



# An overview of the Greek public sector's administrative reforms: From bureaucracy to digital governance

GEORGIOS NASIOS, Ph.D.

*Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece*

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**ABSTRACT:** The Greek public administration has seen considerable changes during the previous few decades. This article attempts to provide an overview of the changes, beginning with a brief historical review of Greece's public administration system. Also, the main weaknesses of the Greek public sector are briefly mentioned, highlighting the need for reforms to address them, as well as the main reforms that have gradually transformed the Greek public administration from a bureaucratic model to a system model based on digital governance, despite Greece's constantly changing environment and the economic and health crisis. Finally, the major conclusions and recommendations for implementing successful changes to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the Greek public administration are presented.

**KEYWORDS:** Public sector, reforms, digital governance, Greece.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The quality of public administration and the effectiveness of governance are heavily influenced by a country's political and administrative systems. In Greece, as in many other European countries, the Napoleonic system serves as a model for the organization and operation of public administration. The Napoleonic system, which emerged in France in the nineteenth century, has as its main characteristics centralized control, emphasis on the observance of the principle of legality, and time-consuming procedures for the recruitment and development of permanent civil servants. As a result, no emphasis is placed on the effectiveness and efficiency of services, and there is little communication and interaction with social partners and other factors of economic and social life in terms of co-forming public policies and, by extension, their implementation [14]. Indeed, this is the more widely held view of Greece's administrative structure, "classifying" it as one of

the Napoleonic countries. This is because the Greek public sector has characteristics that come from both the "Weberian" bureaucracy and the French public administration, which are common in the southern European countries. It is worth noting that even in the postwar period, the administrative system was characterized by strong statism. That is, it engaged in a variety of social, economic, and productive activities within the framework of an expansionary and protective economic policy. In other words, the foundations were in place to create public institutions with a high degree of bureaucracy and centralization, direct hierarchical control by the state, and legal formalism due to the emphasis on the labyrinthine rules and formal procedures resulting from the respective legislation [7].

In particular, in the Greek public sector, public administration was based on geo-economic, social, and transport conditions and, by extension, was organized according to the principle of decentralization. Furthermore, according to the Greek Constitution, local authorities retain control over local matters, that is, decentralized bodies have control over matters of economic and social development in their areas of competence, and the central government supervises and coordinates the decentralized bodies, creating for this purpose decentralized administrations [9]. The rapid changes in the larger economic, social, political, and technological environment over the last few decades have forced all countries to reform their governance systems and administrative structures in order to meet the growing needs and demands of the economy and society. As early as 1974, emphasis was placed on the democratization of public administration, with minor deviations from the characteristics of the "Weberian" bureaucracy, while at the beginning of the 1990s, European integration and globalization put pressure on Greece's administrative system, with the first trends transforming the Greek public administration to meet market conditions. At the same time, the European Union pushed for institutional reforms in



national administrative systems to implement common rules and procedures to modernize and Europeanize public administration [7]. The state's presence in the economy gradually decreased, independent authorities and new organizations were created with greater freedom of action and new organizational methods and technologies [17, 19]. National and supranational organizations have repeatedly emphasized the urgent need for reforms to achieve a more efficient and effective management of public affairs. However, in Greece, the much-desired administrative reform has not been implemented to a satisfactory extent, regardless of the changes in political power, and any steps that have taken place have come with a delay, contributing to Greece being characterized as a country with low reform capability [18]. Despite attempts to incorporate elements of theories such as New Public Management, New Public Service, the New Weberian State, total quality management, management by objectives, e-governance in public administration, and the decentralization of responsibilities at the regional and local levels, a clear administrative reform of the public sector was not presented [7]. That is, the reform efforts and the consensus to modernize the political system failed to solve the problems of bureaucracy, resulting in the continued reduced effectiveness and efficiency of public administration [9]. They only resulted in short-term fiscal improvements, failing to address internal public administration problems and the disadvantages of bureaucracy in Greece, primarily

for the following reasons: a) there were external pressures for the implementation of the reform programs, b) the administration's response to the changes was slow, c) the delay from policy formulation to its implementation, d) policies are influenced by interest groups, e) society's detachment from administrative reality and f) reform efforts are fragmented [7].

Only during the financial crisis and memorandums did programs of radical public administration transformation occur to the extent and intensity that Greek society and economy had never seen before. All economic adjustment programs have had administrative reform (often termed "structural") at their core, with the argument that addressing chronic deficiencies and weaknesses would help strengthen the administration's ability to foster the country's social and economic development. The pressure for reforms was particularly intense because they were combined with the terms and conditions of the memoranda, which aimed to accelerate radical changes in a wide range of public administration functions [18]. The pressure continued during the pandemic period, where the public administration was forced to operate effectively and immediately in a new social and economic environment, with the health and safety environment at the center, but also the operational environment being in uncharted waters, given the uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity, and variability that prevailed [14].

