

**DIGITALIZATION AND PUBLIC POLICY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN TÜRKİYE: A  
STUDY ON E-MUNICIPALITY PRACTICES****Asst. Prof. Recep KAYA (Ph.D.)** **ABSTRACT**

*This study examines how technological transformation reshapes public service delivery and local public policy in municipalities in Türkiye. As administrative units closest to citizens, municipalities represent key sites where digitalization, smart city technologies and e-municipality applications become visible in practice. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative case study approach based on document analysis and the review of municipal digital initiatives. The analysis focuses on selected municipalities of different sizes and evaluates digital initiatives in areas such as transportation, environmental management, social services, disaster response and urban security. The findings show that digital tools improve operational efficiency, accelerate service delivery and support participatory governance through online platforms. However, the results also reveal structural challenges, including infrastructure gaps, digital inequalities, cybersecurity risks and limited institutional capacity. The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how technological transformation functions as a strategic policy instrument shaping sustainable, citizen-oriented and adaptive local governance.*

**Keywords:** Local Governments, Public Policy, Digitalization, Municipality, Administration.

**Jel Codes:** L32, Q38, Z00.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Recent rapid developments in information and communication technologies (ICT) have fundamentally transformed the structural and functional characteristics of public administration, reshaping the form and delivery methods of public services provided by local authorities in particular. The intensive integration of technological innovations into public services alongside digitalisation has reduced the influence of traditional management approaches and encouraged the strengthening of governance principles based on participation, accountability and transparency. In this context, local governments, as the administrative units closest to the public, have become the first areas of application for technological transformation.

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As public institutions in closest contact with citizens, local authorities occupy a pioneering position in the adoption and implementation of digital technologies. Smart city applications, digital municipal platforms and online request–complaint systems enhance procedural coordination while expanding channels of citizen interaction. These developments directly influence how local governments formulate and implement policies. For instance, smart transport systems contribute to traffic management, sensor-based environmental technologies support sustainability initiatives and digitally delivered social assistance services reduce dependency on physical service points.

Technological developments extend beyond improvements in administrative performance and increasingly shape the institutional quality of governance. Through open data initiatives, online guidance services and digital information systems, municipalities expand channels for public engagement and strengthen mechanisms of accountability. These digital platforms enable citizens to access public information, monitor administrative processes and interact more directly with public authorities, thereby contributing to more transparent and participatory governance structures (Meijer and Bolívar, 2016: 395–397). In addition, the integration of digital technologies into local governance practices facilitates new forms of interaction between citizens and administrative institutions and supports more responsive policy processes (Nam and Pardo, 2011: 185–187). In this respect, digital tools function not only as technical infrastructures but also as institutional instruments that reshape the relationship between public authorities and society by strengthening transparency, participation and collaborative governance mechanisms (Mergel, 2016: 47–49).

Although digitalization makes significant contributions to public administration, it also brings various challenges and risks. Inadequate digital infrastructure, unequal opportunities between urban and rural areas, concerns about data security, shortages of qualified personnel and budgetary constraints are among the main obstacles to this process. Therefore, digital transformation should be understood not merely as a technical innovation, but as a multidimensional process that requires strengthening institutional capacity, training of qualified human resources and ensuring social cohesion.

The digitalization of public administration in Türkiye began in the 1990s as part of the transition toward an information society. In the 2000s, it gained momentum due to global competition, European Union harmonization efforts and rapid technological developments. In 2003, the e-Transformation Turkey Project (e-Dönüşüm Türkiye Projesi) was launched, representing one of the first comprehensive public policy initiatives in the digital sphere. Thus, the research aims to contribute to the academic literature in this field and to provide practical guidance to public administrators.

The primary objective of this research is to examine how technology-driven transformation in municipalities in Türkiye, within the local government context, affects public policy processes and public service delivery. The study aims to develop policy-oriented solutions by evaluating the

opportunities that technological developments offer to local governments and the challenges encountered in implementing these opportunities.

The methodological framework of the study is based on two main components. Firstly, academic studies, institutional reports and theoretical sources from both national and international literature were reviewed to provide a comprehensive perspective on the effects of technological developments in the public sector. Within this scope, the implications of technology for local governments were discussed on a theoretical basis. Secondly, the practices of various municipalities in Türkiye have been examined through the analysis of smart city projects, e-participation mechanisms, big data-driven management models and digitalization-based municipal services. These analyses aim to reveal the concrete effects of technological reforms on public policies and service delivery at the local level.

Despite the growing body of literature on digitalisation and smart city initiatives in local governments, existing studies predominantly concentrate on infrastructure development, service optimisation and implementation processes. Comparatively limited attention has been paid to the policy implications of digital reform, particularly regarding how these changes reshape public policymaking, administrative capacity and governance practices across municipalities of varying size and institutional capacity. Addressing this gap, this study examines selected municipal cases in Türkiye to analyse how digitally driven reforms influence local public policies and service delivery. By adopting a governance-oriented and policy-focused perspective rather than an infrastructure-centred approach, the study aims to contribute to the literature on public administration and local governance.

In summary, digital transformation reshapes local public policy both by enhancing administrative performance and by strengthening participatory governance capacities. Addressing a gap in the literature, this study examines digital governance in Turkish municipalities through a policy-cycle perspective, linking service delivery, participation and institutional resilience within a centralized administrative context.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Public Policy and the Transformation of Governance**

The concept of public policy refers to the decisions, strategies and actions developed by governments and other actors to address public problems and meet collective needs. The term “*politics*,” derived from the Greek word *politeia*, has expanded beyond its classical usage to denote a broader understanding associated with governance and public administration in the modern period. In contemporary governance systems, public policy processes involve multiple actors, including political authorities, bureaucratic institutions, civil society organizations and private-sector actors (Howlett, Ramesh and Perl, 2009: 120–125).

