

Navigating Data Privacy in Digital Public Services: Public Perceptions and Policy Implications. Romania Case Study

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Abstract

In the digital age, data collection and analysis technologies has significantly enhanced the efficiency and personalization of public services. However, this reliance on data has raised critical concerns about privacy, security, and ethical data use. This article examines the perception of data privacy in the context of public services in Romania, exploring how public awareness, attitudes, and concerns influence interactions with governmental data practices. This article provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting public trust and engagement with digital public services. The findings aim to inform the development of policies and practices that balance the benefits of data-driven public services with the imperative of protecting individual privacy in Romania.

To conduct the research, we used a mixed-method approach. In the context of the quantitative analysis, the sample comprises XXX beneficiaries of public services from seven Romanian counties. In the context of the qualitative analysis, the sample comprises directors of institutions that offer public services in Romania and people with decision-making roles at the level of the seven counties. The results revealed that the citizens have a positive opinion about public services, but there is a significant concern about data privacy. Due to this aspect, there is a significant level of mistrust and low engagement with digitalized public services. Furthermore, the results of the qualitative analysis provided insights into measures that could enhance public services. We strongly believe that digitization is a crucial element for maintaining the sustainability of public services and increasing public satisfaction with them.

Keywords: public services, Romania, data privacy, personalization, digitization

JEL classification: H80, H83, J18

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1. Introduction

This paper represents research regarding aspects referring to the path of Romanian public administration transition toward digitization. As a EU member state, Romania reformed its public services aiming a new paradigm for providing a personalized and tailored public services.

The research was focused on the following key elements:

- What is the perception of digitalized public services?
- What is the perception of trusting in the data privacy of public administration gathering data?

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- What are the main vulnerabilities affecting digitalized public services implementation?

So that citizens could benefit of digitalized public services characterized by high level of trust and fully data protection privacy.

2. Public services provided by public administration

Public administration is a field that deals with the implementation of government policies and the management of public programs. It is also seen as an important part of a good government. It implies a various type of activities for ensuring the efficient and effective delivery of public services.

The roots of this field can be traced faraway in history, in ancient civilizations (Egypt and Rome). At that time governance was structured around official roles. In ancient Rome separate administrative structures were established for various domains like military, justice, finance, taxation, and foreign relations, each overseen by a designated state official.

The modern conception of public administration finds its roots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Wilson (1887, p. 212) mentioned public administration is "the detailed and systematic execution of public law" laid the groundwork for subsequent scholarly inquiry into administrative processes and functions. Therefore, the author highlighted the need for a professional and efficient bureaucracy to ensure the effective implementation of governmental policies.

Gulick (1937, p.13) introduced the concept of POSDCORB (Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Coordinating, Reporting, and Budgeting), providing a framework for understanding organizational structures and managerial practices within the public sector.

The mid-20th century witnessed the emergence of diverse theoretical perspectives within the field of public administration, reflecting broader shifts in governance paradigms and societal expectations. Simon (1947) challenged traditional views of administrative behavior and highlighted the cognitive limitations faced by decision-makers adding the concept of bounded rationality.

There are two broad views regarding the nature of public administration. The integral view and the managerial view. According to the integral view (White, 1955; Piffner, 1946; Dimock, 1937; Wilson, 1887), administration represents the sum of total activities (manual, clerical, technical, managerial etc.), which are under taken to realize the objectives. This view believes that public administration comprises all types of operations undertaken by all persons ranging from the lowest to the highest in order to implement public policies. Supporter of this views are Marshal Dimock, John Piffner, L.D. White etc.

As regards managerial view (Dhal, 1949; Simon, 1947; Gulick, 1937) administration comprises the work of only those people who are engaged in performing managerial functions in an organization. Therefore, public administration is focussing principally on the planning, organizing, directing,

controlling and coordination of governmental operations. Managerial view believes in getting the things done, not doing things.

