Digital Transformation and Digital Leadership in Turkish Public Administration

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***Abstract*—This study examines the process of digital transformation in Turkish public administration and the strategic role of digital leadership in this context. Digitalization is spreading in the fields of public administration and leadership. In public institutions where digitalization takes place, there are developments that positively affect both the state and the citizen in many areas such as preventing loss of time with the rapid realization of transactions, saving on many materials called stationery. The development of digitalization has also affected the concept of leadership. With this development, classical leadership methods have been questioned and digital leadership, a new leadership method in which digital technologies are actively used, has started to be preferred. This study aims to examine the stage of digital transformation and digital leadership in public administration in Türkiye. This paper discusses the key components of digital transformation, current initiatives in Türkiye, and the importance of digital leadership for ensuring a successful transition.**

***Keywords*—Digital Leadership, Digital Transformation, Public Administration, Türkiye**

I. Introduction

The way individuals connect, communicate, work, and learn has altered significantly as a result of society's digital transition. Today, classical management and bureaucracy applied in public institutions are seen as a waste of time and cost, and instead, faster, practical, easily accessible, transparent, low-cost and efficient processes are preferred with digital technologies and the internet. Furthermore, governments' interest in the transition from e-government to digital government has increased due to the COVID-19 epidemic. For these to be realized, there must be suitable ground and leaders, managers and personnel who are advanced in these areas. To retain their workforce and embark on a successful digital transformation path, governments are changing their workplaces, implementing digital user skills, and providing alluring retention programs.

The transition to an information society and digital transformation creates a difficult situation for underdeveloped or developing countries that have not yet completed their transition to an industrial society like Türkiye.

Therefore, this study examines the applicability of digital leadership in public administration in Türkiye. The aim of the study is to understand whether digital leadership is applicable in Türkiye. In this context, the main question of the study is "Is digital leadership applicable in Turkish public administration?"

The study, prepared as theoretical research, used the secondary data analysis method. The study was prepared by scanning domestic and foreign books, articles, theses, research reports, notices and electronic resources, and especially OECD reports were examined.

II. Digitalization, Digital Transformation And Digital Leadership

A. Digital Transformation

The concept of digital transformation, which is remarkable in recent years, on which almost all institutions have spent a lot of time, and which is actually an indispensable fact of today, is explained as a transformation system that prepares the appropriate ground for the digitalization of factors such as the activities carried out, the returns and benefits generated by the tasks and transactions performed, and the business and operating processes [1]. The definition of the concept of digital transformation by the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye is as follows: "The holistic transformation carried out in human, business processes and technology elements aimed at increasing economic and social welfare through the use and development of digital technologies".

Digital transformation is defined as the rapid and non-superficial transformation of work activities, competencies, examples and processes by emphasizing the variations and possibilities of digital technologies and how these are received by society and developing strategies [2]. According to the consensus on the concept of digital transformation, it is emphasized that digital transformation affects many aspects such as the business processes and ways of working of institutions and organizations, how they name their work, their relations with buyers, the culture of the organization and the maturity of the employees in their work [3].

In order to achieve digital transformation, organizations, businesses and societies need to harmonize advanced technologies with their actions and ways of doing business, lead and stay ahead of innovation, internalize progress by ensuring efficiency and socio-economic development, and involve all

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stakeholders and staff in this process [4]. Digital transformation refers to the integration of digital technologies into all aspects of public service delivery, internal workflows, and institutional culture. It allows governments to operate more efficiently, transparently, and responsively.

B. Digitalization

The transfer of business processes, information or data created through human intervention to the digital (numerical) platform is called digitalization [5]. The definition of the concept of digitalization in Gartner's IT dictionary is as follows: The use of digital technologies to change a business model and provide new income and value generation opportunities; the process of transitioning to a digital business [6].

Digitalization has its benefits in public areas as in other areas. The benefits of digitalization in the public area are explained as the quality of the activities carried out in the public area and the positive results it produces in the time it takes to realize them, the data provided to public policies being reliable and accepted, and the services provided to the public being low-cost and easily accessible by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by technology [7].

C. Digital Leadership

Digital leadership is explained as the ability of the leader to equip herself and the group she represents with new and advanced technological structures, to internalize these equipment and innovations together with the entire team, to change the existing management and leadership techniques and to take them to a different dimension [8].

What is meant by digital leadership is the creation of environments where people who are troubleshooters, strong willed, and have analytical thinking skills will be at the forefront and will operate in the digital environment where science and human interaction are created by putting knowledge, research and logic into action [9].

