



Public Administration in the era of Covid-19: Policy Responses and Reforms underway

GREEK & EUROPEAN ECONOMY OBSERVATORY

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Summary

- Covid-19 has caused an unprecedented shock to the state apparatus and has triggered major reforms in the administrative system of Greece.
- Policy responses to the pandemic have brought about several positive changes towards the modernization and de-bureaucratization of public administration. However, the pace and scale of change vary significantly.
- The pandemic has acted as a strong driver for the digital transformation of the public sector and the strengthening of e-government policies.
- Numerous administrative procedures were streamlined, digitalized and simplified, working conditions have become more flexible and several improvements have taken place in service delivery and state-citizen relations.
- The observed centralisation of decision-making and the often use of fast-track procedures have raised questions of democratic control, transparency and the rule of law, while the emergency measures have been criticized for the threats they pose for the protection of citizens' rights, individual liberties and personal data.
- A key challenge remains the integration the emergency measures of the Covid-19 policy agenda into a longer-term programme of administrative reform in the post-Covid era.

Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has triggered a wave of substantial reforms in the state machinery. All levels and functions of government experienced major transformations in response to the unprecedented shock that was caused by the rapidly evolving health crisis. Covid-19 has profoundly challenged the capacity of the domestic administrative system to effectively respond to external, large-scale shocks and has led to important institutional, structural and operational adjustments. Policy responses to the Covid-19 crisis have brought about important changes in the direction of the modernization and de-bureaucratization of public administration, but at the same time pointed out several limitations as regards its reform readiness and capacity.

“Covid-19 has profoundly challenged the capacity of the domestic administrative system to effectively respond to external, large-scale shocks and has led to important institutional, structural and operational adjustments.”

This paper aims at assessing the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the Greek administrative system. The analysis covers the first, second and third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece and focuses on the central public administration. The implications of the health crisis are analysed in line with six key variables, namely policy-making, government structures, administrative processes, human resources, service delivery and public communication. It is suggested that the initiated measures have led to notable improvements in several areas. However, the pace and scale of change vary significantly. In addition, the responses to the pandemic had certain adverse effects that, up to now, have received less attention. Along with the direct implications of the pandemic for the administrative apparatus, the analysis also seeks to identify whether and how the Covid-19 policy agenda has been joined-up (or not) with broader reform programmes in public administration and what are their prospects in the post-Covid era.

The paper is divided into five sections: Section 1 sets the background of the administrative reform process, linking the 2010-2018 debt crisis to the current health crisis. In section 2, the policies and measures adopted in response to the coronavirus pandemic are presented. Section 3 provides an assessment of the impact of the three waves of Covid-19 on public administration and analyses the gains and losses. Section 4 draws some lessons from the experience of the pandemic up to now and discusses the challenges and opportunities for public administration in the post-Covid era. The concluding section summarizes the key-findings of the analysis and suggests some directions for future research.

Background: from the debt crisis to the coronavirus pandemic

In 2020, Greece was recovering from a severe 8-year sovereign debt crisis that has brought about sweeping social and economic reforms. Public administration has been a key reform area of the economic adjustment programmes (2010-2018) and major institutional and structural changes occurred in all levels of government. The reform agenda included a range of measures primarily aiming at reducing the size and cost of the public sector. At the same time, important structural adjustments in the administrative apparatus took place, for instance regarding organizational structures, administrative processes, human resources management, public procurement, financial management, public revenue administration, digital services, coordination mechanisms, better regulation and the management of state assets.¹

¹ See Ladi, 2014; Featherstone, 2015; Tsekos, 2015; Makrydimitris et al., 2015; Dimitrakopoulos & Passas, 2020; Lampropoulou & Oikonomou, 2020; Spanou, 2018, 2020a, 2022.

Since the conclusion of the financial assistance programmes in August 2018, an enhanced surveillance framework has been activated. Within this mechanism, Greece has committed to continue and complete the implementation of the reforms that were initiated under the ESM programme within a set of given deadlines. A key area is the modernization of public administration, which has aimed at the rationalization and de-politicization of the human resource management, especially regarding the appointment of top-level administrative officials, the implementation of mobility cycles and performance assessments, an integrated HR Management System and an anti-corruption plan².

