

The Principle of E-Government Adapted to Romania's Municipalities

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Abstract

This study examines the development of e-government in Romanian municipalities, focusing on the extent to which local public administrations have adapted digital governance principles to improve access to information, administrative efficiency and online public service delivery. The research addresses the uneven development of municipal digitalization and the need for a clearer empirical assessment of local e-government maturity.

The study uses a quantitative research design based on the evaluation of 102 Romanian municipal websites, including Bucharest, through an indicator-based scoring grid derived from the United Nations e-government maturity model and correlated with the European Commission maturity model. Each maturity stage was operationalized through specific indicators, scored and aggregated by arithmetic means. In addition, two linear regression models were used to test the relationship between e-government development and the number of inhabitants, respectively between website usage and the level of e-government development.

The results show that 89.22% of municipal websites meet the minimum criteria for the emerging stage, 59.80% reach the improved stage, 47.06% reach the interactive stage, while only 46.07% partially reach the transactional stage. No municipality obtained the maximum overall score, although Alba Iulia ranked highest with a development level of 0.83. The regression analysis indicates a positive and statistically significant relationship between the number of inhabitants and e-government development, with $R^2 = 0.276$ and $Beta = 0.526$. A second regression also shows a positive relationship between website usage and e-government development, with $R^2 = 0.264$ and $Beta = 0.514$.

The originality of the study lies in its municipality-level assessment of e-government in Romania, combining maturity-model scoring with regression-based empirical testing. The findings provide practical guidance for local authorities by highlighting the need for standardized digital platforms, improved transactional services, better institutional coordination and stronger digital capacity-building within municipal administrations

Keywords

E-government; digital governance; municipal administration; digital transformation; transparency; Romania

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Introduction

E-government has its origins in the early 1990s, its emergence being closely linked to both the genesis of the Internet (Fountain, 2001) and the development of e-commerce (Bannister & Connolly, 2012). In practical terms, this phenomenon can be defined as the electronic representation of public sector functions, constituting a new way of providing services to citizens and organizations with which public institutions interact. For public administration, e-government, an evolutionary step, has the potential to fundamentally

transform the way services are provided, as well as ways of communicating and interacting with citizens. At the level of the 27 Member States of the European Union, public services intended for citizens were available online in a proportion of 51% (Sabău, 2009) a fact that highlights the importance of this new form of service provision, but also the challenges associated with its implementation. By comparison, in Romania the online availability of public services was, in 2007, only 8% (Urs, 2018) placing the country in last place in the ranking made by the European Commission.

The study focuses on assessing the degree of development of e-government at the level of the city halls of the municipalities in Romania and on its placement in the European context, by reporting the results obtained to the maturity model developed by the European Commission. A secondary objective of the work is to test the relationship between the level of development of e-government and the number of inhabitants of the municipalities, the parties at the local government level and the level of use of the city hall websites (Mureșan, 2025). Therefore, the main purpose of this article is to assess the level of e-government development in Romanian municipalities and to examine the extent to which municipal websites reflect the principles of digital governance, administrative transparency and online public service delivery. The study has three main objectives: first, to evaluate municipal websites using indicators derived from the United Nations e-government maturity model and correlated with the European Commission maturity model; second, to classify Romanian municipalities according to their level of e-government development; and third, to test, through linear regression models, whether the level of e-government development is influenced by the number of inhabitants and by the level of website usage.

The article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the relevant scientific literature on e-government, digital governance and municipal digital transformation. The second section presents the research methodology, including the maturity models used, the scoring grid, the variables and the regression models. The third section discusses the empirical results regarding the level of e-government development in Romanian municipalities and the relationships tested through regression analysis. The final section summarizes the main findings, theoretical and practical implications, research limitations and future research directions.

