EVALUATION OF THE POLICIES AIMED AT IMPROVEMENT OF THE PUBLIC SERVICES

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Content:

1. Introduction

The public services are in the center of interest of the modern society because their availability and good functioning impacts the quality of life of the citizens and contribute the citizens to be satisfied with the institutions and to trust them.

Provision of quality public service is part of the good governance and is one of the key incentives for economic growth. Paying taxes, replacing your expired ID and other documents, applying for social protection – are some of the most common interactions the citizens have with the government. The improvement of quality and accessibility of the public services for all groups of citizens, including vulnerable groups, is of key importance for building trust among the citizens in the institutions.

The recommendations of international institutions are continuously aimed at greater digitalization of administrative services in all areas, but also "agile, simple, mutually harmonized and technology-based" practices for public service delivery (World Economic Forum 2012). Positioning the citizen at the center of the work of the institutions has a double benefit – it forces the institutions to be more efficient and increases the satisfaction and trust of the citizens. The basic principle for quality delivery of public services is, and must be, a response to the demands and needs of the users. This principle is also reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically in Goal 16.6, which seeks to "develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels", as well as indicator 16.6.2 which proposes to measure "the percentage of the population that is satisfied from their recent experience with public services."

The European Union, most relevant due to the strategic commitment of RN Macedonia to achieve full membership, is constantly improving the rules for digital services. In the last months of 2020, the European Commission introduced new, stricter rules for digital service providers that act as intermediaries, both in public and private sectors[1]. Such higher standards for public services are modeled on the basis of the more developed European countries, while for countries with lower GDP and a weaker digital society, achieving high standards is complex and expensive.

1.1. Purpose of the research

North Macedonia also aims to achieve a higher level of quality of services for citizens and businesses, in parallel with a greater digitalization of the processes. For several

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[1] The acts are explained further in the document, in the context of EU.

years now, the Macedonian Government has been putting the public services high on the political and administrative agenda with the measures envisaged in the Strategy for Public Administration Reform and the relatively large investments in that area. Hence, this research aims to assess the expediency of the measures implemented in this area in terms of opinions and demands of the citizens from public services and institutions.

This research also tries to assess the openness of the institutions to the voice of citizens, their feedback on the services and the satisfaction surveying. The assessment implemented by the Center for Change Management so far showed that those are not at a satisfactory level[2].

1.2. Methodology

The citizens are the only ones that can say how much our institutions respond to their needs. For the purpose of this research (and for continuous monitoring of the public service delivery), the citizens were asked to raise the issues they commonly face in obtaining services, how much and whether they are satisfied from the time required for delivery, collection, quality of services, the attitude of the officers, equal treatment, availability, the information provided by the institutions regarding the available services as well as the accessibility and use of electronic services.

The following methods were used to collect the citizen opinions and the data:

1. Citizen satisfaction survey from the public services using representative sample from all over the country that included 700 respondents – users of various public services. The survey was carried out via telephone.

2. Ten individual in-depth researches of various services/ service areas implemented by ten civil society organizations[3] (hereinafter: in-depth research) that included the following:

·   Analysis of the current situation – available rights and services, most problematic services, are there services that are especially needed during this Covid-19 crisis or they create even bigger problems compared to the normal situation. Interviews and questionnaires were used for the analysis that included service beneficiaries and officers providing those services.

·   Analysis of the services available at the www.uslugi.gov.mk portal and analysis of the websites of the institutions/ municipalities/ Ministries/ enterprises providing

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[2] The satisfaction survey implemented among the citizens in 2018 showed that barely 4,8% of the respondents praised some public service and 4,6% complained about public service. The survey is available at: https://cup.org.mk/publication/research-on-the-citizens-satisfaction-in-public-service-delivery.

[3] Collection of researches on public service delivery on both central and local level, available at: https://cup.org.mk/publication/compendium-of-research-of-public-services-delivery-on-central-and-local-level

the services, including comparison with the procedures for obtaining the services in person in the respective institutions.

- Experiment – checking the availability of the services, the possibility and the manner of implementation of the service via the Internet, including communication with the staff.

1.3 Previous research

The work of the Center for Change Management is always on the impact the public policies have on the daily lives of the citizens, all research activities on how the public sector works and what is the service quality always include opinion polls among the citizens from their real experiences. Satisfaction survey was implemented during 2018[4] measuring the satisfaction level among the citizens from the public services using a representative sample and some of the survey questions were repeated in 2020. A number of changes were identified judging by the experience of the citizens so some of this data was also used for this particular analysis in order to compare.

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[4] The 2018 survey results are available at: https://cup.org.mk/publication/research-on-the-citizens-satisfaction-in-public-service-delivery.

2. The European Union context

2.1. Action Plan for e-Government

The European Union Action Plan for e-Government 2016-2020[5] aims to accelerate the digital transformation of the institution and is guided by the following vision: "By 2020, public administrations and public institutions in the European Union should be open, efficient and inclusive, providing borderless, personalized, user-friendly, end-to-end digital public services to all citizens and businesses in the EU. Innovative approaches are used to design and deliver better services in line with the needs and demands of citizens and businesses. Public administrations use the opportunities offered by the new digital environment to facilitate their interactions with stakeholders and with each other".

According to the Plan, the member states are evaluated once a year in terms of their achievements using specific e-Government benchmarks. The Republic of North Macedonia is also part of the annual evaluation carried out in accordance with four main benchmarks:

1. User focus, which includes the level up to which Internet services are provided, how many of them available via mobile phone but also which user feedback and support mechanisms are available to the users.

2. Transparency, which is about whether the administration provides clear, open information about the availability of the services, is it transparent in terms of responsibilities of the institutions and keeping personal data.

3. Key enabling factors or which technological options are put into use to deliver the e-services.

4. Cross-border mobility, which is about easy access and use of services via Internet for citizens from other countries.

In 2020, the total assessment for EU27 (excluding UK) was 68% according to the benchmark based assessment methodology, which is increase of 6% compared to two years ago[6].

The more detailed examination of the first benchmark shows that, in average, more than three (out of four) public services in the EU can be completely carried out via the Internet

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[5] The Plan is prepared by the European Commission, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/european-egovernment-action-plan-2016-2020

[6] e-Government Report 2020, EC, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/egovernment-benchmark-2020-egovernment-works-people.

(78%), the users can find the services they are looking for on the Internet in 95% of the cases and the information on these services in 98% of the cases. 62% of the e-services were available via the mobile phones two years ago and today that percentage is 76%. Transparency had the biggest improvement in the last two years because now the users receive service delivery notification in 64% of the cases, and a high 98% of the websites are transparent in terms of the organizational structure, mission and responsibilities of the institutions and access to information. However, the time it takes for filling in the forms and receiving a service online is deemed satisfactory by barely 46% of the respondents. In 64% of the countries it is possible for the citizen to see how his/ her data was used, in 42% of the countries it is possible to see when your data was used and in only 17% of the countries by whom.

The European countries need to improve the implementation of the digital enabling factors for e-service delivery for e-Government, although the sending and receiving of official documentation via digital channels is possible for 68% of the services and the services can use their national electronic identification (eID) only for 57% of the service that require identification via Internet. Furthermore, only half (54%) of the Internet forms include prepopulated data that make the filling out of these forms easier. The cross-border mobility also needs to be improved. The EU citizens that want to obtain some service in another European country can do that for 62% of the services for citizens and for 76% of the services for businesses. The cross-border acceptance of the eID still requires much more investment by the EU 27.

The table below shows the assessment for RN Macedonia vs. the average assessment for the EU for each benchmark.