The enhanced surveillance framework, coupled with the European Semester have largely shaped the post debt crisis reform agenda, despite the conclusion of the economic adjustment programmes. Thus, when the pandemic erupted, major reform programmes for public administration were already underway. Along with the obligations that stemmed from external obligations, the Greek government, on its own initiative, introduced a new framework for the organization and function of government in August 2019 (“Executive state” – Law 4622) that set out certain directions for the modernization of public administration.

The outbreak of the coronavirus caught the state machinery largely unprepared to cope with a health crisis of such scale and intensity. Thus, the immediate reaction of government was to implement horizontal containment and precautionary measures such as the closure of schools and universities and the suspension of retail businesses and many professional activities. Most public activities were put under a ‘lock-down’ and were subject to strict limitations. In addition, personal mobility and social distancing requirements as well as travel restrictions were imposed to the general population. This reaction was justified by the absence of an effective plan for the management of the health crisis, also given the uncertainty of scientific evidence regarding the implications of the coronavirus in its initial phases.

“The need for immediate action has notably strengthened the top-down and centralized character of policy-making and the role of the centre of government.”

Responses to the health crisis: fast-track reforms and emergency measures

The pandemic had a strong impact on the state apparatus that had to rapidly adjust to the shock and at the same time cope with its devastating consequences. The implications of the Covid-19 crisis for public administration can be discerned in its internal dimensions, including policy-making procedures, government structures, administrative processes and human resources and its external ones, namely service delivery and public communication.

Policy-making

While an ‘Influenza Pandemic Action Plan’ has been elaborated and existed since 2005 and has been accordingly revised in view of the influenza A (H1N1) and other pandemics (Economou et al., 2021), prior planning seemed to be of little use in the case of Covid-19, which required new plans and policy tools. Since the eruption of the pandemic, the Greek government has initiated numerous measures and regulations. The immense pressure to develop and pass new legislation aiming at bringing the spread of Covid-19 under control had a direct effect on the decision-making process. Policy responses were shaped under state of emergency and within extremely pressing timeframes. The need

² See Annex to the Eurogroup statement of 22 June 2018.

for immediate action has notably strengthened the top-down and centralized character of policy-making and the role of the centre of government. Accordingly, the adoption of emergency measures has been often the result of fast-track procedures instead of the normal parliamentary ones and has taken the form of “acts of legislative content”.³

“A novel element has been the growing involvement of health experts and scientific communities in the formulation of policies.”

A novel element has been the growing involvement of health experts and scientific communities in the formulation of policies and the specification of the respective measures. Specialists of the health sector provided expert advice to the government on a regular basis, as policy decisions needed to be informed by scientific developments and evidence on the implications of Covid-19. Committees of experts were established as advisory bodies to the government, providing scientific information and support to the decision-making process.

In the initial phase of the crisis, in February 2020, a special Committee for the Management of Public Health Emergencies from Infectious Agents was established⁴, composed by academics, medical doctors and health specialists. The mission of the Committee was to provide advisory opinions on addressing possible public health emergencies by infectious agents. Shortly after, in March 2020, a Committee of Public Health Experts (EEDY) was created in the Ministry of Health under a framework legislation for the national health system,⁵ as a scientific, advisory and consultative body to the policy-makers.

During the second wave of the pandemic, following to the development and availability of the first effective vaccines, a National Vaccination Committee was established for providing opinion on the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the national vaccinations program for Covid-19.⁶ The committee is composed of top-level administrative officers, namely the Secretary General of Primary Health Care (as President), the Secretary General for Civil Protection, the Secretary General for Public Order, the Secretary General for Information Systems and the head or a representative of the National Defence General Staff.

“In view of the galloping pandemic, the competent government structures were swiftly re-organized, while special bodies and new entities were created.”

Government structures

In view of the galloping pandemic, the competent government structures were swiftly re-organized, while special bodies and new entities were created. A new Government Committee for the Coordination and Monitoring of Government Policy for Tackling the Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic was established in June 2020 as the competent central structure for the planning, monitoring and coordination of government policy in the effort to address the coronavirus pandemic and its social and economic consequences.⁷

The Ministry of Health has been the competent government structure for providing the strategic directions and for overseeing the implementation of national plans and policies to combat the pandemic. At the operational level, the role of the National Public Health Organization⁸ (EODY) has also been strengthened, as the government agency responsible for the implementation of the measures to manage and combat the spread of the coronavirus.