Public policy is not limited to government decisions alone; rather, it represents a multidimensional process shaped by legal, social, economic and institutional factors. Harold D. Lasswell defines public policy as the study of “who gets what, when and how,” emphasizing the political and distributive nature of policymaking (Lasswell, 1951: 15). Similarly, Thomas R. Dye conceptualizes public policy as whatever governments choose to do or not to do, highlighting the importance of governmental choices in shaping social outcomes (Dye, 2017: 3).

The policy cycle model constitutes a central analytical framework in public policy studies. This model includes the stages of problem identification, agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation and evaluation (Dye, 2017: 33). At the local level, the policy cycle is more visible and direct because locally developed policies have immediate and tangible effects on citizens’ daily lives. Therefore, principles such as transparency, accountability and participation become more prominent in local policymaking processes.

Technological developments have transformed the structure and functioning of public policy processes. Digitalization, smart city initiatives and data-driven governance models have accelerated decision-making processes, improved service quality and expanded opportunities for citizen participation (Nam and Pardo, 2011: 185–187). Digital platforms enable citizens to participate in policymaking, access public services and interact directly with administrative institutions. In this context, public policy has evolved from a hierarchical, state-centred activity into a governance-oriented process characterized by collaboration, transparency and responsiveness (Rhodes, 1996: 652–653).

Consequently, contemporary public policy is increasingly shaped by participatory, technology-driven, multi-actor governance systems. At the local level, digitalisation fosters citizen-centred and transparent policy processes and improves the efficiency of public resource use.

## **2.2. Public Services and Changing Models of Service Delivery**

Public services refer to activities carried out by the state or other authorized public institutions to meet collective needs and maintain public welfare. These services encompass functions that individuals cannot effectively perform on their own and that market mechanisms alone cannot provide efficiently (Gözübüyük, 2016: 145). Thus, public services fulfil both public order and social justice functions.

Historically, public services were delivered directly by the state through centralized bureaucratic structures. Classical public administration approaches emphasized hierarchical organization, strict rules and centralized authority. However, since the late twentieth century, public service delivery models have undergone significant transformation. In particular, New Public Management (NPM) approaches introduced market-oriented reforms, performance measurement and efficiency-based service delivery models (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992: 78). These approaches encouraged the adoption of private-sector management techniques in public institutions and promoted customer-oriented service provision.

Public services are generally delivered through three main models:

- ✓ Direct provision by public institutions,
- ✓ Contracting or outsourcing to private-sector actors,
- ✓ Hybrid models involving public–private partnerships or civil society collaborations (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017: 89–92).

The rise of digital technologies has further transformed public service delivery models. E-government systems and digital service portals have enabled governments to provide services more efficiently, reduce bureaucratic delays and increase accessibility (Heeks, 2006: 23–24). According to Dunleavy et al., digital-era governance replaces traditional bureaucratic structures with more integrated, user-centered and technology-driven service models (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow and Tinkler, 2006: 5–7).

Digitalisation has contributed to making public administration more accountable, citizen-centred and transparent. These changes are reflected in efforts to reduce bureaucratic procedures, place greater emphasis on performance in audits, accelerate compliance-related processes and expand the scope of online services. Furthermore, digitalization has increased the controllability and applicability of development plans, strategic reports and budgets, while enabling more flexible and active forms of public–private collaboration. In the current period, the use of digital service portals, the proliferation of international standards and broader governance reforms have reshaped traditional bureaucratic practices and their relationship with political decision-making. With the e-government portal, cumbersome and slow bureaucratic processes have been reduced, public participation has increased and the influence of political instruments on governance has been strengthened (Demirel, 2025: 178). In general, the structure, operation and service delivery in public administration have been redefined with digitalization-based technologies. As Yılmaz and Mecek (2021: 132–133) argue, the integration of digital and physical structures has contributed to the emergence of a governance approach with broader scope and greater impact.

In Türkiye, the provision of public services is constitutionally regulated. Article 128 of the Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye states that “*the fundamental and permanent duties required by public services carried out by the state and other public corporate bodies shall be performed by civil servants and other public employees*”. Municipalities play a central role in delivering local services such as transportation, environmental planning, infrastructure and social assistance (Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye, 1982). Therefore, the evolution of public service delivery reflects a shift from centralized, hierarchical models toward more flexible, multi-actor and digitally enabled service systems.

### 2.3. Theoretical Approaches to Public Administration and Local Governance

The transformation of public service delivery is closely linked to theoretical shifts in public administration. Four major approaches—classical public administration, NPM, governance and the New Public Service (NPS) - have shaped the evolution of local government practices.

Classical public administration is based on Weberian bureaucracy and Taylorist scientific management principles. This approach emphasizes hierarchical structures, centralized authority, rule-based decision-making and administrative discipline (Eryılmaz, 2012: 148). Within this approach, citizen participation is limited and administrative elites dominate decision-making processes. NPM approach emerged in the 1980s as a response to economic crises, perceived inefficiency and bureaucratic rigidity. It introduced market-based reforms, performance measurement and customer-oriented service delivery (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992: 76-78). As a result, local governments began to adopt strategic planning, performance indicators and more flexible organizational structures.

