MODERN APPROACHES TO PUBLIC MANAGEMENT AT THE TERRITORIAL LEVEL

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Abstract: This paper examines modern public management at the territorial level, highlighting the transition towards digital, data-driven and citizen-oriented governance. Using a comparative approach, it analyses differences between the European Union and Romania. The findings emphasize improved efficiency, transparency and decision-making, while underlining the need for sustained investment in digital infrastructure and institutional capacity.
Keywords: Modern public management; territorial governance; digital transformation; e-government; artificial intelligence.

1. Introduction

Modern public management at the territorial level represents a continuous process of administrative transformation, through which public institutions evolve from rigid bureaucratic structures into adaptive, data-driven and citizen-oriented governance systems. In this context, contemporary management approaches are no longer limited to procedural efficiency, but increasingly integrate digital technologies, strategic coordination mechanisms and participatory governance practices. The shift is particularly visible in the transition from hierarchical administrative models to network-based and collaborative governance architectures, where decision-making is distributed and supported by real-time data and technological infrastructures.

The contribution of this article consists in conceptualising modern public management as an operational framework for territorial governance, based on the interaction between digital transformation, institutional capacity and policy innovation. This approach is supported by a growing body of literature which highlights the role of smart governance, data-driven decision-making and administrative modernization in enhancing public sector performance and resilience, as emphasized by authors such as Kitchin [1], Albino et al. [2], Caragliu et al. [3], and Meijer & Bolívar [4].

At the same time, the European administrative space has undergone a significant transformation under the influence of digitalization and policy convergence processes, leading to the emergence of new governance paradigms focused on transparency, accountability and service integration. In this context, territorial public management becomes a key analytical dimension, as local and regional administrations are directly responsible for implementing policies, managing resources and delivering public services. Recent studies indicate that the effectiveness of these processes depends not only on regulatory frameworks, but also on the organizational capacity to integrate digital tools, coordinate multi-level governance structures and respond to complex societal challenges [5].

Consequently, modern public management can no longer be interpreted exclusively as a set of administrative procedures, but rather as a dynamic governance model in which institutional performance is shaped by the interaction between technological innovation, organizational adaptability and policy coherence. This perspective aligns with recent developments in European research, which emphasize the transition towards anticipatory and resilient governance models, where public administrations are required to continuously adapt to changing socio-economic and technological environments [6]. From this standpoint, territorial governance becomes a strategic space for testing and implementing modern management approaches, reflecting both the opportunities and the structural limitations of contemporary public administration systems.

2. Literature Review

The evolution of public management at the territorial level has been extensively analysed in the context of the transition from traditional bureaucratic administration to more flexible, performance-oriented and innovation-driven governance models. Early contributions in this field emphasized the limitations of hierarchical administrative systems and the need for greater efficiency, responsiveness and accountability in public service delivery, leading to the development of

New Public Management (NPM) paradigms. However, more recent literature highlights that NPM alone is insufficient to address the complexity of contemporary governance, particularly in the context of digital transformation and multi-level governance structures [1]. In this regard, the concept of "smart governance" has emerged as a central analytical framework, integrating digital technologies, data-driven decision-making and citizen participation into public management processes. Kitchin [2] argues that the increasing availability of real-time data has fundamentally reshaped the way public authorities understand and manage urban and territorial systems, enabling more adaptive and evidence-based policy interventions. Similarly, Albino et al. [3] and Caragliu et al. [4] emphasize that smart city and smart governance approaches contribute to enhancing administrative efficiency, sustainability and innovation capacity at the local level, while also creating new forms of interaction between public institutions and citizens. At the same time, the literature has increasingly focused on the role of digital transformation as a driver of administrative modernization. Meijer and Bolívar [5] underline that e-government and digital governance tools are not merely technical solutions, but components of a broader institutional transformation that affects organizational structures, decision-making processes and public sector accountability. This perspective is further supported by recent studies highlighting that digitalization requires not only technological investment, but also the development of institutional capacity and strategic coordination mechanisms at different levels of governance [6].

Another important strand of research addresses the relationship between territorial governance and multi-level administrative systems. Scholars argue that the effectiveness of public management is closely linked to the capacity of local and regional authorities to operate within complex governance networks, involving interactions between European, national and sub-national actors. In this context, policy implementation is no longer a linear process, but a negotiated and iterative one, shaped by institutional diversity and contextual factors [7]. Furthermore, recent literature highlights the growing importance of resilience and anticipatory governance in public management. Contemporary approaches emphasize the need for public administrations to develop adaptive capacities, enabling them to respond to uncertainties, crises and rapidly changing socio-economic conditions. From this perspective, modern public management is increasingly associated with concepts such as organizational learning, flexibility and innovation, rather than stability and procedural rigidity [8].

