NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE SERVICE OF EFFICIENT PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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INTRODUCTION

It is often that the will for improving public administration services is not missing; in order, however, to transform the will into concrete results, more is needed: crucially, the funds, necessary for any administrative reform; the implementation mechanisms, that is workable and effective instruments through which reform can not only be introduced, but also monitored and strengthened; the know-how, comprising both human and technological resources; and last, but certainly not least, wider support: support of the people from both sides of the administration, i.e. both those working on offering public administration services and those receiving them.

Starting from the assumption that public administration reform is advantageous, and in several cases even necessary, this paper aims at addressing a rudimentary question: how can e-government initiatives contribute to the much needed institutional and procedural reforms and to more efficient control mechanisms, with the aim of improving public administration services?

In what follows, the study briefly reviews the standards, benchmarks and principles for good public administration, as set at European and international level, and looks into the ways in which new technologies may contribute towards a more open, transparent, accountable, cost-effective, efficient public administration. Contemporary trends in the management and provision of public sector services are highlighted in this respect.

After a general overview of the state of affairs in countries of Southeastern Europe, that have been identified as the 'lagging' ones in terms of IT penetration in both the public sector and in society generally, the study

focuses on the case of Greece, a country that besides the considerable challenges that it urgently needs to address concerning the organisation and functioning of its public sector, must also deal with its critical state of public finances. Re-organising public administration with extensive use of new technologies and an emphasis on e-Government initiatives and schemes has become a priority for the government in power, with the aim of a more cost-effective, and open public administration.

1. SETTING STANDARDS AND PRINCIPLES

Improving public administration necessitates tackling both institutional and procedural shortcomings. The objective should be, in this regard, to approximate a commonly recognised benchmark of good and efficient administration, notwithstanding country-specific features. Such benchmarks have been developed, rightly so, through time, at the EU level and through international organisations.

Almost ten years ago, in its White Paper for European Governance, the Commission identified the central principles for good governance: better administration via rationalization procedures, quality services to the citizens, transparency, effectiveness, independence, equality of treatment, accountability, openness, participation, effectiveness, and coherence. It may have been an initiative motivated by the desire to offset widespread criticism of nepotism and maladministration, amidst its most grave credibility crisis[1], and not by a genuine realisation of the pivotal role the Commission could play in setting public administration standards, nonetheless such principles enhance both the democracy and the efficiency features that should coincide in a governance system, whether national or supranational, as the case of the EU may be.

The promotion of transparency, in particular, is central in tackling corruption and maladministration in public administration. The importance of access to information is recognised by Transparency International and by other International Organisations. In its second Global Corruption report of 2003, entitled "access to information", Transparency International emphasised the enhanced role of transparency in modern societies, noting that it has assumed the place of trust. As proven through case studies, e-governance applications create counter-incentives for corruption to public servants and increase the possibilities for whistle-blowing on such phenomena.

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[1] The 'Santer' Commission.

The European Parliament Code of Good Administrative Behaviour identifies the principles of legality of administrative action, of equality (including non-discrimination), of proportionality, of impartiality, of objectivity. In addition, the Charter of Fundamental Rights proclaims the right of good administration, most notably referring to the right of a person to an impartial, fair and timely examination of his/her case.

Since 2002, the Commission has launched a far-reaching programme with the aim of simplifying and generally improving regulations, at least those produced at EU level. The Better Regulation strategy included a mix of different actions:

- introducing a system for assessing the impact and improving the design of major Commission proposals; this is a knowledge-based approach — aimed at ensuring that decisions on whether and how to proceed with an initiative are based on solid evidence and a thorough analysis of options.

- assessing the cost of administrative action; The European Commission has taken the initiative to set out a method for measuring administrative costs (the EU's net administrative Cost Model), inspired by best practice in Member States such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

- implementing a programme of simplification of existing legislation;

- testing Commission proposals still being looked at by the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, to see whether they should be withdrawn;

- factoring consultation into all Commission initiatives; in this respect, the Commission has, indeed, made significant contribution: The Commission has a long tradition of extensive consultation through various channels: Green Papers, White Papers, communications, fora (such as the European Energy and Transport Forum or the European Health Forum), workshops, permanent consultative groups and

consultations on the Internet. here are also structured processes — such as the social dialogue with trade unions and employers' organisations and the dialogue between the Commission and the European and national associations of regional and local authorities.

• looking at alternatives to laws and regulations (such as self-regulation, or co-regulation by the legislator and interested parties, "soft" law instruments etc).

Reaching such objectives, benchmarks and strategy goals can be facilitated and promoted, it is suggested, through the extensive use and broad introduction of New Technologies in the structure formation, as well as the function, of public administration.

2. IMPROVING PUBLIC SERVICES THROUGH NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Cases of maladministration and corruption are inextricably linked with the administration's operational shortcomings in providing quick and efficient service. Delays in processing citizens' request may be caused by public servants, but usually are the result of the complexity and inflexibility of the bureaucratic machinery. Such delays may form the ideal setting for cases of corruption, originating either from the citizen who is trying to speed up the administrative process, and sometimes even to 'bend the rules' and 'jump the queue' for individual gain, or from public servants, who treat the slow-response nature of the administrative apparatus as an opportunity to apply discretionary treatment on citizens' cases for own profit.