As Khuroshvili (2023, p. 20, citing Frederickson, 1976) mentioned “public administration is a mechanism for implementing the values or preferences of individuals, groups, social classes and/or the entire society”. This definition highlights a fundamental aspect of public administration, emphasizing its role as a mechanism for translating the values and preferences of various entities, ranging from individuals to societal groups, into actionable policies and actions. Public administration acts as a bridge between the citizens and the government. This involves not only listening to the voices of individuals but also considering the interests of different social classes and groups. Public administration also plays an important role in ensuring that governance aligns with the will of the people. Public administration must navigate complex political landscapes and balance competing interests to create policies that effectively serve the common good. A key aspect of public administration is accountability to the public. As societies are dynamic the values and preferences can evolve also over time. Public administration must be flexible and responsive to these changes, continuously adapting policies and practices to reflect shifting societal norms and priorities.

Shields (1998) cited in Nwanisobi and Inienger (2020, p. 69) noted that public administration deals with the stewardship and implementation of the products of a living democracy. In this context, by the term of product, the author refers to those items that are constructed or produced (roads, laws, schools, and security).

As European Commission (2024) highlights country’s economic performance and citizens’s wellbeing are in connection with the quality of public administration and governance. Therefore, public administration plays an important role in translating political decisions into tangible outcomes for society and citizens. According to Rosenbloom and Kravchuk (2005, p. 4), "public administration is the means by which the purposes and goals of government are realized". By this definition, it is underlined the important function of public administrators as limiting the gap between policy statement and implementation.

In order to fulfill its own objectives, government provides for society and citizens a various of services. As Van de Walle (2016) mentioned public service delivery is entrusted with the crucial responsibility of ensuring that all citizens have access to essential services, a duty closely tied to their fundamental rights. This obligation creates a unique service context, distinct from that of the private sector, as it prioritizes inclusivity and equity over profit. In this framework, the delivery of public services must focus on universal access, striving to eliminate disparities and ensuring that every individual, regardless of their socio-economic status, can benefit from these services. This approach underscores the role of public service as a cornerstone of a fair and just society, where access to basic needs such as healthcare, education, and social security is seen not merely as a service but as a right inherent to every citizen.

In accordance with the provisions of the Administrative Code (2019), public administration is defined as "all the activities carried out, under the regime of public

power, to organize the execution and concrete execution of the law and to provide public services, in order to satisfy the public interest" (art. 5, letter b) while the public service consists of "the activity or set of activities organized by a public administration authority or a public institution authorized/authorized or delegated by it, in order to satisfy a need with general character or of a public interest, regularly and continuously" (art. 5, letter kk).

Denhardt and Denhardt (2002) emphasize the changing role of public administrators, stating that "public servants are being asked to be more entrepreneurial, customer-focused, and performance-oriented" (p. 549). These responsibilities need public administrators adjusting to changing circumstances and demands.

3. The characteristics of public services and digitization

From the mid-20th century onward, the rapid changes and developments in the economic and social landscape have pushed marketing into new and diverse arenas. This has not only increased the application of marketing strategies across different sectors but has also driven the evolution of these strategies. As a result, marketing practices have become more specialized and tailored to fit the specific needs and characteristics of various fields, leading to more refined and effective marketing methodologies.

Based on the previous aspects, a public service implies some fundamental characteristics: fulfills a local need; it undergoes constant transformation based on community requirements; ongoing relationship with the public administration that established and oversees it; operates within a legal framework governed by public law principles, distinguishing it from private enterprises.

According to Kotler's opinion (1997, p. 583), the term service describes "any action or performance that a subject can perform for another, which is eminently intangible and does not result in the transfer of ownership over a material good." Kotler's definition (1997, p. 583) of service highlights several core characteristics that distinguish services from tangible goods. It encapsulates the essence of what makes services unique in the realm of economic offerings. The author emphasizes the intangibility of services, meaning they cannot be seen, touched, or stored in the same way physical goods can. This characteristic poses unique challenges for marketing and management, as the quality of a service can be harder to assess prior to consumption. Another important element of Kotler's definition is that services do not result in the transfer of ownership. When a consumer purchases a service, they gain access to or benefit from an activity or performance, but they do not acquire a physical object. This lack of ownership differentiates services from goods and has significant implications for how services are marketed and consumed. The author also notes that services involve actions or performances. This aspect underscores the dynamic and interactive nature of services, which often require a high level of interaction between the service provider and the consumer.