Table 1
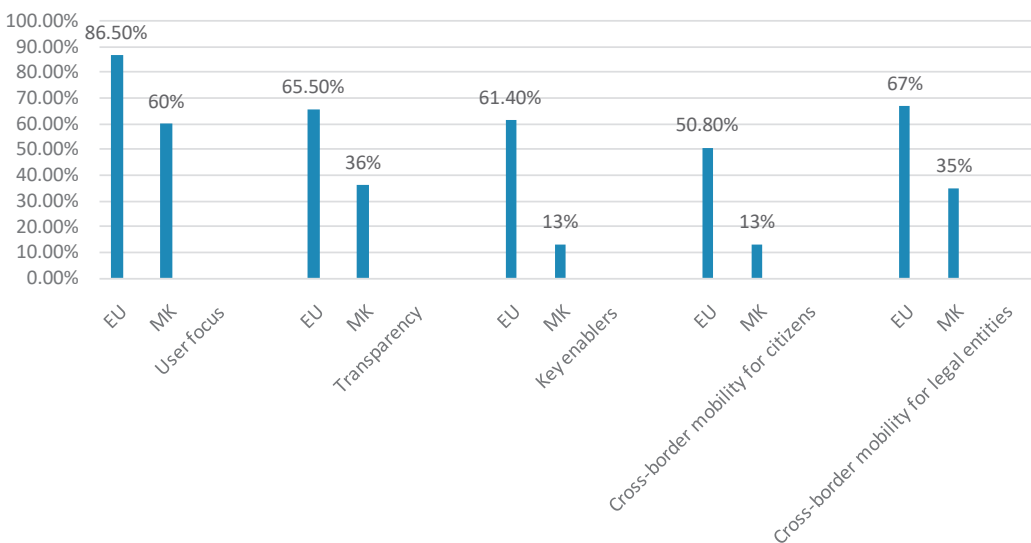
RN Macedonia is ranked best in terms of user focus and this is a welcoming fact, especially since the National e-service Portal was opened just one year ago. However, what is discouraging is that in this category Macedonia is last compared to all member states and countries in the region. In terms of transparency, our country is under the European average, especially in terms of the service delivery transparency but also accountability on the use and keeping of personal data. Any citizen can obtain "an overview of logs of all access to personal data by the users of data included in the Central Population Registry" on the uslugi.gov.mk portal, which is a welcoming fact. However, this overview includes only the access to personal data but it does not say which institution and for what purpose. Even if this data was there, the overview of cases when the data was accessed is not sufficient measure because it does not pertain to the many locations where the personal data of the citizens is stored. The country is assessed lowest of all in terms of key enabling factors, that is, use of technology for all transactions with the institutions. Only the citizens that created profile on the National e-service Portal or in the Public Revenue office have electronic identification, but some services require electronic signature as well. The only measure in this area that is to be welcomed is the adoption of the package of laws in 2019 that create the basis for the electronic communication, electronic documents and electronic identification. Is it is elaborated in the overview of citizen opinions, there is still a huge problem with the fact that many public institution do not accept electronic documents. The last area of e-service for citizens and businesses from other countries is equally assessed (weak), with a note that the situation is better for legal entities than it is for individuals. The cross-border compatibility of the services is required for inclusion into the joint EU market, hence a lot of work and investments are required in this area in order to approximate RN Macedonia to the EU.

On the other hand, there are still measurements missing for particular aspects compared to international researches (such as the e-Government Survey of the United Nations[7]). In other words, there is no data on RN Macedonia on the basis of which it would be possible to compare with other countries. The measurements and standards are necessary in order to determine the current reference point or position in relation to the e-Government standards in order to be able to define the roadmap to the position the country is aiming for.

2.2. Open e-Government services

The EU Action Plan for e-Government for 2016-2020 also prescribes the so called Open Services for e-Government which are collaborative and digital public services opened towards the users and based on cooperation via technology in order to provide greater public value. These service have the following features:

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[7] United Nations e-Government Survey for 2020, available at https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2020.

1. Openness: Effort for publishing elements and components of the service (information, service component, decision support) compared to the traditional electronic management.

2. Cooperation: Recognition that the only objective of the Government should not be to meet the social and economic needs by directly providing service but it should enable, support and continue the cooperation with the stakeholders or citizens and legal entities. This includes services designed and provided by private entities as well, not only the Government, that will assist in resolving issues related to public services.

3. Technology: The open services are essentially dependent on the digital technology for their delivery. It ensures innovation the delivery and by definition is cooperation, via open data, open web tools and cooperation platforms.

Table 2 – Value of the open services

	Services	Technology cost	Monetary value	Non-monetary value
Services for individuals	Entrepreneurship support Street maintenance Collecting feedback from the citizens	*Moderate*	*Moderately positive*	*Very positive*
Administrative services	Transparent publishing of acts Electronic signature Electronic identification	*High*	*Very positive*	*Moderately positive*
Services for greater participation	Participatory budgeting Participatory decision making	*Moderate*	*Negative*	*Very positive*

Our society should also strive towards building more open services. We have the preconditions for development of those services, mainly due to the base established with the National e-service Portal in the Electronic Population Registry, but mainly with the open data infrastructure that is already established. In terms of open data, we do have adopted standards, portal for publishing and systematization of this data and increasing number of institutions and young people that understand their value and use them. The open services are not expected to substitute the traditional public services or document needs but can contribute towards their modernization, simplification, time reduction or by providing more information about them. What is mostly missing at the moment is popularization of the open data for intensive use for their potential for improvement of the work of the institutions.

2.3. Digital literacy

The progress of the EU countries and the fast digitalization are possible due to the increased level of digital literacy. Unfortunately, our country still cannot compare with most of the EU member states when it comes to digital literacy of the entire population. There are obvious differences in data that measure the number of individuals with elementary (and more than elementary) digital skills (Table 3)[8].

Table 3

Individuals having basic or above basic level of digital skills
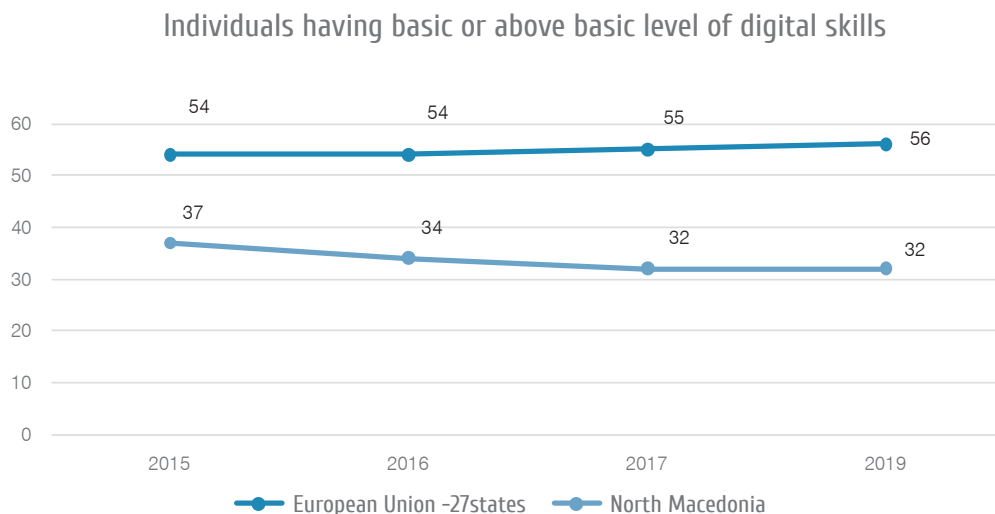
Most of the additional researches show that the digital skills are missing not only with the general population but also among the employees in the institutions that provide the services. The conclusion with this level of digital skills is that the transition towards full

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[8] Source: Eurostat, Digital skill levels of individuals, version from 14.10.2020, available at: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do.

digital operations, including full digital services, will not be going quickly or easy, so the Government must immediately come up with a strategy for addressing the problem.

2.4. New developments in the EU digital services

As it was mentioned in the beginning, the European Union is continuously working on improvement of the services for the citizens and the private sector. The most recent step in that direction was the adoption of the Act on Digital Services and the Act on Digital Market[9]. Namely, the Act on Digital Services regulates and makes stricter the rules for the digital service providers that act as intermediaries in their role of connecting the consumers with goods, services and content. Measures are introduced aimed at opposing illegal content on the Internet, including goods and services, enabling mechanisms for the beneficiaries to flag that content, new rules for tracking of the business users on the Internet market, primarily for the purpose of identifying sellers of illegal goods, effective protection measures for the users, transparency measures for Internet platforms, etc.

The Act on Digital Markets introduces rules for platforms that act as "gates" towards the digital sector. These are platforms that have significant influence on the internal market of the EU, serving as important portal for the business users so they can reach their clients and can be established as bottlenecks between the business and the users. It is therefore necessary to regulate them in a better way.

The new acts that will require the member states to assign relevant regulatory bodies – coordinators for digital services – that will supervise the harmonization of the services established on their territory with the new rules and to participate in the EU cooperation mechanism from the proposed Act on Digital Services.

These trends point out two things:

1. The strict standards imposed on the digital services in the private sector, the government would have to primarily apply them in the delivery of their services as well, meaning public services.

2. Some of the digital services in RN Macedonia are provided exactly via intermediaries that will be concerned with the new set of acts, that is, the public services in our country will very soon be concerned by these rules, which might seem that pertain only to the digital services provided by the private sector in the EU.

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[9] Act on Digital Services, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_2348. Act on Digital Markets, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_2349.

3. Public Administration Reform Strategy

The Public Administration Reform Strategy 2018 – 2022 is a document with which the Macedonian Government sets the framework for achieving higher standards in the work of the public sector. The Strategy sets the measures that will be implemented in the next five years for achieving overall and specific objectives defined for each of the priority areas. It is organized in accordance with the priority areas defined by SIGMA, which is a joint initiative of OECD and European Commission for establishment of good governance system in the public sector of the OECD member states[10]:

1. Policy making and coordination
2. Public service and human resources management
3. Responsibility, accountability and transparency
4. Provision of services and ICT support for the administration

The measures pertaining to improved service delivery for the citizens and businesses are included in the fourth priority objective with a sub-headline "Service provision in quick, simple and easy accessible manner". This portion of the analysis provides an overview on realization of the planned measures but also evaluates whether the results indeed have impact on the everyday life of the citizens.