Overall, the existing body of literature indicates a clear shift from traditional administrative paradigms towards integrated governance models that combine digital technologies, institutional capacity and collaborative practices. This transition is particularly relevant at the territorial level, where public administrations act as key intermediaries between policy design and implementation, and where the effectiveness of modern management approaches can be most directly observed.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative research design aimed at analysing modern approaches to public management at the territorial level, with a particular focus on the European Union and the Romanian administrative context. The methodological framework is based on the triangulation of three main dimensions: (1) conceptual and theoretical analysis of the relevant literature, (2) examination of European policy documents and institutional reports, and (3) comparative assessment of administrative practices at the local and regional levels.

The first component consists of a structured review of the scientific literature addressing public management transformation, digital governance and territorial administration. This analytical step enables the identification of key concepts, theoretical models and emerging trends that define modern public management.

The second component focuses on the analysis of European-level policy frameworks, including strategies related to digital transformation, e-government and administrative modernization, which provide the normative and strategic context for territorial governance.

The third component involves a comparative analysis between the European Union and Romania, with the aim of identifying differences in terms of digital maturity, institutional capacity and implementation of modern management practices.

The analysis is based on secondary data sources, including official reports, statistical indicators and relevant policy evaluations, allowing for an assessment of both structural characteristics and operational outcomes. From a methodological perspective, the study employs a qualitative interpretative approach, emphasizing the understanding of governance processes rather than quantitative measurement. At the same time, the comparative dimension allows for the identification of patterns, gaps and convergences between different administrative systems. The research is subject to certain limitations, particularly related to the availability and comparability of data at the territorial level, as well as the dynamic nature of digital transformation processes. Nevertheless, the triangulation of sources and perspectives ensures a robust analytical framework, capable of capturing the complexity of modern public management in a multi-level governance context. This methodological approach is consistent with recent qualitative and comparative studies in public

administration and digital governance [5], [6]. In addition, graphical representations are used as analytical tools to illustrate comparative patterns and trends identified through the qualitative synthesis of literature and policy data.

4. Results and Discussion

The empirical analysis highlights a clear divergence between the European Union and Romania in terms of the adoption and operationalization of modern public management approaches at the territorial level.

This divergence is particularly visible in three key dimensions: digital transformation, institutional capacity and the integration of data-driven governance practices.

Firstly, with regard to digital transformation, European local and regional administrations have made significant progress in implementing e-government solutions and integrated digital public services. In many EU member states, digital platforms enable seamless interaction between citizens and public authorities, reducing administrative burdens and increasing service accessibility. By contrast, in the Romanian administrative system, although digitalization initiatives have accelerated in recent years, they remain unevenly distributed across territorial units and often lack interoperability. This results in fragmented service delivery and limited efficiency gains, particularly in smaller municipalities and rural areas.

Secondly, institutional capacity represents a decisive factor in the effectiveness of modern public management. At the European level, local administrations increasingly rely on specialized human resources, digital competencies and strategic planning instruments to support governance processes. In Romania, however, institutional capacity is frequently constrained by limited administrative resources, insufficient digital skills and a high degree of procedural rigidity. These limitations affect the ability of public institutions to fully integrate modern management tools and to respond effectively to complex governance challenges.

Thirdly, the use of data-driven governance and advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, remains uneven across territorial administrations. In leading European cities, data analytics and smart governance systems are used to optimize decision-making, manage urban infrastructure and improve public service delivery. In contrast, Romanian local administrations are still at an early stage in the adoption of such instruments, with most initiatives focusing on basic digitalization rather than advanced data integration or predictive governance models. At the same time, the analysis reveals a process of gradual convergence, driven by European policies, funding mechanisms and regulatory frameworks. European Union initiatives supporting digital transformation and administrative modernization have created important opportunities for Romania to accelerate reforms and reduce existing gaps.

However, the effectiveness of these processes depends largely on the capacity of territorial administrations to absorb resources, implement reforms and adapt organizational practices. Where these elements are aligned, public administrations demonstrate higher levels of efficiency, transparency and adaptability. Conversely, where gaps persist, modernization processes remain partial and fragmented. Nevertheless, the Romanian case illustrates that structural and organizational constraints continue to limit the full realization of these benefits, highlighting the need for sustained investment in administrative capacity, digital infrastructure and strategic governance frameworks.