The characteristics outlined by Kotler (1997, p. 583) necessitate different marketing strategies for services compared to goods. Marketers must find ways to tangibilize the intangible, such as through creating strong brand images or providing tangible cues like uniforms and logos. Additionally, they must manage the customer experience carefully to ensure satisfaction, as services are produced and consumed simultaneously.

As for Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) “services are deeds, processes, and performances provided or co-produced by one entity or person for and/or with another entity or person”.

Grönroos (2015, p. 48) defines a service as “a process consisting of a series of more or less intangible activities that normally, but not necessarily always, take place in interactions between the customer and service employee and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems.”

Services are also distinguished by a set of attributes that are considered to be unique (Rathmell 1966; Zeithaml et al 1985; Moeller 2010), such as: intangibility (services are non-physical), heterogeneity (services are tailored), inseparability (services are produced and consumed simultaneously), and perishability (services cannot be stored).

The explosive growth of digital technology brought about in an innovative period, influencing numerous facets of everyday life, including government institutions and processes. This paradigm shift not only impacts conventional ways to provide public services, but it also modifies the patterns of relationships among government entities and society as a whole (Hariguna et al., 2021).

The widespread impact of digital shift is obvious, reaching every facet of modern society. Individuals nowadays prefer digital solutions not only in their everyday lives, but also in their relationships with government agencies. It acknowledges the widespread adoption of digital technology in society and highlights the increasing need for digital solutions in both the business and public sectors. The focus on digitalization in contacts with public sector organizations underlines the need for governments to enhance their services to meet evolving user expectations. Understanding the wider social trend toward digitization is essential for government officials and public administrations to properly respond to their constituents' requirements in an increasingly digitalized society.

Considering numerous advantages, the digitization of Romania's public sector is still slowly. The difficulties range from data privacy to individuals' digital literacy. To take full advantage of the benefits of digitization in public services, it is critical to build digital trust. Public administrations ought to seek to build digital trust in order to overcome the current barriers to digitizing public services and create a contemporary, efficient, and citizen-oriented administration.

Nowadays, citizens require mobility, speed, and tailored services and solutions. However, Romania's public sector has been reluctant to adapt and offer specialized solutions to meet the full range of citizens' needs.

In the age of digital technology, the delivery of public services has become more reliant on gathering and analyzing data for enhanced efficiency, customization, and availability. While these enhancements generate multiple benefits, they also represent significant concerns about data privacy and security. The meeting point of public services and data protection involves navigating the need to ensure efficient service delivery with the imperative to secure citizens' personal information. Securing this personal data is essential for preventing identity theft, illegal access, and different forms of abuse. As to the European Data Protection Supervisor (Wiewiórowski, 2024, p. 3), "data protection is a fundamental right granted by European law". We also underline the Cavoukian (2018, p. 58) observation, by which "the pervasive use of advanced technologies in public services can lead to unintended privacy breaches if not properly managed". Therefore, we can conclude that data privacy in digitization of public services is a key element also for building trust between public administration and citizens. In this case, building the truth can amplify using digital public services.

Perceptions of data privacy are shaped by various factors such as technological progress, regulatory measures, and cultural contexts. Trust in public institutions' ability to manage and protect personal data is essential for citizen participation in digital public services. Notably, prominent data breaches and misuse scandals have raised public consciousness and skepticism, driving a demand for increased transparency and accountability. Understanding these perceptions is vital for policymakers and public service providers to create and enforce data governance strategies that align with public expectations and enhance the effectiveness of services offered. Trust is a central theme, reflecting how confidence in public institutions affects citizens' willingness to interact with digital services. The impact of high-profile data breaches underscores the need for robust data governance frameworks. Policymakers and public service providers are encouraged to consider these factors carefully to foster trust and ensure efficient and secure service delivery. This approach necessitates a balance between leveraging technological advancements and maintaining stringent regulatory and accountability standards to meet public expectations.

