the outcome of intelligent economic systems. (Sherwood-Smith Remeneyi D and MS., 1999)

In conclusion, we consider that performance management at the level of governance, with impact on the egov2.0 field, is an important parameter, sensitive to changes or transformations, vital for the two MS if they were to stop the decline and carve their way to their deserved place alongside other EU MS.

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