1. Review of the scientific literature

The concept of e-government has evolved significantly in recent decades, being associated with the broader process of digital transformation of public administration and with the redefinition of the relationship between state institutions and citizens. The specialized literature emphasizes that e-government does not only represent the use of information technologies for the provision of public services, but a structural change in the way in which the administration operates, communicates and makes decisions. In this perspective, technology becomes a tool of modern governance, oriented towards administrative efficiency (Burlacu et al., 2025), transparency and democratic participation, an aspect highlighted in the fundamental works dedicated to digital governance (Bannister & Connolly, 2012; Heeks, 2006; Profiroiu et al., 2020).

The first theoretical approaches to e-government were focused on the digitalization of administrative information and the creation of institutional portals, but subsequent research has demonstrated that simple computerization does not automatically lead to the modernization of the administration. Fountain (2001) argues that the impact of technology is mediated by organizational structures and institutional culture, which explains the major differences between states or between administrative levels in the implementation of digital solutions. Similarly, Layne and Lee (2001) propose an evolutionary model of e-government that highlights the gradual transition from online presence to full integration of public services and institutional interoperability (Ionita et al., 2009; Stoica, 2009).

In the European context, e-government has been conceptualized as a pillar of public sector modernization, being closely linked to the principles of good governance and citizen-oriented administration. Studies conducted show that the digitalization of administration contributes to reducing operational costs and increasing the accessibility of public services, but the success of implementation depends on the coordination of public policies and the level of digital skills of officials and users. Many researchers highlights that the interoperability of information systems is one of the essential conditions for the development of e-government, as it allows for the automatic exchange of data between institutions and the elimination of bureaucratic redundancies.

The application of e-government principles at the local level has attracted increasing attention in recent literature, with municipalities being considered the administrative space where the impact of digitalization becomes most visible to citizens. According to Meijer and Bolívar (2016), local governments have a central role in the digital transformation because they manage direct public services, such as local taxes, urban planning or urban infrastructure management. In this context, local e-government is frequently associated

with the development of the “smart city” concept, where digital technology facilitates integrated urban management and community participation (Rădulescu et al., 2025).

Analyses dedicated to Central and Eastern Europe indicate that the implementation of e-government is strongly influenced by administrative heritage and institutional capacity (Gâf-Deac et al., 2023). Margetts and Dunleavy (2013) argue that the digital transformation of government involves moving from the traditional bureaucratic model to flexible, service- and data-oriented administrative structures. In the case of post-transition states, including Romania, the process is often characterized by rapid technological developments but slower organizational changes (Vrabie & Țiclău, 2017).

The literature on Romania highlights an uneven evolution of e-government, marked by the existence of ambitious national strategies and access to European funding, but also by difficulties regarding coherent implementation at the local level.

A frequently discussed element in recent literature is the relationship between e-government and citizen participation. Research by Nam (2012) shows that digital technologies can facilitate the involvement of local communities in the decision-making process through online public consultations and digital participatory mechanisms, but the impact depends on the level of trust of citizens in public institutions. In Romania, the relatively low level of use of digital services is explained both by uneven digital skills and by the persistence of the preference for traditional administrative interaction (Stoica & Ghilic-Micu, 2020).

Recent developments in the international literature introduce the concept of data-driven digital governance, in which administrations use data analysis and artificial intelligence to anticipate citizens’ needs and optimize public services.

The literature synthesis highlights that adapting e-government principles to Romanian municipalities involves more than adopting technological infrastructure, involving institutional transformations, developing administrative skills and strengthening the organizational culture oriented towards innovation. In the absence of these elements, digitalization risks remaining limited at the procedural level, without producing significant changes in the quality of local governance (Burlacu, Popescu et al., 2022). Thus, the literature converges on the idea that the success of municipal e-government depends on the integration of technology with administrative reforms and the active participation of the local community, which transforms local administration into a central actor in the transition to digital governance.

2. Research methodology

This study uses a predominantly quantitative research design, based on the systematic evaluation and scoring of municipal websites in Romania. The empirical analysis focuses on the websites of 102 municipalities, including Bucharest. Data were collected between March 30 and April 20, 2025, using the official websites of municipalities, county councils and the Association of Municipalities in Romania. At the time of data collection, three municipal websites were inoperable, either suspended or inaccessible.