It is a fact that traditional-style administrative procedures are plagued by long delays. To a great extend, this reflects mainly the long and arduous processes of filling, registering, retrieving, and circulating documents among the various administration departments[2]. Clearly, such administrative procedures are not in line with the efficiency principle that presides over administrative action. The efficiency of administrative action does not lie in the completion of a procedure, regardless of the time taken, but in the administration's ready response. The efficiency principle sets short time limits for the completion of a procedure, and establishes mechanisms for observing them. Efficiency requires that the time taken to apply the various decisions reached in different phases is such to enable administrations to achieve the aims of administrative action.

By integrating the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in its procedures, public administration can achieve an increase in productivity and efficiency and, simultaneously, reduce phenomena of corruption and maladministration. Indeed, the "digitalisation" of

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[2] P. Dunleavy, H. Margetts, S. Bastow & J. Tinkler, *Digital Era Governance. IT Corporations, the State and e-Government* (OUP, 2006).

administrative procedures may have multiple positive effects. To emphasise but a few:

- It may contribute to overcoming the negative effects deriving from the phenomenon of increasing "fragmentation of procedure".

- It addresses comprehensively issues of red-tape and delays, typical symptoms of inefficient public administration systems.

- It brings citizens/ICT users closer to the source of administrative procedures and action, improving transparency and openness standards.

- It reduces the cost of administrative procedures, and, more generally, of the whole web of administrative institutions and service-providers. Greater cost-effectiveness in administrative action is also and above all promoted by the virtualisation of administrative procedures.

- It simplifies procedures, and renders the processing of citizens' requests and complaints more effective, by standardising them.

- It facilitates monitoring of performance by administrative service-providers, by establishing automated, credible and objective efficiency standards in processing cases.

- It minimises the risks of 'capture' in formulating administrative acts. Corruption in administrative procedures, caused primarily by intervention of the 'human element', the administrator, is more easily detectable, hence less likely to affect the final outcome of an administrative procedure and of the handling of a specific case. If citizens and enterprises have access to valid and timely information regarding the operations and decisions of the State, then, as a consequence, public administration is under constant supervision, hence establishing stiffer accountability standards, and eliminating

the opportunities for corruption. Indeed, as has been illustrated by various case-studies of e-governance systems' applications internationally, granting access to public administration information and services through e-governance applications creates counter-incentives for corruption to public servants and increases possibilities for whistle-blowing on such phenomena[3].

- Be that as it may, the existing inspection and monitoring mechanisms should in no case be scrapped or demoted. ICTs are meant to make inspections more effective and fast, and should be treated as a tool for rendering also other, 'traditional', institutionalised mechanisms of monitoring and inspection more effective.

- It promotes the principle of equality of access to administrative services, which is a fundamental component of 'administrative democracy'[4], by bringing down geographical barriers, and by allowing citizens/ICT users to log in to the administration web platforms at any moment, and in real time.

- It contributes to a cost-effective training of public servants, and to upgrading cooperation and coordination between related institutions internationally through the dissemination of knowledge and relevant experiences.

In what follows, the paper looks closer into some of the abovementioned positive effects of applying ICTs in the public sector.

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[3] K Tsimaras, "The contribution of new technologies in achieving transparency and efficiency in Public Administration. Institutional and operational consequences" in A. Pottakis (ed) *Transparency and Reform of Administrative Procedures. Especially Through E-Government Initiatives for a Better Public Administration* (forthcoming).
[4] A Masucci, "Electronic Administrative Procedures and the New Quality of Administrative Action" in A. Pottakis (ed) ibid.

2.1. Access to Information and Transparency of Administrative Action

The most common method for disclosing, sharing and distributing information is, for quite some time now, the Internet. New advancements in ICT have made possible the use of more complicated procedures, interactive services and personalised use of the available applications. E.g. information are now also distributed and shared through e-journals sent via email to subscribers, sms and email notifications on holding open discussions at local level administration are a common practice, remote convening of meetings with the use of video-conferences are by not established not only at the private but also the public sector etc. Similarly, examples of access to personalised information, requests and services are the tracking of the course of a request, the notification on decisions concerning the individual, the e-submission of documents etc.

The availability of information may be a necessary condition for transparency, but it is not necessarily enough for making use of it. Factors, such as the lack of incentives or knowledge by citizens, the possible apathy that leads to inaction, the excess of information and reduced access of ICTs, reduce the impact of systems for making information available to the citizen. Making a huge and unmanageable volume of data and information available may eventually have the reverse effect: J. Pope concentrates his scepticism on the case of transparency of electoral campaigns in the USA, where despite the abundance of data on the funding of candidates' campaigns, there is no real assessment and estimate of the degree and intensity of influence exercised by large contributions and 'eminent' contributors[5]. Hence, the 'filtering' of the available information, the proper use of services, and the 'sorting-out' of the important from the unimportant information, among the abundance of available data, are equally fundamental processes for the right and effective use of public administration information.

