

PROVIDING PUBLIC SERVICES TO CITIZENS VIA THE EPUAP PLATFORM

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Abstract. The provision of public services via the ePUAP platform contributes to the correct functioning of public administration in the digital sphere. A conducted study shows that an increasing part of society uses online public services, which increases citizens' trust towards e-administration and enhances the efficiency of communication between a public administration body and stakeholders. Moreover, the provision of e-administration services enables the society to strengthen their participation in administrative processes without visiting the office and contributes to reducing costs related to the functioning of public administration. Additionally, e-administration makes it possible to solve issues reported by citizens more quickly, which further increases citizens' confidence in public authorities.

Keywords: e-administration; e-services; computerisation; electronic platform for public administration services; information society.

INTRODUCTION

Public administration, as any other specific purpose organisation, needs to follow the rules of rational organisation of work in order to serve its function properly. The rules should ensure its efficiency. The efficiency of work in the context of public administration means that it works dynamically and flexibly, and at the same time efficiently, while such efficiency is measured both against financial criteria and the time needed to perform tasks [Leoński 2010, 51-52]. For this reason, citizens' expectations towards public administration itself are increasing as far as the use of electronic technologies by public administration bodies is concerned. The introduction of technical improvements in administration is possible and useful. Communication between a citizen and administration bodies is tending to improve as the latter become more friendly and open [Ganczar and Sytek 2021, 66].

E-government means the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in public administration accompanied by changes of an organisational nature and by acquisition of new skills in order to improve

the quality of public services provided, to enhance citizens' engagement in democratic processes, and to support the policy of the State [Werenowska 2018, 313]. It covers various stages that are identified on the basis of various criteria, such as: a) basic dissemination of information (one-way communication) is considered the most basic form as it serves only to provide information; b) two-way communication (request and response) covers an electronic mail system and the technologies used for transmitting information and data in the form of websites; c) services and financial transactions are online services and financial transactions that enable online self-service; d) integration (both vertical and horizontal) – at this stage, the government attempts to provide intergovernmental and intragovernmental integration; e) political participation – this stage means online voting, public forums and public opinion surveys conducted to achieve more direct and broader interactions with the government.¹

The use of ICT transforms internal and external relations of the public sector through network operations and ICT with a view to optimising the provision of public services, voters' engagement, and management. It can be widely defined as a governmental policy in the area of ICT, in particular web-based internet applications, aimed at increasing access to information and their transmission, and providing services to stakeholders, such as citizens, business counterparties, public-sector employees, and other governments, agencies and entities [Ganczar and Haładyj 2015, 61]. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the impact of providing public services via the e-PUAP platform on the proper functioning of public administration in the digital space.

1. THE CONCEPT AND ESSENCE OF E-SERVICES

The term “e-service” refers to the provision, by electronic means, of services that are automated, require limited engagement of a real person, and cannot be performed without information technologies [Szewc 2012, 110]. One of the criteria used for the purpose of classifying electronic services is the type of recipient of the service, and based on this criterion it is possible to distinguish: electronic administration (e-government), electronic commerce (e-commerce), electronic banking (e-banking), electronic marketing (e-marketing), electronic insurance, and electronic accounting [Miłek and Nowak 2021, 49]. According to K. Batko and G. Billewicz, the services in question should display the following features: a) simplicity, understood as being easy to use and intuitive for a user; b) originality; c) individualisation and personalisation, which means that a service is tailored

¹ E-governance: concept and significance, <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/25880/1/Unit-1.pdf>, [accessed: 23.11.2024].

to the needs of users and their preferences, and makes them feel that it is targeted directly at them; d) mobility and extending traditional e-services in the form of websites by new distribution channels, namely solutions for mobile devices dedicated for satellite or digital TV; e) open code, which means that the source code of the service is accessible and may be modified on an ongoing basis by an online community working on its improvement; f) socialisation, understood as a possibility to form an online community around a specific service; g) an option to provide cloud computing or web solutions, which help reduce problems with operating system compatibility and data backup [Batko and Billewicz 2013, 49].