The governance approach, which gained prominence in the 1990s, emphasizes multi-actor decision-making processes involving public institutions, private actors and civil society organizations (Pierre and Peters, 2000: 22). Governance prioritizes transparency, accountability and participation as key principles in policymaking. NPS approach further redefined the role of citizens by viewing them not as customers but as democratic stakeholders. This approach emphasizes public interest, social values and participatory governance processes (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2015: 41). In addition to these approaches, digital-era governance has emerged as a contemporary paradigm. This model emphasizes integrated service delivery, citizen-centric digital platforms and the use of information technologies to redesign administrative processes (Dunleavy et al., 2006: 9–11). Taken together, these theoretical perspectives point to a shift from hierarchical, centralized public administration toward more participatory, citizen-centred and digitally mediated governance systems.

**Table 1. Comparison of Theoretical Approaches by Period, Service Delivery and Citizen Participation**

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>Service Delivery Approach</b>	<b>Citizen Role</b>
Classical Public Administration	Classical Period	Bureaucratic, hierarchical, centralized control	Managed
NPM	Modern Period (Post-1980)	Market mechanisms, efficiency, effectiveness	Customer
Governance	Modern Period (Post-1990)	Multi-actor, transparent, accountable	Stakeholder
NPS	Modern Period (Post-2000)	Participatory, inclusive, focused on common benefit	Democratic citizen

Table 1 summarises the historical transformation of public administration approaches from centralized and hierarchical models to participatory and citizen-oriented governance structures. This

theoretical evolution forms the conceptual foundation for understanding digital governance practices in contemporary local governments.

#### **2.4. Local Governments and Local Public Policies**

Local governments are administrative institutions established to meet the common needs of communities within specific geographical boundaries. Although they operate under the administrative supervision of the central government, they possess administrative and financial autonomy and legal personality under public law (Eryılmaz, 2012: 45–47).

Local governments play a critical role in both service delivery and local policymaking. In many contexts, municipalities are key actors in the development and implementation of policies related to transportation, environmental management, social assistance and infrastructure. Citizen participation mechanisms such as local referendums, participatory budgeting and digital consultation platforms can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of local policies (Shah and Shah, 2006: 14–16).

In Türkiye, the legal framework of local governments is defined by the 1982 Constitution, which recognizes municipalities, villages and provincial administrations as local government units. Metropolitan municipalities, which have expanded authority and resources, play a significant role in shaping local public policies (Keleş, 2016: 211–213). However, administrative tutelage and financial dependence on the central government may limit their policy autonomy (Mecek and Atmaca, 2020: 2070–2072).

Technological developments have become a key factor influencing local policymaking. Applications such as big data analytics, digital participation platforms and smart city systems have accelerated decision-making processes and increased efficiency (Nam and Pardo, 2011: 185–187). According to Anthopoulos, smart city technologies transform local governance by integrating digital infrastructures into public services and urban management systems (Anthopoulos, 2017: 102–105).

In local governments, digitalization refers not only to delivering public services through digital and information technologies but also to strengthening transparency in decision-making and enabling citizen participation in policy processes and service design. This process encompasses the transfer of public services to digital applications, smart cities implementation, digitalization-based governance systems and open data-based public policies (Meijer and Bolivar, 2016: 26).

#### **2.5. Restructuring Local Governments in the Era of Globalization and Digitalization**

Globalization and rapid technological change have significantly transformed the structure and functions of local governments. Local governments that once focused mainly on basic infrastructure services now operate in a competitive global environment, seek to attract investment and engage with international networks and partners (Castells, 2010: 71–73). This restructuring is closely linked to the

rise of governance-oriented administrative models. Over time, traditional hierarchical structures have increasingly given way to participatory, network-based and multi-actor arrangements (Pierre, 2005: 452–454). As a result, collaboration among local governments, civil society and private-sector actors has become more prominent.

E-governance is the digitalized form of governance processes, in which information and communication technologies are used to deliver public services, support citizen engagement and facilitate interaction between the state and society. Through digital platforms, citizens can access services, follow administrative decisions and take part in decision-making mechanisms. In Türkiye, e-government applications enhance participation by allowing individuals to monitor decisions, submit petitions and obtain public information. In particular, the Presidential Communication Centre (CİMER) supports both efficiency and democratic processes by enabling citizens to communicate directly with public authorities (Fang, 2002: 4–6). Black (2000) defines governance as “a conscious effort to control, regulate, or influence the behaviour of others,” emphasizing its multi-actor character. Singh and Sharma (2009) describe e-governance as a technology-based model that improves service quality, participation and accountability, while Saparnie (2013) conceptualizes it as an umbrella structure encompassing e-government and e-democracy.

Definitions related to the e-government portal highlight the scope of the concept from different perspectives:

- ✓ E-government requires the timely provision of high-quality information and communication technology services in line with public expectations (Şahin and Örselli, 2020: 56–57),
- ✓ E-government involves implementing electronic-based applications in public administration to enhance the effectiveness of public service delivery and to support citizen participation through digital channels.
- ✓ E-government also entails providing services to citizens as well as civil society and non-profit organisations through web-based applications in an efficient, secure and cost-effective manner (Ekinci and Özyardımcı, 2022: 38).