³ According to art. 44 (par.1) of The Constitution of Greece, acts of legislative content can be issued “under extraordinary circumstances of an urgent and unforeseeable need”.

⁴ Decision Α1β/Γ.Π.οκ.11180/20.02.2020 of the Minister of Health.

⁵ Law 4675/2020.

⁶ Cabinet act no 50/22.12.2020.

⁷ Ministerial act 23/18.6.2020.

⁸ EODY is a legal entity of private law supervised by the Ministry of Health.

The unprecedented effect of the pandemic called for several re-arrangements within the central administrative structures. Shortly after the eruption of the crisis, the Secretary General for Civil Protection was upgraded to Deputy Minister for Civil Protection and Crisis Management, while the respective General Secretary was placed at the forefront of the government's action. As regards the enforcement of policy measures, new control competences were assigned to existing bodies. For instance, the Hellenic Police, the National Transparency Authority (EAD) and the Labour Inspectorate (SEPE) carry out controls to ensure compliance with the measures and impose fines in cases of non-compliance.

Along with the competent structures for civil protection and health policy, other ministerial departments have launched certain initiatives to provide information and support the fight against Covid-19. For instance, in the Ministry of Interior, the Department of Innovation and Best Practices of the General Secretariat for Human Resources, since April 2020, collects and publishes data on best practices regarding the management of the pandemic by the OECD countries.⁹

“The Greek government has placed particular emphasis on the digital transformation and data governance in the public sector.”

Administrative processes

The eruption of the crisis triggered the sudden suspension of most public activities due to the contamination risk, the lack of protective equipment and the uncertainty of medical evidence. The first wave of the pandemic found the state apparatus largely unprepared to effectively respond to these conditions. Thus, new arrangements were required in order to maintain the continuity of existing organisational processes and operations as well as to respond to the requirements and threats posed by the crisis.

A common response of governments to the shock of the pandemic has been the embracement and strengthening of digital technologies (OECD, 2021). The Greek government has placed particular emphasis on the digital transformation and data governance in the public sector. Numerous administrative procedures and operating conditions were digitalized and linked to new applications and e-government systems. A range of important initiatives were launched for the improvement of interoperability and the development of interfaces used for interconnecting registries and databases. Existing platforms were upgraded, for instance the “Transparency” program (di@vgeia) and the utilization of available infrastructures such as cloud systems has been expanded.¹⁰

The integration of new IT tools and platforms was accompanied by the development and / or the expansion of existing programmes and practices. The use of e-mails for the circulation of documents, digital signatures, interoperability centers, applications and platforms for the electronic publishing and handling of administrative documents are some indicative e-government actions that have been strengthened during the pandemic. In addition, many meetings and consultations have been held via telephony or online platforms, such as the teleconference platform e-presence.

Human resources

The crisis has had a dual effect on human resources of the state apparatus. On the one hand, as citizens they needed to be protected from the pandemic. On the other hand, as civil servants they were expected to continue to perform their duties in order to ensure

⁹ https://innovation.gov.gr/en/covid-19-world_en/.

¹⁰ See for instance the Single Government Cloud (G-Cloud Services), which can be used for hosting the Information Systems of public entities.

the continuity in the operation of the administrative system and the provision of public services.

“...new working arrangements were set out and existing working conditions shifted towards a more flexible basis.”

In view of the escalation of the crisis, new working arrangements were set out and existing working conditions shifted towards a more flexible basis. The initiated measures included remote working, teleworking, rotation, special leave, part-time working, staggered arrival times and online meetings. Special provisions covered vulnerable groups, while physical distancing measures were adopted for those civil servants that needed to be in the office (senior officials and heads of units). In addition, technical adjustments in the workplaces were made in order to limit physical contact, where needed, while gradually all categories of employees that do not work from home have been required to be self-tested for Covid-19 on a weekly basis.

