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BEYOND DIGITAL ACCESS: CITIZEN-CENTRED PUBLIC SERVICES IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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Abstract. *Research problem: digitalisation has become a central instrument of public-administration reform, but the online availability of services does not necessarily make administrative journeys simple, inclusive or trusted. Research gap: comparative e-government studies often measure digital maturity and portal availability, while giving less attention to how Central European administrations transform digital access into integrated, accountable and citizen-centred service journeys. Objective: this article examines how digitalisation can support client- and citizen-centred public services in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia. Methodology: the study applies a qualitative comparative design based on documentary analysis and a structured review of public-administration literature; the analytical framework covers five dimensions: life-event service design, interoperability and the once-only principle, mobile and proactive delivery, inclusion and assisted access, and trust governance. Principal findings: the countries have moved beyond basic portal development, but progress remains uneven because strengths in digital identity, e-health, connectivity, skills, cybersecurity and life-event reform do not always coincide. Scientific novelty: the article proposes an integrated framework that links public value, administrative burden and digital-government maturity, shifting the analysis from the existence of digital channels to the quality, integration, accessibility and accountability of the full administrative journey. Practical implications: the study recommends life-event redesign, service-quality dashboards, institutionalisation of the once-only principle, assisted digital access, accountable mobile services, workforce reform, regional pilots and trust-by-design mechanisms.*

Keywords: public services, citizen-centred services, customer orientation, Central Europe, digital access, public value.

Introduction

Digital public services have moved from a reform experiment to an ordinary way in which many citizens meet the state. In Central Europe, public administration is increasingly encountered through

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portals, mobile applications, electronic identification, pre-filled forms, digital health records, notifications and data exchanges between agencies. This change is not only technical. It changes how citizens evaluate the state. Legality and formal availability remain essential, but they are now accompanied by practical questions: Can the service be found and understood? Does the administration ask for data it already holds? Can the transaction be completed without unnecessary visits? Is there support for users who cannot complete the process alone? Is personal data used transparently? Is there a meaningful route to correct errors or challenge decisions?

These questions are often described through the language of client orientation, customer orientation or citizen-centricity. The terminology is useful, but it is also politically and administratively sensitive. A citizen dealing with tax, social protection, health insurance, residence registration or a small-claims procedure is not the same as a private-market customer. Public services are often compulsory, monopolistic or rights-based. Citizens cannot always choose another provider. A client-centred approach in public administration should therefore not mean importing consumer logic into government. It should mean designing public authority in ways that reduce unnecessary burden, protect rights, strengthen inclusion and produce outcomes that citizens and institutions can recognize as public value *(Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017; Moore, 1995).*

Central Europe is a useful regional setting for this discussion. Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia are all EU member states and are covered by a common Digital Decade policy architecture. They are measured through EU-level indicators and share obligations related to digital public services, interoperability and cross-border access. At the same time, they differ in administrative traditions, territorial structures, digital-skills profiles, connectivity gaps, service-design capacity and political-administrative priorities. This combination makes the region analytically valuable. It avoids a narrow focus on Nordic or Western European digital leaders and instead shows how digital public-service reform works in administrations where ambition, law, legacy systems, skills and organisational routines do not always move at the same pace.

The EU eGovernment Benchmark 2025 is particularly relevant because it assesses around 100 key public services connected to nine life events: moving, transport, starting a small claims procedure, family, career, studying, health, starting a business and regular business operations *(European Commission, 2025a)*. The life-event approach matters because it is closer to the way people and businesses experience government. Citizens rarely think in terms of agency mandates. They experience public administration as a sequence of tasks: having a child, moving house, starting work, enrolling in education, registering a business, obtaining health services or resolving a legal problem. A service may be online in the narrow sense and still be difficult if the journey crosses several institutions, requires repeated documents or lacks clear accountability.

Recent international research has substantially advanced knowledge on digital-government maturity, user adoption, administrative burden, public value and AI-enabled public administration. Yet three unresolved issues remain especially important for Central Europe. First, many studies still assess digital government through aggregate maturity indicators and do not sufficiently trace the citizen journey across agencies. Second, the relationship between digital tools and public value remains under-specified when inclusion, contestability and data-governance safeguards are considered together. Third, Central European cases are often discussed through EU benchmarking but less often analysed as a regional laboratory where similar EU obligations interact with different administrative capacities, legacy systems, skills profiles and reform sequences. These gaps justify a comparative framework that evaluates digitalisation as a governance arrangement rather than as a list of online services.

The specific contribution of the article is the proposed five-dimensional analytical framework. Compared with approaches that focus mainly on portal maturity, infrastructure or digital take-up, the framework combines life-event design, once-only data reuse, mobile and proactive delivery, assisted access and trust governance. Its advantage is diagnostic: it shows where administrative burden is reduced, where it is merely shifted to citizens, and where digital integration must be balanced by transparency, human review and routes to remedy.

The article therefore pursues a clearly defined objective: to explain how digitalisation can create citizen-centred public value in selected Central European administrations and to identify governance conditions that make digital services simpler, inclusive and accountable. It asks three research questions. First, what does the public-administration literature suggest about the relationship between digitalisation, citizen-centred services and public value? Second, what patterns can be identified in the digital public-service reforms of selected Central European countries? Third,

what governance lessons can be drawn for the next generation of digital public-service reform within the region? The argument is that Central European administrations have largely moved beyond the first question of whether services can be put online. Their more difficult challenge is whether digitalisation reduces administrative burden, integrates fragmented service journeys, protects vulnerable users, makes data use accountable and improves trust.