The assessment of e-government development was based on two maturity models: the United Nations e-government maturity model and the European Commission maturity model. The United Nations model was used as the main operational framework because it provides a more detailed sequence of stages: emergent, improved, interactive, transactional and connected. The European Commission model was used as a complementary framework for interpreting the results in the European context. The first two stages of the United Nations model correspond to the first level of the European Commission model, the interactive stage corresponds to the second level, the transactional stage corresponds to the third level, while the connected stage is associated with the fourth level of advanced e-government.

The empirical analysis was limited to the first four stages of the United Nations model, namely emergent, improved, interactive and transactional. The connected stage was excluded because it requires the assessment of interoperability, institutional data exchange and infrastructure compatibility between public authorities, elements that cannot be reliably measured only through website observation. Therefore, the study evaluates the visible and functional components of municipal e-government that can be identified through public online sources.

The improved stage captures the availability of more developed information, such as local council decisions, reports, public announcements and institutional documents. The interactive stage assesses whether the website allows citizens to access downloadable forms, procedural information and online guidance for public services. The transactional stage evaluates the existence of more advanced online services, such as online tax payment facilities and information related to permits or administrative requests.

Each indicator was coded numerically. A value of 1 was assigned when the criterion was present and functional, while a value of 0 was assigned when the criterion was absent, inaccessible or non-functional. For each maturity stage, the score was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the indicators assigned to that stage. Therefore, each stage score ranges between 0 and 1, where 0 indicates the absence of the relevant characteristics and 1 indicates full compliance with the indicators included in that stage. All indicators were given equal weight, because the maturity models do not establish a formal hierarchy between criteria within the same stage, and because the purpose of the study was to provide a comparable and transparent assessment across municipalities. The classification threshold was set at 0.5 points for each maturity stage. This threshold was used because it indicates that a municipality fulfils at least half of the observable criteria associated with a given stage. Since both the United Nations and European Commission maturity models describe stages through indicative characteristics rather than mandatory cumulative conditions, the 0.5 threshold is considered appropriate for distinguishing between municipalities that only have a minimal online presence and those that display a sufficient level of development for a specific stage. Scores below 0.5 indicate insufficient fulfilment of the stage requirements, while scores equal to or above 0.5 indicate that the municipality can be classified within that maturity stage.

The main dependent variable used in the empirical analysis is the level of e-government development. This variable was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the scores obtained by each municipality across the four evaluated maturity stages. Although the more advanced stages may reflect a higher degree of digital transformation, the stages were treated equally in the aggregate score in order to preserve comparability and to reflect the idea that mature e-government requires balanced development across all stages. Two independent variables were used in the regression analysis. The first is the number of inhabitants of each municipality, used to test whether larger municipalities tend to have a higher level of e-government development. Bucharest was excluded from this regression because its population size represents an extreme outlier compared with the other municipalities and could distort the estimated relationship. The second independent variable is the level of website usage, used to examine whether more frequently used municipal websites are associated with a higher level of e-government development. The study tests two research hypotheses. The first hypothesis states that the level of e-government development is positively influenced by the number of inhabitants of the municipality. This assumption is based on the idea that larger municipalities generally have greater administrative capacity, higher demand for digital public services and more financial resources for digitalization. The second hypothesis states that the level of website usage is positively associated with the level of e-government development. This reformulation is necessary because the empirical regression results indicate a positive and statistically significant relationship, not an inverse relationship.