Along with the flexibility of working conditions, new tools and facilities were made available in order to enable distance working. Public administration codes and user authentication tools were developed as well as VPN/MFA connections, allowing civil servants to have remote access to the relevant electronic applications of their services. Training programs were organized with the aim of strengthening the digital skills of public sector employees. A Safe Teleworking Guide for Employees was issued by the National Transparency Authority and the Cyber Crime Division of the Hellenic Police. In addition, an IT system was developed in the Ministry of Interior for the monitoring of available civil servants delivering public services along with an e-monitoring application of the number of public servants working from home or on special leave, providing real-time data (OECD, 2020a: 71).

Service delivery

The sudden suspension of major government activities due to the rapid spread of the pandemic has challenged the capacity of the state apparatus to ensure the prompt provision and continuity of essential services to the citizens and businesses. In this section, the focus is mainly on administrative services (not including health, education, justice, etc.), analysing the effect of the Covid-19 crisis on the ‘street-level bureaucracy’.

“New digital tools were employed and existing applications were upgraded in order to facilitate the provision of distance services to citizens during the pandemic.”

The government undertook numerous measures to adjust service delivery to the new requirements and restrictions that were posed by the Covid-19 emergency. As expected, special attention was paid to the development and effective usage of digital infrastructures and technology. The physical interaction of public administration with citizens shifted to online and phone communication. For example, applications, certificates and other requests could be sent and circulated via e-mails and submitted via e-forms, while many administrative documents have been scanned and sent electronically to the citizens. Pre-appointments were scheduled where citizen’s presence was necessary to accommodate special requests / cases.

New digital tools were employed and existing applications were upgraded in order to facilitate the provision of distance services to citizens during the pandemic. For instance, the services provided by the gov.gr platform via the use of citizens’ tax codes (taxisnet) were expanded, including the submission of solemn declarations and authorizations, the electronic provision of municipal registration and registry certificates, retirement certificates and much more. The mydesklive platform provides public distance services to citizens and businesses by appointment via video conferencing. It is available in several public entities, such as the Independent Authority for Public Revenue (myadelive), Citizens' Service Centres (mykeplive) and the Hellenic Manpower Employment Organization (myoedlive). In addition, a new portal, the egov-KYC (Know-Your-

Customer) service was launched as a digital alternative to the submission of public documents for the certification of citizen data to private sector bodies.

The role of Citizens' Service Centres (KEP), which is the key administrative one-stop service, was also upgraded and strengthened with new digital applications. Routine administrative procedures, such as the ordering and issuing of certificates were made available upon telephone and the respective documents were sent by courier. The interaction and communication between KEP and citizens were made available via online applications, for instance myKEPlive, as noted above. Recent initiatives have upgraded the services provided by the Citizens' Service Centres, such as the KEP-plus programme, and strengthened the use of digital tools. In addition, a broader programme for KEP's reform has been initiated, namely the KEP Re-branding, which aimed at upgrading the digital, organizational and operational standards of KEP.

“...regular press conferences and other media briefings were held in order to distribute information.”

Along with the adjustments affecting service delivery, special provisions were set out for the obligations of the citizens during the pandemic. Several deadlines for citizens' obligations were extended or suspended, for instance regarding tax declarations / payments and social contributions and the expiry dates of documents and permits were extended. In addition, special applications were developed for the movement of citizens during the lockdown, such as the sms service (13033) and the platform forma.gov.gr.

Beyond (horizontal) administrative services, new applications were launched to support major policy sectors, for example the provision of health services, social security and education. New technological tools have been employed, such as the electronic medical appointment system (eRDV), the electronic prescription (citizens receive doctor's prescriptions by sms) (e-syntagografisi), the vaccination platform (emvolio.gov.gr) and the digital social security services (e-ΕΦΚΑ). The provision of online medical consultations via teleconference was also made available. In the education sector, the development and provision of digital resources has supported the distance learning at all levels of the educational system. In most cases, these changes have been accompanied by the development or upgrading of users' helpdesk services.

Public communication

“...the administrative apparatus provided detailed information on the course and the consequences of the pandemic.”