## II. THE PRIMARY WEAKNESSES OF THE GREEK PUBLIC SECTOR

Despite the reforms implemented in Greece's public sector, particularly in the last decade, the latter is frequently referred to as the country's "biggest patient" in academic circles as well as official reports of European and international bodies. At the same time, the attempt to identify the "symptoms" and "treatments" of the problem is visible in these reports [9]. Starting before the financial crisis, the Greek public sector suffered from significant pathologies. In a 2011 report, the OECD discovered the lack of an overall strategic vision and broader agenda for the long-term future of Greek society and economy, as well as the absence of short-term, medium-term, and long-term measures to be implemented in this regard. It also lacked a high-level structure with the authority and capacity to guide a strategic vision for public policies to be implemented. Governments lacked unity and interagency coordination, and public structures were marked by fragmentation and

overlapping responsibilities, opaque governance systems, corruption concerns, complex legal frameworks, lax control mechanisms, and insufficient human resource management. At the same time, reforms initiated by the central administration and implemented by public sector bodies failed to produce the desired results due to poor implementation and ineffective supervision and control. Weaknesses were also presented in matters of expenditure control, budget monitoring, placement and competence of senior public sector officials, while at the same time redundant structures, limited mobility of public sector staff, lack of statistical data and records, complex legal framework, and the prevailing culture that did not encourage changes in the public sector further hampered efforts to effectively implement reforms [11]. Furthermore, Spanou and Sotiropoulos (2011) identified structural weaknesses in the Greek public sector, including the short-term horizon of reforms,



the absence of long-term goals, the loss of institutional memory due to frequent changes in personnel in top administrative positions, a lack of modern skills and a reform management culture, insufficient social support for reform implementation, and citizens' low trust in state institutions [19].

The features listed above were essentially the traditional model of Greek public administration, but they are insufficient to address the global problems and challenges that arise and affect all countries. In short, an unprepared Greek public sector faced political, demographic, social, and technological changes (primarily as a result of globalization), increased migration flows, the emergence of terrorism, and a variety of other challenges. This is due to a number of factors, including: centralization, strict hierarchical control, an extensive bureaucracy that takes special care to ensure legitimacy, a slow decision-making process, a large number of legislative provisions and responsibilities among public bodies, an obsession with formalism at the expense of efficiency, a "regular" culture, introversion and the inability to form cooperative networks, conservatism in the integration of new technologies and innovative administrative action models, and the strong influence of politics in administration [2].

The academic - and not only - community is concerned about whether the deep reform cuts implemented during and after the financial crisis have cured the Greek public sector's weaknesses. The common finding is that, despite extensive interventions and widespread political support for reforms, the problems of mismanagement and bureaucracy have not been adequately addressed. Furthermore, the characteristics of the economic crisis increased the deficit in public finances, and the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector did not yield the desired positive results. At the same time, it has been argued that the economic crisis coincided with an administrative crisis, as evidenced by employees' lack of technical knowledge, outdated organizational structures, the absence of modern management methods, the dominance of formalism and legalism, and a lack of professional ethics. The above results in the dominance of an oversized state with a centralized model of administration and management, an extensive range of activities, an interventionist role, and excessive involvement in the productive sector of the economy, but at the same time with a limited capacity for efficient and quality operation, due to the existence of an excessive number of personnel with insufficient knowledge and skills [9]. Spanou

(2018) contends that, despite the reforms implemented, the public sector is characterized by a proliferation of administrative structures and hierarchical levels, inflation in positions of responsibility, problematic employee supervision, multi-division of structures and responsibilities, lack of coordination and communication between services, swelling of political hierarchy (e.g., with the creation of Special Secretariats), and inefficient structures, in terms of responding to new operational needs and requirements [18]. The preceding conclusions are substantially consistent with those of the White Paper on European Governance. The conclusions above illustrate the major issues and shortcomings in Greece's public sector. It is obvious to focus on concerns such as the huge number, fragmentation, and uncertainty in the allocation of duties of the state apparatus (often overlapping), the inadequate system of decision-making and policy implementation, the excessive number of staff tasks, the unstructured policy of strategic planning and the incapacity to plan and coordinate public policies, the rising budgetary demands, the poor management of public resources, the lack of standardization and simplification of procedures, the unclear regulatory framework, the absence of planning and evaluation tools, the faulty implementation of information systems, the issue of corruption and the inability of functional separation between the various levels of government [20].

