Beyond Digitalisation: Evaluating Citizen Experience in Romanian e-Government Services

Mihaela Apostol, Alexandra-Mirela Kiș and Teodor-Iulian Gheorghe
National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (NUPSPA), Bucharest, Romania

mihaelaapostol@hotmail.com
kismirela1808@gmail.com
gh_teodor@yahoo.com

Abstract: The digital transformation of public administration has been widely assessed in terms of technological development and service availability. However, less attention has been paid to the quality of citizen–administration interactions and the extent to which digital public services effectively respond to users' needs and expectations. This paper addresses this gap by focusing on the evaluation of citizen experience as a central dimension of smart public administration. It argues that the effectiveness of e-government cannot be adequately measured solely through indicators related to digital infrastructure or service uptake, but must also consider how citizens perceive and engage with public services. Building on contemporary approaches to digital governance and citizen-centric public services, the study proposes an analytical framework for evaluating citizen experience in Romanian e-government. The research conceptualises citizen experience as a multidimensional construct, encompassing accessibility, usability, responsiveness, and perceived trust in digital public services. Methodologically, the paper adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining document analysis, exploratory qualitative evidence, and qualitative insights from institutional actors. The findings are expected to highlight structural and processual limitations in the current implementation of digital public services, particularly in relation to interoperability, feedback mechanisms, and user-oriented service design. The contribution of the paper lies in repositioning citizen experience from a secondary evaluative tool to a central component of digital governance, offering both theoretical and practical implications for public sector reform in Romania and beyond.

Keywords: Citizen experience index (CEI), e-Government, Digital governance, Citizen-centric public services, Public service evaluation, Smart public administration, Romania

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of public administration has fundamentally changed the way governments interact with citizens and deliver public services. Across Europe, governments have invested heavily in digital infrastructures, interoperable platforms and online services, expecting digital technologies to increase efficiency, transparency and accessibility. Experience over the last decade, however, tells a more sobering story: in many cases, digital technologies have simply reproduced existing administrative procedures in electronic form, leaving citizens' interactions with public institutions largely unchanged (Haug, Dan and Mergel, 2024).

This distinction highlights a central challenge for contemporary public administration. Digitalisation refers primarily to the technological conversion of existing administrative procedures into electronic form, whereas digital transformation requires deeper institutional change involving organisational learning, process redesign and continuous adaptation to citizens' evolving needs (Mergel, Edelmann and Haug, 2019). The success of digital transformation is increasingly seen to depend less on technological sophistication than on the capacity of public institutions to generate public value through citizen-centred governance (United Nations, 2024).

Research has reflected this evolution: early studies concentrated on e-government implementation, while more recent contributions have shifted towards digital government, public value, citizen-centred services, adaptive governance and, most recently, the implications of artificial intelligence (AI) for public service delivery and evaluation (Madan and Ashok, 2023). Nevertheless, existing evaluation frameworks continue to privilege technological indicators – digital maturity, service availability, user adoption – while paying limited attention to whether digital transformation genuinely improves citizens' experiences and enables institutions to learn from them.

We argue that citizen experience should be understood not as a by-product of digital government but as a strategic governance resource in its own right. A public administration becomes genuinely intelligent not when it deploys advanced technologies, but when it learns – continuously and systematically – from its interactions with citizens.

Romania offers a particularly relevant empirical context for exploring these issues. Similar to many countries undergoing accelerated digital transformation, Romanian public administration has made significant investments in digital infrastructure and online public services while continuing to face challenges related to

citizen adoption, institutional trust and administrative process redesign (OECD, 2023b; Lobonț et al., 2025). These characteristics make Romania an appropriate case for examining how citizen experience may serve as a meaningful indicator of digital transformation beyond technological implementation alone.

Against this background, this paper makes three interrelated contributions. First, it conceptually distinguishes digitalisation from digital transformation by emphasising organisational learning and public value as defining characteristics of intelligent public administration. Second, it proposes the Citizen Experience Index (CEI) as an analytical framework for evaluating citizen-centred digital public services across six dimensions: accessibility, usability, responsiveness, transparency, institutional trust, and feedback and adaptation. Third, it demonstrates how citizen experience can support adaptive governance by providing evidence that informs continuous administrative learning and service redesign. Although grounded in the Romanian context, the framework contributes more broadly to current debates on evaluating citizen-centred digital government.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Framework

This study builds upon three complementary theoretical developments: the evolution from e-government towards digital transformation and smart public administration; the growing importance of citizen experience as a governance concept linked to public value; and the operationalisation of citizen experience through a multidimensional analytical framework supporting institutional learning and adaptive governance.