Shortly after the eruption of the health crisis, the government had to set out a communication strategy to deliver timely and reliable information to the citizens. To this end, regular press conferences and other media briefings were held in order to distribute information and respond to questions by journalists. The Greek government, as in other countries (OECD, 2020c: 15), actively involved members of the medical and scientific community in press conferences, who provided specialized scientific information on the medical aspects of the pandemic. In critical moments, the Prime Minister has addressed the nation, presenting the planned or initiated measures and explaining their rationale. Special press conferences were organized by line Ministers to present the details of the sectoral plans and measures for Covid-19, for instance by the Minister of Education and Religious Affairs.

The government has launched a broad information and raise awareness campaign for limiting the transmission of the Covid-19 disease and containing the pandemic. The narrative of the government's campaign against Covid-19 was based on the message “we stay safe”, while the vaccination programme was launched under the title “operation freedom”.

Along with the top-government level, the administrative apparatus provided detailed

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information on the course and the consequences of the pandemic. The Ministry of Interior issues (since October 2020) the Special Bulletins of Legislation on an annual and weekly basis, including all legislation and regulations for the prevention and control of the coronavirus. In addition, a Special Administrative Codification of the legislation-urgent measures to prevent and limit the spread of Covid-19 was prepared by the Department of Administrative Codifications in the Ministry of Digital Governance (October 2020) and is being updated on a regular basis.

Public communication and the promotion of open government data (OGD) were strengthened through the release of health communications, reports, data repositories, informative charts, dashboards, data analysis and visualisations depicting the course and the consequences of the pandemic. Websites providing information on the coronavirus were created,¹¹ also including a special section for government's response to disinformation and fake news.¹² In addition, a telephone line available on a 24-hour basis was set out to provide direct information and guidelines to the citizens (1135). With a view to alleviating the emotional and psychological implications of Covid-19 to the population, an information and emotional support line (10306) has been in operation since April 2020, while the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the University of Athens has issued psychological support guidelines for citizens.¹³

¹¹ <https://covid19.gov.gr/>.

¹² <https://covid19.gov.gr/mythoi-covid19/>.

¹³ <https://eody.gov.gr/koronoios-covid-19-odigies-psychologikis-ypostirixis-ton-politon/>.

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Table 1. Policy responses to Covid-19 and impact on Public Administration

	Reform areas	Policy responses	Policy tools and institutional adjustments
Internal	Policy-making	Decision-making	Centralization Fast-track procedures Top-down decision-making
		Policy formulation	Involvement of health experts Advisory / consultative bodies Scientific evidence
		Establishment of new Committees	Government Coordination Committee Committees of experts
	Government bodies and structures	Strengthening of sectoral ministries and executive agencies	Ministry of Health National Public Health Organization
		Upgrade of civil protection structures	Deputy Minister for Civil Protection and Crisis Management
		Compliance control mechanisms	Hellenic Police National Transparency Authority Labour Inspectorate
	Administrative procedures	Digitalization of procedures Strengthening of e-government systems New IT tools	Upgrade of di@vgeia Single Government Cloud (G-Cloud) Digital signatures Teleconference platforms
		Procedures' simplification	Digitalization of services Electronic publishing / handling of documents, e-mails
		Interoperability	Interoperability centres Interconnection of registries
	Human resources	Flexibility of working conditions	Distance working, teleworking Rotation, part-time working Staggered arrival times Special leave Online meetings
New IT tools and facilities		Public administration codes Digital signatures VPN/MFA connections Training programs	
External	Service delivery	Online / phone communication E-platforms and web services Digitalization of service provision Upgrade of Citizens' Service Centres	Distance services via video conferencing Digital certificates, e-forms Scanned and electronically sent documents
	Public communication	Government communication strategy	Press conferences Media briefings Official statements of the Prime minister
		Regulations and legislation on covid-19	Special Bulletins of Legislation on covid-19 Special Administrative Codification of the covid-19 related legislation
		Information platforms and websites	Health communications, reports, data repositories, charts, dashboards, data analysis, visualisations
	Information and emotional support telephone services	24-hour information line Emotional support line	

Public administration and covid-19: gains and losses

The dynamics of administrative reform

“...the pandemic created momentum for reforms and gave an opportunity to push forward pending or unfinished reforms as well as to introduce new agendas.”