4. Research methodology

Starting from the previously presented aspects, we carried out a qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative research aimed to capture the way in which the beneficiaries of public services perceive the challenges associated with data protection. In this regard, a number of 14 persons in the management of some tax administrations were interviewed, as follows: male (11), female (3), age (35-62 years), period of working in public administration (9-30 years), period of having a management position (1-17 years).

The quantitative research sought to capture the way in which public services are perceived by the beneficiaries, especially in terms of the level of expectation of public services. In this regard, a questionnaire was applied to which a number of

438 people answered, as follows: Argeş (96; 21,9% of total), Călăraşi (27; 6,2% of total); Dâmboviţa (143; 32,6% of total); Giurgiu (26; 5,9% of total), Ialomiţa (55; 12,6 of total), Prahova (48; 11,0% of total) and Teleorman (43; 9,8% of total).

Also, taking into account the fact that at the level of administrative-territorial units in Romania there are significant differences in terms of the degree of digital literacy, but also specificities related to the socio-economic context, the study was carried out on a number of seven administrative territorial units (ATU), having the following specificities: Călăraşi, Giurgiu, Ialomiţa, Teleorman, – low level, Argeş, Dâmboviţa, Prahova – high level.

The questionnaire was distributed using the GoogleForm platform, the data being processed and interpreted using the IBM SPSSwin v.23 software.

5. Findings

The recorded data demonstrate the existence of slight discrepancies between the preference for digital interaction and the place of residence. A first observation is that, in UATs with a high level of digitalization, the percentage of respondents who indicated the type of digital interaction is higher, values between 53.1% and 70.8% (Table 1). In this case, the highest percentage is registered by ATU Prahova (70.8%), the explanation of this phenomenon being linked to the local specificity according to which there is a strong economic development in terms of the IT&C field which, traditionally, is oriented towards the use of specific digitization tools. Moreover, at the local level there are also public and private initiatives regarding the development of data centers that amplify the digitization segment.

Crosstab place of residence * on-line interaction

Table 1

			On-line interaction		Total
			No	Yes	
Place of residence	Arges ↑	Count	45	51	96
		% within Localitate domiciliu	46,9%	53,1%	100,0%
	Calarasi ↓	Count	13	14	27
		% within Localitate domiciliu	48,1%	51,9%	100,0%
	Dambovita ↑	Count	44	99	143
		% within Localitate domiciliu	30,8%	69,2%	100,0%
	Giurgiu ↓	Count	11	15	26
		% within Localitate domiciliu	42,3%	57,7%	100,0%
	Ialomita ↓	Count	37	18	55
		% within Localitate domiciliu	67,3%	32,7%	100,0%
	Prahova ↑	Count	14	34	48
		% within Localitate domiciliu	29,2%	70,8%	100,0%
	Teleorman ↓	Count	16	27	43
		% within Localitate domiciliu	37,2%	62,8%	100,0%
Total		Count	180	258	438
		% within Localitate domiciliu	41,1%	58,9%	100,0%

Source: Outcome from IBM SPSSWin v.23

Another aspect that must be emphasized is the case of ATU Ialomita. Respondents, in percentage of 67.3%, indicated a preference for traditional interaction, direct contact. Taking into account the specificity of the local economic activity, mainly agriculture, it can be assumed that these values have a direct connection with the literacy level of the consumers of public services.

The significant percentages recorded regarding the option of direct contact with the public service provider lead to the idea of the existence of well-founded reasons. And, in this context, the respondents were asked to identify what would be those elements generating reluctance in using digital tools. This approach is justified in the context of the transition to digitalization, in the sense that the purpose of the public service provider, from a marketing perspective, is to provide services that meet the needs of the consumer.

Therefore, the recorded data revealed that, in proportion to 31.3%, the respondents identified "protection and security of personal data" as the main reason for reluctance (Table 2).