2.1 From e-Government to Digital Transformation

Research on digital public administration has evolved considerably over the past two decades. Early e-government initiatives focused primarily on the digitisation of administrative procedures, the provision of electronic public services and the improvement of administrative efficiency (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Evaluation during this stage concentrated largely on technological indicators such as infrastructure availability, online service provision and user adoption.

As digital technologies became embedded within public administration, the focus shifted towards digital government, recognising that technology alone cannot transform governance: organisational redesign, interoperability, integrated service delivery and citizen engagement became central elements of digital government strategies (Mergel, Edelmann and Haug, 2019; OECD, 2020). This evolution is summarised in Figure 1. More recently, the concept of digital transformation has expanded this perspective further. Rather than viewing transformation as the digital replication of existing administrative procedures, contemporary research emphasises organisational adaptation, continuous learning and public value creation; a recent systematic review confirms that much of what is labelled digital transformation in public administration still amounts to digitisation or digitalisation rather than genuinely transformational change (Haug, Dan and Mergel, 2024).

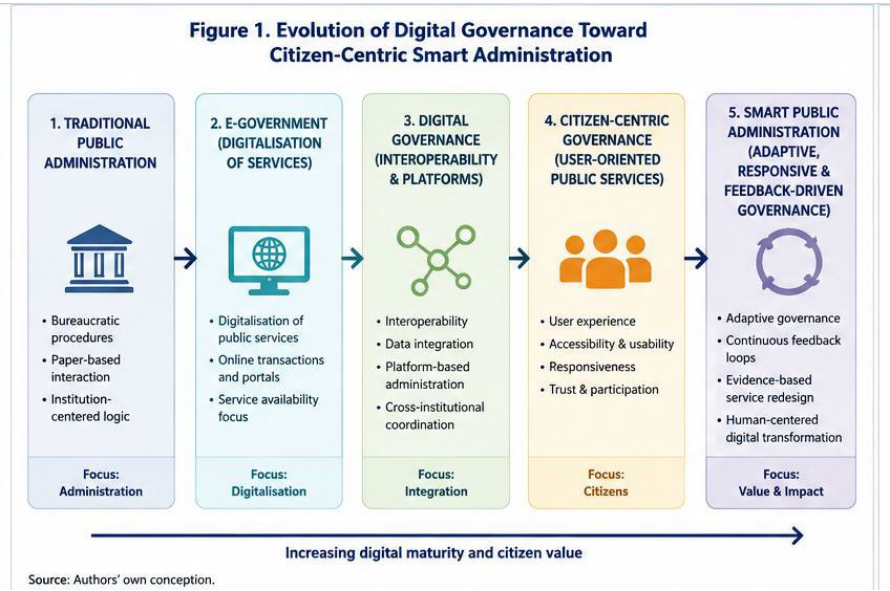


Figure 1: Evolution from traditional public administration to citizen-centred smart public administration

The end point of this evolution is smart public administration – a concept that should not be reduced to the deployment of advanced digital technologies. Instead, it represents an institutional capability through which

digital infrastructures, organisational processes and citizen interactions become mutually reinforcing components of adaptive governance. Within such systems, citizens are no longer passive users of digital services but active contributors whose experiences generate evidence for institutional improvement and governance innovation (Scholta and Lindgren, 2023).

2.2 Citizen Experience, Public Value and Institutional Learning

Citizen experience has moved to the centre of debates on digital transformation. Traditional frameworks measure service availability, technological maturity or administrative efficiency; although essential, these indicators reveal little about how citizens actually experience digital public services.

This perspective is closely aligned with public value theory (Moore, 1995), which argues that public organisations should be evaluated according to their capacity to create value for citizens and society. Public value extends beyond efficiency to include trust, legitimacy, accessibility, transparency, responsiveness and meaningful participation. Recent syntheses confirm that public value has become a central lens for evaluating digital public services, connecting information quality, system quality and trust with citizen satisfaction and broader societal outcomes (Setyawan, Sulistyo and Hartanto, 2024; Asmawanti-S et al., 2025); citizen experience is thus the empirical terrain on which public value is created or eroded.

Citizen experience should therefore not be interpreted simply as an indicator of user satisfaction. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated strong relationships between citizen experience, institutional trust and perceived service quality (Welch, Hinnant and Moon, 2005; Carter and Bélanger, 2005), and recent evidence shows that perceived government responsiveness moderates the link between citizen expectations, participation and satisfaction (Mo and Beh, 2025). Contemporary digital transformation, however, requires understanding how citizen experience contributes to institutional learning: from an adaptive governance perspective, every citizen–institution interaction is a potential source of organisational knowledge, and systematically analysed feedback enables institutions to identify procedural bottlenecks and redesign administrative processes.