It should be emphasised that using information technologies in public administration in order to improve the quality of public services provided and to enhance citizens' engagement in democratic processes is also considered e-administration [Wolny 2013, 19]. According to Romaniuk, the main aspect of the functioning of e-administration is its universal accessibility, usually perceived as operating without any time limits. He further emphasises that this means that a public administration office is available to citizens 24/7. This illustrates the changing organisational circumstances, as contact with a public administration body is continuous. However, it should be highlighted that procedures can only be fully completed during working hours [Romaniuk 2019, 275]. In this manner, as rightly pointed out by Smarż and Śwital, problems such as the need to visit the office during its working hours, waiting in the queue and manual form filing are eliminated. A lower number of paper documents reduces processing time and administrative costs, providing significant added value. Additionally, digital tools make it possible to solve issues reported by citizens more quickly and precisely [Smarż and Śwital 2024, 302-303]. It should also be mentioned that entities authorised to provide e-administration services are public sector entities, including national government entities, local government entities, and other organisational units of the public sector [Wolny 2013, 29]. The list of such entities is set out in Article 2 of the Act on the Computerisation of Activities of Entities Performing Public Tasks, according to which the provisions of the Act apply to: 1) national government administration bodies, state control bodies and law protection bodies, courts, organisational units of public prosecutor's offices, as well as local government units and their bodies, 2) budgetary units and local government budgetary establishments, 3) special purpose funds, 4) independent public health establishments and companies conducting medical activity within the meaning of legal regulations on medical activity, 5) the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS), the Agricultural Social Insurance Fund (KRUS), 6) the National Health Fund (NFZ), 7) national or local government legal entities established under separate acts to perform public tasks, 8) universities, 9) the federation of entities

that form the system of higher education and science, 10) research institutes, 11) institutes belonging to the Łukasiewicz Research Network, 12) organisational units established by the Polish Academy of Sciences, 13) the Polish Accreditation Committee, 14) the Council of Scientific Excellence.²

According to the case-law of the Voivodship Administrative Court, “the wording of the provision in question indicates that the list is exhaustive. [...] It should also be noted that in order to have access to the ePUAP as a service provider it is not enough to perform public tasks, but it is also necessary to enjoy the status of a public entity as strictly defined in Article 2(1) of the Act on Computerisation.”³

2. THE EPUAP AS A PLATFORM PROVIDING ACCESS TO SERVICES

The ePUAP, a Polish electronic platform for public administration services, is a centrepiece of the Polish system of e-administration. Ensuring its uninterrupted and efficient functioning is of paramount importance for the proper functioning of public administration and the Polish State in the digital space. For citizens, it is important to have access to the largest possible number of electronic services made available by the state, covering the range of most important procedures used by them. From the perspective of a citizen, e-administration means intuitive and simple interactive forms pre-filled with data already possessed by the public administration. Nonetheless, one of the most significant challenges in building citizens’ trust towards e-administration is to ensure the security of implemented solutions, which is of key importance in the context of the procedures used by citizens, taking into account the processing of data.⁴ According to Article 3(13) of the Act on the Computerisation of Activities of Entities Performing Public Tasks, an electronic platform for public administration services should be understood as an IT system through which public institutions make their services available via a single access point on the Internet. Service providers are public administration officers and other entities responsible for public tasks commissioned or entrusted to them.⁵ According to Śwital, the main objective of the ePUAP’s functioning is to provide a single platform for government administration

² The Act of 17 February 2005 on the Computerisation of Activities of Entities Performing Public Tasks, Journal of Laws of 2024, item 1557 as amended, Article 2(1).

³ Judgment of the Voivodship Administrative Court in Warsaw of 26 March 2021, ref. no. VII SA/Wa 1959/20, Lex no. 3176288.

⁴ See *Realizacja usług publicznych dla obywateli z wykorzystaniem platformy ePUAP. Informacje o wynikach kontroli NIK*, KAP.430.022.2020, Nr ewid. 200/2020/P/20/004/KAP, Warszawa 2021, p. 5.