Although definitions may vary, e-government can generally be considered a comprehensive system composed of policies, processes and human-centred service applications. These features contribute to improving administrative performance by streamlining procedures, reducing operational burdens and promoting transparency and coordination. In this context, e-government applications function not only as managerial reform tools but also as instruments that reinforce democratic governance and participatory public administration (Örselli and Taşpınar, 2020: 13; Meccek, 2018: 2312).

In Türkiye, the restructuring of local governments accelerated after the 1980s under the influence of neoliberal economic policies and globalization. In this period, reforms related to European Union harmonization, democratization, strategic planning and financial restructuring have strengthened local government capacities (Keleş, 2016: 215–218). Digitalization has become one of the most significant drivers of this restructuring process. E-government systems, smart city initiatives and digital service platforms have transformed not only service delivery but also policymaking processes. According to Mergel, Edelman and Haug, digital transformation in the public sector involves not only technological change but also organizational and cultural transformation within public institutions (2019: 6–8).

Similarly, the concept of the digital state represents the next phase of administrative transformation, in which policy processes, service delivery and decision-making are driven by digital infrastructures and data-based governance models (OECD, 2020). Digitalization refers to the fundamental reconfiguration of public services through technologies such as big data, cloud computing and artificial intelligence, aiming to increase speed, security and efficiency in service delivery (Mergel et al., 2019: 7–9). In Türkiye, national-level applications such as the Central Physician Appointment System (MHRS) and the Hayat Eve Sığar (HES) platform illustrate how data-driven systems can enhance service quality and crisis management capacity. This national-level transformation has also shaped local governments by normalizing digital service expectations and accelerating the adoption of e-municipality practices.

Despite the growing body of research on e-government, digital governance and smart city practices, the literature remains fragmented in three respects. First, a significant portion of international studies focuses on technological infrastructure and service efficiency, while normative and public policy dimensions are addressed more indirectly (Mergel et al., 2019; Heeks, 2006). Second, studies conducted in the Turkish context often examine e-municipality practices descriptively or institutionally, without embedding them systematically within the public policy cycle or governance theory framework. Third, although the COVID-19 pandemic has generated an expanding literature on crisis governance and digital transformation, limited research examines how local digital governance practices reshape public policy processes in a sustained and structural manner rather than merely as temporary emergency responses (United Nations, 2022; OECD, 2020).

This study addresses these gaps by integrating the digital governance practices of local governments in Türkiye into a public policy analytical framework and by examining pandemic-accelerated digitalisation not merely as a technological shift but as a broader transformation shaping agenda setting, service delivery, participation mechanisms and institutional capacity. By examining selected metropolitan municipalities through a qualitative case-based approach, the study contributes to the literature in three ways: (i) it connects e-municipality applications to the broader public policy cycle, (ii) it analyzes digital governance in relation to democratic participation and accountability beyond technical efficiency and (iii) it situates the Turkish experience within contemporary debates on digital

state transformation. In doing so, the study offers a structured and policy-oriented perspective that moves beyond descriptive accounts of digital services and highlights their implications for local governance capacity and democratic practice.

### 3. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design in order to examine how digitalization practices in local governments in Türkiye reshape public service delivery and local public policy processes. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the objective of the research is not to measure the level of digitalization through numerical indicators, but rather to interpret institutional transformation, governance practices and policy implications within their broader administrative and social context. Qualitative research designs are particularly suitable for exploring complex governance processes and institutional change, as they enable researchers to analyse policy practices within their real-life context (Yin, 2018: 15–18).

Within this framework, the study follows a case-based analytical strategy focusing on selected metropolitan municipalities that have demonstrated relatively advanced digital governance practices. Case study research allows an in-depth investigation of contemporary administrative processes and policy practices within their institutional settings (Yin, 2018: 45–50). The qualitative design therefore enables the study to examine institutional arrangements, policy instruments and digital service applications implemented by local governments. Rather than concentrating on technical performance indicators or quantitative metrics, the study seeks to understand how digital tools influence governance structures, participation mechanisms and the organization of local public services.

The cases included in the study were determined through purposive sampling. Metropolitan municipalities were selected primarily because they generally possess greater administrative capacity, financial resources and technological infrastructure compared to smaller municipalities. In this context, Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Konya and Gaziantep were included in the analysis due to their visible smart city initiatives, e-municipality applications and digital participation platforms. Another important criterion in the selection of cases was the accessibility of institutional data and the transparency of municipal digital platforms. In addition, the continuity of digital service provision during and after the COVID-19 pandemic was taken into consideration. The objective of this selection strategy was not to produce statistically generalizable results, but rather to examine structurally significant examples that reflect broader patterns of digital transformation in local governance in Türkiye.

The empirical data used in the study consist of various institutional and publicly accessible documents. These include municipal strategic plans, annual activity reports, official municipal websites, digital service portals, policy documents and national strategy papers related to digital governance. In addition, publicly available information regarding e-government services, smart city initiatives and digital participation mechanisms was examined. The primary data collection technique employed in the

study is document analysis. Document analysis is widely used in qualitative research as a systematic method for examining institutional records and policy materials (Bowen, 2009: 29–30). In this study, the collected documents were reviewed systematically and organized according to analytical themes such as service delivery transformation, participation mechanisms, transparency, institutional capacity and digital inequality.