This interpretation is consistent with systemic approaches to public administration, which understand institutional performance as the product of dynamic interactions between governance structures, processes, technologies and citizen engagement (Matei, 2021). Within this framework, citizen experience functions simultaneously as an indicator of governance quality, a source of institutional knowledge and a mechanism through which digital transformation generates public value.

2.3 The Citizen Experience Index as a Governance-Oriented Analytical Framework

Building upon this literature, the paper proposes the Citizen Experience Index (CEI) as an analytical framework for evaluating digital transformation through the perspective of citizen experience. The CEI represents the citizen-centred component of a broader systemic approach to evaluating smart public administration, which also considers process maturity and institutional interaction.

The CEI operationalises this perspective through six complementary dimensions:

- Accessibility – the extent to which digital public services are available and inclusive for different categories of citizens;
- Usability – the clarity, simplicity and efficiency of digital interaction;
- Responsiveness – the capacity of institutions to respond effectively to citizens' requests and interactions;
- Transparency – the visibility and comprehensibility of administrative procedures and decisions;
- Institutional trust – citizens' confidence in the reliability, integrity and security of digital public services;
- Feedback and adaptation – the institutional capacity to collect, analyse and integrate citizen feedback into continuous service improvement.

Transparency is retained as a distinct dimension rather than being subsumed under trust. Recent EU-level evidence indicates that transparency correlates with e-government adoption but does not, by itself, build citizen trust, which is shaped by broader institutional and socio-economic conditions (Eizaguirre et al., 2025). Treating the two dimensions separately therefore allows the framework to capture situations in which citizens trust the security of a service while finding its procedures opaque – a pattern that proves empirically relevant in the Romanian case. These dimensions extend existing e-government evaluation models by explicitly incorporating

the adaptive relationship between citizen experience and institutional learning: rather than treating feedback as a secondary service-quality indicator, the framework recognises it as a strategic governance mechanism (Figure 2).

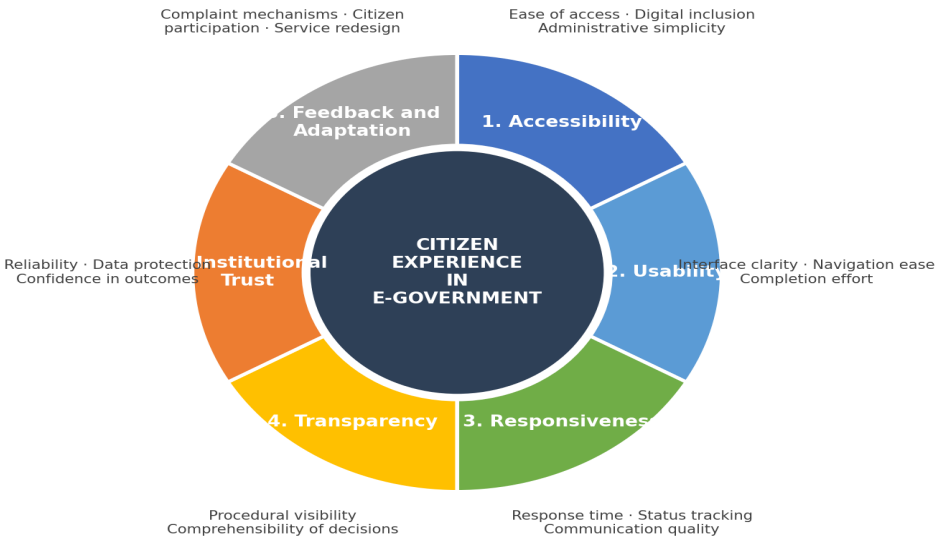


Figure 2: Citizen Experience Evaluation Framework (CEI)

3. Literature Context

Research on digital public services has evolved from a primarily technological understanding of e-government towards broader governance-oriented approaches. Early studies focused on the adoption and diffusion of electronic services, examining perceived usefulness, ease of use, trust and citizens' willingness to interact online (Carter and Bélanger, 2005); they established the relevance of user acceptance and trust, but offered only a partial understanding of the governance implications of digital transformation.

As e-government initiatives matured, scholarly attention progressively shifted from service availability towards service quality, user experience and citizen–government interaction. Frameworks such as e-GovQual and public-sector adaptations of service-quality models introduced multidimensional approaches to evaluating digital public services (Papadomichelaki and Mentzas, 2012), and recent work continues to refine the factors shaping e-government quality from the citizen's perspective (Patergiannaki and Pollalis, 2024; Suradi, Purnomo and Hendry, 2026). This shift recognised that the existence of digital services does not necessarily imply meaningful improvement in the quality of citizen experience.