⁵ See https://epuap.gov.pl/wps/wcm/connect/epuap2/PL/Strefa+Klienta_Pomoc/Co+to+jest+ePUAP/ [accessed: 22.11.2024].

services, which ensures a safe, uniform and legally binding electronic channel through which public administration services are provided to all citizens, businesses, and public administration entities [Śwital 2022, 146]. It should be emphasised that for the purpose of providing electronic services, public entities may use the following ePUAP functions that guarantee non-repudiation of certifications or statements, i.e.: a) creation and handling of electronic documents by natural persons and legal entities, b) submission of electronic documents, c) data exchange between the ePUAP and other IT systems, d) identification of users and accountability with respect to their actions, e) verification of the electronic signature, f) creation of services provided by a public entity or a group of public entities cooperating with each other on the basis of two or more services, g) processing of electronic payments, h) actions related to the process of trusted profile validation, i) verification of the compliance of an electronic document with its model specified in the central repository of electronic document models, j) issuance of official confirmations of receipt, electronic confirmations of payment and electronic time stamps.⁶

The benefits for service users, as observed by Ganczar and Sytek, include: a) time saving and enhanced productivity, b) automation of public services, c) initial verification in terms of errors, d) possibility of providing complex public services, e) ensuring flexible access that enables better time management for businesses and citizens. This is of vital importance for small enterprises and independent professionals who can have more time for their clients during working hours and handle administrative procedures when it is more convenient for them. Also employees can run administrative errands outside their working hours, reducing losses to their employers related to their absence, f) transparency of public services – access to public services on the Internet via a single point enhances the easiness of searching and using such services, ensures better access for entities and citizens, and strengthens their participation in administrative processes and political matters [Ganczar and Sytek 2021, 135-36].

Not only does the ePUAP bring benefits related to providing services to citizens, but it also allows public administration offices to create their own services. Offices may add services to the system independently or use pre-made forms made available by other institutions. There is also a ready service portfolio available for the administration to provide services to residents. The portfolio includes, among other things, the electronic drop box or the trusted profile. The use of the ePUAP platform brings public administration the following advantages: simplified creation of the electronic office; streamlining and increasing the uptake of electronic access channel to public administration; access

⁶ Regulation of the Minister of Digitalisation of 5 October 2016 on the Scope and Conditions of the Use of the Electronic Platform for Public Administration Services (ePUAP), Journal of Laws of 2023, item 2514 as amended, para. 10.

to free infrastructure for the exchange of data among public administration offices, as well as increased volume of public services that are available electronically [Michalczyk and Zalewska-Bochenko 2016, 392-93].

As emphasised by Śwital, key services for businesses include PIT and CIT settlements, motor vehicle tax settlements, VAT returns, stamp duty payments, reporting employees for health insurance, application for the postponement of health insurance contribution payments, requests for an advance individual or general tax ruling, statements on no tax arrears, registration of vehicles, and deregistration of vehicles. For the use of the ePUAP, an account and a trusted profile are required. The trusted profile enables citizens to communicate with public administration bodies and serves as an identification tool. Any electronic document may be signed with a trusted profile [Śwital 2023, 295-96].

It is also worth noting that according to a Voivodship Administrative Court judgment, “communication via the ePUAP (a national platform) or via a regional electronic platform for public services is based on the transmission of .xml documents [...]. Submitting an .xml document through the ePUAP platform [...] differs essentially from sending documents via email. Each .xml file includes exactly one main file in which other documents may be included, such as appendices uploaded from the local driver of the service user. However, the fact that the main file is an .xml file has significant consequences. Signing it electronically with a single signature ensures the integrity of all documents and data containers included in the main file. Although it is possible to sign each document separately within the ePUAP, this is not recommended as the signature itself increases the weight of the file, which means that a higher number of signatures would decrease the capacity of the ePUAP system.”⁷

3. EVALUATION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION ELECTRONIC SERVICES BY POLES

“The process of e-service development is not always a decision of citizens themselves, but a choice of the state that provides specific services to the society. This requires changes in legislation. [...] Such a transition in the provision of public services requires that business owners change their choices related to public services provision. This is to standardise the performance of public tasks and ensure easier and more efficient communication with a public administration office. The main aim of the computerisation of public administration is to ensure that public administration bodies can provide