The analytical process followed a thematic interpretation strategy. Thematic analysis is frequently used in qualitative research to identify recurring patterns and themes within textual data (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79–81). In the first stage, relevant digital governance practices and applications were identified through a coding process based on the examined documents. In the second stage, these codes were grouped into broader analytical categories reflecting key dimensions of digital governance. In the final stage, these categories were interpreted within a broader thematic framework in order to explain how digitalization influences public policy processes and administrative practices in local governments. In addition, similarities and differences among the selected municipalities were comparatively evaluated. The findings were interpreted within the theoretical perspectives of governance theory, New Public Management and digital state literature. Throughout the analysis, particular attention was given to maintaining a clear distinction between empirical observations and theoretical interpretation in order to ensure analytical clarity.

Despite its analytical contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the research focuses only on selected metropolitan municipalities and therefore does not represent all local governments in Türkiye. Second, the analysis relies primarily on publicly available documents and digital platforms; consequently, internal administrative processes and informal decision-making mechanisms could not be examined directly. Finally, the study does not include interviews or survey-based data, which may limit the depth of stakeholder perspectives. Nevertheless, the selected cases provide valuable insights into the structural transformation of local governance practices through digitalization and contribute to understanding how technological change reshapes policy processes at the local level.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the qualitative analysis of digital governance practices in local governments in Türkiye. The findings are based on document analysis of municipal websites, mobile applications, strategic plans, institutional reports and secondary data sources, focusing on the scope, distribution and functional characteristics of digital municipal services.

##### **4.1. Digital Governance Processes and Practices in Turkish Public Administration**

The findings demonstrate that digital governance in Türkiye functions as an institutional restructuring process in which information and communication technologies reorganize administrative interaction and service coordination at the local level. Rather than merely digitizing existing bureaucratic

procedures, municipalities increasingly operate through platform-based and data-driven administrative mechanisms (Eryılmaz, 2012: 228–230).

The findings of this study indicate that digital governance practices in Turkish public administration have expanded significantly through centralized digital service platforms and institutional e-applications. In practice, digital tools are not limited to basic online service provision; they are increasingly used for complaint management, information requests, internal coordination and performance monitoring. This reflects a structural transformation in public service delivery, characterized by reduced physical interaction, standardized procedures and greater reliance on digital interfaces (Eryılmaz, 2012: 146).

The analysis shows that national-level platforms such as the e-government portal and CİMER play a central role in structuring citizen–administration interaction. These systems enable uninterrupted access to public services regardless of time and location. At the same time, they allow public institutions to collect and respond to citizen demands in a more systematic and traceable manner. The integration of multiple public services into a single digital access point has contributed to procedural efficiency and reduced bureaucratic fragmentation within the administrative system (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Digitalization reflects not only a technical reform but also a public administration approach related to governance (Bekkers and Homburg, 2007: 216-218).

Findings further demonstrate that digital governance practices extend across different policy fields. In the health sector, applications such as the Central Physician Appointment System (MHRS) facilitate access to services and improve coordination. During extraordinary situations, digital systems have been used to ensure information flow and administrative continuity. At the local level, digital governance is supported by municipal websites, mobile applications and smart city technologies. Metropolitan municipalities, in particular, employ digital systems in transportation management, environmental monitoring and energy efficiency. Applications based on real-time data contribute to operational efficiency and support decision-making processes in urban governance (Keleş, 2016: 217-221).

However, the findings reveal that the scope and effectiveness of digital governance practices vary among municipalities. Differences in institutional capacity, technological infrastructure and qualified human resources directly affect the depth of digital integration. While some metropolitan municipalities demonstrate advanced digital applications, smaller municipalities exhibit more limited service diversity. Overall, digital governance has become an integral component of public administration in Türkiye, increasing accessibility and procedural efficiency. Nevertheless, infrastructure limitations, digital literacy levels and data security concerns continue to shape the sustainability and uniformity of this transformation. Although digital governance emphasizes multi-actor participation, in practice many municipalities limit interaction to one-way information sharing rather than genuine deliberative

engagement. This restricts citizens' actual influence on decision-making processes and weakens transparency, particularly in contexts where open data practices remain underdeveloped (Chadwick, 2011: 84).

#### **4.2. Digital Governance (E-Municipality) Applications and Importance in Local Governments in Türkiye**

Local governments in Türkiye have undergone significant transformations in service delivery due to technological developments, urbanisation and increasing global competition. One of the most visible dimensions of this transformation is the adoption of digital governance practices at the municipal level. The concept of e-municipality refers to the integration of digital technologies into local public services in order to provide faster, more efficient, transparent and accessible service delivery (Anthopoulos, 2017: 102–105). The findings of this study show that this transformation is reflected in the widespread adoption and diversification of digital municipal applications across municipalities of different sizes.

Empirical findings indicate that e-applications facilitate the digitisation of core municipal services such as tax payments, water bill inquiries, zoning information, permit applications, debt inquiries and online petitions and complaints. These services reduce bureaucratic procedures and simplify citizens' daily interactions with local governments (Bozkurt and Kaman, 2023). Particularly in metropolitan municipalities, digital service portals have become the primary interface between citizens and municipal administrations. This development demonstrates that digital governance at the local level is not limited to technological modernization but represents a structural shift in service delivery practices.

The institutionalization of e-municipality practices in Türkiye began in the early 2000s within the broader e-Government program. With the launch of the e-Government Portal in 2008, municipal services were gradually integrated into a centralized digital system, enabling citizens to access local services through a unified platform (Linders, 2012: 448). The findings suggest that this integration strengthened procedural coordination between central and local levels while also expanding citizen access to municipal services.