As a result of the above, the implementation of a substantial volume of structural reforms in a relatively short period of time raises concerns about the desired outcome. Delays in reform implementation, as well as an increase in administrative reform backlogs, rendered expectations of effective completion unrealistic, particularly at a period of harsh budgetary adjustment. However, the root of the problems remained in the internal workings of the Greek political-administrative system, which had an over-inflated center, opacity, clientelistic and guild logics, and a low level of confidence from society and citizens, which was not addressed by the changes implemented. In addition, the fragmentation of tasks remains, making it a key administrative weakness and a source of future challenges in the operation of public administration [18]. This, however, contradicts the most essential organizational feature of the Greek public sector: its centralization. According to the data, 84% of public sector employees worked in the central public administration in 2020, which includes ministries, monitored Legal Entities under Public Law, and autonomous public agencies situated in Athens.



Despite the efforts of European partners and key EU policies, the expected degree of administrative decentralization has not been realized [15]. In addition, despite the centralization, there is still a fragmentation of responsibility and multiple institutions, with the competent Ministry effectively having the first say on operational, financial, and operational matters. In fact, the aforesaid monitoring is carried out on the basis of "intense formalism", which overshadows the attainment of public administration efficiency, rather than "management of results". A typical example is the inappropriate usage of European NSRF money from 2006 to 2013 and 2014 to 2020. Other factors also contribute to the low efficiency of public administration, such as the unequal distribution of staff in public services, the lack of specialized staff and staff in "frontline" services, the "fixed" salaries of public servants, the clientelistic logic regarding the recruitment of non-permanent staff, the lack of incentives for permanent employees, and the lack of a "administrative elite," i.e. a group of competent and independent high-ranking officials [14, 16].

As a result, the reason for the existence of the aforementioned weaknesses, despite the significant reforms implemented in recent years, should most likely be found in the structural composition of the country's administrative system, which includes political superiors and senior

officials of the central services influencing the administration. In fact, according to one point of view, the financial crisis increased the power of the discretionary treatment of the above compared to other administrative employees and the increase of centralization, due to the special mission of controlling and approving the finances of all services from the territory by the central administration [15]. However, it is worth noting that there is an adequate legal framework for the substantial decentralization of the State's powers (there is even a constitutional provision - relevant article 101, paragraph 1 of the Constitution), and Greece has yet to sufficiently implement the relevant regulatory provisions to converge with the international trend of decentralization [15]. As a result, the chronic pathologies and deficiencies of the Greek public administration can be addressed by strengthening the decentralization of responsibilities, combined with the increase of capacity in the planning and implementation of public policies, better coordination between services, the implementation of an integrated human resource management system, the effective allocation of human resources, the simplification of the regulatory framework, the increased penetration of e-government services and the introduction of modern methods and techniques [10].

### III. THE MAIN STRUCTURAL REFORMS IN THE GREEK PUBLIC SECTOR

Despite the noted problems it is worth noting the major reforms that occurred in the Greek public sector, dramatically altering its features in practically every aspect. The major reform adjustments in Greek public administration began in the early 1990s, as a result of the constraints and pressures imposed by the European integration and globalization processes. Nevertheless, the European Union has been the most powerful pressure force for institutional changes, owing to the necessity to adapt national administrative systems to EU regulations and processes, as well as supranational patterns of state transformation. Institutions were thus created to promote the rule of law, accountability, and sound financial management, such as independent regulatory and audit bodies (e.g. Ombudsman, Supreme Council for Civil Personnel Selection, General Inspector of Public Administration, Hellenic Authority for Communication Security and Privacy, Money Laundering Authority, Hellenic

Independent Authority for Public Revenue, Hellenic Single Public Procurement Authority, Hellenic Fiscal Council) that would help to the legalization of public administration and the elimination of political nuances [5, 7, 13]. Following the adoption of these reforms, the public sector has a diminished role in the economy due to market liberalization, erstwhile state monopolies have practically gone, and new independent authorities have taken over the state's regulatory function in numerous industries [17]. Strong foreign forces, particularly from the European Union, played a key role in policy areas such as market liberalization, economic competitiveness, and the shrinking of the bloated public sector. The political and administrative framework was also beneficial for the crucial role of reform measures, imbued with management and economic ideas, in boosting efficiency and effectiveness [19]. Furthermore, decentralized services and regional entities gradually gained more influence and resources than in the past. In this direction, the organization and operation of Local Government Organizations was changed with the



"Kapodistrias" and "Kallikratis" plans, as well as the decentralized administration of the State with the seven (7) decentralized units for the organization of government projects at the regional level. The use of community funding and programs (e.g., Community Support Frameworks) resulted in the execution of the required changes to increase the efficacy of Local Government institutions, particularly in the administration of regional and sectoral operational programs [1].