Literature review

The literature on citizen-centred digital public services brings together several strands of public-administration scholarship, but these strands do not answer the research problem in the same way. Client-orientation research emphasises responsiveness and service standards; public-value theory asks whether digital services create collective value and legitimate outcomes; administrative-burden scholarship examines how rules and procedures distribute costs between the state and citizens; and digital-government research focuses on transformation, platforms, interoperability and data-driven services. A critical synthesis is therefore needed because each approach highlights a different part of the same reform problem.

The main limitation of the existing literature is not a lack of concepts, but fragmentation among them. Maturity models can show whether digital channels and key enablers exist, but they may understate whether users can complete a full journey without repeated proof or institutional handoffs. Adoption studies explain why citizens use or avoid e-services, but they do not always examine whether the service itself reproduces administrative silos. Public-value approaches capture legitimacy and outcomes, but they may remain too broad for operational service redesign. Administrative-burden theory is stronger at identifying user costs, but it needs to be connected to interoperability, platform governance and assisted access. This article responds to these limitations by combining the concepts into a single comparative framework.

The idea that public services should be responsive to users has a long and contested history. New public management promoted customer orientation, service standards and performance measurement, arguing that public organisations should become less producer-driven and more attentive to service users. This legacy remains important because it challenged administrative cultures that treated internal rules as more important than citizens' experiences. However, it also created a risk of reducing public administration to service consumption. Public organisations do not only deliver individual benefits. They allocate rights, impose obligations, protect public goods, redistribute resources and exercise coercive powers. For this reason, client orientation in public services must be combined with legality, equity and democratic accountability *(Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017).*

Public value theory helps to avoid a narrow interpretation of citizen-centred services. Moore *(1995)* argues that public managers create value when they align public purposes, operational capacity and authorising environments. Later work on public value and digital government shows that digital services can create value through access, efficiency, transparency, participation, trust and better outcomes, but these values may also conflict *(Bannister and Connolly, 2014; Twizeyimana and Andersson, 2019)*. Recent public-service logic research develops this argument further by showing that value is created or destroyed through interactions among users, public organisations and service systems rather than through technology alone *(Virtanen and Jalonen, 2024; Zyzak and Martinussen, 2024)*. A faster digital service is not necessarily more valuable if it excludes users with low digital skills, hides data use or weakens the possibility of human review. The central question is therefore not whether a service is digital, but what type of value is produced by the digital arrangement.

Digital-government scholarship has similarly moved beyond the early view of e-government as publishing information or forms online. Janowski *(2015)* describes digital-government evolution as a movement from digitisation and transformation towards contextualisation, where institutional and societal conditions shape what digital government means in practice. Mergel et al. *(2019)* define digital transformation in the public sector as deeper organisational change rather than simple technology adoption. This interpretation is reinforced by recent systematic work: Haug et al. *(2024)* show that digitally induced change in the public sector depends on drivers, implementation processes and outcomes, while Mergel et al*. (2023)* emphasise that artificial intelligence in public administration creates managerial and organisational implementation challenges, not only technical ones. In public services, the visible portal or mobile application is only the front end of a longer administrative chain involving legal rules, registers, data standards, back-office processes, frontline

routines and accountability mechanisms.

Recent literature also strengthens the article's focus on citizen experience and service adoption. Studies of e-government adoption show that perceived usefulness, ease of use, trust, data security, digital skills and satisfaction influence whether users actually adopt electronic services *(Ilieva et al., 2024; Popescu et al., 2024)*. These findings are important for Central Europe because formal online availability may coexist with age, education, rural-urban and skills-based inequalities. Asmawanti-S et al. *(2025)* also show that government digital services should be analysed through both public value theory and citizen perspectives, because the same service can be efficient for government but burdensome or exclusionary for specific users.

This distinction is central to citizen-centred design. Lindgren et al. *(2019)* argue that digitalisation changes public-service encounters by redistributing work between the state, public employees and users. Some tools reduce effort through pre-filled forms, clear guidance and automatic data exchange. Other tools move work to citizens, who must interpret rules, upload documents, correct registry errors or navigate portals that reproduce administrative silos. A citizen-centred approach should therefore examine the whole journey rather than the attractiveness of the interface. It asks what citizens must learn, prove, submit, wait for and possibly contest.

Administrative-burden theory is especially useful for such analysis. Herd and Moynihan *(2019)* distinguish learning costs, compliance costs and psychological costs. Digitalisation can reduce learning costs by making information clear and personalised; it can reduce compliance costs through data reuse and once-only procedures; and it can reduce psychological costs when services are predictable and respectful. Yet digitalisation can also create new burdens. Login complexity, inaccessible design, lack of human support, document-format requirements, uncertainty about eligibility, fear of data misuse and opaque automated decisions may make a digital service formally available but practically difficult. A recent systematic review by Hegemann and Ritz *(2026)* confirms that digital services can generate administrative burden through technological, organisational and individual factors, especially for less-resourced users and people with complex needs.