The specific objective *4.1. Rational investing in development of the digital environment* sets the strategic approach towards the improvement of services for the citizens, that is, adoption of strategic documents and identification of the approach to be used for finding solutions on policy level. This means that activities are implemented within this objective that set the background for the processes required for delivery of more efficient services. The investments in digitalization are always very expensive, that is, they are significant for the budgets of the institutions and the country, and hence a strategic approach towards these investments and upgrade of the system are required in order to obtain the best value for the invested money vs. building completely new systems from scratch.

A National ICT Council was established in 2018 vested with a task to prepare and monitor the implementation of the National ICT Strategy and to provide opinions on the annual plans for public procurements and technical specifications of the tender documentations prepared by the public sector institutions where subject of procurement is equipment and/ or software with value greater than 20,000 euros in denars equivalent. According

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[10] www.sigmaweb.org.

to the Ministry of Information Society and Administration (MIOA)[11] reports, a total of 269 ICT projects were published by the state administration bodies, agencies and inspection services, 86 of which were reviewed and discussed by the ICT Council, and 32% of the ICT projects were coordinated on central level. Unfortunately, no information was published about the amount of savings achieved with this coordination of the procurement, nor whether they happened as a result of the Council work, but in any case we evaluate these activities as highly positive and aimed at cost-efficient management with the public finances.

In the same direction of better utilization of the available assets, that is, getting maximum value for the available assessed, the Strategy also included "development of plan for rational investing" (Activity 4.1.1.5. of the Strategy). Unfortunately, MIOA informed that "with the revision of the Action Plan for implementation of the Strategy, it was decided that no Plan for Rational Investing shall be developed", although this measure was initially welcomed by the civil society sector and the public.

In the frames of the same measure M.4.1.1. Strategic approach in the process of digital transformation, use of cloud infrastructure is planned to be used on strategic level which is especially relevant for this period. The Covid-19 crisis imposed the need on the public sector staff to work from home, that is, to have access to documents from home that could be uploaded to cloud space[12]. However, most of the institutions failed to adapt the business processes to the more flexible way of work (remote work) and this had significant impact on the implementation of their functions which also reflected on the delivery of the services. The impact of the pandemic in the area of public services raised the need to accelerate the use of digital tools in the public sector operation while the MIOA, as a relevant Ministry, must rethink the measures for transformation of the public sector in order to ensure sustainable and flexible structure that will serve the citizens. Judging by the most recent information, conditions are currently prepared for providing cloud space for each employee in the state administration with size sufficient to allow all staff to completely shift their work in the virtual space.

In order to be able to move to digital operations, it is necessary to adhere to the legal requirements for electronic documents and electronic operation[13]. Their adoption equalized

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[11] Annual Report on the Implementation of the Strategy, 2020, available at: https://mioa.gov.mk/sites/default/files/pbl_files/documents/rja/godishen_izveshtaj_2019.pdf.

[12] The Building a Knowledge Based Public Sector research (2020, CUP, available at: https://cup.org.mk/publication/developing-knowledge-based-public-sector) regarding preservation and sharing of the institutional knowledge in the public sector showed that a high 70% of the employees in the institutions save the documents only locally on their computer, that they do not have access to information and documents when they are not physically present in the office and that they do not have obligation, nor practice, to share the knowledge they acquire while working in the public sector. This showed that the organization of the "work from home" during the pandemics is not a work for the public sector employees, but rather a holiday. The situation in which the institutions failed to respond to the needs of the citizens and the private sector in a pandemic situation created a large level of dissatisfaction among the citizens that requested services but never received them due to the halt in the work of the administration.

[13] Law on Central Registry of Population "Official Gazette" No. 98/19; available at: https://mioa.gov.mk/

the validity of electronic documents and their paper-based equivalents that bear watermark and seal. The adoption of the legal framework is one of the most important results of the Strategy but the implementation thereof is still problematic in practice. Although there is a requirement for issuing electronic documents as well, still many institutions are reluctant to accept them so the citizens complain that the purpose of the electronic documents is lost when the institutions want to see watermark or seal "in original".

The implementation of work in a virtual space is foreseen with the activities included in Measure 4.1.3 of the Strategy, but except for the improvement of the legal framework for archive and office work which is currently being carried out, most of the activities in this measure were not implemented. Another ongoing work is a complete redesign of specific procedure that end up with service for the citizens, as a piloting of completely digital procedures and services, but the actual number of digital services did not yet substantially increase.

We evaluate these measures as excellent and exceptionally useful for the society. However, they are also late. Due to the pandemics maybe they were accelerated by a precious time was lost – time when the public sector was not properly functional. The lack of functionality resulted in a serious dissatisfaction among the citizens because of the reduced access to the services, which showed the lack of readiness of the administration.

Although Measure *4.1.2 Centrally coordinated management with e-Government and ICT projects* includes mainly internal administrative activities, it also includes a development of a training program for improvement of the digital literacy. Without this program all digitalization efforts could fail. The report includes no information on implementation of this activity for 2019 but in the report for the previous period[14] MIOA says that only a final draft of the training program was prepared and potential donors are sought for delivery of the program. There is no information about the implementation of this program nor for realistic improvement of the digital skills of the staff. On the other hand, no comprehensive strategy for building digital skills of the people of RN Macedonia has been prepared, which is one of the key prerequisites when it comes to digitalization of the society, as it is the case in the EU member states.

The Public Administration Reform Strategy also envisages improvement in the quality management, including systems for measuring satisfaction of the service users. These measures are of special importance for the citizens and we evaluate them as measures aimed directly at involvement of the citizens in the process of making policies pertaining to

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sites/default/files/pbl_files/documents/legislation/zakon_za_centralen_registar_na_naselenie.pdf; Law on Electronic Management and Electronic Services "Official Gazette" No. 98/19; available at: https://mioa.gov. mk/sites/default/files/pbl_files/documents/legislation/zakon_za_elektronsko_upravuvanje_i_elektronski_ uslugi_0.pdf; Law on Electronic Documents and Reliable Services "Official Gazette" No. 101/19, available at: https://mioa.gov.mk/sites/default/files/pbl_files/documents/legislation/zakon_za_elektronski_dokumenti_ eid_i_doverlivi_uslugi.pdf.

[14] The MIOA Reports on implementation of the Strategy are available at: https://mioa.gov.mk/?q=mk/ node/2103.

the services. Unfortunately, as it is mentioned in the introduction, there is small percentage of people that have option to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction directly at the institutions – a feedback that will be considered in a systematic manner and will contribute to changes.

The 2019 Report for implementation of the Strategy shows that some of the websites of the Ministries and Government have been uniformed in order to facilitate information finding and to supplement the Catalogue of Services as a tool running in the background of the National e-service Portal. At the end of 2019, the citizens had 129 electronic services at their disposal while at the end of 2020 the portal shows that 150 service were possible to be obtained electronically. The report also says that the "number of registered users at the end of 2019 was 2,827 and 1,040 requests for electronic services were filed". Quality standards were also established for the data that the institutions will use in their mutual exchange and in electronic procedures, which is especially relevant for the upcoming process of digitalization of the key registries in the country. It is also said that during 2020 projects will be initiated that aim to digitalize 40 registries that will enable 135 new electronic services for the citizens, which very necessary for the citizens[15]. However, the biggest weakness of the National e-service Portal is the lack of availability of services for legal entities. The legal entities are the most prepared to work with digital services since they have been already using these services from institutions such as Public Revenue Office or Central Registry for quite some time now.

These measures are good for improvement of the digital environment for e-services and we welcome the fact that the institutions are working in parallel on improvement of services that are still being delivered and shall continue to be delivered using traditional means (via counter).

The Report also says that the physical access to the institutions has been improved in order to enable equal access for all citizens. In 2019 @315 buildings of the state administration and 62 local government buildings introduced access ramps, lifts and/or mobile platforms, thus providing proper access for the people with special needs. This increased the percentage of institutions accessible to people with special needs from 61% to 66% in a course of one year". There is no doubt that these physical improvements are necessary for availability of the institutions and services, especially in view of the lack of readiness of the citizens to work in the digital environment or to receive electronic services. Small investments are required for these activities in order to make a significant change for particular group, so they are always evaluated as required and with positive impact.