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[5] J Pope, *Access to Information: whose right and whose information*, Global Corruption Report 2003, Transparency International 2003.

2.2. Customer-Centred Approach and Proximity of Administrative Action

Adapting, rather than adopting, the private sector model that is organised around -and targeted towards- the individual as customer, public administration has already created services and mechanisms that treat citizens in a similar manner. It is suggested that an e-governance system with a customer-centred approach may provide[6]:

- services around the clock, and beyond working hours, thus increasing the hours that a citizen has access to public administration services,

- services provided through decentralised centres or one-stop-shops, thus reducing the irritation and fatigue that citizens experience when their physical presence is required –and very often not in one dept. or office, but in several- so that their request is processes by the administration,

- several and various (including some the most complex ones) services at one point, reducing red-tape phenomena, delays, and coordination problems arising between different public administration departments when their cooperation is required for delivering a service.

Such an approach, it is suggested, has several advantages: The personal contact of the citizen with the public servant is infrequent, and the servant's discretionary powers are limited, thus minimising the risk of corruption or maladministration. Simultaneously, this approach allows for a more efficient use of the human resources of the public sector: By processing a number of citizens' requests and offering certain services electronically, a heavy load is lifted from the shoulders of –very often understaffed- departments, that may

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[6] WB E-Gov (2007), *Leveraging E-governance for Successful Anti-Corruption Programs*, Global dialogue, World Bank, 17 January 2007.

concentrate on dealing more complex and particular issues, for which the intervention of the human element ensures that the particularities of an individual case will be taken into consideration and fairly assessed.

The electronic transmission of documents from citizens to the public administration eliminates the time documents lie idle, waiting to be registered, distributed to the appropriate department etc. The registration and filing of documents by computer make it easier and quicker to retrieve them. It also allows for the almost automatic assignment of documents to the office responsible for the procedure. Moreover, the ready response of administrative action can also be favoured by using ICT through the automation of decision taking and in drawing up administrative acts. In addition, the possibility for public administrations to send documents and acts to addresses through the Internet cuts out all the time taken for their delivery without compromising the need to guarantee proof of the communication.

The use of new technologies in administrative procedures not only renders 'red-tape' obsolete, but above all implies a major reshaping of the public administration-citizen relation, opening up administrative action to citizens[7]. A permanent virtual channel is built to permit interaction between the public administration and the individual. The individual citizen, as argued more extensively earlier, is progressively transformed from 'administered' person to an interlocutor on equal terms with the public administration.

2.3. Standardization of Procedures and Monitoring Efficiency

The use of specific ICT tools for offering public sector services inevitably leads to a 'standardisation' of the processes. Software platforms are developed in such a way that the possibility of intervention and exercise of any kind of discretionary power on behalf of a public servant becomes practically

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[7] K Holkeri, "Votre avis nous intéresse". Une expérience finlandaise de participation citoyenne par les NTIC, in G Chatillon & B du Marais (eds), *L'administration électronique au service des citoyens* (Bruxelles, 2003), p. 307.

obsolete. As noted earlier, this contributes to tackling phenomena of corruption, favouritism and maladministration, while at the same time it increases the system's capacity and efficiency.

The effect of 'standardising' procedures in the public administration also contributes to identifying –and possibly resolving- problem areas. Procedure recording may highlight possible problems of different handling of the same issue by different operators/public servants, or by sectors and offices within the same department, or even by different departments of the public sector in cases of overlapping competencies. The replacement of operators/public servants with ICT systems can prevent forms of maladministration, such as administrational irregularities, unfair discrimination, wrong or excessive use of discretionary power, omission of due action etc. Further, an effective administration system reduces the chances for discretionary treatment as regards the speed of service because it is equally fast for all citizens.

Indeed, the introduction of ICTs in public administration services offers greater capability of assessing the performance of public servants, and of the system itself. It allows for the implementation of administration through targets. Recording the actions of each operator of a system facilitates inspection, while at the same time it acts as a preventive and deterrent factor, increasing accountability. Reports and complaints are a significant source of information for inspection bodies in cases of corruption and maladministration. The protection of the confidentially of the 'whistle-blower's' personal data in a report or complaint can be sufficiently guaranteed by existing –and ever developing- software, that provide for the registering of sensitive personal data in such a way, through encryption of data, that only the operator/inspector to whom the information is revealed can retrieve them.

2.4. Cost-Effectiveness

As resources budgeted for the functioning of the public sector are progressively reduced, not least because of the ongoing global economic crisis, the principle of cost-effectiveness takes center stage in public administration. This principle, essentially intertwined with the principles of efficiency and transparency, has become especially important[8]. E-Governance aims at and promulgates to carry out administrative procedures at a lower cost.