3. Results and discussion

The development of e-government at each stage was established by ranking the average points obtained by each site. It was considered that a minimum average of half a point out of a maximum of one point, for each stage, is sufficient to qualify a site at that stage, since both the European Commission model and the United Nations model do not establish a fixed number of criteria without which e-government cannot exist, but rather offer a series of characteristics for each stage or level, reflecting the evolution of this phenomenon. Thus, the set of criteria of the two models is not exhaustive, but indicative, having the role, in the worst case, of signaling the online presence of the institution or of establishing the level of development of the services provided online. In this context, the minimum fulfilment of the criteria is considered appropriate, and compliance with as many of them as possible is favorable.

The following paragraphs summarize the data collected: for each stage of the United Nations maturity model, the number of municipalities that reached that stage was counted, obtaining both absolute and relative frequencies. Within each stage, the points obtained were broken down into subcategories to determine how many municipalities barely qualified for that stage, how many are in the upper half, and how many have reached the maximum level of the stage. This breakdown is useful because it provides precision and avoids overestimations.

Table 1. Emerging stage

Score	Number of municipalities
1	16
0.75-1	49
0.5-0.75	26
Under 0.5	11

In the emerging stage, it is notable that only 16 municipalities achieved maximum scores on the simplest e-government requirements; however, most sites were very close to this score but did not reach it because one of the five basic features was missing. A relevant example is the 49 municipalities that do not have a valid e-mail address.

Table 2. Improved stage

Score	Number of municipalities
1	11
0.75-1	19
0.5-0.75	31
Under 0.5	41

In the second – improved – stage, compared to the previous stage, only 50 municipalities reached the threshold required to qualify for this stage, of which 11 obtained the maximum score. It is noteworthy that, of the eleven municipalities with the maximum score, five obtained the same score in the previous stage, and another five had a score very close to the maximum. Also, a significant number of municipalities that were in the upper half of the previous stage migrate to the lower half of the improved stage, and those in the lower half fall outside the stage. Thus, out of 102 municipalities, only 10.78% obtained the maximum score, and 59.80% of them can be classified in this stage, which represents a decrease of approximately 30% in the number of sites compared to the previous stage. Municipalities that achieved high scores in this stage publish online, with greater or lesser regularity, activity reports, decisions adopted by the local council and ensure electronic information for citizens regarding the institution's current activities.

Table 3. Interactive stage

Score	Number of municipalities
1	14
0,75-1	8
0,5-0,75	26
Under 0,5	54

The interactive stage is reached by 48 municipalities, and the number of those that obtained the maximum score does not vary significantly within the three stages analyzed so far. At the same time, the fact that 54 institutions did not accumulate enough points to reach the minimum threshold is worrying, as this reflects the non-publication online of forms or information on administrative processes necessary to access public services. This situation is important, since within this stage the websites should provide useful information for accessing public services, thus marking the evolution of e-government towards the provision of fully online services.

Table 4. Transactional stage

Score	Number of municipalities
1	0
0.75-1	0
0,5-0.75	47
Under 0.5	55

From the perspective of the overall ranking, it is remarkable that only Alba Iulia municipality obtained maximum points in the first three stages and thirty-three hundredths in the last stage, placing it self in first place and demonstrating consistency in implementing e-government features. The response to the requests sent by e-mail came from only 43 of the 102 municipalities, which does not necessarily imply that the e-mail address is not valid, but does not confirm the existence of a minimum level of e-government development. However, the majority of those who responded did so in less than ten days, and 25.58% of the responses came on the same day. There is also evidence that some requests received by e-mail follow the same route as a classic request, that is, they are transposed into printed form and sent for resolution; an example in this regard is the Buzău City Hall, which attached a scanned copy of the response provided by the specialized department to the e-mail.

Comparatively, the municipalities that fell into the third stage of the United Nations maturity model correspond to level two – online government – of the European Commission model, and those that obtained thirty-three hundredths in the fourth stage represent the first steps towards level three – integrated government of the EC. The European Commission website is assessed at level two – online government, although

some sections reach level four. Although comparing the website of the European Union executive with that of local administrations in Romania is forced, accessing the local websites and then the EC website allows users to observe significant differences in terms of the richness of content, classifications, information methods and information on administrative procedures.

