

Turbulent times as a trigger for digital transformation of the Slovenian public administration: reflection on the long-term impact of the Covid-19 crisis

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Abstract: The article critically reflects on the long-term effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the degree of digitalisation of the Slovenian state administration. While the crisis attracted great scientific attention in its acute phase, it led to somewhat inflated expectations regarding its impact on public administration in terms of organisational and digital transformation. The time lag from the (acute) crisis now offers the opportunity to assess the lasting effects and the actual extent of organisational and digital change in public administration.

This article therefore aims to answer two primary research questions:

RQ 1: How profound are the long-term organizational changes triggered by the Covid-19 crisis in the Slovenian state administration, and what is their nature?

RQ 2: Can we consider the Covid-19 crisis as a catalyst for digital transformation within the state administration?

To answer these research questions, we chose a multiple case study research design involving five representative public organizations at the central level of government, including a ministry, a body within the ministry, a government office, an administrative unit, and a public agency. Our main method of data collection were semi-structured interviews with representatives of top management, middle management, and operational staff of the research organizations.

The assessment of whether the crisis triggered digital transformation in the Slovenian state administration is theoretically based on the Leavitt-Diamond model, in particular the 2014 model upgraded by Nograšek and Vintar. This model is considered the most appropriate theoretical framework as it focuses on technology as the central driver of organizational change and adopts a holistic perspective that encompasses all elements that make up an organization. The latter is particularly important as digital transformation inherently implies the redefinition of organizational processes, culture, structure and employee relationships in response to the introduction/use of new technologies.

On this basis, our study shows that the long-term effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the Slovenian state administration are uneven. In two of the cases studied, the crisis triggered significant changes in the field of digitalization, although we are cautious to call them "digital transformation." In two cases, we observed minimal impact on digitalization due to their advantageous starting position, while in one case no changes were observed.