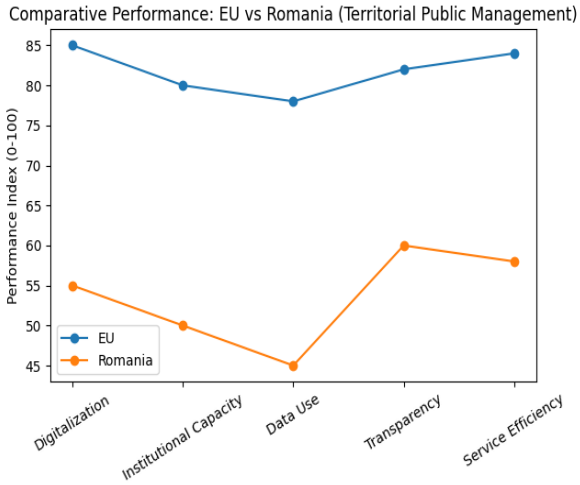


Fig. 1. Comparative performance of modern public management at the territorial level: European Union vs Romania. *Source: Author's elaboration based on comparative literature and European policy reports.*

The graphical representations are based on composite performance indices constructed through the qualitative synthesis of existing literature, European policy reports and comparative administrative analyses. The values do not represent direct statistical measurements, but analytical approximations designed to illustrate relative differences and trends in the adoption of modern public management practices at the territorial level.

Figure 1 presents a comparative analysis of key dimensions of modern public management at the territorial level, including digitalization, institutional capacity, data-driven governance, transparency and service efficiency. The results indicate a consistent performance gap between the European Union and Romania across all analysed dimensions. The most significant disparities are observed in the areas of data-driven governance and institutional capacity, where Romania demonstrates limited integration of digital

tools and reduced administrative adaptability. In contrast, European administrations exhibit higher levels of performance, supported by advanced digital infrastructures, strategic coordination mechanisms and the systematic use of data in decision-making processes. The relatively smaller gap in the area of transparency suggests a partial convergence influenced by European regulatory frameworks and policy transfer mechanisms.

Overall, the data highlight that, although Romania is undergoing a process of administrative modernization, structural constraints and uneven territorial development continue to affect the full implementation of modern public management approaches. The values represent composite indices derived from comparative analysis of policy reports and existing literature. As illustrated in Figure 2, the evolution of modern public management performance between 2018 and 2024 reveals a consistent upward trend in both the European Union and Romania, although significant differences in performance levels persist.

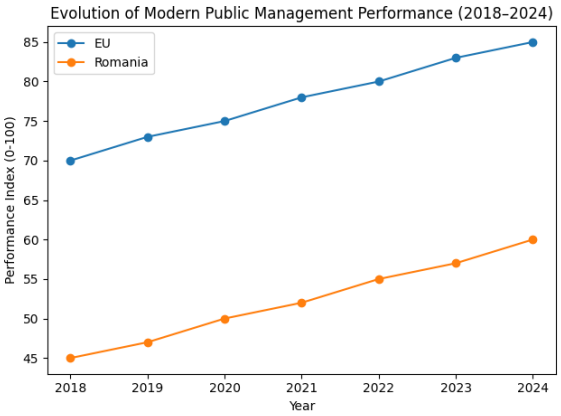


Fig. 2. Evolution of modern public management performance at the territorial level (2018–2024): European Union vs Romania. *Source: Author's elaboration based on comparative literature and European policy reports.*

Figure 2 illustrates the evolution of modern public management performance at the territorial level over the period 2018–2024, highlighting both convergence trends and persistent disparities between the European Union and Romania. The data indicate a steady improvement in both contexts, reflecting the increasing importance of digital transformation, administrative reform and policy innovation in public governance.

The graphical representations are derived from composite indices developed through the triangulation of scientific literature, European policy documents and institutional reports on digital governance and administrative capacity. These indices are intended to capture relative levels of development and evolution trends, rather than provide precise quantitative measurements, offering an analytical framework for comparative interpretation.

At the European level, the upward trajectory is more pronounced and consistent, suggesting a higher degree of institutional maturity and capacity to integrate modern management approaches. This evolution is closely linked to sustained investments in digital infrastructure, the development of e-government systems and the consolidation of data-driven governance practices. In Romania, although a positive trend can be observed, the pace of development remains slower, and the gap relative to the European Union persists throughout the analysed period. This dynamic reflects structural constraints, including limited institutional capacity, uneven territorial development and challenges in the implementation of digital reforms. Nevertheless, the gradual increase in performance indicators suggests a process of convergence driven by European policies, funding mechanisms and administrative modernization efforts. These findings underline the importance of sustained investment and strategic coordination in accelerating the transition towards modern public management models at the territorial level. The values represent composite indices constructed based on comparative analysis of European policy reports and relevant literature. These findings are consistent with existing literature emphasizing the role of institutional capacity and digital maturity in shaping public sector performance [5], [6].