**Table 2. Historical Development of the E-Municipality Concept**

<b>Time/Period</b>	<b>Researcher/Writer</b>	<b>The E-Municipality Approach and Use of the Concept</b>
<b>2002</b>	Murat Erdal	In local governments, information and communication technologies enable online public service delivery, internal integration and digital communication with external stakeholders.
<b>2002</b>	Erol Köktürk	Information and communication technologies enable municipalities to provide online services and become compatible with the information society by facilitating the participation of citizens in decision-making processes.
<b>2004</b>	Birgül Ayman Güler	Thanks to technological infrastructure, municipalities go beyond the traditional approach and offer fast, uninterrupted and participatory services to citizens.

2004	H. Burçin Henden	It is the transformation of city-related data and information into a form useful to society by managing it with technology.
2004	Türkiye Bilişim Derneği	Municipalities manage and produce data and information about cities using modern technologies and share useful information with society.
2005	Osamu Sudoh	Management of urban data aims to benefit society and increase service efficiency.
2006	Türksel Bensghir/ Aslı Akay	Urban data is transformed into useful information for society through technologies and presented to the public.
2006	Rabia Karakaya Polat	As the fundamental element of e-government, a transparent, effective, efficient, citizen-oriented and participatory structure is created with information and communication technologies.
2007	Reşit Fıstıkçioğlu	It comes with unlimited access to online public services.
2008	Nur Şat	The aim is to collect service data and transform it into information for the city and stakeholders.
2009	Mustafa Çoruh	It is a tool used in municipal administration that provides quick access to information over the internet 24/7.
2011	Kahraman Çatı/ Mustafa Işkın	Information technologies enable service delivery, unit integration and external stakeholder communication in the municipality.
2013	Gökhan Çobanoğulları	Municipalities offer 24/7 online communication for fast and transparent service.
2013	Kemal Küçükergüler	Providing municipal services without interruption 24/7.
2014	İsmail S. Aydın	It is the provision of public services in a fast, effective and high-quality manner using modern technology.
2015	Canan Çakır	Municipalities create a transparent and accountable management model with quality service and participatory processes.

Source: Mecek, 2017: 1825-1826.

In practice, metropolitan municipalities often stand out for the breadth and maturity of their digital initiatives. For example, in Istanbul, platforms such as “Digital White Desk” and “Istanbul is Yours” support faster handling of citizen requests. Izmir’s “Biz Izmir” application offers more integrated access to information on social assistance, transportation and environmental services. Ankara’s “Capital Mobil” and Bursa’s smart transportation systems expand digital access to urban services, while Konya applies smart city technologies in areas such as traffic management, energy monitoring and environmental services. Overall, these cases suggest variation in scope and sophistication across municipalities, reflecting differences in institutional capacity and technological investment.

The main digital governance practices observed in selected metropolitan municipalities are summarized comparatively in Table 3.

**Table 3. Digital Governance Practices in Selected Metropolitan Municipalities in Türkiye**

<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Identified Digital Platforms / Applications</b>	<b>Functional Areas</b>	<b>Observed Characteristics</b>
<b>Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality</b>	Digital White Desk; “Istanbul is Yours”; Suspended Invoice Initiative	Complaint management; citizen service access; social assistance	Advanced digital interaction tools; crisis-period digital solidarity mechanisms; high service diversity
<b>Ankara Metropolitan Municipality</b>	“Capital Mobil”; digital service portals	Urban services; mobile-based service access	Mobile-centered service model; expanded digital interface for citizens
<b>Izmir Metropolitan Municipality</b>	“Biz İzmir” application	Social assistance; transportation; environmental services	Integrated service access platform; diversified urban service information
<b>Konya Metropolitan Municipality</b>	Smart traffic systems; energy monitoring; GIS applications	Smart transportation; environmental monitoring; spatial planning	Strong smart city orientation; real-time data use in urban management
<b>Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality</b>	Online education tools; smart city applications	Digital education; urban services	Expanded digital tools during pandemic; sector-specific smart applications
<b>General Municipal Pattern (Smaller Municipalities)</b>	Basic e-municipality portals; online tax/bill payment systems	Core administrative services	Limited service diversity; lower institutional capacity and infrastructure depth

Digitalization also transforms internal municipal operations. Systems such as the Electronic Document Management System (EBYS), e-archive and e-signature applications streamline administrative procedures, reduce paperwork and enhance organizational coordination. These tools contribute to more transparent and manageable internal processes. In addition, online surveys, digital participation platforms and social media communication channels create new channels for citizen engagement in local decision-making (Mergel, 2016: 45–52). However, existing findings indicate that these participation tools are mostly used for consultation rather than direct decision-making, pointing to structural limits in participatory depth.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) further strengthen digital municipal capacity. GIS applications enable citizens to access zoning plans and spatial data while supporting evidence-based urban planning and infrastructure management. Such systems are particularly developed in metropolitan municipalities including Istanbul, Ankara and Konya. Moreover, digital tools addressing environmental sustainability—such as smart waste management, energy monitoring and water management systems—expand the functional scope of e-municipality practices and link digital governance with sustainable urban policy goals.

Overall, the findings indicate that e-municipality applications have improved accessibility, operational efficiency and service diversity in local governments in Türkiye. However, the sustainability of these gains depends on institutional capacity, digital literacy, infrastructure quality and data security conditions. Differences between metropolitan and smaller municipalities also suggest that digital transformation remains uneven. Therefore, although digital governance has become embedded in local administrations, its depth and effectiveness continue to vary across municipalities.