More recent literature has further expanded this perspective by linking digital government to public value, institutional change and adaptive governance (Criado and Gil-Garcia, 2021; Haug, Dan and Mergel, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for this research agenda: governments worldwide accelerated digital service delivery under crisis conditions, and comparative studies of pandemic-era digital performance demonstrated that institutional capacity, rather than technology alone, determined the effectiveness of digital responses (Kwong and Wong, 2026; United Nations, 2024). In parallel, a rapidly growing body of research examines the adoption of artificial intelligence in public administration, highlighting both its potential to improve responsiveness and personalisation and the governance challenges it raises for accountability, transparency and trust (Wirtz, Weyerer and Geyer, 2019; Madan and Ashok, 2023; Medaglia, Gil-Garcia and Pardo, 2023).

Citizen trust has emerged as a central theme in this post-pandemic literature: digital government can increase public trust through both institution-based and process-based mechanisms (Chen and Jiang, 2025), yet systematic reviews emphasise that these trust-building effects are conditional on service quality, transparency and responsiveness rather than automatic (Nyadzi and Morris, 2026; OECD, 2023a), and EU-level evidence shows

that infrastructure, transparency and mobile compatibility influence adoption in distinct ways across member states (Eizaguirre et al., 2025).

This development is particularly relevant for Central and Eastern European countries, where digitalisation has advanced unevenly across institutions and administrative levels. Research on Romania has repeatedly identified a gap between investment in digital infrastructure and citizens' actual use, trust and satisfaction with digital public services (Androniceanu, 2020; Matei and Săvulescu, 2021; OECD, 2023b). Recent comparative analyses confirm that e-government performance in the region is closely linked to governance quality and institutional capacity (Lobonț et al., 2025; Bădîrcea et al., 2026; Joia and Altieri, 2021). Such gaps are often linked to fragmented administrative structures, limited interoperability, insufficient user-centred design and weak feedback mechanisms.

A further limitation of existing approaches concerns feedback and institutional adaptation: most frameworks assess digital services at a given moment in time, but pay less attention to whether institutions systematically learn from citizen interactions (European Commission, 2024). Yet, in a genuinely citizen-centred model of digital transformation, feedback is a governance mechanism through which public institutions identify problems, redesign processes and create public value.

Against this background, the present study proposes the CEI as a governance-oriented evaluation framework that extends existing approaches in three ways: it integrates six dimensions within a single analytical model; it evaluates the relational quality of citizen–administration interaction rather than only technological performance; and it treats feedback and adaptation as indicators of institutional learning and smart governance maturity.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

We adopt an exploratory mixed-methods design, examining how citizens experience digital public services and how institutions respond to these interactions. A triangulation strategy integrates documentary evidence, structured platform assessment and qualitative institutional insights, supporting the interpretation of citizen experience as an indicator of governance quality rather than merely user satisfaction.

4.2 Platform Selection

Five Romanian digital public service platforms were selected for comparative evaluation: ANAF e-Tax Services (fiscal administration); Ghișeul.ro (national electronic payment platform); MySMIS (EU funds management platform); CNAS Online Services (healthcare administration); and a representative municipal portal (local government digital services). The selection was guided by three criteria: institutional relevance; frequency and diversity of citizen interaction; and variation in governance context, allowing comparison between central and local government. Together, the platforms provide variation across administrative levels, institutional functions and degrees of interaction complexity.

4.3 The Citizen Experience Index (CEI)

Each platform was evaluated across the six dimensions defined in Section 2.3: Accessibility (A), Usability (U), Responsiveness (R), Transparency (TR), Institutional Trust (T), and Feedback and Adaptation (F). These dimensions extend existing e-government evaluation models (Carter and Bélanger, 2005; Papadomichelaki and Mentzas, 2012) by explicitly incorporating the adaptive relationship between citizen experience and institutional learning.

Scores were assigned on a five-point scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) using predefined qualitative criteria for each dimension, combining document analysis, structured platform observation, expert review, qualitative interview evidence and comparative interpretation. The overall CEI score was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the six dimensions:

$$CEI = (A + U + R + TR + T + F) / 6$$

For interpretative purposes, four governance maturity levels were established: 1.0–2.0 (low citizen-centred maturity); 2.1–3.0 (limited digital interaction quality); 3.1–4.0 (moderate citizen-centred performance); and 4.1–5.0 (advanced smart governance orientation). The CEI does not seek statistical representativeness; it provides a structured analytical framework for identifying governance patterns, citizen-experience gaps and institutional learning opportunities.

4.4 Qualitative Insights and Triangulation

Semi-structured interviews with institutional actors and qualitative observations from citizen users contextualised the platform assessments. Participants included representatives of institutions involved in digital service provision, digital governance specialists and stakeholders familiar with Romanian e-government initiatives. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns across the six CEI dimensions, strengthening the credibility of the findings and connecting citizen experience with institutional adaptation.

5. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the comparative Citizen Experience Index scores for the five evaluated Romanian digital public service platforms across the six analytical dimensions.

Table 1: Citizen Experience Index – comparative evaluation of Romanian e-government platforms

Platform	Access. (A)	Usability (U)	Respons. (R)	Transp. (TR)	Trust (T)	Feedb. (F)	CEI	Maturity level
ANAF (e-Tax Services)	3.0	2.5	2.0	2.5	3.0	1.5	2.4	Limited
Ghișeul.ro	4.0	4.0	3.5	4.0	4.0	2.5	3.7	Moderate
MySMIS	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.5	3.0	2.0	2.8	Limited
CNAS (Online Services)	3.5	3.0	2.5	2.5	3.0	1.5	2.7	Limited
Municipal Portal (example)	2.0	2.0	1.5	1.5	2.0	1.0	1.7	Low

Note: Scores based on structured expert review, document analysis and qualitative data. Scale: 1 (very low) – 5 (very high). CEI = mean of the six dimension scores. Source: Authors' own conception.

5.1 Comparative CEI Profiles

Differences among Romanian digital public services, the comparison shows, extend well beyond technological implementation: they reflect distinct levels of citizen-centred governance maturity. Ghișeul.ro achieves the highest overall score (3.7), reflecting the most balanced performance across all dimensions, while the representative municipal portal records the lowest (1.7), revealing substantial limitations in local digital governance capacity. ANAF, MySMIS and CNAS occupy intermediate positions: despite moderate levels of digitalisation and service availability, they perform less successfully in dimensions associated with citizen interaction, responsiveness and organisational adaptation.

The comparative profiles are visualised in Figure 3. Notably, the Feedback and Adaptation dimension records the lowest score on every platform – a pattern examined in Sections 5.6 and 6.3.

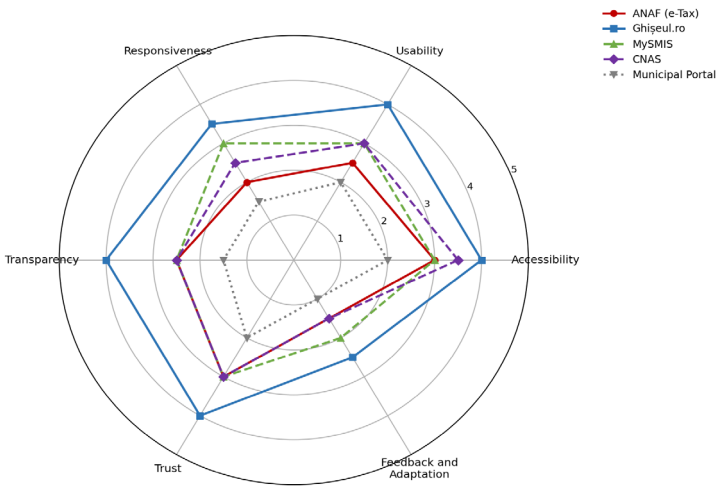


Figure 3: Comparative citizen experience profiles across selected Romanian e-government platforms

5.2 ANAF (e-Tax Services): CEI 2.4 – Functional Digitalisation without User Orientation

The ANAF platform illustrates functional digitalisation without citizen-centred transformation: although citizens can complete tax procedures electronically, successful interaction often requires considerable administrative knowledge, procedural familiarity and tolerance for process ambiguity. The service works; the relationship does not. The platform's weakest dimensions – Responsiveness (2.0) and Feedback and Adaptation (1.5) – indicate limited institutional capacity to engage meaningfully with citizens once digital transactions have been initiated. Interview evidence confirms that requests submitted through official channels frequently receive standardised responses that rarely address individual circumstances. As one institutional participant observed: "ANAF measures compliance, not experience. Those are very different things."

The distinction between the Trust score (3.0) and the Transparency score (2.5) is analytically revealing: citizens generally trust ANAF to process tax information securely but express considerably lower confidence regarding procedural clarity, communication quality and the comprehensibility of administrative decisions. This dissociation empirically supports the treatment of transparency and trust as distinct dimensions, and illustrates the broader difference between digital administration and digital transformation: procedures have been successfully digitalised, yet organisational practices remain largely unchanged.