Co-production and co-creation add a further perspective. Public services are not simply delivered by providers and consumed by passive users. They are experienced and partly produced through interaction *(Osborne et al., 2016; Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012)*. In digital public services, this interaction may occur through forms, notifications, chatbots, help desks, call centres, service centres and data-exchange systems. Co-production does not mean transferring administrative responsibility to citizens. It means designing encounters in which users can provide necessary information and exercise agency without being forced to manage the state's organisational complexity.

The idea of government as a platform also matters. Cordella and Paletti *(2019)* argue that platform approaches can support public value when they enable coordination, interoperability and reuse, but they also require governance. A platform state is not automatically citizen-centred. Shared infrastructures may make services faster, but they can also make accountability less visible if citizens do not know which institution is responsible for a problem. Recent empirical work on the digital transformation of document-management services also shows that public-service digitalisation depends on organisational integration, process redesign and the alignment of stakeholder expectations *(Szedmak et al., 2025)*. The same applies to mobile identity, digital wallets and proactive services. They can reduce burden, but only if users retain control, access to explanations and routes to remedy.

International policy frameworks increasingly reflect these concerns. The OECD Digital Government Policy Framework identifies six dimensions of digital government: digital by design, data-driven public sector, government as a platform, open by default, user-driven and proactiveness *(OECD, 2020)*. The framework is helpful because it treats digital government as an organisational and governance question rather than a simple technology programme. The OECD Digital Government Index also emphasises that digital maturity involves design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of public services, not only infrastructure *(OECD, 2024)*. Recent maturity-model research points in the same direction: Waara *(2025)* finds that digital-government maturity models do not always integrate citizens sufficiently, which supports the need to evaluate digitalisation through citizen inclusion, experience and rights rather than institutional readiness alone.

EU frameworks add a legal and comparative layer. The Single Digital Gateway Regulation requires easier online access to information, procedures and assistance services across the EU, and it strengthens the importance of cross-border usability (Regulation (EU) 2018/1724). The eGovernment Benchmark measures user centricity, transparency, key enablers and cross-border

mobility, and in 2025 it introduced additional indicators linked to Single Digital Gateway implementation *(European Commission, 2025a)*. This makes the benchmark more demanding than a simple count of online services. It asks whether services are findable, usable, interoperable and available for users who are not domestic residents.

Trust is a final condition. Public trust in digital government is not generated by speed alone. It depends on reliability, cybersecurity, data protection, understandable communication, visible accountability and the possibility of complaint or appeal. Trust becomes more important as services become more proactive and data-driven. If a benefit is granted automatically, burden may fall. If eligibility is denied because of a hidden data problem, burden may increase. The more invisible the administrative process becomes, the more visible safeguards and accountability should be.

Existing studies make important contributions, but they also leave a gap that is relevant for the selected region. Much of the comparative literature either concentrates on digital leaders or analyses e-government maturity through aggregated indicators. Recent studies have strengthened understanding of digitally induced organisational change, AI implementation, citizen adoption, maturity assessment, administrative burden and public-service logic, yet less attention is given to how Central European administrations translate EU-level digital-government obligations into citizen-centred service journeys under conditions of uneven skills, institutional fragmentation and varying administrative capacity. The proposed framework contributes to this debate by treating digital public services as a configuration of design, data reuse, delivery channels, inclusion and accountability rather than as a single maturity score.

Materials and methods

The article uses a qualitative comparative design based on documentary analysis and a structured literature review. The aim is not to rank countries or to construct a statistical model. The aim is analytical lesson-drawing: identifying patterns that explain how Central European countries are moving from digital availability towards citizen-centred service quality. Such an approach is appropriate because the selected cases share an EU-level policy environment but differ in administrative capacity, skills, infrastructure, institutional fragmentation and reform priorities.

The selected cases are Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia. Their selection follows a most-similar systems logic combined with purposeful variation. They are comparable because all six are EU member states operating under the Digital Decade, Single Digital Gateway and eGovernment Benchmark policy environment, and all have post-socialist administrative legacies in which legal modernisation, EU conditionality and inherited organisational routines interact. At the same time, they vary in analytically useful ways: Poland has visible strengths in digital identity and e-health but continuing skills gaps; Czech Republic has strong 5G coverage and digital inclusion but needs deeper business and service transformation; Slovakia has a life-situations roadmap but below-average digital public-service performance; Hungary has strong infrastructure and e-health access but uneven wider digitalisation; Slovenia has developed infrastructure but skills constraints; and Croatia has progressed in infrastructure and cybersecurity while still facing inclusion and SME challenges *(European Commission, 2025c; 2025d; 2025e; 2025f; 2025g; 2025h).* This combination allows the article to compare cases that share a common policy framework while differing in the mechanisms through which digitalisation becomes, or fails to become, citizen-centred public value.

The materials analysed in the study are organised into three groups. The first group consists of academic literature on digital government, public value, administrative burden, co-production, interoperability and public-service design. The second group consists of international and EU-level policy sources, especially the OECD Digital Government Policy Framework, the OECD Digital Government Index, the State of the Digital Decade 2025 and the eGovernment Benchmark 2025. The third group consists of country-level European Commission materials for the six selected states, supplemented by legal context from the Single Digital Gateway Regulation.