#### **4.3. Advantages of Digital Governance in Local Governments in Türkiye**

Since the 2000s, digitalization has become a central component of administrative transformation in both central and local governments in Türkiye. E-government applications at the central level and e-municipality practices at the local level have contributed to the reorganization of public service delivery by embedding digital infrastructures into routine administrative processes (Eryılmaz, 2012: 145–147). The findings of this study confirm that digital governance has become an integral element of municipal service provision and has generated multiple administrative and democratic advantages.

One of the most significant advantages of digital governance is the ease of access to public services. The digital completion of routine municipal transactions illustrates a shift toward platform-based service delivery, reducing transaction costs and increasing administrative responsiveness. This transformation reduces the need for physical interaction with municipal offices and shortens service delivery times, thereby creating both time and cost advantages for citizens (Oğurlu, 2020: 134). Digital interfaces function as primary contact points between citizens and municipalities, particularly in large urban areas.

Digital governance also contributes to transparency and accountability in local governments. Municipal websites and digital service platforms enable citizens to access information on budgets, tenders, council decisions and strategic plans. According to the literature, such practices strengthen democratic oversight and increase trust in local authorities (Güler, 1994: 148–156). The findings indicate that online feedback channels, complaint systems and participation tools have expanded opportunities for citizen interaction with municipal administrations. However, these tools are often limited to information sharing and consultation rather than direct participation in decision-making.

Another key advantage of digital transformation is enhanced administrative efficiency. Internal digital systems such as Electronic Document Management Systems (EDMS), e-archives and automation-based service processes standardize procedures and support coordination within municipal organizations. By shortening processing times and reducing operational costs, these systems contribute to institutional productivity and more consistent service delivery across administrative units (United Nations, 2020).

Digital governance also supports environmental sustainability and urban management. Smart transportation systems, digital waste management solutions and energy efficiency monitoring tools help municipalities reduce operational costs and environmental impacts. These applications support sustainable urban development goals and demonstrate that digitalization is not limited to administrative processes but also influences environmental and infrastructural policies (Batty, 2018: 115).

The findings further show that digital governance plays a critical role in crisis management. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital municipal platforms enabled the rapid distribution of social assistance, remote service delivery and continuous communication with citizens. These practices demonstrated the importance of digital infrastructure in maintaining administrative continuity during extraordinary circumstances (Oğurlu, 2020: 142).

The widespread adoption of digitalization-centered public services has increased the demand for qualified personnel with advanced information and communication technology skills. However, many municipalities in Türkiye continue to face shortages of technically competent staff, which constrains the effective implementation and sustainability of digital projects. In addition, limited digital literacy among public employees negatively affects the continuity and quality of digitally enabled services. Although significant progress has been achieved in local digital infrastructures since the early 2000s (Çetinkaya Bozkurt and İncekara, 2021: 45–62), structural and institutional capacity limitations continue to shape the uneven development of digital governance across municipalities.

Overall, digital governance in local governments in Türkiye has enhanced accessibility, transparency and administrative efficiency while expanding service diversity and crisis preparedness. These developments have contributed to more effective public service delivery and increased public trust in local authorities. However, the extent and sustainability of these benefits vary depending on municipal capacity, infrastructure quality and the level of digital literacy among citizens.

#### **4.4. The Impact of the Pandemic on Digitalization in Local Governments in Türkiye**

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the digital transformation of public administration by exposing the structural importance of digital governance for service continuity under conditions of restricted physical interaction (Aytekin, Özköse, Akgün and Ayaz, 2025: 12). As face-to-face administrative procedures became limited, routine municipal transactions were rapidly shifted to digital platforms. This transition not only reduced procedural bottlenecks but also institutionalized platform-based service delivery as a standard mode of local governance. The findings further suggest that the normalization of digital interaction enhanced user satisfaction and administrative responsiveness (Chadwick, 2006: 134).

During this period, metropolitan municipalities such as Istanbul and Izmir actively used social media and digital communication tools to provide real-time information, manage crisis communication

and maintain interaction with citizens (Ünlü-Yücesoy, Sivrikaya, Argın, İnce and Salah, 2022: 344). Digital channels became essential tools for coordination, transparency and public reassurance. The pandemic thus transformed digital platforms from optional service tools into primary governance mechanisms.

E-municipality systems also played a crucial role in the delivery of social assistance. Online platforms were used to distribute financial and food aid in a transparent and traceable manner. A notable example is the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's "suspended invoice" initiative, which enabled financially secure citizens to pay the bills of those in need, thereby strengthening solidarity through digital means (Urhan and Arslankoç, 2021: 950–972). The findings show that such practices expanded the social function of digital governance beyond routine service provision. At the administrative level, remote working practices and online meetings increased institutional experience with digital tools and ensured continuity in municipal operations (Aytekin et al., 2025: 15).

However, the rapid expansion of digital service use also exposed structural weaknesses. Increased reliance on online systems raised concerns regarding data security and cyberattacks, particularly in municipalities with limited technological infrastructure. Moreover, unequal internet access and low digital literacy levels prevented some groups from benefiting equally from digital services. Age-based differences became more visible during this period, as younger populations adapted more quickly to digital platforms, while older individuals experienced greater difficulties (Öztaşkın, Iyit and Alkan, 2024: 6-8). These findings demonstrate that digital transformation during crises can deepen existing inequalities if supportive measures are not implemented.