2.5. New Prospects for Participatory Governance

Besides the positive effects, briefly mentioned above, of the 'digitalisation' of administrative procedures, considerable gains are to be attained in terms of invigorating the political mobilisation of citizens. ICT may produce what has been termed in the course of the conference 'a user generated state'[9]. The user generated state impacts on both the political mobility of citizens, and the foundations of public services. As Prof. Morison notes, while voter turnout in most member-states, on aggregate, barely reaches 60%, and membership in political parties has declined to less than 25% from what it was in the – politically vibrant and turbulent- 1960s, all indicators show that citizens are not disenchanted with politics per se. The roots of their apparent indifference, if one focuses only on voter turnout in elections, should more probably be found in the way the political discourse is conducted, allowing for only a marginal role for the civic society, or the way the power play takes place, which excludes 'outsiders'.

This approach appears to have been espoused by the EU, which, in the Lisbon Treaty recognises EU citizens' will to have a more direct and active role in policy-making. The Treaty provides for a citizens' petition to provoke

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[8] E Schmidt-Aβmann, *Das Allgemeine Verwaltungsrecht als Ordnungsidee*., (Springer 2004), p. 316.
[9] J Morison, "Gov 2.0: Transparency and the User Generated State' in A. Pottakis (ed) ibid.

legislation in areas identified by a significant number of EU citizens as needing regulating. And to this end, the role of new technologies is central.

With respect to citizens' relation with public administration, a 'user generated state' puts forth the notion of the choosing citizen/user/consumer. The idea is simple, yet revolutionary. Just as consumers have the right and liberty to pick and choose among a variety of available products the ones they want in order to satisfy their needs, citizens will also have the opportunity to select the types of public services they wish to receive, and do this from a distance, making full use of the possibilities offered by ICT, and thus reducing the burden of the administration. The underlying danger is that citizens may be treated as consumers in all respects. As a 'failed' consumer is not interesting to the private company providing goods, and hence the whole marketing and production policy of the company is designed without taking into consideration the preferences, needs, wishes of such consumer, a 'failed' citizen, one who either has little need of public services, or need of very particular and extraordinary ones, may be disregarded and cast aside, when designing public policies, and public services[10].

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[10] J Morison, ibid.

3. THE FUTURE OF E-GOVERNANCE: FROM CITIZENS-CONSUMERS TO USERS

The most recent advancements in ICT, with the upgraded web systems and the new generation of web design and development, pave the way of enhanced levels of interconnectivity and interactivity[11]. Web 2.0, as many commentators have named the new evolution in ICT, may be defined as involving "*web-based interactive tools and media, oriented primarily to create a rich and engaging user experience. In this system, users are an integral part of the value that is added to the content and data online, and their interactions with the information (both collectively and individually) can significantly alter the experience of subsequent users*"[12].

This definition epitomises the enhanced creativity and superior interaction, which are prime characteristics of the new system[13]. The emphasis is transferred from non-responsive websites, capable of only transmitting official information, or from sites that allow some degree of interaction, perhaps involving secure transactions: in contrast to more traditional websites, which simply allow the user to view information, Web 2.0 sites feature a user-friendly, interactive and participatory tools, encourage visitors to add content, thus co-designing and co-formulating them.

Web 2.0 is, thus, a highly sophisticated, and dynamic environment, where change and innovation is at the heart of the system. Examples of its application are universally popular, user-friendly and prone to constant change, through the interaction with the user. To name but some of the most common examples:

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[11] T O'Reilly, *What Is Web 2.0? Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software*, available at http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html.

[12] See Environmental Protection Agency Web 2.0 White Paper available at http://www.collaborationproject.org/download/attachments/11206698/EPA+Web+2.0+White+Paper.pdf.

[13] See further D Tapscott & A Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes everything* (2007) and C Sunstein, *Infotopia: How many minds Produce knowledge* (2006).

- File sharing: The new ICT systems are founded on the idea of multi-media rich websites used by many people. There are huge amounts of data hosted on the internet in various formats.

- Blogs: blogs are websites authored by individuals offering news or commentary, which are updated.

- RSS (Really Simple Syndication): RSS is a way of publishing the updated elements of online documents such as blog entries, news or podcasts which are subject to frequent change and updating. This is of benefit to users who want to subscribe to timely updates from specified websites or to aggregate feeds from many sites into one place.

- Wikis: Wiki is a piece of server software that allows users to create and edit a web page content using any web browser. In this way wikis are especially suited to collaborative and developmental projects with interest group or community based users operating in a social networking context to assimilate team output into a single product[14].

- Social Networking sites: there are a wide variety of online communities, e-communities or virtual communities which feature media rich platforms for users to interact for all sorts of social, professional, educational, interest-based and other purposes[15]. Social networking sites may have variable levels of interaction and participation but they are based on the idea of users producing and sharing information themselves rather than merely consuming content provided by others.

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[14] The most well-known wiki is "wikipedia", which operates as a collaborative, free encyclopedia.
[15] MySpace and Facebook are probably the best known and most used examples currently.