Data collection was conducted through a structured documentary review. First, the study identified concepts that define citizen-centred digital public services in the scholarly literature. Second, it extracted country-level evidence from EU Digital Decade materials and benchmark reports. Third, it compared the six cases across a common analytical framework. The analysis focused on institutional patterns rather than isolated numerical scores, because the central question concerns the governance conditions under which digital availability becomes citizen-centred public value.

The analytical framework has five dimensions. They were selected because they captured the transition from online availability to citizen-centred public value. Life-event service design focuses on whether services are organised around citizen and business journeys rather than agency structures. Interoperability and the once-only principle focus on whether public bodies reuse data lawfully and reduce repeated document requests. Mobile and proactive delivery considers whether new channels reduce effort while preserving control and contestability. Inclusion and assisted access examine whether digital services work for users with limited skills, disabilities, territorial barriers or complex needs. Trust governance considers whether users can understand data use, accountability and routes to remedy (Table 1).

Table 1. Analytical framework for citizen-centred digital public services

Dimension	Operational meaning	Evidence to examine	Main risk
Life-event service design	Services are organised around the citizen or business journey rather than agency structures.	Number of steps, completion time, documents requested, handoffs between agencies, plain-language guidance.	Online services reproduce institutional silos.
Interoperability and once-only	The state lawfully reuses data it already holds and does not require citizens to move information between agencies.	Pre-filled forms, eliminated certificates, registry quality, data-sharing rules, correction procedures.	Data reuse becomes opaque or errors are transferred to users.
Mobile and proactive delivery	Mobile identity, notifications and proactive services reduce burden while preserving user control.	Mobile completion rate, delegated access, opt-out mechanisms, appeal routes, service-history visibility.	Mobile access becomes the only practical route to services.
Inclusion and assisted access	Digital services remain usable for people with low skills, disabilities, rural access barriers or language needs.	Accessibility testing, assisted sessions, rural access points, disaggregated satisfaction and failure rates.	Online availability hides unequal practical access.
Trust governance	Users can understand how data are used, who is accountable and how to correct or contest decisions.	Data-use logs, cybersecurity reporting, complaint handling, human review and algorithmic/automation audit.	Seamless services become opaque and difficult to challenge.
Source: Authors' synthesis based on OECD (2020), Janowski (2015), Mergel et al. (2019), Lindgren et al. (2019), European Commission (2025a) and Regulation (EU) 2018/1724			

The framework deliberately avoids treating digitalisation as a single variable. A country may have a strong portal but weak interoperability, high mobile uptake but limited assisted access, sophisticated identity tools but low trust, or strong legal foundations but fragmented implementation. The value of the framework is that it separates these dimensions while also showing their interdependence. Proactive services, for example, depend on interoperability, but they are legitimate only if trust governance, data-correction mechanisms and human review are also available.

The method has limitations that should be acknowledged explicitly. First, documentary analysis depends on the availability, comparability and framing of official and secondary sources; country reports may emphasise national priorities and may not capture all local implementation problems. Second, EU-level indicators are valuable for comparison but can simplify complex administrative journeys and may not reveal the lived experience of users who encounter errors, exceptions or accessibility barriers. Third, the absence of original empirical validation through surveys, interviews, service-log analysis or in-depth case studies means that the article identifies plausible governance patterns and policy implications rather than causal effects. Fourth, the study does not test the proposed framework through direct measurement of specific life events. These limitations are partly mitigated by triangulating academic literature, EU and OECD policy sources and country-level reports, but they also define a clear agenda for future empirical research.

Results and discussion

The EU Digital Decade creates a common reform horizon for Central European digital public services. The eGovernment Benchmark 2025 assesses the digital transformation of around 100 key public services across nine life events, and for the first time measures all life events annually *(European Commission, 2025a)*. The State of the Digital Decade 2025 provides country reports and fact pages that describe progress towards the 2030 digital targets and identify country-specific strengths and weaknesses *(European Commission, 2025b)*. Together these sources show that Central Europe is no longer at the stage of simply creating online portals. The central issue is how to make digital public services interoperable, user-friendly, cross-border, inclusive and trusted.

The first regional pattern is the growing importance of life-event thinking. The eGovernment Benchmark evaluates service journeys in areas such as family, career, health, study, moving and business creation *(European Commission, 2025a)*. This approach exposes a persistent weakness of public administration: services are often institutionally fragmented even when their front ends are online. A citizen may complete one step digitally but still need to obtain certificates, contact another office, understand a separate procedure or wait for inter-agency confirmation. Central European administrations are therefore under pressure to move from digital forms to integrated service journeys.

The second pattern is the uneven relationship between infrastructure and service quality. Several countries have strong connectivity or advanced digital infrastructures, but this does not automatically lead to integrated or citizen-centred services. The Czech Republic benefits from nationwide 5G coverage and progress in digital skills, but the country report also emphasises the need to accelerate fibre and very high-capacity network rollout, especially in rural areas, and to strengthen cybersecurity preparedness *(European Commission, 2025d)*. Hungary has solid digital infrastructure and above-average access to e-health records, yet broader digitalisation of businesses and public services remains uneven *(European Commission, 2025f)*. Infrastructure is therefore a condition of service quality, not a substitute for service redesign.