The goals and process of administrative reform in Greece since 2010 appear largely dependent on requirements and obligations posed by external crises. The focus has recently shifted from the debt crisis and enhanced surveillance framework to the coronavirus crisis, which also placed tremendous pressure on the administrative apparatus. Notwithstanding the weaknesses and the limitations of the reform capacity of the domestic administrative system (Makrydimitris & Michalopoulos, 2000; Hlepas, 2003; OECD, 2011; Spanou & Sotiropoulos, 2011; Spanou, 2018, 2020b; Sotiropoulos, 2021), the pandemic created momentum for reforms and gave an opportunity to push forward pending or unfinished reforms as well as to introduce new agendas.

In the course of the health crisis, ongoing programmes for the modernization of the administrative system have been accelerated and new ones have been introduced. These programmes were largely a mix of (i) previous obligations imposed in the framework of the economic adjustment programmes, such as the Human resources management system¹⁴ (HRMS), (ii) directives and guidelines deriving from the EU, such as the Digital Transformation strategy and open government, and (iii) policies that have been initiated on domestic governments' own initiative, such as the 'Executive State' law (2019), the National Program of Procedures Simplification (2019), the reform of the recruitment system in the public sector (2021) and the internal audit system (2021). Recently, some efforts to link the covid-19 measures to more durable and organized changes in public administration have been observed, for instance the initiation of a legislative framework for teleworking in the public sector.¹⁵ However, the implementation of other major initiatives that have begun before the eruption of the crisis was delayed, postponed or abandoned, such as the creation of a special branch ('klados') of public officers provided by the 'Executive State' law¹⁶ and the revision of powers and competences of the central and local government.

“The response of the administrative system to the health crisis has been characterized by multi-speed adjustments across different parts of the state apparatus.”

A multi-speed modernization

The response of the administrative system to the health crisis has been characterized by multi-speed adjustments across different parts of the state apparatus. Within the rapidly changing context of the pandemic, initial policy responses have built on existing tools and platforms. But the necessary policy instruments for coping with covid-19 were only partially in place when the crisis erupted. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, the available resources and infrastructure were inadequate and largely incapable of addressing such a large-scale threat. Thus, new mechanisms needed to be developed in order to respond to the devastating effect of the evolving crisis.

The direct response of the state apparatus to the pandemic focused on measures aiming at the upgrading and strengthening of existing e-government tools and digital infrastructure. Accordingly, the creation of new e-platforms for supporting both internal administrative processes and service delivery became a priority. To this end, along with the strengthening of the single digital portal (gov.gr), other public entities developed similar tools in specific policy areas, such as in the social insurance and employment

¹⁴ Since the eruption of the health crisis, a significant number of digital organizational charts and job descriptions have been completed.

¹⁵ Law 4807/2021.

¹⁶ Law 4622/2019, art. 104.

“...the prioritization of measures that were directly linked to the pandemic policy agenda has caused delays in other priority areas and ongoing or scheduled reforms.”

sectors. However, the type, scope and outcomes of these changes as well as the particular functions and services covered by each entity / platform varies. Similarly, the pace and volume of the adjustments that took place within the state apparatus differ significantly, for instance between the central and local government level, and largely depend on existing capacities and resources.

As regards policy reform, the prioritization of measures that were directly linked to the pandemic policy agenda has caused delays in other priority areas and ongoing or scheduled reforms. For example, the completion of the digital organizational charts (‘organigrams’), the appointment of top and middle-level managers in several key posts, the performance assessment cycles, the reform of public financial management, public revenue administration, process simplification, the Hellenic Cadastre and the implementation of several provisions of the ‘Executive State’ law were stalled or slowed down, while certain disruptions were observed due to the pandemic (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

State-citizen relations

In the aftermath of the covid-19 crisis, the citizen-administration relations have experienced notable changes. Though under state of emergency, the health crisis pushed forward important reforms for the modernization and simplification of bureaucratic procedures and public service delivery. As already described, digital services of the public sector have been expanded and new technologies have been embraced that allow citizens to communicate and be served in a more direct and easy way.

“The digitalisation of government functions and services has not only simplified and speeded up service delivery but also facilitated access and interface.”