Additionally, European integration resulted in the institutionalization of a decision-making process at the lowest administrative level available to the person, therefore strengthening the state's democratic face. The implementation of multi-level governance was therefore initiated, allowing the state to better respond to the demands of local people while reducing heavily centralized government. In that context, open governance was progressively institutionalized, in terms of a network approach to the exercise of public power and the acknowledgment of the role of civil society (e.g. public pre-legislative consultation via [opengov.gr](http://opengov.gr)), as well as public and private sector partnerships (Law 3389/2005), the strengthening of transparency and the documentation of the public administration action (Law 3861/2020), management by objectives (Law 3230/2004), the abolition of the monopolistic nature of public enterprises, benchmarking practices, competition with private sector entities for the provision of public services, the introduction of the concept of quality in public administration (Common Evaluation Framework, ISO), and integration of e-government and new technologies (e.g. Ermis National Portal since 2007). Furthermore, due to the complicated difficulties they had to deal with, the newly constituted agencies worked differently than typical bureaucratic structures with a new governance framework. The variations primarily affected the legal status, the selection of administrations, the status of the workers, the norms of operation, and accountability [5, 13].

During the economic crisis and the memoranda, a fresh wave of reforms was initiated in the Greek public administration as part of a larger strategy to rebuild the country and tackle the chronic dysfunctions of the public sector. The fiscal and debt crisis prompted urgent and forced reforms at all levels of government. The compass of these reforms was the central fiscal goal of limiting costs throughout the public sector, and thus the applied policies were inspired by a governance model with an emphasis on fiscal measures aimed at saving resources, abolishing state monopolies,

reorganization of management mechanisms, radical revision of personnel management, and redefinition of the concept of administrative efficiency, in which "legalism" did not have a primary role. To accomplish the aforementioned, an attempt was made to enhance the administrative mechanism's quality parameters, reinforce staff roles, and dramatically lower its size, scope, and operational expenses (known as "downsizing" or "right-sizing"). The oversized public sector and its unwieldy mode of operation were considered the main causes of the economic crisis, and thus the accompanying policies, under fiscal pressure, concerned the modernization and rationalization of the state in a limited and efficient format, and indeed under an atmosphere of "emergency necessity". The basis for the application was based on strong criticism of the "failed state" and the necessity to use new methods and instruments in the context of New Public Management, such as economic efficiency logic, public expenditure reduction, and management by objectives. In logical order, agencies and services at all levels were abolished and merged, employees were removed from their services, privatizations were promoted, the architecture of administrative structures was documented at an analytical level, new ministry organizations were established, several administrative level units were reduced, the distribution of responsibilities to public bodies was redefined, coordination units were created, and emphasis was placed on strengthening financial management units. Furthermore, the emphasis on the efficient operation of the administrative apparatus became more apparent, and the managerial approaches and technocratic methods of administration used incorporated elements from good governance, e-government, and the neo-Weberian state. Such policies were the strengthening of transparency (e.g. Transparency Portal "Diavgeia", publication of data regarding civil servants, Single Payments Authority), the streamlining of financial operations (diplographic system, fiscal rules, control of expenses, public procurement, outsourcing), the simplification of procedures (e.g. Code of Administrative Procedure) and the emphasis on relations with citizens (e.g. Citizens' Service Center as a "one-stop-shop" point of service), the use of IT and communication technologies, controlling the central administration via review and enhancing strategic planning. Simultaneously, focus was placed on examining civil servant labor relations (employment, salary, and career) and decreasing inflexible expenditures in the framework of limiting changes to budgetary terms. However, despite the projected aims, these



changes resulted in short-term budgetary gains but did not solve the underlying difficulties of public administration. This appears to be due to the fact that the reforms were the result of external pressures, the Greek administration's compliance was slow, especially in the implementation stages, the interventions of interest groups were not eliminated, and the society did not participate significantly in the reforms [6, 7, 10, 13].