The third pattern is the continuing importance of digital skills and assisted access. Poland's country report notes that digital identification means are widely provided and online access to medical records is a strength but also highlights low digital skills and marked urban-rural and age differences *(European Commission, 2025c)*. Slovenia can rely on developed infrastructure, but it lags in digital skills and faces a shortage of ICT specialists *(European Commission, 2025g)*. Slovakia's younger generation shows promising digital skills, while structural barriers and fragmented skills policies hinder wider progress *(European Commission, 2025e)*. These cases show that digital public-service reform cannot be separated from skills, inclusion and user support.

The fourth pattern is that cross-border and transparency issues remain difficult. Slovakia's Digital Decade reporting indicates that performance in digital public services is below the EU average, especially for cross-border users, and recommends increasing the transparency and availability of digital public services *(European Commission, 2025e)*. This is significant because the EU's digital single market requires public services to work not only for domestic users but also for mobile citizens, residents, students and businesses. Cross-border usability is a high test of administrative maturity: it requires identity recognition, multilingual information, compatible data structures and clear procedures.

The fifth pattern is the strengthening of trust-related concerns. Croatia has made strong progress in digital infrastructure and cybersecurity, while also facing challenges in SME digitalisation and advanced technology uptake *(European Commission, 2025h)*. Poland has deployed measures to enhance cybersecurity across different levels of government *(European Commission, 2025c)*. The Czech Republic's country report recommends strengthening cybersecurity preparedness, particularly in critical infrastructure sectors *(European Commission, 2025d)*. These findings show that digital public services are increasingly treated as part of resilience and security policy. Trust is not an external communication issue. It is embedded in cybersecurity, data governance and accountability.

Poland illustrates a reform path in which digital identity, mobile access and health-related digital services have become visible elements of everyday public administration. The country report states that digital identification means are widely provided by government and that online access to medical records places Poland among the leaders in this area *(European Commission, 2025c)*. At the same time, Poland faces low digital skills and differences by age and urban-rural location. The policy lesson is that a strong digital identity ecosystem can support convenience and trust, but it

cannot by itself ensure inclusion. Mobile and identity tools should be accompanied by skills policies, assisted access and monitoring of service failure rates across user groups.

The Czech Republic presents a somewhat different profile. It benefits from strong nationwide 5G coverage and progress in digital skills, with relatively small gender and rural-urban gaps in basic digital skills *(European Commission, 2025d)*. The same reporting identifies weaknesses in very high-capacity network rollout, business transformation and digital civic participation. The Czech Republic therefore illustrates a common feature of digital reform: progress in one layer does not eliminate gaps in another. Strong connectivity and skills can coexist with incomplete service integration, limited civic participation and cybersecurity needs.

Slovakia is notable for the adoption of a roadmap for digitalising administrative procedures for 16 priority life situations in 2024 *(European Commission, 2025e)*. This is directly relevant to the citizen-centred agenda because it recognises that people experience administration through situations rather than institutions. Yet Slovakia also illustrates the difficulty of implementation. Its digital infrastructure lags EU average levels, particularly in rural areas, and its performance in digital public services is below the EU average, especially for cross-border users *(European Commission, 2025e)*. The Slovak case shows that life-event reform must be matched with infrastructure, governance capacity and user-friendly implementation.

Hungary shows the importance of distinguishing infrastructure from transformation. The 2025 country report describes very good digital infrastructure and above-average access to e-health records, but it also notes that digitalisation of businesses still lags EU peers, and that broader public-service digitalisation requires acceleration *(European Commission, 2025f)*. Hungary therefore raises a question relevant across the region: whether sectoral digital successes can be translated into cross-government simplification. E-health achievements are important, but they do not automatically redesign social, business, tax, education or local-government services.

Slovenia combines well-developed digital infrastructure with a skills challenge. Its country report notes activity in cutting-edge technology projects, including quantum, semiconductors, cloud and AI, while also identifying digital skills and ICT specialist shortages *(European Commission, 2025g)*. This combination is important because technologically ambitious states may still face practical service-delivery limits if users and public servants lack relevant capabilities. Citizen-centred digital services require not only advanced projects but also everyday competence in process mapping, plain language, accessibility, data protection and problem resolution.

Croatia has made strong progress in digital infrastructure and cybersecurity and has improved digital public services, while continuing to face challenges in SME digitalisation and advanced technology uptake *(European Commission, 2025h)*. The country also illustrates the relationship between public services and wider digital transformation. If citizens and businesses are expected to use digital public services, then public-sector reform must be connected to digital skills, enterprise digitalisation, local infrastructure and trust in digital systems. Public service digitalisation is not an isolated administrative agenda (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative patterns in selected Central European countries

Case	Relevant pattern	Implication
Poland	Wide provision of digital identification and strong online access to medical records, combined with low digital skills and age and urban-rural differences.	Digital identity and e-health can support convenience, but skills and assisted access remain essential.
The Czech Republic	Strong 5G coverage and progress in digital skills, with remaining needs in fibre rollout, business transformation and cybersecurity.	Connectivity helps, but citizen-centred service quality still requires integration, resilience and service redesign.
Slovakia	Roadmap for 16 priority life situations, but digital public-service performance remains below the EU average, especially for cross-border users.	Life-event reform is promising but must be matched with implementation capacity and cross-border usability.
Hungary	Very good digital infrastructure and above-average e-health access, alongside uneven business and public-service digitalisation.	Sectoral digital success should be translated into cross-government simplification.
Slovenia	Well-developed digital infrastructure and	Technological ambition must be