The investment also continues in the service room pertaining to the "One Stop Shop for All Service" (ETU) where the citizens can obtain around 50 services from 10 different institutions on a single point of service (these numbers describe the ETU functionality in Skopje. The one-stop-stop principle was the basis for operation for the ETU services but the experience so far showed that they are only simple extensions of counters of different institutions in a single office. There is no modernization whatsoever nor simplification in

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[15] МИОА, https://www.mioa.gov.mk/?q=mk/node/3219.

the delivery of services, and on top of that were huge crowds and queues in the midst of pandemic in front of the ETU in Skopje. This office underwent construction renovations several times which rendered it inaccessible for the citizens during those periods. We assume that all investments in this office were in specific amount but, as a result, the citizens did not receive improved services. Regardless of the fact that the counter services need to be improved, there is no justification for the large investments in new rooms such as ETU because these modern times shall undoubtedly require the use of digital services as primary and very soon as the only way.

However, we must not forget that the general gap in terms of the strategic planning of the e-Government development. Initially, the purpose of integrating the state functions in terms of public administration reform and building information society was for the IT society development to stimulate the digitalization of the administrative processes. However, it seems that the very opposite was actually achieved. The Public Administration Reform Strategy puts much greater priority to other reform measures in the administration while the measures pertaining to digitalization of the administrative processes are at the level of activity which are last in terms of priority and it is almost a trend that most of them remain non-implemented and simply carried forward to the following Action Plan or following Strategy. Most of the independent digital processes that were covered in the e-Government Strategy 2012 of the Government were simply merged or lost. The only special document is the ICT Strategy but it does not include full set of measures pertaining to digital government. For example, even the most advanced countries in this area continuously have e-Government strategies which are now commonly called Digital Government Strategies. It is necessary to have more clear approach for this question because the model of integration of these measures strictly in the context of public administration reform fails to give the desired results and also does not provide indication on the direction in which the country should be developing this segment of the IT society.

3.1. Budget

The planning of budget funds for digital society development has been relatively stable in the recent years, which is especially important for the purpose of implementation of *Priority 4 – Provision of services and IT support for the administration from the Public Administration Reform Strategy*. However, the allocations planned within the MIOA budget for the *Information society* category have been reduced by 4.6% in 2020, compared to 2019; and the reduction in the *Development and implementation of ICT* category was only 0.05% for the same period. These reductions are not due to budget rebalancing because of the pandemics because they were planned in 2019, which is an additional indicator that this area is not one of the top priorities of the Government.

Annex 1 provides a detailed overview of the allocations planned.

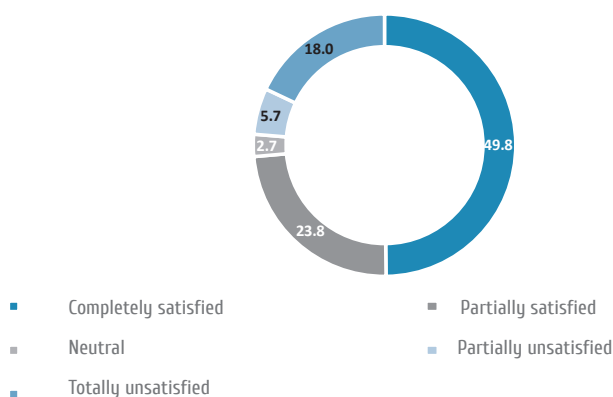# 4. Public service delivery and satisfaction of the citizens

4.1. Overall satisfaction

This section of the analysis includes opinions and satisfaction of the citizens when it comes to receiving services from the institutions, the manner of communication, their attitudes about the electronic services and experiences with the National Portal for Electronic Services, including statistics identified in the Eurobarometer 2020 of the European Union[16]. This data is required in order to come up with a realistic evaluation of the progress achieved by the institutions. The institutions could further use these guidelines from the citizens, including their realistic problems, practical experiences, proposals and suggestions in order to change the services and make them more user-friendly for the citizens.

The researches have been continuously showing that a relatively high percentage is, in general, satisfied from the manner and quality of public services. A total of 73.6% in 2018 and 80.2% in 2020 (fully satisfied and partially satisfied from the delivery of services they obtained from the institutions) (Table 4 and Table 5).

Table 4

2018 – Колку сте генерално задоволни од испораката на јавната услуга која сте ја добиле?

- ■ Completely satisfied
- ■ Neutral
- ■ Totally unsatisfied
- ■ Partially satisfied
- ■ Partially unsatisfied

18.0 5.7 2.7 23.8 49.8

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[16] Standard Eurobarometer 93, Summer of 2020, European Commission, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/yearFrom/1974/yearTo/2020/surveyKy/2262

Table 5

2020 –How satisfied are you from the public
service you have received?

- ■ Completely satisfied
- ■ Neutral
- ■ Totally unsatisfied
- ■ Partially satisfied
- ■ Partially unsatisfied
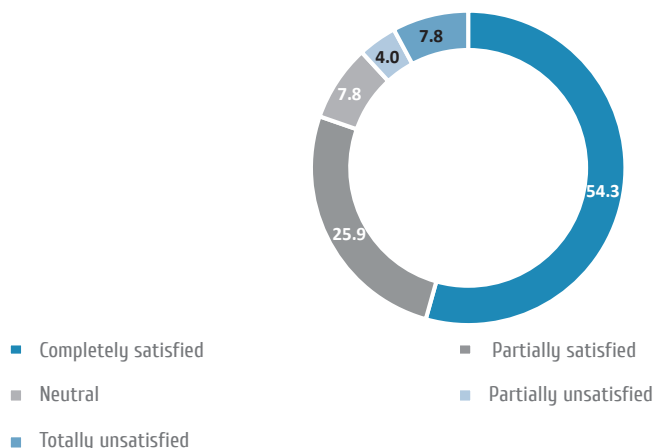
We noticed not very big but still visible differences in positive direction because the percentage of citizens who are fully satisfied increased by 4.5% and this increase among the partially satisfied was 2.1%. The percentages show that the institutions do not have some greater improvement in their work but still the period of just one year and a half between the two surveys is quite short and on top of that the second survey was carried out during a world pandemics.

According to the Eurobarometer 2020 of the European Union[17], the satisfaction survey related to public services received from institutions showed that only 41% of the Macedonian citizens answered they are satisfied (fully satisfied and satisfied) from those services. The average from 28 EU member states is 54% but the satisfied goes also to very high 92% of Luxembourg citizens and 90% in Holland – both of them highly digitalized societies. The difference in the percent of general satisfaction is because the Eurobarometer considered a number of sub-questions in order to determine the percentage while the Center for Change Management survey shows result from one question.

The in-depth survey of the most recent individual experiences the citizens had with the institutions showed that they raised many problems in the everyday service delivery. We must not neglect the problems related to the need to visit in person the institutions during a pandemics, for example the process of registration of unemployed persons or the parents had to bring in person the documents related to a newborn child, although they are documents from other public institution and the only information they report is the name of the child.

[17] Ibid, Question 1.7.

The citizens continuously face different problems in the delivery of service from the institutions and they assess what are the reasons for those problems – mainly raising the lack of competency of the staff and the political party influence in the public administration. However, the most worrying information is that there is an obvious increase of dissatisfaction in 2020 because of the unequal treatment of the users on various grounds. This means experiences related to corruption of marginalization of particular vulnerable groups in the society. This is serious issue that must be addressed by the authorities.

Table 6

2018 –What do you think are the biggest problems in the public service delivery?
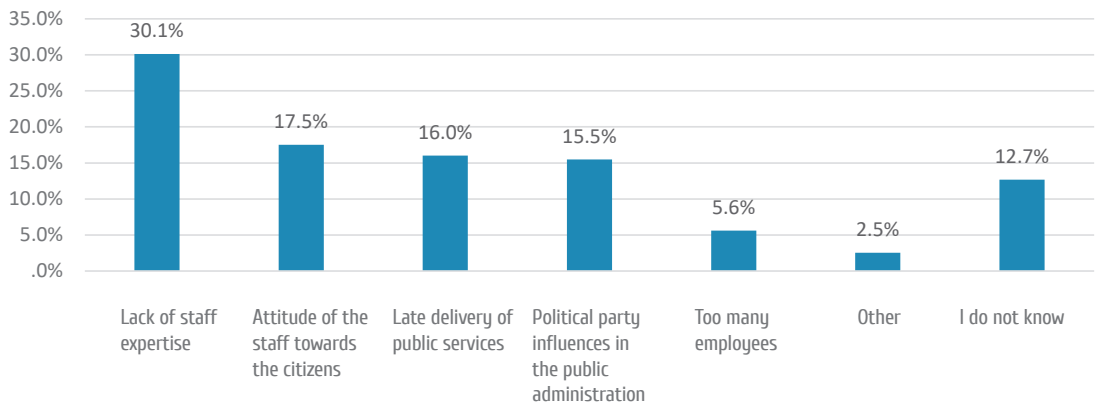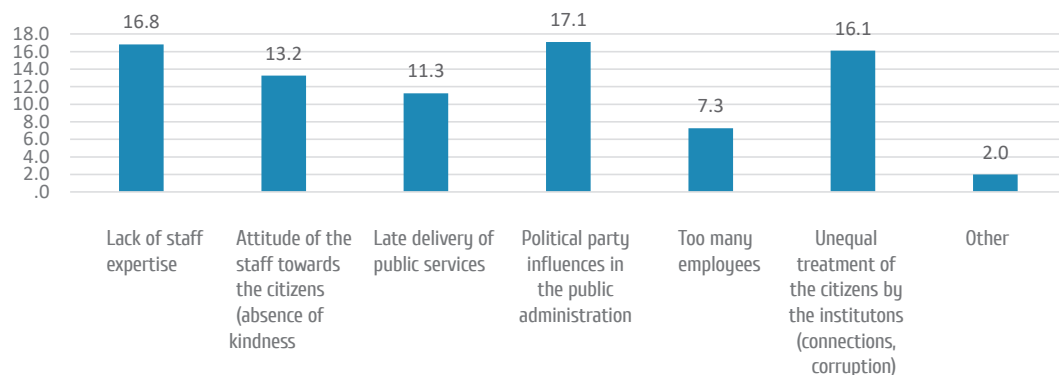
Table 7

2020 –What do you think are the biggest problems in the public service delivery?