5.3 Ghișeul.ro: CEI 3.7 – The Positive Outlier and Its Limits

Ghișeul.ro is the clear positive outlier, corresponding to moderate-to-advanced citizen-centred maturity. Its highest scores – Accessibility (4.0), Usability (4.0), Transparency (4.0) and Trust (4.0) – reflect an interface deliberately designed around user simplicity and clearly defined administrative processes. Nevertheless, even this positive example reveals limitations: the Feedback and Adaptation dimension receives only 2.5, indicating that mechanisms capable of systematically integrating citizen experience into service improvement remain relatively weak. This finding suggests that the absence of institutional learning mechanisms represents a systemic characteristic rather than an isolated weakness of individual platforms. Ghișeul.ro demonstrates that citizen-centred digital services are achievable within the Romanian administrative context when usability, simplicity and procedural transparency become explicit design priorities.

5.4 MySMIS and CNAS: CEI 2.8 and 2.7 – Complexity without Institutional Adaptation

Although MySMIS (2.8) and CNAS (2.7) achieve similar overall scores, the factors explaining their performance differ. For MySMIS, the principal challenge derives from procedural complexity rather than technological capability: the platform supports highly regulated European funding processes characterised by multiple procedural stages, extensive documentation requirements and frequent regulatory updates. Participants consistently described digital interaction interrupted by procedural uncertainty, leading users to revert to email or direct institutional contact. The CNAS platform presents a different profile: its relatively strong Accessibility score (3.5) reflects substantial progress in expanding digital healthcare services, but weaker scores for Responsiveness (2.5) and Feedback and Adaptation (1.5) indicate that citizens frequently encounter difficulties in resolving problems, obtaining meaningful status updates or understanding administrative decisions. Both cases demonstrate that digital service availability does not necessarily generate positive citizen experience when institutional support mechanisms remain underdeveloped.

5.5 Municipal Portal: CEI 1.7 – The Local Governance Challenge

The representative municipal portal records the lowest overall performance, corresponding to low citizen-centred maturity, with weak scores across all six dimensions. These finding matters because many of citizens' most frequent interactions with public administration occur at local level – taxation, permits, social services, urban planning – so weaknesses in municipal digital governance directly shape citizens' overall perception of public administration. Successful digital transformation cannot rely exclusively on national platforms; it requires strengthening organisational capacity, citizen-centred design and institutional learning mechanisms across all administrative levels.

5.6 Cross-platform Patterns

Four patterns stand out across the five platforms. First, the availability of digital services does not automatically translate into positive citizen experience: several platforms provide substantial online functionality while performing poorly on usability, responsiveness or trust. Second, Responsiveness and Feedback and Adaptation consistently represent the weakest dimensions, suggesting that Romanian digital public services remain predominantly transaction-oriented rather than learning-oriented. Third, significant differences persist between

national and local administrative contexts, with local administrations facing greater organisational and institutional constraints.

Fourth, the Transparency dimension follows the general pattern closely: it is strong only where citizen-centred design is an explicit priority (Ghișeul.ro) and weak elsewhere, reinforcing the interpretation that procedural transparency is a design choice rather than an automatic by-product of digitalisation. The degree of meaningful interactivity also appears to depend on the type of service and the complexity of the underlying administrative process: relatively simple transactional services (payments) achieve higher citizen-centred maturity than complex, multi-stage procedures (EU funds management, healthcare administration), indicating that context and service sophistication condition the quality of citizen–government interaction.

Perhaps the least expected finding is the uniformity of the feedback deficit: even the best-performing platform lacks systematic mechanisms for transforming citizen input into service redesign. The principal challenge facing Romanian digital transformation is therefore no longer the digitalisation of services but the development of institutions capable of continuously learning from citizen experience.

6. Discussion: Repositioning Citizen Experience in Digital Governance

6.1 Beyond Digitalisation: The Citizen Experience Gap

Our findings reveal a persistent gap between digitalisation efforts and the actual quality of citizen–administration interactions, challenging the assumption that technological deployment is, by itself, sufficient to improve governance performance. Digitalisation should instead be understood as an enabling process supporting broader institutional transformation. More fundamentally, the findings reinforce the conceptual distinction between digitalisation and digital transformation: digitalisation may successfully convert existing administrative procedures into electronic services without changing the way institutions operate, whereas digital transformation requires organisational learning, process redesign and continuous adaptation based on evidence generated through citizen interaction (Haug, Dan and Mergel, 2024).

6.2 Citizen Experience as a Strategic Governance Resource

We contend that citizen experience is not merely a service-quality indicator; it is a strategic governance resource. Traditional frameworks assess outputs such as the number of online services or transaction volumes, which demonstrate whether digital services exist but reveal little about whether they respond to citizens' expectations. From a public value perspective, citizen experience offers insight into the extent to which institutions transform technological capabilities into meaningful social outcomes (Moore, 1995; Asmawanti-S et al., 2025), functioning simultaneously as an evaluation criterion, an indicator of governance effectiveness and a strategic resource supporting institutional adaptation.

