Albania's digital transformation of public services delivery

ESPN Flash Report 2022/30

ELIRA JORGONI – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK

Albania's government in a bold and sudden move announced that as of 1 May, 95% of the services delivered by the public administration will be provided online only and the service windows for in-person communication with the citizens will be shut down, in a bid to further improve service quality and transparency. Low-levels of digital skills among socially vulnerable groups are likely to impede this transition. The establishment of call centres is a welcome measure in the short term, but in the long run the digital divide will need to be addressed.

Description

"e-Albania" is the unique government portal of Albania that serves as a single contact point for government services. It has acquired a prominent status in the delivery of online public services in the country, triggered also by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On 27 April, the government announced that from 1 May all public services in Albania would go digital. Hundreds of service windows and counters have been closed. 1,225 or 95% of all services delivered by the public administration are now only provided online. In a bold move towards digital transformation and for the benefit of service quality and transparency, the government considers this a crucial point for Albania's development.

It is expected that through transitioning to digital online services only, all citizens will be equally provided with the required service without facing any delays or obstacles, regardless of their place of residence. This major step in delivering public sector services aims at eliminating physical interaction and communication between the citizens and the public administration's employees, eradicating corruption practices, long queues and dissatisfaction.

Digital transformation has been high on the policy agenda of Albania's government. A new Digital Agenda has been drafted, built around four main pillars: 1) Enabling Digital Policies, Intelligent Processes and Advanced Solutions on Secure Platforms; 2) Digital Business: Accessible, Proactive Services and Business Ready Operations; 3) Digital Education and Digital Skills: Transformation of Learning and Education; and 4) Digital Citizens: Citizens and Privacy, Transparency of the Data and Citizen Services. In addition, a law on e-Government is being drafted defining the rights, obligations and responsibilities of public authorities and private entities to comply with electronic security standards. This law will establish the rules for the creation and provision of e-Government services in the Republic of Albania and define the rules for accessing, processing and recording information electronically.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's Transition Report 2021–22 highlights Albania's progress on digitalisation by placing the country 17th on a list of 37 countries, with an overall score of 65.4 mostly due to the progress in government services. The UN E-Government Index also ranks Albania 59th (2020) out of 193 countries, with a considerable year on year improvement.

The government recognises that certain social categories will face difficulties in this digital transition but is ensuring that institutions will make call centres available to address any issues that citizens may experience. Indeed, issues with the government portal due to heavy traffic have been reported and certain non-governmental organisations have called this a premature move.

⭐ Outlook and commentary

Although the expected total rollout of digital services had been referred to in the government programme during 2021, the abrupt announcement on 27 April for 1 May was short notice for a measure with such impact, and took not only the citizens but also the institutions by surprise.

Digital transformation is a very welcome move that indeed will facilitate better and more efficient services and tackle petty corruption. However, the radical manner of implementation is bound to create more problems and difficulties that could have been prevented or dealt with through a well thought-out road map.

Albania has made progress in terms of access to the internet as according to the national statistical institute of Albania (INSTAT), 88.3 % of Albanian households had access to the Internet in 2021. However, the very same reports that praise Albania's government e-progress (see above), also point out that low levels of digital skills are impeding the use of e-government services.

Indeed, the percentage of individuals in the age group 65-74 who declared that they had never used the Internet was 51.1%. If one adds to this figure certain socially vulnerable groups,

including people with disabilities and those in remote areas, then access to online services becomes scarce for a large share of the population. The establishment of call centres is certainly a welcome measure, but in the long run, adequate digital literacy skilling and upskilling will be necessary to address the digital divide. Moreover, private businesses are seeing this as an opportunity and are providing support to citizens needing to access services from e-Albania. This will result in a higher cost for services which are intended to be free and accessible for all. This in particular will affect the elderly and other categories lacking digital skills. Moreover, the system is not equipped to serve those people with visual impairment or other disabilities – thus currently creating another barrier to accessing essential services.

The rollout of all services online has just started and it remains to be seen how the implementation will evolve. Online services are not just about front-end work. The back end is equally important to ensure adequate delivery. Data protection and cyber security, monitoring and accountability are only some of the key issues that will need to be properly considered. Assessments and adequate data will be necessary to understand the positives and the challenges of this major reform.

Further reading

Albanian Government Programme 2021–2025 (accessed on 20 April 2022).

Council of Ministers update on the change (accessed on 27 May 2022).

E-Government Development Index

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Transition Report 2021-2022 System Upgrade: Delivering the Digital Dividend

Council of Ministers Decision of 29 April 2022 (accessed on 27 May 2022) "Procedurat e ofrimit të shërbimeve on-line nga institucionet shërbimofruese dhe për metodologjinë e monitorimit e të kontrollit të veprimtarisë administrative të ofrimit të tyre" [*Procedures for providing on-line services from the service provider institutions and on the monitoring methodology for the oversight of the administrative activities of service provision*].

INSTAT (2021) Survey on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) usage in Households and by Individuals in 2021 (accessed on 2 June 2022).

Local newspaper Panorama (3 June 2022) Shërbimet on (off)line të e-albania, Kofindustria italiane: kanë krijuar kaos dhe kosto për biznesin [*On (offline) services have created chaos and costs for the businesses*] (accessed on 3 June 2022)

National Agency for Information Society Revolucioni digjital, nga 1 Maji mbyllen sportelet fizike [The digital revolution, from 1 May all the physical counters will be closed] (accessed on 27 April 2022).

Author

Elira Jorgoni (Independent social policy expert)