Case	Relevant pattern	Implication
	advanced technology projects, but digital skills and ICT specialist shortages persist.	matched by user capability and public-sector skills.
Croatia	Progress in infrastructure and cybersecurity, with continuing challenges in SME digitalisation and advanced technology uptake.	Security and infrastructure gains should be connected to inclusive service use and business-facing services.
Source: Authors' synthesis from European Commission Digital Decade country reports (European Commission, 2025c; 2025d; 2025e; 2025f; 2025g; 2025h)		

The comparison suggests that Central European digital public-service maturity is not linear. A country can perform well in mobile identity and e-health while facing digital-skills gaps. Another can have strong 5G coverage but weaknesses in fibre rollout, business digitalisation or public-service integration. A third can adopt a life-situations roadmap while still underperforming in cross-border availability. This unevenness is analytically important. It prevents a simplistic narrative in which digital government develops through identical stages everywhere (Figure 1).

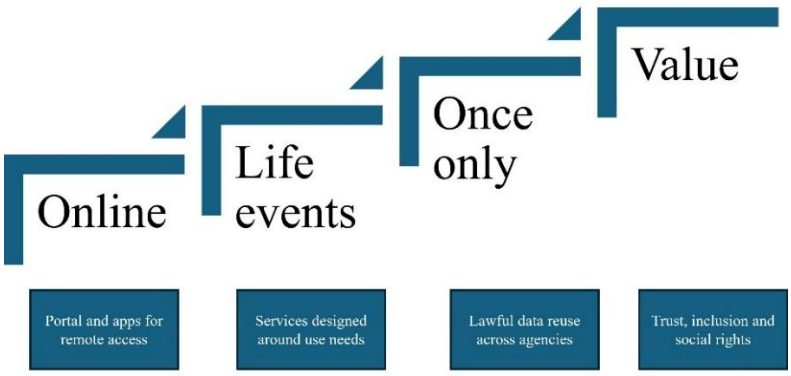


Figure 1 – Citizen-centred maturity pathway for digital public services
(Source: authors.)

The Figure 1 is used as an interpretive model rather than a decorative summary. It shows that the pathway from digital availability to citizen-centred public value is sequential but not automatic: portals and apps create access; life-event redesign connects services around user needs; once-only data reuse reduces repeated proof; and public value emerges only when trust, inclusion and accountability are built into the journey.

This synthesis reduces a possible descriptive reading of the country evidence. The comparison indicates that Central European maturity is uneven across layers. The technical layer includes portals, e-ID, mobile applications, registers, APIs, cybersecurity and infrastructure. The organisational layer includes process redesign, inter-agency agreements, service ownership, data-quality responsibilities and workforce skills. The normative layer includes rights, transparency, accessibility, appeal, inclusion and public value. Countries may advance in one layer while remaining weaker in another; therefore digital-government success should not be inferred from infrastructure or portal availability alone.

The analytical implication is that channel availability and journey completion are different reform outcomes. A service may be mobile-responsive, accessible through e-ID and described on a portal, but still require users to upload certificates, interpret eligibility rules, contact separate agencies or wait for manual confirmation. For this reason, evaluation should include completion rates, time to resolution, number of documents requested, frequency of in-person visits, complaint rates, appeal outcomes, accessibility compliance and satisfaction among different user groups. These indicators shift the discussion from descriptive digitalisation to measurable burden reduction.

The once-only and mobile/proactive dimensions should also be interpreted as administrative-rights issues. Once-only implementation is legitimate only when data reuse is lawful, understandable and correctable. Mobile delivery is citizen-centred only when it improves service visibility without becoming the only practical route to the state. Trust governance is therefore not an external communication issue but a core design requirement: data-use logs, cybersecurity safeguards,

accountable service ownership, complaint channels, human review and audit mechanisms must remain visible even when the front end appears seamless.

Policy lessons for Central European public administrations follow from the comparison. They translate the analytical findings into practical reform directions for governments and public managers.

Table 3. Systematised policy recommendations for citizen-centred digital public services

Recommendation	Implementation mechanism	Expected public-service value
Life-event redesign	Map end-to-end journeys for high-volume events before adding new digital features.	Fewer handoffs, shorter completion time and clearer service ownership.
Service-quality dashboards	Publish operational indicators on steps, documents, completion rates, complaints, appeals and accessibility.	Continuous simplification and public accountability beyond benchmark scores.
Once-only institutionalisation	Audit document requests and remove those already available in registers where lawful.	Lower compliance costs and fewer repeated proofs for citizens and businesses.
Permanent assisted access	Provide support through service centres, libraries, local offices, call centres and trained intermediaries.	Inclusion for older users, rural residents, people with disabilities and low-skill users.
Accountable mobile services	Show pending applications, deadlines, data-use history, delegated access and appeal routes in mobile accounts.	Convenience without loss of transparency or contestability.
Workforce reform	Train mixed teams in service design, data protection, accessibility, plain language and service recovery.	Organisational capacity to manage exceptions and improve user experience.
Regional/local pilots	Test redesigned journeys in different territorial contexts before national scaling.	Evidence-based scaling that reflects connectivity, staffing and skills differences.
Trust-by-design	Embed data-use logs, human review, cybersecurity safeguards and complaint mechanisms into service journeys.	Higher legitimacy for integrated, proactive and data-driven services.
Source: Authors' synthesis based on the comparative findings and analytical framework.		