In addition, the digital leader should be a role model for other group members as a pioneer of creative and developing perspectives and ideas, should convey the importance of working together and exchanging ideas with team spirit to employees, should motivate group members with the team spirit they create and support them against changing conditions, and should be able to do all these by fully understanding technology and digital [10].

Digital leadership in the public sector involves more than simply endorsing technology. It requires visionary thinking, change management, and the ability to embed a culture of innovation and collaboration within government institutions.

Key responsibilities of digital leaders in public administration include:

- Designing and implementing digital strategies
- Overcoming resistance to change and fostering a digital mindset
- Enhancing digital literacy among staff
- Encouraging data-driven policy and decision-making

III. Digital Transformation In Turkish Public Institutions

Türkiye has a centralized power system with increased executive power due to its long history of robust conventional administrative procedures and culture. Türkiye has been governed with a unique presidential system since 2018. Despite being divided among the three branches, the executive nevertheless has the most influence and authority. Central and local governments make up the two tiers of the public administration structure. The president assigns the Presidential Cabinet. Due to administrative decentralization, Türkiye is divided into 81 provinces, each of which is made up of municipalities, villages, and metropolitan areas. The legislative branch is composed of 600 deputies elected for 5 years. About 86 million people live in the presidential and constitutional republic of Türkiye [11].

In 2008, the e-Government Gateway, one of the most tangible outputs of the Project, was opened for access, which brought significant gains in the provision of public services in Türkiye. Although it is seen that significant progress has been made regarding e-government in the intervening period, it is now understood that a more comprehensive digital state regulation is required, and concrete steps have started to be taken towards this end. As a matter of fact, the Presidential Decree No. 48, published in the Official Gazette No. 30928 dated 24.10.2019, defines digital transformation as “a holistic transformation in human, business processes and technology elements to increase economic and social welfare through the use and development of digital technologies” [12].

For many years, national development plans and thematic initiatives in Türkiye have incorporated the digital transformation agenda. But in 2016, The Republic of Türkiye's Ministry of Transport, Maritime Affairs, and Communications created its first thorough National e-Government Strategy and Action Plan. Following the first independent strategy's completion, the Turkish government carried on with its initiatives in line with the Development Plans. Despite having aims and objectives pertaining to digital transformation, the eleventh strategic document focuses on e-government applications in public services rather than the digital transformation of the public sector. The 12th development plan places a strong emphasis on digital transformation and the environment.

A. Digitalization Practices in Turkish Public Administration

Since the early 2000s, the government's strategy for digitization, digitalization, and now digital transformation has been sustained politically by the leadership's longevity. E-government—the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by governments as a tool to accomplish better government—is at the heart of the nation's public sector modernization drive, which aims to boost the effectiveness and efficiency of its sizable public sector.

In addition to the e-government portal that all citizens can use for many public works, there are also applications such as E-Nabiz (health), CIMER (disclosure), MERNIS (civil registration), POLNET (law enforcement), UYAP (judicial network), MERSIS (trade), MEBSIS (national education), TAKBIS (land registry and cadastre), E-SGK (social insurance).

B. Digital Transformation Office

With the referendum held in 2017, the Presidential Government System was adopted as the form of government in Türkiye, and this system started to be implemented with the presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2018. The new system has brought many innovations. One of these innovations is the establishment of offices under the Presidency in various fields. There are four of these offices: Finance Office, Human Resources Office, Investment Office and Digital Transformation Office. The Digital Transformation Office of the Presidency (DTO), established in this period, gathers digitalization efforts in public institutions under a single roof.

Türkiye brought its disparate digital transformation initiatives under one roof as it moved from a parliamentary to a presidential administration. The DTO gained the backing of the highest authority and the required legal foundation in 2018 with the issuance of Presidential Decree No. 1. The DTO coordinated all issues pertaining to digital services, digital public administration, cybersecurity, critical infrastructures, big data, and artificial intelligence (AI) under the direction of the president, who also holds the position of government Chief Digital Officer.

But the Digital Transformation Office was abruptly closed in 2024. Most of its tasks were transferred to the Cybersecurity Directorate and some to the Office of Finance and Investment. This comprehensive regulation aims to make the structure under the Presidency more effective and efficient. Gathering the authorities in the field of digitalization and cyber security under a single roof is seen as the beginning of a new era for Türkiye's digital future.

C. Public Sector Digital Workforce and Digital Leadership

It is essential that all public employees receive training in digital government user skills in addition to basic 21st century competencies to lead a successful digital government. Research shows that a clear vision articulated by strong leadership is highly important in promoting a change of working environment and establishing a work culture focused on digital practices.