The change of this equal treatment indicator is something that catches our eye because of the tendency of the Government that has been promoting the "One society for all" concept in the recent years. Regardless of the adoption of the strategic documents and the media promotion of the concept we deem that the measures implemented for it did not yield satisfactory results so far. We base this opinion on the fact that the perception of the citizens that the institutions do not have equal treatment towards all citizens is on increase.

In-depth research[18] of this topic in relation to social services in the Municipality of Shuto Orizari showed that a high 80% of the respondents who use social services felt discriminated when dealt with by the Intermunicipal Center for Social Work. These citizens also reported unequal treatment by the institutions and actions "with connections" when it comes to accommodation in state student dormitories and use of legal assistance. Unfortunately, most of these services affect exactly the most vulnerable categories of citizens which are discriminated instead of protected by the state.

4.2. Cooperation between the institutions

Although the Law on General Administrative Procedure[19], which categorically requires interinstitutional cooperation on ex-officio basis, has been in force for a good number of years and should be actively implemented, it seems that this is not the case when it comes to this provision which is important for the citizens. The ex-officio cooperation requires the institutions to obtain the documents needed from each other through official cooperation and not to request these documents from the citizens.

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[18] The research explained above in 1.2. Methodology. See footnote 4.

[19] Law on General Administrative Procedure (Official Gazette No.124/2015, 65/2108), available at: https://www.mioa.gov.mk/?q=mk/documents/legislation.

Table 8

Were you rquired to obtain/ submit documents issued by a specific institution when you were to receive a service from a different institution?
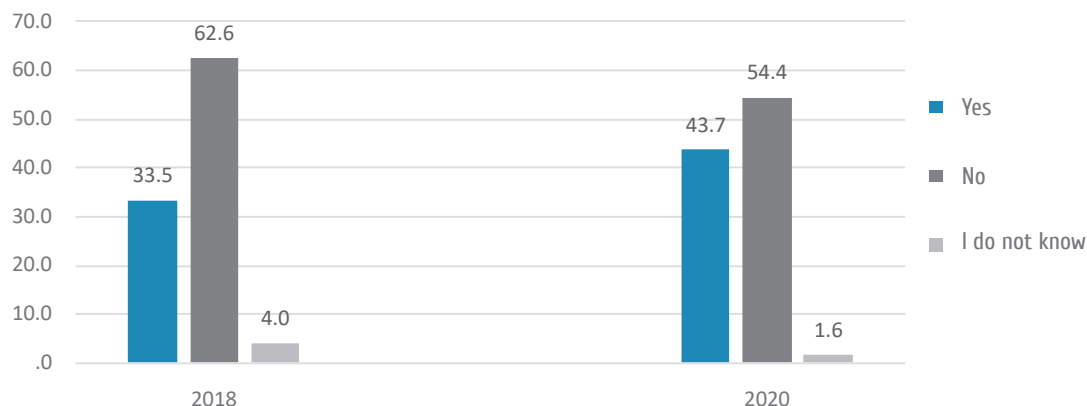
The results here show the most negative trend – there is backward tendency in this aspect of delivery of services. This was also confirmed in the in-depth interviews, that documents from other institutions were required for obtaining the following:

· Social services that required certificates from schools, from health institutions, from Cadaster, from Employment Service Agency;

· Health Services that required a marriage certificate;

· Access to financial services that required certificate of family status, property status, labor relations, tax clearance certificates, etc.;

· Calculation of taxes with requirement for cadaster documents;

· Student services that required certificates for social assistance and family status certificates.

Ninety percent of the respondents said documents from other public institutions were requested from them when it comes to social services in the Municipality of Shuto Orizari and 13.7% of the students had to provide these documents when applying for accommodation in the student dormitories.

There is no justification why there is an increase in the number of procedures requiring documents from other institutions. The pandemics nor the measures the institutions praise pertaining to investments and improvement in the digitalization of services do not go in favor of this information, which means that only the human factor remains as a possible reason for such a setback.

4.3. Communication with the citizens

In term of communicating with the institutions for receiving services, due to the pandemic, the citizens were suddenly required to carry out more transactions to communicate from their homes electronically, which is clearly reflected in the results of prior contact with the institutions (Tables 9 and 10) and on their preferred way of communication in the future (Tables 11 and 12).

Table 9

2018 – How did you communicate with the public institution for obtainig public service?
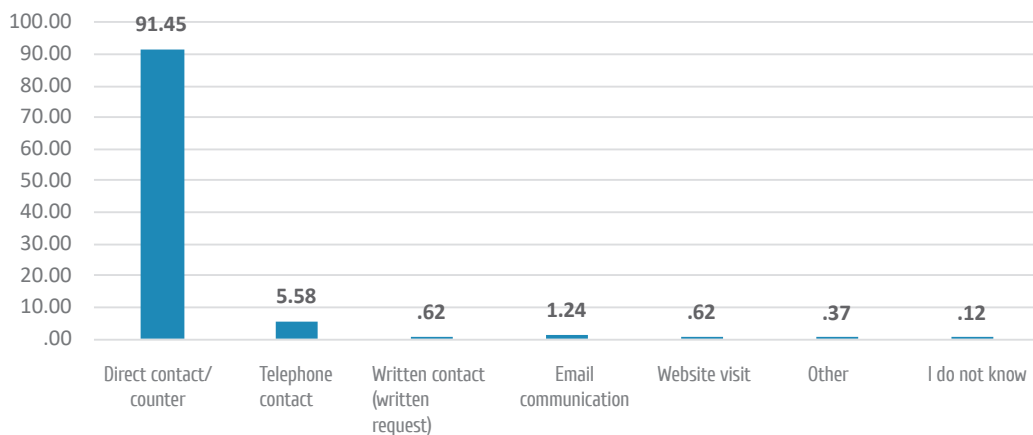
Table 10

2020–How did you communicate with the public institution for obtainig public service?

Category	Value
Direct contact/counter	69.2
Telephone contact	15.2
Written contact (written request)	2.8
Email communication	1.9
Website visit	5.0
Other	5.6
I do not know	.2

Table 11

2018 –What is prefererd way of communication with the institutions?

Category	Value
Direct contact/counter	86.1
Telephone	9.4
Internet	3.6
Other	.2
I do not know	.6
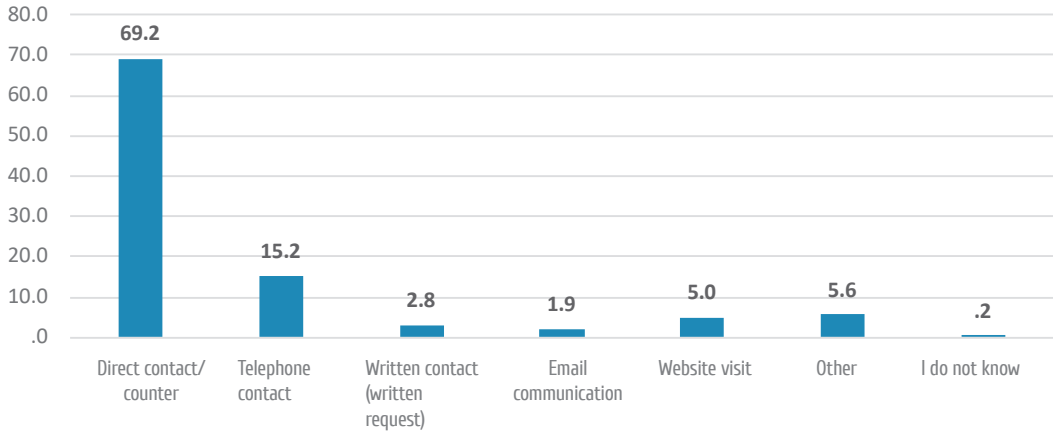
Table 12

2020 – What is your preferred way of communication with the institutions (explanation: something that you are most comfortable with and your first choice among many different options)?