Reason for not using digitalized services

Table 2

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Valid I didn't know the website or the service I was looking for	105	24,0	24,0
I am not familiar with digital instruments	44	10,0	10,0
I prefer personal contact.	134	30,6	30,6
Things are resolved faster by interacting with the officials of the institution	18	4,1	4,1
I am concerned about the protection and security of personal data	137	31,3	31,3
Total	438	100,0	100,0

Source: Outcome from IBM SPSSWin v.23

At the same time, the data recorded regarding the protection and security of personal data also reveal the fact that, in the UATs with a high degree of digitization, the percentage of respondents is higher, respectively: ATU Prahova (60.4%).

Regarding UATs with a low level of digitization, we note the percentage expressed by ATU Teleorman (11.6%) for which the protection and security of personal data is not a major concern.

We also note that the concern related to the protection and security of personal data is more significant in the case of respondents who indicated the level of education as "master's", while, in the case of respondents with secondary education, respectively secondary school and vocational school, the reasons are related of ignorance of the service – 40% and low degree of digital literacy – 50% (Table 3).

Crosstab level of education and reason of not using digital public services

Table 3

		Reasons of not using digital public services					Total	
		1	2	3	4	5		
Level of education	Gymnazium	Count	0	1	1	0	0	2
		% within Level of education	0,0%	50,0%	50,0%	0,0%	0,0%	100,0%
	High-school	Count	9	9	16	3	16	53
		% within within Level of education	17,0%	17,0%	30,2%	5,7%	30,2%	100,0%
	Professional school	Count	4	2	4	0	0	10
		% within within Level of education	40,0%	20,0%	40,0%	0,0%	0,0%	100,0%
	University	Count	47	28	51	4	42	172
		% within within Level of education	27,3%	16,3%	29,7%	2,3%	24,4%	100,0%
	Master	Count	35	4	61	10	74	184
		% within within Level of education	19,0%	2,2%	33,2%	5,4%	40,2%	100,0%
	PhD.	Count	10	0	1	1	5	17
		% within within Level of education	58,8%	0,0%	5,9%	5,9%	29,4%	100,0%
Total		Count	105	44	134	18	137	438
		% within within Level of education	24,0%	10,0%	30,6%	4,1%	31,3%	100,0%

Legend:

- 1 I didn't know the website or the service I was looking for
- 2 I am not familiar with digital instruments
- 3 I prefer personal contact.
- 4 Things are resolved faster by interacting with the officials of the institution
- 5 I am concerned about the protection and security of personal data

Source: Outcome from IBM SPSSWin v.23

Therefore, we appreciate the fact that the reasons for reluctance regarding the use of digitalization-specific means find their explanation both in terms of consumer characteristics (digital literacy level, information level, etc.) and in terms of how the provider of public services manages to inform its consumers about the services provided.

Moreover, taking into account the fact that, from a marketing perspective, the public service provider has monopoly status, it can be assumed that, within marketing strategies, there is no concern along the lines of the public communication and information vector, but rather a concern related to of the objective of the fiscal entity's existence, namely the level of tax collection.

In other words, at the level of consumers there is a high level of mistrust regarding the personal data that, within the digital public services, they provide to the tax administration. But if we analyze the process objectively, even in the traditional face-to-face interaction the consumer provides identical information.

However, in this case, the existence of the suspicion of faulty handling of personal data seems not to be justified. Both in one case (the digital variant) and in the other case (the direct contact variant), the consumer provides the same amount and consistency of personal data. Therefore, we appreciate that the reluctance along the line of the personal data security vector finds its explanation mostly in the way the public service provider manages to communicate, in an efficient and transparent manner, the benefits of digitization, including the aspects related to the protection of personal data. Also, it can be assumed that the information circulated at the public level regarding the supposed control that the State, through the authorized entities, tries to impose on the population is an amplifying factor. At the same time, even in the conditions of an influx of false information, we note the fact that 1 out of 3 respondents consider that the protection and security of personal data is a serious reason for reluctance.

The level of trust in the security of personal data identified as a reason for reluctance to use digital services (Table 4) appears to be a real concern, with 27.9% of respondents indicating this. We note that this percentage is close to the one previously identified, namely 31.3%.