6.3 From Citizen Feedback to Institutional Learning

The consistently low Feedback and Adaptation scores indicate that effective feedback loops are missing precisely where they matter most: without them, institutions cannot identify citizens' evolving needs, and digitalisation risks reproducing existing administrative inefficiencies in electronic form. Citizen feedback constitutes institutional knowledge capable of revealing procedural bottlenecks and informing administrative redesign. Put simply, digital transformation without institutional learning produces digital administration – not intelligent public administration.

6.4 Multi-level Governance and the Local Administration Challenge

The municipal portal's weak performance highlights the uneven distribution of digital governance capacity across administrative levels: national platforms benefit from greater investment and political visibility, whereas local administrations face persistent organisational, financial and technical constraints. Successful digital transformation therefore requires coordinated action across all levels of government (OECD, 2023b).

6.5 Towards Intelligent Public Administration in the Age of AI

Taken together, our findings support a reconceptualisation of smart public administration as a governance model centred on citizen experience, institutional learning and public value creation, in which digital government maturity is measured by the institutional capacity to understand citizens' needs, generate trust, incorporate feedback and continuously improve services.

The accelerating adoption of AI in the public sector reshapes the research questions surrounding citizen experience. AI technologies – conversational interfaces, automated case handling, predictive service delivery –

introduce a new layer of citizen–government interaction whose quality cannot be captured by infrastructure-based indicators (Wirtz, Weyerer and Geyer, 2019; Medaglia, Gil-Garcia and Pardo, 2023). On the one hand, AI-driven analysis of citizen feedback could substantially strengthen the Feedback and Adaptation dimension by enabling institutions to process interaction evidence at scale and in real time (Madan and Ashok, 2023). On the other hand, algorithmic opacity poses direct challenges to the Transparency and Trust dimensions, since citizens may be unable to understand how automated decisions are reached (United Nations, 2024). The CEI therefore provides a timely analytical basis for evaluating whether AI adoption enhances or erodes citizen-centred governance – a question that conventional digital maturity assessments are not designed to answer.

Although the empirical analysis focuses on Romanian e-government services, the framework has broader relevance, supporting comparative assessments across administrative contexts and providing policymakers with practical evidence for service redesign and governance innovation.

7. Conclusion

By proposing and applying the Citizen Experience Index, we have sought to reposition citizen experience from a secondary service-quality measure to an analytical framework for citizen-centred evaluation of digital transformation. The comparative assessment of five Romanian platforms demonstrates significant differences not only in technological maturity but also in accessibility, usability, responsiveness, transparency, institutional trust and feedback adaptation – dimensions that technology-centred indicators cannot capture.

The most significant contribution concerns the role of citizen feedback: its consistently weak performance shows that opportunities to transform citizen interactions into institutional knowledge remain largely underdeveloped. The Romanian case reflects a broader challenge – investments in digital infrastructure have expanded the availability of online services, but organisational learning, adaptive governance and citizen-centred process redesign have not progressed at the same pace.

We have argued that the defining characteristic of intelligent public administration is not the sophistication of the technologies it deploys, but its capacity to learn – continuously – from citizen experience and to transform this learning into adaptive governance and public value. Digital technologies therefore represent enabling instruments rather than objectives in themselves. Future research should validate the framework through large-scale citizen surveys, comparative analyses across administrative systems and longitudinal assessments of institutional learning, and should explore integrating citizen experience indicators with AI-supported public service evaluation and data-driven governance models.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for this research. The data collected were fully anonymised and participation was voluntary. No personally identifiable information was retained.

AI Declaration: Artificial intelligence tools were used to support language refinement, text editing and the structural organisation of the manuscript, as well as to assist in identifying recent literature, which was subsequently verified by the author. All conceptual development, analysis, interpretation and final content were reviewed and validated by the author.

References

Androniceanu, A. (2020) “Digitalization of public administration in Romania: current trends and challenges”, Administrație și Management Public, Vol 34, pp 7–20.

Asmawanti-S, D., Afiah, N.N., Ritchi, H. and Suharman, H. (2025) “Literature review of government digital services based on public value theory and citizen satisfaction”, Cogent Business and Management, Vol 12.

Bădîrcea, R.M., Olaru, S.M., Doran, N.M. and Manta, A.G. (2026) “E-government adoption, governance quality, and fiscal sustainability in Central and Eastern European countries”, Sustainability, Vol 18.

Bélanger, F. and Carter, L. (2008) “Trust and risk in e-government adoption”, The Journal of Strategic Information Systems, Vol 17, No. 2, pp 165–176.