As illustrated in Figure 3, the performance gaps between the European Union and Romania vary significantly across key dimensions of modern public management, highlighting structural imbalances in the Romanian administrative system.

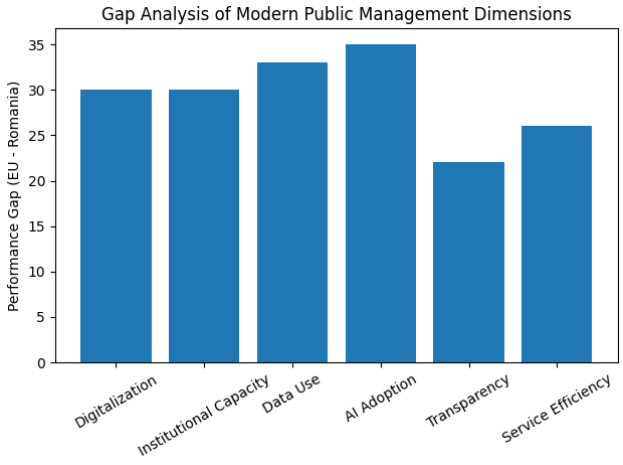


Fig. 3. Performance gaps in modern public management dimensions at the territorial level: European Union vs Romania. *Source: Author's elaboration based on composite indices derived from comparative literature and European policy reports*.

Figure 3 provides a comparative overview of the performance gaps between the European Union and Romania across key dimensions of modern public management at the territorial level. The results indicate

that the most significant disparities are observed in the areas of artificial intelligence adoption and data-driven governance, where Romania lags considerably behind European administrative systems. These gaps reflect limited integration of advanced digital tools and insufficient development of predictive and analytical capacities within public institutions. Substantial differences are also visible in terms of digitalization and institutional capacity, suggesting structural constraints related to administrative resources, interoperability and strategic coordination. In contrast, the gap is relatively smaller in the area of transparency, indicating partial convergence driven by European regulatory frameworks and policy transfer mechanisms.

Overall, the distribution of gaps highlights that the modernization of public management in Romania is uneven, with progress in certain areas but significant delays in the adoption of advanced governance models. These findings reinforce the need for targeted policy interventions focusing on digital transformation, institutional strengthening and the integration of data-driven decision-making processes. The paper argues that sustainable territorial governance requires continuous innovation, coherent policy frameworks, and strategic investment in digital infrastructure and administrative capabilities. In this context, contemporary approaches to public management increasingly emphasize the transition towards anticipatory governance models, in which public administrations are expected not only to react to emerging challenges, but to proactively identify risks, forecast developments and design adaptive policy responses. This transformation is closely linked to the growing use of artificial intelligence and predictive analytics, which enable administrations to process large volumes of data, identify patterns and support evidence-based decision-making in real time [5], [6].

At the same time, resilience has become a central concept in modern public management, referring to the capacity of territorial administrations to absorb shocks, adapt to disruptions and maintain functional continuity in complex and uncertain environments. From this perspective, resilience is not merely a reactive capability, but an embedded organizational feature, shaped by institutional flexibility, learning processes and innovation capacity [8].

Complementarily, the emergence of risk-based governance frameworks further redefines public management practices, particularly within the European administrative space. In this approach, decision-making is structured around the continuous assessment, prioritization and mitigation of risks, allowing public institutions to allocate resources more efficiently and to anticipate potential vulnerabilities. The integration of AI-driven predictive tools with risk-based governance mechanisms thus contributes to the development of more adaptive, resilient and forward-looking territorial governance systems, capable of addressing the increasing complexity of contemporary socio-economic and technological environments.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the impact of modern approaches to public management at the territorial level, highlighting the transition from traditional administrative models to digital, data-driven and citizen-oriented governance frameworks. The findings confirm that modern public management is not solely defined by the adoption of technological tools, but by the interaction between digital infrastructure, institutional capacity and policy coherence. The comparative analysis between the European Union and Romania reveals both progress and persistent disparities. While European administrations demonstrate a higher level of maturity, characterized by integrated digital systems, advanced data utilization and strong institutional capacity, Romania continues to face structural and organizational constraints that limit the full implementation of modern management approaches. Nevertheless, the upward trend identified over the period 2018–2024 indicates a gradual process of convergence, driven by European policies, funding instruments and administrative reform efforts.

From a governance perspective, the results emphasize that territorial administrations play a critical role in translating policy frameworks into concrete outcomes. As such, the effectiveness of modern public management depends on the capacity of local and regional authorities to adapt, innovate and integrate new technologies within existing administrative structures.

6. References

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