The idea that it may be possible to apply the interactive, user-generated elements of Web 2.0 to the practice of government finds its realisation in project Gov 2.0. Gov 2.0 refers to an idea that some of the elements of interactivity that engage people in the context of shopping, music and social networking might have an application in improving how government both delivers its services and interacts with its citizens. At the most basic level, Gov 2.0 might simply involve permitting and encouraging government officials and elected representatives to use social media tools such as blogs and wikis to communicate with their constituents and clients. At a slightly higher level this might be developed to encourage citizen feedback in a process of improvement of services. At a third level this could be developed into a participatory space where citizens as users and consumers of government services are engaged in debate with those who provide them. At a more evolved stages, government could make available all non-confidential, non-personal government data to enable citizens and organisations to use it for a variety of purposes. At its most evolved, Gov 2.0 might deploy what is sometimes termed "crowdsourcing", which involves harnessing the power that is thought by some people to come from applying the mass thinking of a very large group of people to a task such as policy formation that is usually given to only a small group[16].

All of these stages of evolution would represent advances to the e-government agenda and introduce the idea that Gov 2.0 developments will impact both on the service delivery aspects of government and in improving the element of democratic participation.

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[16] See further Tapscott & Williams, and Sunstein ibid, and also J Howe, *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd Is Driving the Future of Business* (2008); also C Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (2008).

4. ICT in the EU: The Regional Dimension

In a recently published study, the Commission addresses the regional dimension of e-services use[17]. The study notes that low rates of regular internet usage are linked to the cost/income factor of the internet use and the availability and coverage of broadband. It identifies Romania and Bulgaria as the countries with the lowest rate of regular internet usage, although it does not fail to highlight the remarkable inroads made in recent years, especially in Bulgaria.

The study also focuses particular attention on another regional group, except the one of Eastern European member states, that of the countries of the South. It notes that Greece, Italy and Portugal are still below EU average rates[18].

A further indication of the disparities in dispersing ICT in different regions of the EU is drawn from the level of e-Business conducted in them. Again, the pattern is the same: countries in the North and Centre or Europe perform -on average- on a competitive level with the U.S.A., while countries in the East and the South of Europe perform very poorly indeed[19].

The ICT country specific profile that accompanies the study[20] is even more illuminating about the state of affairs in Eastern and Southern European Union member states, and the distance they have to cover to approximate the level of ICT penetration that their EU partners from the West and the North of Europe demonstrate.

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[17] EC, *Europe's Digital Competitiveness Report, vol. I*, Commission Staff Working Document SEC (2010) 627.
[18] In order to help "lagging" regions to catch up with the more advanced ones of Central and Northern Europe, the EC has earmarked more than one billion euros, under the European Economic Recovery Package, for broadband deployment in rural areas and lagging regions.
[19] The study also notes the disparity of basic infrastructure between businesses of Western Europe compared to those of Eastern Europe. Indicatively, the study notes that Western European firms have 2 PCs more per 10 employees than Eastern European ones. See also P. Ifinedo & R. Davidrajuh 'Digital divide in Europe: assessing and comparing the e-readiness of a developed and an emerging economy in the Nordic region' Electronic Government vol. 2, no 2, 2005.
[20] *Europe's Digital Competitiveness Report* (ibid) *vol. II*.

In Bulgaria, the EC notes a significant progress. While the country is placed at the far end of the EU 27 ranking, significant inroads were made in the previous years that have started to bear fruit in 2009. The National Healthcare Portal, the implementation of personal electronic records, the enforcement of the law on e-Governance, the launch of an e-paying system for the state administration, the digitalisation of a number of public administration services (including, inter alia, vehicle registration, business regulation, registry of corporate bodies, licenses, public procurement) are but few examples of the advances made in the last years in the area of ICT. In particular with respect to e-Government services, there seems to be a substantial disparity between their availability to citizens, which was very low, to that of enterprises, which was remarkably high.

Romania seems to be in a worse state than Bulgaria. The Commission study identifies Romania as the country with the lowest broadband penetration[21]. On e-Government services, Romania appears to have made only small advancements over the past few years, and remains at the bottom of nearly every indicator of the study of the Commission .

The assessments of the Commission report on Slovenia could not have been more strikingly different than the previous ones. Slovenia scores extremely high on the provision of e-Government services both to citizens and to business. The same cannot be said for Croatia: broadband penetration is still low, and e-Government initiatives scarce and limited in scope.

Similar conclusions are drawn also by a global e-government survey, where, on regional level, Eastern Europe is ranked lower than the Middle East and the Pacific Ocean Islands (!)[22]

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[21] To address this problem, the Bulgarian Government has adopted the "Government strategy on broadband electronic communications in Romania for the period 2009-2015". The strategy plan expects to raise household penetration rates to 80% by the year 2015.

[22] D. West 'Global e-Government 2004', Center for Public Policy, Brown University. In the same study, and at country specific level, Romania and Croatia are listed last among the (by now) EU member states, with scores near the ones of Serbia, FYROM and Albania. Remarkable progress, however is noted in the 2006 Global e-Government report, if not about the average regional score, but for specific countries, most notably Romania, Bulgaria and FYROM.