The first lesson is to adopt life-event redesign as a formal reform method. Governments should select a small number of high-volume or high-impact life events, such as birth of a child, moving residence, unemployment, starting a business, studying, health care access or small-claims procedures. For each life event, reform teams should map all agency contacts, document requests, data exchanges, payments, waiting periods, eligibility checks and points of failure. The aim should be to redesign the journey before adding new digital features. Otherwise, digitalisation risks preserving the same administrative complexity in a more convenient channel.

The second lesson is to develop public service-quality dashboards. Existing EU indicators are valuable, but domestic administrations need operational indicators that are meaningful for managers and citizens. Such dashboards should include completion time, number of steps, number of documents requested, online and mobile completion rates, in-person visit requirements, error rates, complaint rates, appeal outcomes, accessibility compliance and user satisfaction disaggregated by age, education, disability, location and business type where possible. The purpose is not decorative ranking but continuous simplification.

The third lesson is to institutionalise the once-only principle. Each country should audit high-volume services and classify document requests into three categories: legally necessary and not available to the state; already available in a public register; or unnecessary. Requests in the second and third categories should be removed from citizen-facing procedures wherever lawful. At the same time, correction mechanisms should be strengthened. A citizen should not have to solve data-quality conflicts between agencies without institutional support.

The fourth lesson is to preserve assisted access as a permanent part of digital government. Assisted digital support should be provided through service centres, local government offices, libraries, call centres and trained intermediaries. It should be treated as a component of inclusion,

not as a temporary transition tool. The Central European evidence on digital skills, rural gaps and older users shows that online availability is not the same as practical access. A service that works only for confident digital users is not citizen-centred.

The fifth lesson is to make mobile services accountable. Mobile applications should not become only catalogues of services. They should help citizens understand their administrative relationship with the state: pending applications, deadlines, eligibility notifications, submitted documents, data-use histories, delegated authority, complaint options and appeal routes. Such an approach would turn mobile access into a public-service account and make administrative action more transparent.

The sixth lesson is to connect digital public services with workforce reform. Public servants should be trained not only in new systems but also in process mapping, plain language, accessibility, data protection, service recovery and complaint handling. Mixed teams should bring together legal experts, service designers, IT specialists, data stewards and frontline staff. Without such capacity, digital transformation remains dependent on technology suppliers and central IT units while everyday administrative culture changes slowly.

The seventh lesson is to use regional and local pilots before national scaling. Central European countries have territorial diversity and differences between urban and rural users. Pilots in different regions can show whether a life-event service works under varying conditions of connectivity, staff capacity, user skills and institutional cooperation. Scaling should follow evidence of reduced burden and maintained inclusion, not only technical readiness.

The eighth lesson is to treat trust governance as part of service design. Digital services should clearly show how data are used, which institution is responsible, how citizens can correct errors and how decisions can be challenged. For proactive or automated elements, public administrations should provide human review, audit and explanation mechanisms. Trust should be designed into the service journey rather than handled afterwards through communication campaigns.

Conclusion

Digitalisation can make public services more client- and citizen-centred, but it does not do so automatically. The Central European experience shows that online availability, mobile access and digital identity are necessary but insufficient. The decisive question is whether digitalisation changes the administrative journey: fewer unnecessary steps, lawful reuse of data, clearer responsibility, better inclusion, transparent safeguards and visible routes for complaint and appeal.

Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia show different strengths and weaknesses. Poland demonstrates the importance of digital identity and e-health but also the persistence of skills gaps. The Czech Republic illustrates the coexistence of strong connectivity and remaining transformation needs. Slovakia shows the promise of life-situation reform and the difficulty of implementation. Hungary highlights the gap between infrastructure and broader service transformation. Slovenia shows that advanced technology ambition must be matched by human capabilities. Croatia demonstrates progress in infrastructure and cybersecurity while reminding policymakers that inclusion and SME digitalisation remain essential.

The scientific contribution of the article is conceptual and comparative. Conceptually, it links three debates that are often treated separately: public value, administrative burden and digital-government maturity. Comparatively, it applies this synthesis to six Central European cases that share EU digital-government obligations but differ in skills, infrastructure, cybersecurity emphasis, service integration and reform sequencing. The framework therefore contributes to the literature by explaining why digital availability should be considered only the first stage of citizen-centred reform.

The framework also has practical value because it can be used as a diagnostic tool by public managers. It allows administrations to ask not only whether a service is online, but whether it is organised around a life event, whether the state reuses data lawfully, whether mobile or proactive delivery preserves user control, whether assisted access is available, and whether trust safeguards are visible. In this respect, the study advances current knowledge by translating broad citizen-centred principles into operational reform dimensions.

Future research should empirically validate the framework through user surveys, interviews with public servants, accessibility testing, service-log analysis and comparative case studies of specific life events. A particularly useful next step would be to compare the citizen journey for one service, such as birth registration, moving residence or starting a small business, using the same measurement template across the six cases. Such research would test whether the proposed

dimensions predict actual burden reduction, inclusion and trust outcomes, and would help move comparative digital-government scholarship from maturity description towards evidence of public value creation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Galy A.: conceptualisation, theoretical framework, and final approval of the submitted version.