The digitalisation of government functions and services has not only simplified and speeded up service delivery but also facilitated access and interface. A growing number of public services, forms, certificates and information can be offered digitally and accessed via online portals by any device. The benefits of the digital delivery of public services were accompanied by the upgrade of one-stop-shops (KEP) that reduced red-tape and improved the quality of service delivery. However, beyond these positive changes, the fact that many citizens, especially older people, are not familiar with digital technology and cannot easily adapt to and take full advantage of these benefits should not be overlooked.

Democracy and transparency

Government’s responses to the health crisis faced increasing criticism as regards their adverse effect on civil rights and freedoms. Substantive concerns have been raised with reference to the restrictions imposed on citizens’ rights and their impact on civic freedoms, the limits of health surveillance technology and the protection of individual data and privacy as well as the latent threats that these measures pose for democratic principles and the rule of law (European Parliament, 2020). The risks emerging from the imposed social control measures and the biopolitics of government’s responses to the pandemic have been stressed as well (Contiades, 2020).

“Government’s responses to the health crisis faced increasing criticism as regards their adverse effect on civil rights and freedoms.”

Questions of transparency and control in government action have been raised with reference to fast-track procedures in decision-making, especially in public procurement where direct award procedures were often used instead of the normal formal procurement process. Additional challenges are posed by the risk of fraud or corruption as a result of the abuse of emergency measures (OECD, 2020b), for instance regarding the use and allocation of the emergency funds. The crisis management system also entails potential trade-offs between capacity and legitimacy (Christensen & Lægheid,

2020), which in the Greek case was linked to the critique on the intensity of the containment measures.

“Questions of transparency and control in government action have been raised with reference to fast-track procedures in decision-making.”

The missing link: a joined-up reform programme

The covid-19 crisis has been an extremely strong factor for activating pending reforms and for accelerating reform programmes that were already underway. However, the rapid escalation of the crisis and the lack of time for adequate preparation of effective policy responses has led to a range of changes which often took place in a disjointed way, without a clear linkage to an overall plan of administrative reform. The government’s response to the pandemic, especially in the early stages, seem to lack a coherent background that would interconnect and co-ordinate these elements to a broader strategic direction. Thus, while the volume of change is impressive, the integration of the emergency measures in a longer-term agenda of state reform is not (yet) as clear.

“...while the volume of change is impressive, the integration of the emergency measures in a longer-term agenda of state reform is not (yet) as clear.”

The pandemic has caused disruptions in the conclusion of previous programmes and stalled the implementation of ongoing reforms. At the same time, the priorities of the administrative reform agenda have been revised. Since the conclusion of the 2010-2018 economic adjustment programmes and the ‘shock therapy’ approach on public sector reform, an effort was made to detach the administrative reform process from the bail-out agreements and to shift its focus from fiscal to structural policy measures. However, the eruption and rapid spread of the covid-19 crisis left little room for strategic planning and urged for targeted and immediate action to address its escalating effect. Thus, the joining up of the measures that were adopted during the debt crisis (fiscal oriented reforms), in the aftermath of the crisis (structural reforms) and in response to the health crisis (technical adjustments and targeted measures) remains to be seen.

Another critical missing element of the reform agenda has been the integration of crisis management as a horizontal capacity of the state apparatus for addressing present and future crises. The adopted crisis management plan has been characterized by targeted interventions and has not (yet) been clearly linked to broader institutional standards that would strengthen the resilience of the domestic administrative system towards external shocks. Thus, a critical question is whether a general plan and effective pro-active mechanisms will be developed to ensure that public administration will be prepared for future global crises, such as migration or IT systems security threats.

“A key challenge remains the resilience of the administrative system to external shocks and its capacity to effectively respond to situations of increased complexity.”

Current prospects and challenges ahead

The outbreak of the pandemic has brought to the forefront of policy responses the question of the capacity of the domestic administrative system to rapidly adjust to uncertain and changing environments and cope with large-scale shocks in a timely and effective way. A key challenge remains the resilience of the administrative system to external shocks and its capacity to effectively respond to situations of increased complexity. The Greek administration largely lacked an emergency plan as well as the necessary resources to manage the complex social and economic implications of the crisis, especially in its early phase. Hence, policy and institutional responses were mostly of a re-active nature. However, within a relatively short period of time, the domestic administrative system has managed to adjust to this new environment and to support the fight against the pandemic and the implementation of the measures for addressing its effect. In this respect, the pandemic pointed out the need to develop stronger pro-active mechanisms for crisis management.