⁷ Judgment of the Voivodship Administrative Court in Warsaw of 23 May 2019, ref. no. III SA/Wa 2894/18, Lex no. 2681520.

services to citizens and other stakeholders electronically” [Smarż and Śwital 2024, 305-306]. In mid-2023, the Behavioral Analysis and Social Research Team at the Institute of Finance conducted a study on the digitalisation of public administration, which showed that the vast majority of adult Poles (69%) rated the digitalisation of public administration services in Poland positively. The frequency with which citizens use online public services varies. More than 40% of Poles used more than one type of such services. The most popular service among Poles was the submission of the PIT return via the website of the electronic Tax Office: 80% of Poles claimed to have used this service in mid-2023. The second most popular public service available online was the mObywatel app, with 71% of adult citizens claiming to have used it. A large share of adult Poles, namely 42%, used the electronic form for the Child-Raising Benefit (known as 500+), 37% used information services: “Check your penalty points”, 35% reported the acquisition or sale of a vehicle online, and 35% used applications for family benefits other than the application for the Child-Raising Benefit (such as one-off childbirth allowance, Large Family card, Family Care Capital, parental allowance, school grant, maintenance allowance, family allowance). Less than one-third of citizens used the following services: Geoportal (31%), providing updated information to the labour office (29%), obtaining an excerpt from the register of lands and buildings (22%), creating/suspending/closing business activity (18%), submitting requests for direct payments for agricultural activity (Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture) (15%). Lower popularity of certain services may arise from the fact that they are dedicated to specific groups or types of activity. For example, the applications for the Child-Raising Benefit are submitted only by parents with minor children, while the requests for direct payments for agricultural activity (Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture) are submitted only by farmers.⁸

Twelve electronic public administration services were evaluated by Poles in the study. All of them were rated positively. The highest rates were achieved by the mObywatel app (85.3% of positive rates), the application for the Child-Raising Benefit (84.9% of positive rates), the “Check your penalty points” information service (84.9% of positive rates), submission of the PIT return via the electronic Tax Office (84% of positive rates) and applications for family benefits other than the Child-Raising Benefit (83.3% of positive rates). These were followed by services related to the identity card (80.9% of positive rates), Geoportal (79.7% of positive rates) and reporting the acquisition or sale of a vehicle (79.0% of positive rates). The third rank in terms of the share of positive rates went to services that are more

⁸ See *Cyfrowe osiągnięcia i wyzwania. Cyfryzacja administracji publicznej, w tym skarbowej, środowiska pracy i płatności w oczach Polaków w 2023 r. Raport 1/2024*, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Finansów, Warszawa 2023, pp. 7 and 15.

specialised and less frequently used by respondents, such as: obtaining an excerpt from the register of land and buildings (72.2% of positive rates), creating/suspending/closing economic activity (70.9% of positive rates), providing updated information to the Labour Office (69.3% of positive rates), and submitting applications for direct payments for agricultural activity (Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture) (68.7% of positive rates). The shares of Poles who evaluate online public services covered by the study (rather or completely) negatively were very low. In the majority of cases, namely with respect to as many as nine services, less than 6% of rates were negative. Higher shares of negative rates were observed in the case of obtaining an excerpt from the register of land and buildings (9.3% of negative rates), providing updated information to the Labour Office (9.6% of negative rates) and submitting applications for direct payments for agricultural activity (Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture) (13.3% of negative rates).⁹

CONCLUSION

When summarising the above considerations, it is worth noting that the provision of public services via the ePUAP platform contributes to the correct functioning of public administration in the digital sphere. A conducted study shows that an increasing part of society uses online public services, which increases citizens' trust towards e-administration and enhances the efficiency of communication between a public administration body and stakeholders. Moreover, the provision of e-administration services enables the society to strengthen their participation in administrative processes without visiting the office and contributes to reducing costs related to the functioning of public administration. Additionally, e-administration makes it possible to solve issues reported by citizens more quickly, which further increases citizens' confidence in public authorities.

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⁹ Ibid, p. 16.

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