Carter, L. and Bélanger, F. (2005) “The utilization of e-government services: citizen trust, innovation and acceptance factors”, Information Systems Journal, Vol 15, No. 1, pp 5–25.

Chen, X. and Jiang, H. (2025) “Bridging trust through institution and process: how does digital government increase public trust?”, Public Management Review.

Criado, J.I. and Gil-Garcia, J.R. (2021) “Delivering public services in the digital era: digital government and citizen-centred governance”, Government Information Quarterly.

Dunleavy, P., Margetts, H., Bastow, S. and Tinkler, J. (2006) “New public management is dead – long live digital-era governance”, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Vol 16, No. 3, pp 467–494.

Eizaguirre, M., Gómez Funes, A., García-Monleón, F. and Carrero, O. (2025) "Bridging digital divides: infrastructure, transparency and mobile compatibility in citizen-centric e-governance across the EU", European Journal of Innovation Management.

European Commission (2024) eGovernment Benchmark 2024, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Haug, N., Dan, S. and Mergel, I. (2024) "Digitally-induced change in the public sector: a systematic review and research agenda", Public Management Review, Vol 26, No. 7, pp 1963–1987.

Joia, L.A. and Altieri, D. (2021) "Assessing citizen adoption of e-government initiatives in developing and emerging countries: a systematic review", Information Development, Vol 37, No. 2, pp 246–266.

Kwong, Y.-H. and Wong, M.Y.H. (2026) "E-government in global health crisis: comparing the e-performance of COVID-19 contact tracing", International Journal of Health Planning and Management.

Lobonț, O.R., Criste, C., Vintilă, A.I. and Crăciun, A. (2025) "Assessing digital performance of public services in the EU: e-governance and technology", Systems, Vol 13.

Madan, R. and Ashok, M. (2023) "AI adoption and diffusion in public administration: a systematic literature review and future research agenda", Government Information Quarterly, Vol 40, No. 1, 101774.

Matei, A. (2021) "Systemics of public administration", in Farazmand, A. (ed.) Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance, Springer, Cham.

Matei, A. and Săvulescu, C. (2021) "Digitalization and public administration reform in Central and Eastern Europe", Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences, Vol 63E, pp 5–20.

Medaglia, R., Gil-Garcia, J.R. and Pardo, T.A. (2023) "Artificial intelligence in government: taking stock and moving forward", Social Science Computer Review, Vol 41, No. 1, pp 123–140.

Mergel, I., Edelmann, N. and Haug, N. (2019) "Defining digital transformation: results from expert interviews", Government Information Quarterly, Vol 36, No. 4, 101385.

Mo, H. and Beh, L.-S. (2025) "From expectation and participation to satisfaction: the moderating role of perceived government responsiveness in digital government", Administrative Sciences, Vol 15.

Moore, M.H. (1995) Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Nyadzi, B.K. and Morris, J.C. (2026) "E-government and public trust in developing countries: a systematic review and research agenda", International Journal of Public Administration.

OECD (2020) The OECD Digital Government Policy Framework: Six Dimensions of a Digital Government, OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (2023a) Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy, OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (2023b) Digital Government Review of Romania: Towards a Digitally Mature Government, OECD Digital Government Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Papadomichelaki, X. and Mentzas, G. (2012) "e-GovQual: a multiple-item scale for assessing e-government service quality", Government Information Quarterly, Vol 29, No. 1, pp 98–109.

Patergiannaki, Z. and Pollalis, Y. (2024) "E-government quality from the citizen's perspective: the role of perceived factors", International Journal of Public Sector Management.

Scholta, H. and Lindgren, I. (2023) "Proactivity in digital public services: a conceptual analysis", Government Information Quarterly, Vol 40, No. 3, 101832.

Setyawan, N.H., Sulistyo, S. and Hartanto, R. (2024) "A review of e-government implementation: its impact on public value creation and citizen perspectives", Proceedings of the 2024 International Conference on Smart Computing, IoT and Machine Learning (SIML), IEEE, pp 132–137.

Suradi, A., Purnomo, H.D. and Hendry (2026) "A user-centred e-government service design framework to enhance public trust in sustainable policies", Engineering, Technology and Applied Science Research, Vol 16, No. 1.

United Nations (2024) United Nations E-Government Survey 2024: Accelerating Digital Transformation for Sustainable Development, with the Addendum on Artificial Intelligence, United Nations, New York.

Welch, E.W., Hinnant, C.C. and Moon, M.J. (2005) "Linking citizen satisfaction with e-government and trust in government", Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Vol 15, No. 3, pp 371–391.

Wirtz, B.W., Weyerer, J.C. and Geyer, C. (2019) "Artificial intelligence and the public sector: applications and challenges", International Journal of Public Administration, Vol 42, No. 7, pp 596–615.