“...the pandemic pointed out the need to develop stronger pro-active mechanisms for crisis management.”

The priority and emergency of the Covid-19 measures entail the risk for the policy agenda to (over-) emphasize the direct responses to the crisis at the expense of other structural reforms currently underway. However, the consistent implementation of broader structural and institutional adjustments is a critical prerequisite to support public policies and strengthen public administration during the next waves of covid-19 and when the pandemic will end. Thus, the measures and policies of the health crisis agenda should be joined up with other structural reform programmes in a coherent and holistic plan. This condition is critical also with reference to the often conflicting effects of the administrative reform process, for instance the benefits of digital technologies and the protection of citizens' rights.

“...the measures and policies of the health crisis agenda should be joined up with other structural reform programmes in a coherent and holistic plan.”

Along with the policies and programmes that have been directly linked to the pandemic and the recovery effort, other major reforms have recently been introduced and / or are underway, for instance the new legislative framework for the recruitment procedures in the public sector (2021) and internal audit (2021). However, in Greece important 'implementation gaps' are often observed between the goals and outcomes of the reform programmes, as well as between formal (legal) provisions and actual implementation. In addition, the administrative apparatus has to be reformed 'on the move', amidst the health crisis, while its resources remain limited. Therefore, an overload of the reform agenda should be avoided before ensuring a certain degree of system stabilization and change management capacity.

The health crisis has not only brought to surface weaknesses and limitations of public administration but also unveiled hidden reform capacities. The pace, volume and nature of the adjustments that were set in place to mitigate the effect of covid-19 has been unprecedented. In this respect, the pandemic has created strong momentum for reform that goes beyond the management of its direct implications for the state machinery. Public sector entities have experienced major transformations and beneficial changes have taken place across all levels of government that could lead to broader, systemic improvements. To this end, the administrative system may seize upon this window of opportunity and take advantage of the positive prospects for longer-term and deeper reforms.

“The pandemic has provided an opportunity to launch important modernization, simplification and digitalization reforms that could have a lasting positive impact on deep-rooted problems of the Greek administration.”

In view of the next waves of the pandemic, certain adjustments and revisions in the emergency measures that were adapted in the initial phases will be needed. In most cases, policy responses have been the result of fast-track procedures and decisions that lacked adequate preparation. Thus, early choices may be required to be revised and redesigned considering the evolution of the pandemic. A key challenge will be particularly the detachment of the structural measures from the targeted (technical) responses to the pandemic and their embedment in a longer-term plan of administrative reform in the post crisis era.

Further structural and institutional adjustments will be needed in order to capitalize the gains and the lessons that have been learned during the first three waves of the ongoing pandemic. The viability of policy responses to the coronavirus emergency and the following recovery effort will depend on whether the positive changes will be maintained when the Covid-19 crisis is over. The pandemic has provided an opportunity to launch important modernization, simplification and digitalization reforms that could have a lasting positive impact on deep-rooted problems of the Greek administration. A critical question is whether and to what extent these new tools and opportunities will be normalised via 'reflective learning' (Dunlop et al., 2020: 370) or the domestic administrative system, in a 'path dependence' reaction, will return to its traditional, bureaucratic style when the external threat will be gone. The recently presented

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National Recovery and Resilience Plan (“Greece 2.0”) has set out some directions for the modernization of public administration in the post-covid era, including reforms that have been interrupted by the outbreak of the pandemic (such as the allocation of responsibilities between administrative levels, the improvement of public procurement system and the modernisation of the hiring procedures), measures that have been adopted in response to the pandemic, especially regarding the digital transformation of the public sector, and new initiatives, for instance the creation of an AI-based strategic workforce planning tool.¹⁷

¹⁷ See Hellenic Republic, “Next Generation EU”, *Greece 2.0 - National Recovery and Resilience Plan*, May 2021 (https://primeminister.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Greece-2_0-April-2021.pdf).