Reform attempts resumed in the end of the 2010s, coinciding with the financial crisis and the implementation of the memorandums, as it appears that the memorandum era changes served as a spur for more reforms. The "flag" of the executive state, Law 4622/2019, developed a governance handbook for the first time based on the differentiation of the Greek state's organizations and the uniformity of public sector processes. According to the aforesaid law, the General Directors of the ministries were granted the right to issue individual administrative acts, and the systematization and horizontal coordination between public services (via the "Coordination Service" in each Ministry) became operational. Moreover, the Service Secretaries of the Ministries, selected without political interference and with objective criteria, undertook the issuing of all individual administrative acts and the administrative and financial management of the Ministries. The Service Secretary is a permanent civil servant who serves at the head of each ministry's civil service hierarchy and is appointed by the special and non-politicized five-member Public Executive Selection Committee. The integrity and transparency of state operations were also emphasized through the establishment of a comprehensive framework on obstacles, incompatibilities, and rules to avoid conflicts of interest for government members and public sector administration bodies in general, as well as the establishment of the National Transparency Authority. The latter is a new independent authority, subject to Parliament, to which the fragmented powers of the various auditors and inspectors were transferred, with the goal of increasing transparency and accountability in state and government action, as well as preventing and treating corruption phenomena. Further, the new public service of the Presidency of the Government was established to

effectively coordinate the action and operation of the government, with an active role in the legislative process (to achieve proper legislation and fight polynomialism and maladministration) and in the monitoring and evaluation of government policy through an advanced integrated information system [4, 15].

Nonetheless, significant progress has been made in terms of increasing the range and amount of electronic services available to residents and companies, with the Ministry of Digital Governance "leading the way". After all, the establishment of this Ministry was intended to focus on the digital performance and operation of public services, primarily through the use of electronic platforms, which also proved to be one of the key tools in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, which necessitated maintaining distance and avoiding personal contact [3]. IT and communication technologies enabled the handling of a wide variety of citizen duties, the creation of digital organizational charts and job outlines, the implementation of the public sector employee mobility system, and, in general, the development of an integrated Human Resource Management System. Many services were rapidly digitized, including those in tax administration and public procurement, contracts and projects, national digital networks, centralized digital systems, the Government Cloud (G-Cloud), and the interoperability of public service databases (e.g., Electronic Waste Register, Unified Digital Map, e-poleodomia). Simultaneously, transparency and meritocracy in the appointment of senior executives (such as General Directors of Ministries) in the public administration were strengthened, public servant mobility became more transparent and objective, and technocrats were appointed to positions of responsibility in public services (e.g., hospitals) that were previously held by political figures. Significant progress has been made in reducing bureaucracy through legal codification with the goal of addressing the fragmentation of the legislative framework, both with the establishment of the central codification committee and with codification in individual sectors, such as tourism and forest maps [8, 10, 15, 16].



#### IV. CONCLUSION – RECOMMENDATION

However, multiple tasks must be performed to fully implement the previously adopted reforms. In practice, the decentralization of powers, responsibility, and decision-making has not been accomplished in various areas of public policy, which remain the responsibility of the government and the central services of the Ministries. The decentralization of the central administration continues with the development in the Region of Greece of units of the central services of the Ministries (such as the Health Regions and the Regional Directorates of Education). Additionally, management by objectives has not been satisfactorily implemented, despite the fact that a relevant law (3230/2004) has existed for about twenty years, as has the evaluation of civil servants, which remains a formal - rather than substantive - procedure, and the evaluation structures and functions of the services [15, 16]. Currently, there is essentially Multi-Level Administration (with responsibilities exercised at several levels by Ministries, Regions, and Municipalities), but not Multi-Level Governance, as it is required to secure operationally, legislatively, and politically the systemic relationships between them, i.e. synergy, cooperation, and mutual information. This can be accomplished through Digital Multilevel Governance, as defined by the Charter of the European Committee of the Regions, which entails redefining and safeguarding the systemic relations of Central Administration, Decentralized Administrations, Regions, and Municipalities through sectoral public policy via sectoral Integrated Information Systems. The conditions for the effective operation of Digital Multilevel Governance are the elimination of the obligation to approve decisions made at a subordinate level by a superior administrative level, the clarification of the responsibilities and roles of each administrative level in the design and implementation of public policies, the identification of new duties at an administrative level when these are required (e.g., owing to European Union Regulations and Directives, newly arising difficulties, etc.) and the alteration of the administrative subordination of entities currently placed at a regional or local level.

As it turns out, the participation of the Local Government in the planning and implementation of public policies is imperative, aside from the necessary actions to strengthen, organize, and digitize the Local Government Organizations, even non-state bodies, such as non-

governmental organizations, businesses, and unions [8, 16]. After all, the unforeseeable conditions of the previous few years (economic and health crises) underscored the necessity for dramatic changes in the organization and functioning of the state, reintroducing "administrative reform" to the forefront. In this setting, a "smart" and "strategic" state must develop instruments and regulations that prioritize proactive uncertainty management and service coordination. The assignment of responsibilities and resources with networking and synergy is required to be able to meet new challenges and dangers and proactively defend society and the economy in a fast changing global competitive environment [12].

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