5. APPLYING NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: THE GREEK CASE

It may be that if one were to seek for model applications of new technologies in public administration, one would most probably have to study the examples of the Nordic or the Central European countries. Indeed, the level of penetration of information technologies in the Scandinavian countries, as well as the countries of Central Europe[23], is far greater than in any other European region[24]. The discrepancies are much more vivid if one compares the above countries to those of Southern and Eastern Europe, as recent studies have highlighted[25].

However, this distance between on the one hand the Central and Northern European countries and on the other the Southern and Eastern, offers an argument in favour of examining the state of affairs in the later: Countries in the South and the East of Europe have a longer distance to cover, many more difficulties to overcome, and more space for rapid development. Hence, their cases present great interest.

Among the countries of the South and East of Europe, Greece is a particular case, for several reasons, that render its study an exceptionally interesting project. To name but the most apparent:

- Greece not only represents a country of Southern Europe, but also of the Balkan region, which by and large is among the least developed regions of the Union, not just in terms of IT diffusion but also in terms of most of the critical economic and social development indicators.

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[23] Most notably Austria.

[24] To mention but one, albeit quite indicative, example, the Finnish Government proudly announced earlier in 2010 that it has managed to offer 100% coverage and access to IT in its entire territory, joining France, Sweden and the UK. It is worth noting that in this way, the Finnish Government has realised its promise that access to IT and internet services is a positive right that should be available to all its inhabitants.

[25] *Europe's Digital Competitiveness Report*, ibid.

- It has consistently exhibited the worst indicators among the 'old' member states in terms of IT penetration, not just in the public sector organisation and functioning but in society in general.

- Yet, Greece is a country within the 'hard core' of Europe, being a member of the "Euro-zone".

- Since the last parliamentary elections of October 2009, a new government is in power in Greece. In its –victorious- electoral campaign, the new government (then, main opposition) had placed the reform of the public sector with the use of new technologies -with the aim of improving its efficiency, opening up administration services and procedures to citizens and cutting public administration spending- very high in its agenda.

- Just a few months after the shift of power, and faced with the imminent threat of a collapse of public finances and of bankruptcy, the new government had to resort to extreme measures for public spending cuts, including cuts in salaries of public sector employees, and a reconsideration of all public investments and development programmes, in compliance to the Memorandum signed with its creditors, the IMF, the EU and the ECB[26].

Within this broad frame, it is quite interesting to examine the extend to which the overall economic state of Greece has affected the objectives of the new government to invest heavily on improving public administration services through the introduction of new technologies[27].

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[26] The resort to the sui generis mechanism of economic support to Greece was proclaimed by the Prime Minister in April 2010, after the announcement of the official figures of the public debt for 2009. See http://www.primeminister.gr/2010/04/23/1611. The memorandums signed on 3rd of May 2010 were the Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies (MEFP) and the Memorandum of Understanding on Specific Economic Policy Conditionality (MoU).
[27] For a relatively recent bibliography on e-Government in Greece, including sectoral case studies see K. Markellos, P. Markellou & A. Panayiotaki 'Current state of Greek e-Government initiatives' Journal of Business systems, Governance and Ethics vol. 2 no 3, 2007; P. Hahamis, J. Iles & M. Healy 'e-Government in Greece: bridging the gap between need and reality' Westminster Business School (http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/2761/1/Hahamis_Iles_Healy_2005_final_author_version.pdf); D. Gouscos, G. Mentzas & P. Georgiadis 'Planning and Implementing e-Government Service Delivery: Achievements and Learning from On-line taxation in Greece, 8th Panhellenic Conference on

<u>5.1. Enhancing Citizen Participation Through the Application of New Technologies: The "OpenGov" Project</u>

One of the central promises of the now governing party included in its electoral campaign platform was the promotion of mechanisms of further transparency, deliberation and accountability in public administration decision-making, including both decisions taken at the level of the central government as well as those of the local and regional administration.

Immediately after its election, the new government launched the project "OpenGov". The declared objective of the project is meeting the needs of citizens for information, meritocracy in the selection of key public administration officials and participation in the decision-making process.

Although still a pilot-project, the "OpenGov" already offers deliberation services[28] and includes invitations for expression of interest for filling key posts in public administration[29]. The Deputy Minister of Education is the political supervisor of the project, while the development and service support is the responsibility of the E-Governance and ICT team of the Prime Minister's office.