Level of trust regarding data privacy

Table 4

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Valid Totally disagree	48	11,0	11,0
Disagree	74	16,9	16,9
Agree	88	20,1	20,1
Fully agree	228	52,1	52,1
Total	438	100,0	100,0

Source: Outcome from IBM SPSSWin v.23

However, 72.2% show a high degree of confidence in the security of the personal data provided. The explanation of this percentage can be justified by the fact that, from a technical point of view, accessing any database requires the existence of additional cyber security measures through which the people who have accessed various data are registered. In other words, we could appreciate the existence of a high degree of digital literacy of the 72.2% of respondents or even the existence of a high level of trust in the public service provider.

85.2% of respondents indicated that this process of transition to digitalization also brings other benefits, such as increasing consumer literacy (Table 5). And, from this perspective, in an extended approach, increasing the degree of digital literacy of consumers has a direct benefit to the direct relationship between the citizen and the state authorities.

Digitization of public services implies high level of literacy

Table 5

		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Valid	Totally disagree	19	4,3	4,3
	Disagree	48	11,0	11,0
	Agree	199	45,4	45,4
	Fully agree	172	39,3	39,3
	Total	438	100,0	100,0

Source: Outcome from IBM SPSSWin v.23

As regards the qualitative research, data gathered reveals the following aspects:

- “digitization is beneficial for the beneficiaries of public services because it mediates the relationship between the public administration and them”, but also “the quality of the public services offered increases directly through digitization” (respondent no. 7);

- “The issue of the transition to digitalization must be nuanced. From the perspective of the beneficiaries of the public services we offer, the process can seem very complicated and generate frustration which, in turn, leads to a negative perception of the services provided. So, no matter how high-quality digital public services are, it is important to make sure that the beneficiaries also know how to use them. Without going into the mention of specific cases, there are localities where the age of the beneficiaries of our services is very advanced, and the existence of modern means (tablet, laptop) does not exist. There are, in many cases, smart phones. Or, from this perspective, the digitization of services and their provision to beneficiaries will generate misunderstanding. However, the public administration staff will have to be trained so that, at least in a first phase, they can offer the necessary support to beneficiaries who, for objective reasons, do not have a high level of literacy. Including digital” (respondent no 9).

Respondent no 5 excludes the existence of possible negative effects, underlining the fact that “digitalization means progress, it means a better quality service received by the beneficiary, delivered in a shorter time and with minimal efforts on their part”. In turn, respondent no 7 brings into discussion the demographic characteristics of the beneficiaries of the public services offered by the public administration, underlining the fact that “(...) it is more difficult for the older ones, they are not familiar with online applications.” In other words, not only the degree of digital literacy of the public administration staff influences the process of transition to digitalization, but also the degree of literacy of the beneficiaries.

We also retain the point of view expressed by respondent no 12 which indicates that “(...) it can be difficult only for those without knowledge in the digital field, from rural areas, that's why we need to find counseling and prevention services”. In other words, apart from the basic service offered by the local administration, the respondent brings into discussion the importance of providing

auxiliary services to the basic service through which the beneficiaries can be trained in their use.

Furthermore, respondent no 11 stated that due to the lack of digital literacy and a low level of education, some beneficiary of public services may believe that their personal data recorded by public administration are not ethically used. This statement implies a reluctance in using digital public services.

6. Conclusions

As can be seen from the data presented previously, at the level of the beneficiaries of public services provided by the public administration, there is a concern regarding data protection and privacy.

In the absence of a high degree of digital education this is normal, especially if we take into account the various narratives used in the public space regarding the Big Brother Law. However, from the point of view of service marketing, we appreciate that this reluctance proves a lack of concern on the part of the provider in terms of consumer information. Moreover, taking into account the specific marketing objectives, the public service provider should adapt to the conditions and needs of the consumers. Or, in this case, the significant degree of reluctance regarding the use of digital public services can also be interpreted in the paradigm of a shared deficiency. Thus, on the one hand, it is about the existence of a low degree of digital literacy together with the lack of specific technical tools (laptop, internet, smartphone, etc.), but also the failure of the public service provider to meet the real needs of consumers.

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