Independently of the intermediate rankings necessary to classify municipal websites in the two models, a general ranking was made, using the arithmetic averages of the scores obtained by each municipality in the four stages. The construction of this ranking will be detailed in the next section, and the graphic representation is presented in Figure no. 1. For reasons of space, only 26 municipalities are listed in the graph, extracted automatically at a statistical step of four.

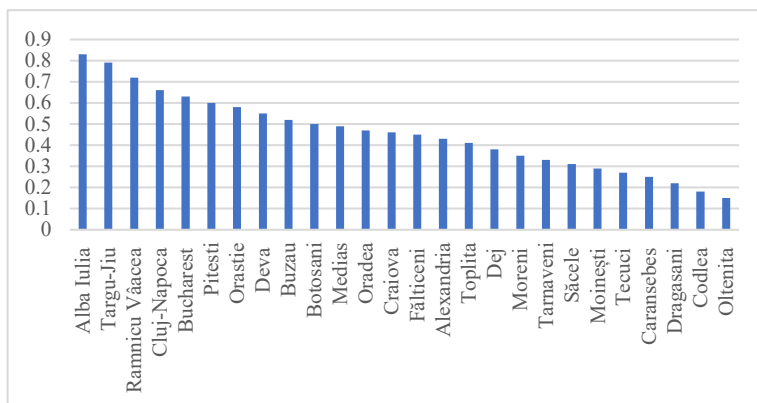


Figure 1. General ranking of municipalities by level of e-government development

The general ranking of municipalities confirms that e-government development in Romania is highly uneven. The highest score was obtained by Alba Iulia, with an overall e-government development level of 0.83, followed by Târgu-Jiu with 0.79 and Râmnicu Vâlcea with 0.72. At the opposite end of the ranking, several municipalities recorded substantially lower levels of digital development, which indicates that the existence of a municipal website does not automatically imply the existence of advanced e-government services. This finding is consistent with the literature, which argues that digital transformation in public administration depends not only on technological adoption, but also on institutional capacity, administrative culture and the ability to integrate digital services into public service delivery.

The first regression model tested the relationship between the number of inhabitants and the level of e-government development. The results indicate a positive and statistically significant relationship between the two variables. The value of $R^2 = 0.276$ shows that approximately 27.6% of the variation in e-government development can be explained by the number of inhabitants. This indicates a moderate explanatory power..

This result supports the first hypothesis and can be explained by the fact that larger municipalities generally have greater administrative capacity, higher public demand for digital services, more complex administrative needs and better access to financial, human and technological resources. However, the moderate value of R^2 also shows that e-government development is influenced by additional factors not included in the model, such as local budgetary resources, political priorities, access to European funds, IT staffing capacity, managerial commitment and the level of digital skills among citizens and public servants. Consequently, the regression result should not be interpreted as evidence that population size alone determines digital development, but rather as an indication that demographic size is one relevant factor within a broader institutional and administrative context.

The second regression model examined the relationship between website usage and the level of e-government development. The initial assumption of an inversely proportional relationship is not supported by the empirical results. On the contrary, the regression indicates a positive and statistically significant relationship between the two variables. The value of $R^2 = 0.264$ shows that approximately 26.4% of the variation in website usage can be explained by the level of e-government development. The standardized Beta coefficient of 0.514 indicates a moderate positive association. Thus, municipalities with more developed e-government services tend to record higher levels of website usage.

This result requires a revision of the theoretical interpretation of the second hypothesis. Instead of assuming an inverse relationship, the empirical findings suggest a mutually reinforcing relationship between digital service development and website usage. More developed municipal websites may attract more users because they provide more relevant information, downloadable forms, online payments and clearer procedural guidance. At the same time, higher levels of website usage may encourage municipalities to further improve

their digital services. Therefore, the second hypothesis should be reformulated as follows: the level of website usage is positively associated with the level of e-government development.