Informatics, 2001; C Vassilakis, G. Laskaridis, G. Lepouras, S. Rouvas & P. Georgiadis 'A framework for managing the lifecycle of transactional e-government services' Telematics & Informatics vol 20, issue 4, 2003; G. Anthopoulos, P. Siozos & I. Tsoukalas 'Applying participatory design and collaboration in digital public services for discovering and re-designing e-government services' Government Information Quarterly vol. 24, issue 2, 2007; P. Tahinakis, J. Mylonakis & N. Protogeros 'The contribution of e-government to the modernisation of the Hellenic taxation system' Electronic Government vol. 3, no. 2, 2006

[28] Basically, it consists in a platform, where important government acts are published for open deliberation with any interested person-user. Already, the following ministries have established and are using deliberation platforms: Ministry of Interior (http://www.opengov.gr/ypes), Ministry of Economy, Competitiveness and Shipping (http://www.opengov.gr/ypoan/), Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change (http://www.opengov.gr/minenv/), Ministry of Finance (http://www.opengov.gr/minfin/), Ministry of Justice, Transparency and Human Rights (http://www.opengov.gr/ministryofjustice), Ministry of Citizen's Protection (http://www.opengov.gr/yptp/), Ministry of Education, Life Long Learning and Religions (http://www.opengov.gr/ypepth).

[29] This services has so far been used for receiving candidatures for the following posts: General and Special Secretaries of Ministries, staff and consultants of the Deputy Minister of Education, staff for the office of the Minister and the Deputy Minister of Finance etc.

The project was criticised for adding to the delays in the selection of key public administration personnel[30], and the finalisation of important government acts. Nonetheless, after its shaky start, it seems to progressively gain confidence among citizens and enhance the image of a more open, transparent, accountable, and hence democratic government[31]. And most importantly perhaps than anything else, it seems to be doing quite well in transforming public perceptions, without making the government dig deep into the government fund to set it up and keep it running.

5.2. Improving Services Provided to Citizens

The programme that has served as the forefront of e-government services in Greece, being the first and by now most popular one, is the TAXISnet[32]. The programme is managed by the General Secretariat of Informatics Systems of the Ministry of Finance, and offers basic, and the most common, services to citizens in relation to taxation. Citizens and businesses may submit their annual tax statement online, as well as submit all other periodic statements (VAT, VIES etc).

The programme has already had quite noticeable results, both in terms of the efficiency of the tax offices but also in terms of citizen satisfaction.

The basic government action plans that deal with the promotion of e-Government services to both citizens and enterprises are

- The National Action Plan for Public Administration 2008-2010 (programme "*POLITIA*"),

- The programme "Digital Convergence 2007-2013", and

- The programme "Administrative Reform 2007-2013".

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[30] And even of 'depoliticising' posts in central government, a criticism originating mainly from Ministers and Deputy Ministers.

[31] According to Government statistics, 61 government acts have so far been put to open deliberation through the OpenGov platforms of the ministries, provoking more that 45.000 comments from citizens, while 41 posts were published at the platform, attracting more than 1200 applications.

[32] www.taxinsnet.gr.

It remains, however, to been seem how the current crisis in public finances will affect the implementation of these framework programmes, and the possible different prioritisation of objectives that the new government may advance, as it is also faced with the daunting challenge of 'shrinking' the Public Sector, in general, and Government, in particular.

ICT issues fall under the competences of the Ministry of Interior[33]. In the wider frame of its prerogatives and with the aim of advancing the targets for e-governments set at both national and European level, the General Secretariat of Public Administration and E-Government of the Ministry of Interior, Decentralisation and e-Governance takes part as a user partner in the research project "*Providing Integrated Public Services to Citizens at the National and Pan-European Level with the use of Emerging Semantic Web Technologies (SemanticGov)*". The project is funded under the strategic objective "2.4.9. ICT Research for Innovative Government" of the 6th framework programme[34].

The objective of the project is to create the infrastructure that will allow public bureaus and organizations to create their own flexible platforms and to reconfigure the existing infrastructure of the public administration in a way that opens up new means of providing services and of rendering the performance of the public sector more efficient. More specifically, the project is focused on the demand of public services from their users (citizens and enterprises), and recognizes three important challenges from the Administration:

- Determination and identification of the necessary services

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[33] Recently, after the last elections of 2009, renamed to Ministry of Interior, Decentralisation and e-Governance (its previous one was Ministry of Interior, Public Administration and Decentralisation).
[34] It was ranked as 7th, out of a total of 77, project proposal after its evaluation, and was subsequently selected for a total funding of € 2.700.000,-. The consortium of partners of the project includes Universities and research institutes, like The Hellenic Centre for Research and Technological Development (EKETA), the Digital Enterprise Research Institute, the National University of Ireland, and the University of Innsbruck, the University of Rome "La Sapienza", as well as Software development companies from the Netherlands, Germany, Bulgaria and Greece. Apart from the Ministry of Interior of the Hellenic Republic, two more government bodies were among the partners of the project consortium, the Prefecture of Central Macedonia of the Hellenic Republic, and the City of Turin (Torino) in Italy.

- Understanding, execution and control of the flow of work of complex services, in which more than one public departments is involved,

- Communication with the other European Public Administrations, through the development of a Community semantic portal for resolving semantic incompatibilities of administrative systems[35].