There is obvious positive movement among the attitude of the citizens to communicate electronically with the institutions – from 3.59% to 18.8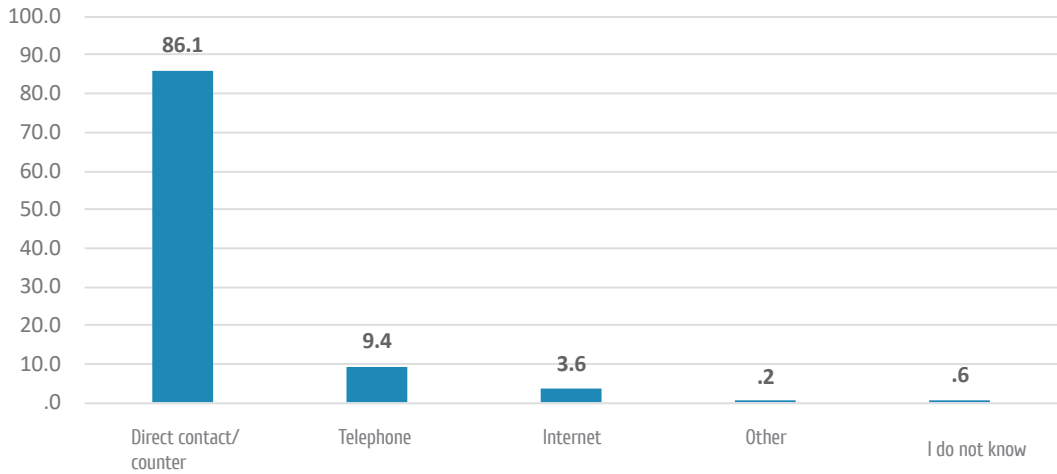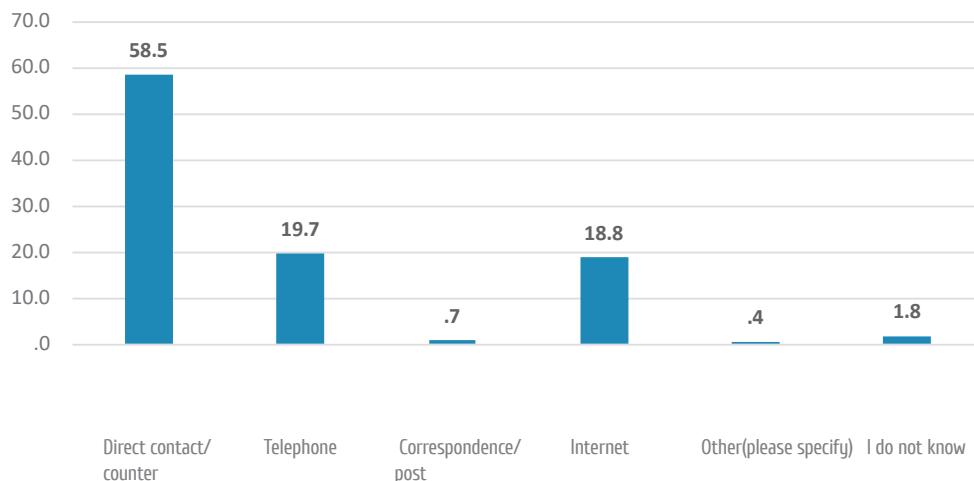%, although most of them had this first communication already because of the pandemic restrictions. The citizens are becoming more and more open for digital communication which is undoubtedly due also to the quality of information and service they receive digitally (see Table 16 below). These results are encouraging, although given the level of education in the country, no "quantum leaps" should be expected in this area in terms of change in the behavior of the citizens.

The field researches gave answers why the citizens prefer more to receive the documents electronically in comparison to the traditional way:

·   "It is much easier and you save time and money";

·   "Faster, more convenient and more efficient ";

·   "Accessible 24/7, no queues, no time is wasted, no unnecessary breaks";

·   "It can arrive to any address you want ";

·   "It respects my time and the time of the officers ";

·   "It is cost-efficient, environmental, saves paper, it is fast and efficient ";

·   "I can't stand crowds and I hate been ping-ponged with because of their incompetency and lack of professionalism ";

·   "I want to have some evidence that I've used some service from that institution, because what happens is the cases get lost, they disappear";

- "Because it is easier, simpler, no 'ping-ponging' from counter to counter and raising shoulders".

Reasons why some citizens still prefer the traditional way of obtaining the service over the counter:

- "A habit";

- "I can't navigate electronically and can't fill in forms";

- "No cooperation with the staff";

- "The electronic services are not adopted to senior people, they are too complex and incomplete ";

- "Lack of information about the option to receive the service electronically".[20]

Hence, we conclude that now is the time for institutions to continue working on mass digitalization because the situation requires it (generally) to be accepted very soon. During the field research we noticed that there are more problems that stand in the way of greater digitalization and mass use of digital tools and services by citizens, but the current context has changed and advantage should be taken of it.

As for the communication with the citizens, there is no doubt that there is a human factor here, that is, the communication depends on the level of digital literacy of the citizens, as already mentioned in the previous context. Although the pandemic has slowed the world down and reduced the global exchange, only one area has experienced an undisputed boom, and that is the digital area because it enabled simple, fast and contactless communication at a time when it was most needed. Although, objectively, the biggest obstacle are the insufficient digital skills of the population, in the absence of an alternative, the situation has forced all age grops to adapt to the electronic communication very quickly. It is recommended to bring the electronic services closer to the citizens.

The most obvious example is the area of education where there was urgent and full transition towards remote learning using e-tools by the teachers and students. Today, 90% of school-age children in RN Macedonia successfully attend classes, regardless of the fact that most of them do not go physically at school[21].

A recent research on the feedback platforms in developing countries shows that there is a difference between platforms that collect individual feedback and those that aggregate the input from citizens, and there common cases when both of these options are available.

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[20] See footnote 10.
[21] Data from the Ministry of Education and Science, 16.12.2020, available at: https://mon.gov.mk/m/content/?id=3582.

The study emphasizes that the publishing of feedback from the citizens is crucial in order to ensure the full operationalization of various accountability and trust mechanisms[22].

1. This means that the institutions in RN Macedonia should create their own feedback mechanism on what is the citizens' satisfaction from their services and the input they will receive:

2. They need to mandatory publish it and strengthen the trust among the citizens, thus showing they do listen to criticism and share publically.

Use that feedback mechanism for improvement of the services.

In the same positive direction, the number of citizens who feel ready to use electronic services increased sharply in 2020, that is, over half of the respondents gave that answer (Table 13), although the general level of digital skills of the population is far below the European Union average.

Table 13

In view of the global pandemic, do you feel ready to use electronic services?
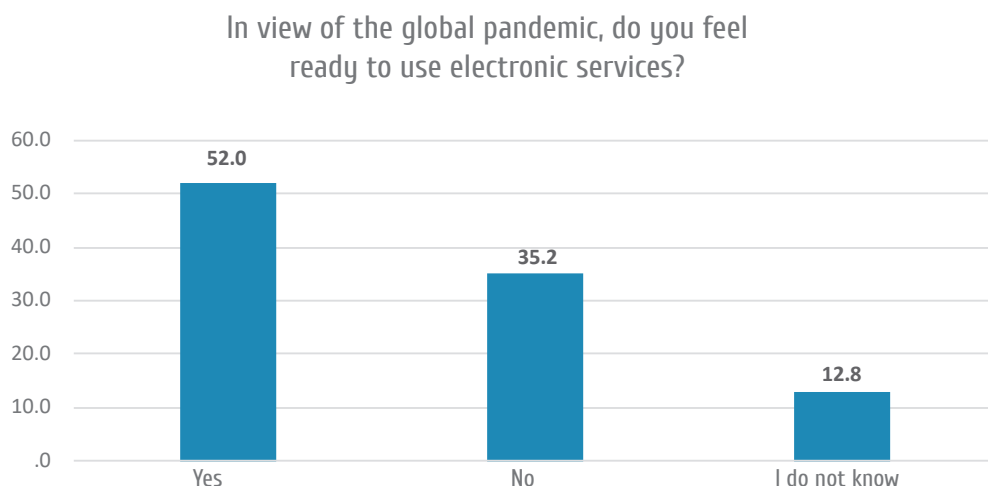
By comparison, an average of 70% of European Union citizens feel sufficiently prepared to use digital technologies in everyday life, with the highest percentage of citizens (87%) thinking this way in the Netherlands and Sweden. Surprising is the fact that in 19 member states this percentage has decreased compared to 2017[23]. This can be explained by the

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[22] United Nations, 2020, E-Government Survey 2020, Digital Government in the Decade of Action for Sustainable Development

[23] Question 11.1, Special Eurobarometer 503, March 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/yearFrom/1974/yearTo/2020/surveyKy/2228.

sudden growth of the various transactions that EU citizens have to make electronically, which further means that their digital skills were sufficient to work with ICT tools in the past, but that is no longer the case. Hence, it is concluded that continuous upgrading of digital skills is needed at international level, not only in our country.