The moderate explanatory power of the second model also requires caution. Although the positive relationship is statistically significant, website usage is not determined exclusively by the maturity of e-government services. It may also depend on the digital skills of citizens, Internet access, the visibility of the municipal website, the availability of alternative communication channels, the trust of citizens in online public services and the extent to which local authorities promote digital interaction.

This limitation confirms the need to interpret the regression results as exploratory evidence rather than as a complete explanation of municipal digital behavior.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that local authorities should prioritize the transition from basic online presence to functional and citizen-oriented digital services. Municipalities should improve the availability of online forms, online tax payment systems, procedural information, electronic communication channels and integrated service platforms. The findings also indicate that smaller municipalities may require additional institutional and financial support in order to reduce the digital gap between local administrations. Standardized platforms shared digital infrastructure and targeted training programs for municipal staff could reduce disparities and increase the capacity of local administrations to provide efficient online public services.

Overall, the regression models confirm that both population size and website usage are positively associated with e-government development, but their explanatory power remains moderate. This means that digital transformation at the municipal level cannot be explained by a single determinant. It depends on a broader combination of demographic, institutional, financial, technological and cultural factors. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as evidence of relevant associations, while future research should include additional explanatory variables in order to provide a more complete understanding of the determinants of e-government development in Romanian municipalities.

Conclusions

The findings of this study show that e-government development in Romanian municipalities remains uneven and incomplete, despite the existence of a basic digital presence across most local administrations. The analysis indicates that municipal websites are generally more developed in terms of information provision than in terms of interactive and transactional public services. This suggests that Romanian municipal e-government is still mainly oriented toward institutional visibility and administrative communication, while the transition toward integrated digital service delivery remains limited.

The main theoretical contribution of the article consists in applying and correlating the United Nations and European Commission maturity models at the level of Romanian municipalities. By operationalizing e-government development through a structured scoring grid, the study provides a clearer empirical framework for assessing local digital governance.

From an empirical perspective, the study confirms that larger municipalities tend to display a higher level of e-government development, which can be explained by stronger administrative capacity, higher demand for online services and better access to financial and technological resources. At the same time, the positive relationship identified between website usage and e-government development suggests that digital maturity and citizen engagement may reinforce each other. However, the moderate explanatory power of regression models shows that e-government development cannot be explained only by population size or website usage. Other factors, such as local budgetary capacity, political priorities, digital skills, administrative culture, access to European funding and availability of IT expertise, should also be considered.

The practical implications of the study are relevant for both policymakers and local authorities. Municipal administrations should move beyond basic online presence and prioritize the development of interactive and transactional services, especially online payments, digital forms, integrated service portals and clearer procedural guidance for citizens. At the institutional level, the results highlight the need for standardized digital platforms, stronger inter-institutional coordination and continuous training programs for municipal staff. Without these measures, digitalization risks remain fragmented and limited to formal website modernization rather than producing real improvements in public service delivery.

The study also has several limitations. First, the analysis is based on publicly available information from municipal websites, which means that internal administrative processes, back-office digitalization and interoperability between institutions could not be fully assessed. Second, the scoring system uses equal

weights for all indicators, although some dimensions of e-government may have greater practical importance than others. Third, the regression models are exploratory and include a limited number of explanatory variables, which restricts the extent to which broader causal conclusions can be drawn.

Future research should expand the analysis by including additional variables such as municipal budgets, EU-funded digitalization projects, political continuity, IT staffing capacity and citizens' digital skills. A longitudinal approach would also be useful in order to evaluate how municipal e-government evolves over time and whether digitalization strategies generate measurable improvements in administrative efficiency and citizen satisfaction. Further studies could also combine quantitative website assessment with qualitative methods, such as interviews with public servants and citizens, in order to better understand the institutional barriers and user-side challenges that influence the real effectiveness of e-government at the local level.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) usage statement:

ChatGPT (version 5.0) was responsibly used for language improvement. After this process, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the present article.

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