Amirova A.: literature review, methodology, comparative analytical framework, documentary analysis, writing - review and editing, and final approval of the submitted version.

Bokayev B.: supervision, validation of public-administration interpretation, critical revision of the manuscript, and final approval of the submitted version.

Baktiyarov A.: data collection from EU and OECD sources, preparation of tables and figure, reference management, technical formatting, and final approval of the submitted version.

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ЦИФРЛЫҚ ҚОЛЖЕТІМДІЛІК: ОРТАЛЫҚ ЕУРОПАДАҒЫ АЗАМАТҚА БАҒДАРЛАНҒАН МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК ҚЫЗМЕТТЕР

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Аңдатпа. *Зерттеу мәселесі: цифрландыру мемлекеттік басқару реформасының маңызды құралына айналғанымен, қызметтердің онлайн қолжетімді болуы азаматтың әкімшілік жолын автоматты түрде қарапайым, инклюзивті және сенімді етпейді. Зерттеу олқылығы: салыстырмалы электрондық үкімет зерттеулері көбіне цифрлық жетілу мен порталдардың бар-жоғын бағалайды, ал Орталық Еуропа әкімшіліктерінің цифрлық қолжетімділікті интеграцияланған, есеп беретін және азаматқа бағдарланған қызмет жолдарына қалай айналдыратыны жеткілікті ашылмайды. Мақаланың мақсаты: Польша, Чехия, Словакия, Венгрия, Словения және Хорватиядағы клиентке және азаматқа бағдарланған мемлекеттік қызметтерді дамытуда цифрландырудың рөлін талдау. Әдіснама: зерттеу құжаттық талдау мен мемлекеттік басқару әдебиетін құрылымдалған шолуға негізделген сапалық салыстырмалы дизайнды қолданады; аналитикалық негіз бес өлшемді қамтиды: өмірлік жағдайларға негізделген қызмет дизайны, интероперабельділік және деректерді бір рет ұсыну қағидаты, мобильді және проактивті қызмет көрсету, инклюзия мен сүйемелденетін қолжетімділік, сондай-ақ сенім басқаруы. Негізгі нәтижелер елдер базалық порталдар кезеңінен өткенін, бірақ цифрлық сәйкестендіру, e-health, байланыс, дағдылар, киберқауіпсіздік және life-event реформалары бойынша ілгерілеу біркелкі емес екенін көрсетеді. Ғылыми жаңалығы қоғамдық құндылық, әкімшілік жүктеме және цифрлық үкімет жетілуі тәсілдерін біріктіріп, талдауды цифрлық арналардың болуынан толық әкімшілік жолдың сапасы, интеграциясы, қолжетімділігі және есептілігіне көшіруінде. Практикалық маңызы өмірлік жағдайларды қайта жобалау, қызмет сапасының панельдерін енгізу, once-only қағидатын институционалдандыру, сүйемелденетін цифрлық қолжетімділік және trust-by-design тетіктерін ұсынуда көрінеді.*

Түйін сөздер: мемлекеттік қызметтер, азаматқа бағдарланған қызметтер, клиентке бағдарлану, Орталық Еуропа, цифрлық қолжетімділік, қоғамдық құндылық.

ЦИФРОВАЯ ДОСТУПНОСТЬ: КЛИЕНТООРИЕНТИРОВАННЫЕ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЕ УСЛУГИ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ ЕВРОПЕ

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Аннотация. *Проблема исследования заключается в том, что цифровизация стала ключевым инструментом реформы государственного управления, однако онлайн-доступность услуг не гарантирует простоты, инклюзивности и доверия к административному пути гражданина. Исследовательский пробел состоит в том, что сравнительные исследования электронного правительства чаще оценивают цифровую зрелость и наличие порталов, но недостаточно раскрывают, как страны Центральной Европы превращают цифровой доступ в интегрированные, подотчетные и человекоцентричные сервисные маршруты. Цель статьи - определить, как цифровизация может способствовать развитию клиентоориентированных государственных услуг в Польше, Чехии, Словакии, Венгрии, Словении и Хорватии. Методология основана на качественном*

сравнительном дизайне, документальном анализе и структурированном обзоре литературы; аналитическая рамка включает пять измерений: дизайн услуг по жизненным ситуациям, интероперабельность и принцип однократного предоставления данных, мобильное и проактивное предоставление услуг, инклюзию и сопровождаемый доступ, а также управление доверием. Основные результаты показывают, что страны региона вышли за пределы базового развития порталов, но их прогресс остается неравномерным. Научная новизна заключается в интеграции подходов общественной ценности, административной нагрузки и цифровой зрелости для анализа качества полного административного пути, а не только наличия цифровых каналов. Практическая значимость выражается в рекомендациях по редизайну жизненных ситуаций, внедрению показателей качества услуг, развитию принципа once-only, сопровождаемому доступу и механизмам доверия-by-design.

Ключевые слова: государственные услуги, человекоцентричные услуги, клиентоориентированность, Центральная Европа, цифровой доступ, общественная ценность.

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