4.4. Trust in the institutions

What we can confirm with certainty is that the world pandemic has pushed the whole world into mass digitalization of processes, and that is also the case in the Republic of N Macedonia, which is a relatively developed democratic society. We mention democracy precisely because of its connection to digitalization in society.

The high degree of digitalization of the communication is always associated with a large degree of mutual trust on both sides. The digitalization is always linked to expectations for direct reduction of corruption and unprofessionalism of the institutions due to the greater automation of the processes, even use of artificial intelligence meaning exclusion of the human factor from the procedures. Removing the human decision making achieves greater accuracy (hence quality), but above all removes the bias and unequal treatment, which goes hand in hand with corruption.

On the other hand, the trust is built on both sides. It is not necessary for citizens to trust the institutions only due to the accuracy in the procedures and equal treatment but also because of keeping personal data. For this trust, the government is required to work in completely open and transparent manner, to be open even in cases it makes eventual mistakes. The example of openness of the Estonian institutions in the case of Russian hacker attack is today referred to as a perfect example of building mutual trust, which is the basis for one of the most advanced IT societies[24].

The state must equally gain the trust of the citizens that they will not abuse the system and that they will have the skills to act in the digital world, but also that they will continue to use it and develop it for the benefit of all.

In RN Macedonia, trust in the institutions is low. After the release of the recordings of the mass wiretapping of citizens and political entities, and the political crisis from 2015 to 2017, the citizens had a record low trust in the institutions. Even during the health crisis in

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[24] News example: https://www.bbc.com/news/39655415; https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2020/0204/Cybersecurity-2020-What-Estonia-knows-about-thwarting-Russians

2020, most of the citizens do not have much trust in the government, even in relation to critical decisions related to health protection[25].

The most recent information on the trust the European citizens have in their national administrations shows that, in general, there is a stable 53% of citizens that trust their public administration[26] but the differences between the member states are huge meaning that the EU average should not be our reference or target towards which we would aim, and that it would be better to follow the good practices and examples from the public sector in the more developed European countries. Luxembourg has the highest average with 81% while only 25% of the Italian citizens trust their administration.

4.5. Electronic services

Since the National Portal for Electronic Services www.uslugi.gov.mk was launched in December 2019, the survey conducted during 2020 put more emphasis on electronic services and their use by citizens. Since it was opened, the Portal provides still a relatively small number of electronic services, that is, most services are there only as information for the citizens about the procedure and the relevant institutions. However, its value as a single location for information and access to services is undoubtedly one of the great achievements of the Government in the past period[27].

The Portal and the services it delivers electronically or informs about were not sufficiently promoted to the public, and this is still the case. In that sense, barely 45.6% of the respondents said that they are informed that there is such Portal although not all of them obtained electronic service (Table 14).
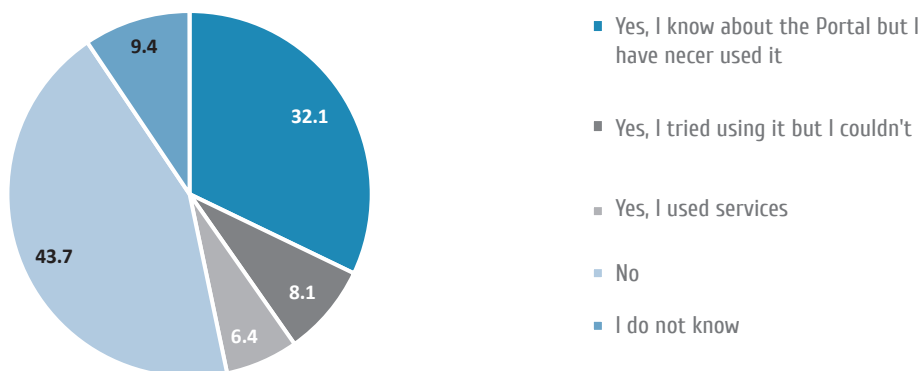
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[25] MCMS research; 2020, available at: https://mcms.mk/images/docs/2020/Akutelni_opshtestveni_prashanja_-_dekemvri_2020_-_stavovi_na_javnosta_mcms.pdf.

[26] Question 6.6, Annex Standard Eurobarometer 93, Summer 2020, see footnote 8.

[27] Government with a mandate from 2017 to 2020.

Table 14

Do you know that you can get many information and service
via the uslugi.gov.mk portal and have you used it?

- Yes, I know about the Portal but I have necer used it
- Yes, I tried using it but I couldn't
- Yes, I used services
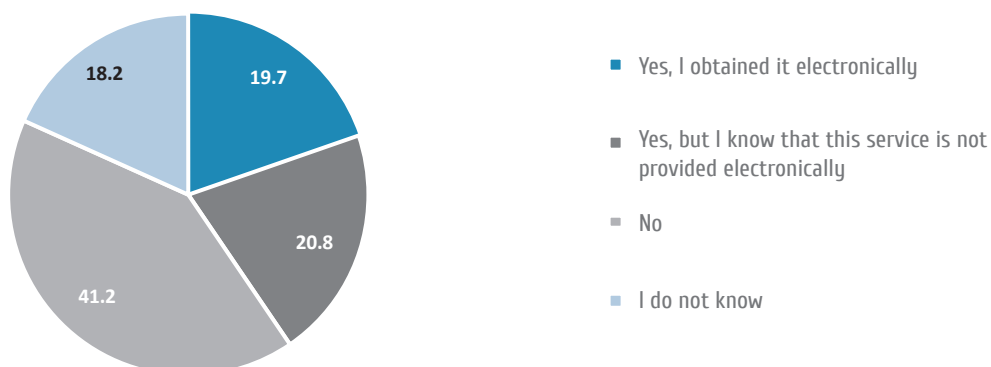- No
- I do not know

In order for the Portal to gain wider use, the citizens must be primarily aware of it and aware of everything it offers. They also need to create a profile and only then receive a service. The Portal has been in operation for one year but the citizens still do not have an option to request for practical assistance for creating profile and receiving services. Those that do have basic profile have no option of expanding it to a "low" level which is necessary in order to receive services (the response was that in this moment "there are no active registration offices").

The institutions are required to refer the citizens to use electronic services, either through public campaigns or through daily communication with them. The survey showed many steps or procedures in which the citizens were the ones that had to obtain documents, although the institutions could have been able to obtain those documents on ex-officio basis anyway, but they could have obtained them in digital form if they were informed about that or had assistance on how to use the Portal.

Table 15

Are you aware that the service you used can be also
obtained electronically?

- Yes, I obtained it electronically
- Yes, but I know that this service is not provided electronically
- No
- I do not know

As an example, the in-depth field surveys showed that the staff in the Intermunicipal Centers for Social Work in Shuto Orizari and in Bitola did not refer a single respondent to use the National e-service Portal. The staff interviewed in Bitola was not even aware that a Portal like this exists. A research among the farmers when they were applying for financial support from the IPAD program showed that a whopping 90% of them did not even know about the uslugi.gov.mk Portal. This situation was better with the respondents in Strumica, where 38.8% of them were not aware of the Portal and its possibilities.

The biggest difference identified in this research was the general citizen satisfaction from the use of electronic services and their delivery (the totality of services received in any way). It is obvious that the satisfaction from the delivery of electronic services is better than the expectations for the traditional services. A total of 97.8% of the respondents who used electronic service are satisfied from the services while none of the respondents said that they were not satisfied (Table 16).

Table 16

How satisfied are you from the digital delivery
of the public service in general?

2.2

■ Overall satisfied

■ Neutral

97.8
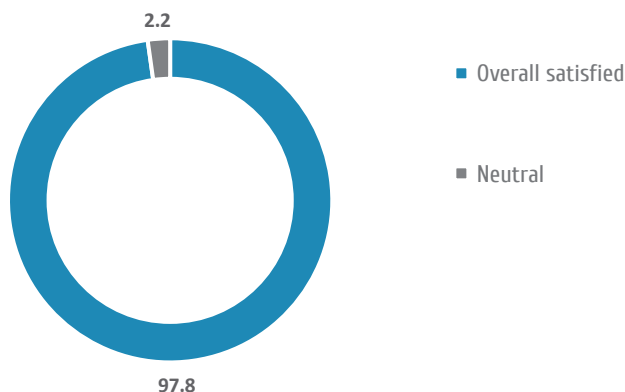
In the last months of 2020, when it was realized that the educational sector requires modernization because of the pandemics, a larger number of electronic services were quickly prepared[28]. The scholarship competitions published by the Ministry of Education and Science and the procedures for recognition of various types of certificates for all educational centers are currently being reconsidered, simplified and digitalized (with support from the Center for Change Management). This responded to the needs for simplification of a series of obsolete and unnecessary procedures that were just unnecessary burden and obstacle for delivery of the educational process for the pupils and students.