The project is based on Service Oriented Architectures, to develop a software making use of cutting edge technology «Semantic Web». It also applies a methodology for the analysis of public administration procedures, including decisions, rules definitions and models of recent initiatives and institutions, like the European Interoperability Framework, the reports of the working group of the European Programme IDABC, of the group for the action plan «i2010», of the Competitiveness & Innovation Programme – CIP of the Commission etc.

A more recent tool has been established for the improvement of services rendered to users; the government portal "Ermis" contributes further to offering citizens, enterprises, but also foreigners, electronic services (like e-certificates etc) as well as providing them with useful information[36].

5.3. Improving co-operation of public sector departments

It is undoubted that by improving the co-operation and interconnection of the different public sector departments the quality of services provided to citizens is better, and the public sector as a whole operates more efficiently.

The project "Syzefxis" aims at the development and updating of public sector's telecom infrastructure[37]. It's about a core and access network for the

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[35] For the analysis of the semantic differences between the collaborating public sector departments that are involved in providing a European electronic service the "SemanticGov" project developed an appropriate methodological analysis model, called GEA (Governance Enterprise Architecture). V Peristeras & K Tarabanis, *Reengineering the public administration modus operandi through the use of reference domain models and Semantic Web Service technologies*.

[36] www.ermis.gov.gr. The portal offers from a central point completed briefing in the citizens and the enterprises with regard to all their transactions with the Public Administration (natural or electronic), as well as selected services of Electronic Transactions.

[37] http://www.syzefxis.gov.gr.

public sector departments and organizations aiming to satisfy all their needs for communication through telephony (telephone communication between various departments, offices, and organizations), data (e-communication, internet) and video (teleconference, training).

The project has been running since 2004, increasing each year the number of different departments and organisations of the public sector[38]. The project offers

- Unified data network for its users,

- Integrated internet and e-mail services,

- Portal with information essential to users,

- Security system for the issuance of e-certificates,

- Tele-conference services, and free telephony.

On the whole, and while the strains in public spending imposed by the grave condition of public finances, and by the terms and conditions of the MoU for financial assistance to the Greek Government of the IMF, the Commission and the ECB have put on a halt –that still remains to be seem if it will be a temporary or a permanent one- the implementation of new projects and the continuation of the already existing one, the new government has already shown its intentions of placing e-government initiatives high on the agenda. The "eGov" project, even if still at its infancy, has proved a significant success on a symbolic level. It has managed to change public perceptions, and strengthen citizen confidence on public administration practices. Naturally, like every government, its work will be assessed by citizens at the end of the parliamentary term, and the present government has quite a challenging task,

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[38] Departments and organisations falling under four central Ministries are already connected to the project, namely from the Ministry of Interior Prefectures, Municipalities and the Centres for Services to Citizens (ΚΕΠ), from the Ministry of Defence the Recruitment Offices, from the Ministry of Health several hospitals, health centres and regional administrative departments, and from the Ministry of Finance the management authority of the Cofinanced Development Programme for Greece 2000-2006 (3rd Community Support Framework).

judging from the depth and breadth of its pre-electoral promises for public administration reform through mainly the digitalisation of services.

A reasonable guess would be that e-government initiatives would be sidelined. On the contrary, the state of public finances, and the insistence of the country's creditors on radical and sweeping reforms in the architecture and functioning of public administration –including not only the central government but also regional, local and municipal administration- leads to the conclusion that ICT will play an instrumental role in the new public administration of the country.

CONCLUSION

The use of ICT in reforming public administration institutions and improving the services offered has been the focal point of the present volume. Commentators has contributed various national experiences, outlining ICT tools and their impact on public administration, with a view to rendering its performance more simple, more transparent, more accountable and efficient.

In the era of globalisation, where geographical barriers have been lifted, services of the public sector should, and can, be accessible to a much larger portion of the population, faster and simpler. At the same time, the cost of providing such services is minimised through the use of ICT.

A good administration, as has been defined in the present volume, corresponds to the ever-increasing need for clearer and more transparent regulatory instruments and more accountable institutions, for enhanced citizen participation in decision-making. Simply put, good administration exhibits the features and principles of a democratic administration. To this end, ICT applications play a central role.

Much like with many other economic and/or social indicators, the EU does not demonstrate a balanced development of ICT in the public sector of its member states. Regional disparities are obvious. The member states in the South and the East of Europe fare poorly compared to their partners from the North and the Centre of Europe.

Being a country of the South, Greece served as a case study for the present study, although the geographical criterion was not the first, nor the most important, in selecting the specific country. Greece is a member of the Euro-zone, yet faced with a serious economic crisis. Its public administration is heavily criticised for inefficiency and corruption. The role that e-government initiatives are expected to play in reforming public administration is central. The government has given the first signs of its intentions, however time is of

the essence; more ambitious and far-reaching e-government projects will have to be designed and implemented quickly, and more public finances have to be invested in such projects, albeit prudently and appropriately, for the government to achieve the significant cuts in public spending it has agreed with its creditors and to modernise the services offered by the public sector, contributing thus also to revitalising economic growth.