Given the rigidity of the current organizational structure, it appears that the Government of Türkiye's public sector talent management system does not provide opportunities for job mobility between sectors to improve learning. The concern of losing talent to more alluring career routes, benefits, employment flexibility, and learning opportunities in the private sector may also be explained by this [13].

It appears that there are insufficient mentorship and feedback loop programs, which are essential elements of a successful public sector talent management system. This discrepancy stems from the challenge of creating a sustainable workplace that empowers digital talent to realize their full potential and improve public services.

Whether there is an interaction between leadership and institutional design in the process of governments' digitalization plans and projects is among the topics investigated. The studies and research carried out reveal that there is an interaction between leadership and institutional design. As a result of the studies carried out, it is evident that leadership and institutional design are inseparable. It is possible to see these in public areas with many traditional and solid bureaucratic bases [14]. At the institutional level, effective leadership can also enable organizations to take the initiative to develop a distinct vision that aligns with the government's overall strategic aims. However, for many organizations in the Turkish public sector, the existing lack of such institutional leadership appears to be impeding their progress towards greater digital maturity. The public sector struggles to attract and retain top talent, even if its population is young and tech-savvy.

Of course, to train future digital leaders, it is necessary to train young people of working age. Programs implemented to train future digital leaders are Career Gate, National Internship Program, National Talent Fairs, Talent TV.

D. Digital Transformation Barriers in Turkish Public Institutions

According to the Digital Government Index conducted by OECD [15], Türkiye remains below the OECD average in total. While it is above average in the Digital by Design, User-Driven and Proactiveness dimensions of the research, it is below average in the Open by Default, Government as a Platform and Data-driven public sector dimensions. Although the justice and health sectors stand out in user-centered digital government service design and delivery, administrators generally aim to reduce costs or spread technology by eliminating bureaucracy instead of being user-oriented and responsive to needs [12]. Leaders themselves currently see the urgency of eliminating bureaucracy in terms of cost reduction or technology deployment rather than a desire to be user-driven and respond to needs.

Türkiye has the chance to create and carry out the next digital government plan in a way that is both sustainable and cohesive. However, some ingrained customs in the civil service culture, such as the 1965 legal framework for civil servant management, may operate as a significant impediment to administrative and cultural reforms in the public sector. The vast geographic expanse of Türkiye may also make it difficult to promote digital transformation that is equally inclusive throughout the public sector.

There has been some improvement in Türkiye during the last ten years in terms of data, services, and infrastructure for communications. However, societal lack of digital skills and restricted access to Internet connectivity continue to be barriers to the broader adoption of digital technologies. Despite these obstacles, Türkiye has succeeded in expanding the range of digital public services available to both enterprises and residents.

There is a lack of institutional coordination, policies to foster a multidisciplinary work environment in the public sector, and assistance in forming teams with professional and socioemotional skills relevant to digital governance. The lack of a complete set of shared policies limits the administration's overall effectiveness and the coordinated and long-term transformation of the public sector, notwithstanding the institutional efficacy and capacities.

According to the OECD survey [13], senior officials and political leaders are not given training, which has an impact on how the workforce views the skills leaders could possess to successfully manage a digital transition.

Another societal concern impacting the context for the digital transformation of the Turkish public sector is uncertainty about the purchasing power of services valued in US dollars (USD) or euros (EUR) due to fluctuations in the value of the Turkish Lira (TRY).

IV. Conclusion

Since the early 21st century, advances in information and communication technologies have significantly altered the landscape of public administration. Citizens today expect faster, more transparent, and accessible public services. In this new environment, digital transformation goes beyond technical upgrades — it involves a comprehensive rethinking of how government institutions operate, make decisions, and deliver services. Crucially, the success of this transformation depends heavily on the presence of effective digital leadership within public institutions.

Türkiye has made notable progress in this area, particularly through projects such as the e-Government Gateway, Open Data Platforms, and Smart City Initiatives. However, digital transformation is not solely a technological process — it requires reform in legislation, strategic planning, and human capital management, supported by capable digital leaders.

Digitalization efforts in Türkiye began gaining momentum in the early 2000s. The launch of the e-Government Gateway in 2008 was a milestone, offering citizens streamlined access to a broad range of public services. In recent years, the establishment of the DTO has provided stronger institutional guidance.

Despite these advancements, several challenges persist:

- Lack of full interoperability and integration between public agencies
- Shortages of qualified digital talent within the public sector
- Insufficient awareness of data privacy and cybersecurity
- A legal framework that struggles to keep pace with digital innovation

These challenges highlight the importance of leadership that can manage not only technical transitions but also organizational change and cultural adaptation.

In conclusion, Türkiye need to create a digital environment, employ the people who have 21st century skills and, maintain the digital workforce.

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