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[28] The services are available at: https://uslugi.gov.mk/lifeevent/edukaci%D1%98a-107.

5.Conclusions and recommendations

The services are the point where the policy meets the everyday life of the citizens. The current social, technological and economic change create new and higher expectations from the public services. An increasing number of users expect personalized, simplified or automatic services delivered through their preferred channels, and these are mainly the mobile phones. The pandemic crisis also required greater use of contactless services.

RN Macedonia is not moving fast enough towards a digitalized society, nor is it following in the footsteps of the EU member states. It is concluded that, although many measures are planned and being taken in order to improve the services, primarily through digitalization, the activities[29] implemented so far do not have a great impact on the experiences of the citizens, so there are no major changes in the satisfaction from the services.

> Recommendation: More measurements and comparative data are needed with international research who have established methodology, approach and data needed for objective comparison and determination of the strategic direction.

Focus on the needs of the citizens

Although the Public Administration Reform Strategy was adopted in an inclusive process, it has not established permanent channels for collecting feedback on citizens' experiences in order to respond to their needs. So far, only the National Plan for Quality Management in the Public Sector (2018-2020) has been adopted and there is no real implementation after it.

Institutions need to have an in-depth understanding of what exactly citizens, businesses and other public institutions need and expect, using a variety of ways of gathering information, including surveys, focus groups, mystery shopper, innovative methods such as mapping the customer experience, analyzing life events and the needs that arise from them, as well as techniques based on empathy.

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[29] Pertains to measures and activities planned in the Public Administration Reform Strategy and realized by the last quarter of 2020.

Adjust the delivery of services in terms of time, place and in a way that best suits the specific users, whereby the "digital by default" principle must be combined with the needs of the groups of citizens who are not yet ready to use electronic services.

Prepare wide strategy for building digital skills population wide because this measure does not exist in the national strategic documents.

National Portal for Electronic Services – uslugi.gov.mk

Undoubtedly, a lot has been done to make the National Portal for Electronic Services available to the citizens. These efforts of the institutions, although technical and in the background, enabled the citizens to have initial access to 150 services, which justifies all the investments. On the other hand, during the one year period the Portal was barely upgraded with 13 new services, and there are other needs for improvement as well.

Speed up the digitalization of as many services as possible and maintain the existing ones. Unfortunately, even the current systems that are use, such as the UVMK portal, have either not been available lately or there is no option for electronic services.

For the citizens who register for the first time on the Portal and do not have a profile through the Public Revenue Office, an upgrade to a level that enables receiving electronic services must be enabled immediately. Here, it is necessary to engage persons that will be providing this type of assistance to the citizens in the *One Stop Shop Point* halls – this is something that is missing at the moment.

It is urgently necessary to upgrade the National e-services Portal that will enable it wot work with legal entities. Although legal entities are relatively satisfied with the online services of the institutions, they need to be provided through a single point in the future.

Introduce "register just once" possibility for all public portals and automatized and personalized services (where the services will be delivered automatically on the basis of the realized right), mainly for the portals to which the citizens are referred to via the uslugi.gov.mk.

Institutions as service for the citizens

It is necessary to keep pushing for digital communication inside and between the institutions. This is in accordance with the existing legal provisions but also for the sake of more efficient services. It will contribute towards quicker and simpler procedures for

the citizens but also for efficient and accountable management with public funds and corruption reduction. It is also necessary to introduce open and transparent operation of the public institutions because the citizens today expect to be able to follow the administrative processes and procedures, to be able to ask for information, to know which officer is in charge for that issue, etc.

> It is mandatory to open more and more public sector information to the public as this will send a strong message and call for trust, it will use the value of the open data and support the data-based businesses.

No matter how sophisticated and good one ICT system is, it will be rendered useless if the officers do not how to operate it (human factor).

> Intensively upgrade the digital skills of the public sector employees.

Improvement of service quality

ICT and automation are definitely drivers for better public service delivery, but one must also be aware of the great risk of simply digitizing the bureaucracy. Technological considerations and changes should come at the end of simplifying the design of the services. They need to be based on streamlined processes, otherwise there is a risk of digitalization of the existing bureaucratic procedures, instead of providing smooth services.

> It is of great importance to review of all available services in order to check whether they overlap or if they are obsolete. It is also necessary to consider how to redesign them according to the needs of the citizens with creative and innovative methods, and only afterwards start digitalization.

One stop shop delivery of all services (ETU)

Although the government must address the needs of the citizens who are not ready for electronic services, it is still recommended to invest more in the digitalization of processes, finalization of services and building of digital skills of the population, than in transitional and expensive solutions such as ETU.

In addition, care must be taken to avoid possible overlap with local government development plans to establish municipal service centers, as It is currently announced for the next Local Development and Decentralization Program 2021–2026[30], referring to European approximation standards for bringing the services as close as possible to the citizens, meaning that the municipal level should provide services that are equivalent

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[30] МЛС,   http://mls.gov.mk/images/documents/regionalenrazvoj/2.%20%20%20Programa%20za%20odrzliv%20lokalen%20razvoj%20i%20%20decentralizacija-Revidirana-Precisten%20tekst-MAK-lektor.pdf

to the services vested in central authorities. The approach which means service delivery at local level is excellent, even by the central government institutions, but care must be taken not to spend funds unnecessarily by creating parallel service centers alongside the ETU. As quality services for citizens require more financial and human resources than those available in most municipalities, it is recommended to enhance the inter-municipal cooperation and to deliver services from joint centers or from one to several municipalities.

> Reconsider the actual need to have an ETU as it is much useful to delegate more services on local level and strengthen the municipalities and the municipal cooperation.

Building trust in the institutions

The data protection is the core principle which must be adhered to in full. If there is no flawless data protection and if the citizens are not convinced in it, no proper trust will be established for increased use of electronic communication and electronic services.

> Continue the strengthening of the cyber security of the systems as a prerequisite for greater trust in the institutions.

Cooperation with the European Union

Although many processes undertaken to provide better services to citizens have been encouraged, even financially supported by the EU, enhanced cooperation is still needed in terms of knowledge transfer and experience. Many proven digital solutions for public services already exist and are freely available from various EU programs, for example ISA through the JoinUp platform.

Thinking in the long run and in view of the EU membership perspective, we must start thinking right away about interoperability and cross-border compatibility of the services. These factors are a consequence of the increasing digitalization and internationalization of the society, but they are also becoming increasingly relevant principles in the public policy making.

> It is recommended to share and innovatively use the existing tools and systems in RN Macedonia and in the EU because each process requires to have a different new tool. The knowledge transfer from the EU should be also used for compatibility with the EU systems and services.

6. Annex 1

Annex 1 includes the portion of the state Budget intended for information support of the Government (Table 17) and the budget planned by the Ministry of Information Society and Administration for the *Information Society* and *Development and Implementation of ICT* categories (Table 18).

It is also important to mention that the investments in this sector are continuously supported by the international donors as well, primarily the European Union, as a support for the key reforms in the country (in this case development of ICT society).

Table 17

Macedonian Government (administration and committees)	
	Budget item: Information support of the Government (in denars)
Budget for 2019	205,115,000
Budget for 2020	367,490,000
Increase in 2020 compared to 2019	0.79%
First rebalance of the Budget for 2020	107,441,000
Second rebalance of the Budget for 2020	341,441,000
Budget for 2021	396,416,000
% of reduction with the first rebalance in comparison with the initial core Budget for 2020	–0.71%
% of increase of the Budget for 2021 in comparison to the second rebalance for 2020	16.10%

Table 18

	Budget item: Ministry of Information Society and Administration	Item categories (according to the Program) (in denars)	
		Information society	Development and implementation of ICT
Budget for 2018	1,425,107,000	103,679,000	92,890,000
Budget for 2019	1,570,316,000	116,037,000	104,699,000
% of increase in 2019 compared to 2018	10.19%	11.92%	0.13%
Budget for 2020	1,540,460,000	110,700,000	109,739,000
% of decrease or increase in 2020 compared to 2019	-1.90%	-4.60%	0.05%
First rebalance of the Budget for 2020	1,489,902,000	109,542,000	91,739,000
Second rebalance of the Budget for 2020	1,395,707,000	107,742,000	64,139,000
% of reduction – second vs. first rebalance	-6.32%	-1.64%	-0.30%