Smart city applications were also utilized more actively during the pandemic. For example, Konya Metropolitan Municipality used digital systems to monitor traffic density, while Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality provided online educational tools (Şahin, 2023: 89). These examples illustrate that digitalization served both operational and strategic purposes, supporting service delivery while enhancing crisis management capacity.

Overall, the pandemic acted as a catalyst for digital transformation in local governments. The findings suggest that COVID-19 accelerated the institutionalization of digital services, diversified municipal service portfolios and expanded participatory practices through digital channels. Municipalities have increasingly incorporated digitalization goals into their strategic plans in order to sustain and further develop the temporary measures adopted during the crisis (United Nations, 2022). In this sense, the pandemic did not merely increase the use of digital tools; it reinforced the perception of digital governance as a structural component of contemporary public policy and local governance. At the same time, it underscored the importance of infrastructure investment, cybersecurity capacity, inclusive access and long-term sustainability in digital governance strategies.

The main empirical patterns identified across the findings are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4. Empirical Findings on Digital Governance Practices in Local Governments in Türkiye**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Main Digital Practices</b>	<b>Observed Effects</b>	<b>Structural Limitations</b>
<b>Service Accessibility</b>	E-municipality portals, online tax and bill payments, zoning inquiries, complaint systems	Reduced physical interaction, faster service delivery, increased accessibility for citizens	Digital divide, unequal internet access, low digital literacy among some groups
<b>Administrative Efficiency</b>	Electronic Document Management Systems (EDMS), e-archives, e-signature, automation-based processes	Reduced paperwork, shorter processing times, cost savings, improved internal coordination	Shortage of technically qualified personnel, limited institutional capacity in smaller municipalities
<b>Transparency and Accountability</b>	Online publication of budgets, tenders, council decisions, strategic plans; digital feedback channels	Increased visibility of administrative processes, strengthened public oversight and trust	Participation often limited to consultation; weak open data practices in some municipalities
<b>Citizen Participation</b>	Online surveys, digital complaint platforms, social media communication tools	Expanded communication channels between citizens and municipalities	Interaction often one-way; limited deliberative or decision-making participation
<b>Smart City and Urban Management</b>	Smart transportation systems, GIS-based planning, energy and waste management tools	Improved operational efficiency, evidence-based planning, environmental sustainability	Uneven technological infrastructure between metropolitan and smaller municipalities
<b>Crisis Management (COVID-19)</b>	Online service delivery, digital communication platforms, remote work systems, social assistance portals	Service continuity during lockdowns, rapid aid distribution, increased administrative responsiveness	Data security risks, unequal digital access, difficulties for elderly populations
<b>Social Solidarity via Digital Platforms</b>	“Suspended invoice” and similar online support initiatives	Strengthened social cooperation and digital-based assistance mechanisms	Dependent on digital access and platform usability
<b>Institutional Integration</b>	Central platforms such as e-government portal and digital complaint systems	Unified service access, reduced bureaucratic fragmentation, traceable citizen requests	Integration depth varies across institutions and municipalities

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that digital governance in local governments in Türkiye has gradually evolved from a technology-oriented service delivery model into a broader governance approach shaped by transparency, participation, crisis management and institutional transformation. In this sense, digitalization should not be understood merely as a technical modernization process but as a broader administrative restructuring that reshapes administrative practices, service delivery mechanisms and the relationship between citizens and local authorities. In this context, the results align with much of the international literature on digital governance while also revealing context-specific dynamics related to Türkiye’s administrative structure, central–local relations and socio-economic conditions.

First, the study confirms the widely accepted argument in the literature that digital governance emerges primarily as a response to concerns related to efficiency, accessibility and administrative

capacity. As noted by Eryılmaz (2012: 145–147), the transition from classical bureaucracy to digital governance structures enhances the speed and effectiveness of public services. This transformation is particularly visible at the local level, where municipalities maintain direct interaction with citizens through routine service provision. The findings show that e-municipality applications in Türkiye have simplified administrative procedures such as tax payments, zoning inquiries, complaint submissions and service requests, enabling citizens to access services remotely and with fewer procedural barriers. This result aligns with international studies suggesting that digital governance lowers transaction costs and improves administrative performance (Mergel, 2016: 45–52; Linders, 2012: 448). In this respect, digital governance functions as a mechanism that strengthens institutional responsiveness and service capacity.

However, the findings also indicate that the transformation in Türkiye is not limited to technical efficiency. Digital governance has gradually become a tool for strengthening transparency, accountability and citizen participation in local governments. Municipal websites, digital service platforms and mobile applications have enabled citizens to monitor budgets, tenders and strategic plans more easily. These developments have contributed to the visibility of administrative processes and have reduced the informational asymmetries between local authorities and citizens. This aligns with the governance-oriented perspective on digitalization, which emphasizes transparency and participatory decision-making processes rather than merely technological modernization (Anthopoulos, 2017: 102–105). In this respect, the results support the argument that digital governance represents a shift from “electronic service delivery” to more interactive and participatory governance structures (Chadwick, 2006: 134). Therefore, digital platforms should be understood not only as service tools but also as mechanisms that potentially expand democratic interaction at the local level.

Nevertheless, the findings reveal that this transformation remains uneven across municipalities. While metropolitan municipalities such as İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir and Konya have adopted more advanced digital systems and smart city applications, smaller municipalities continue to face infrastructural and financial constraints. This variation in digital capacity suggests that digital governance is strongly shaped by institutional resources, financial autonomy and administrative experience. This supports the argument that digital transformation in local governments depends not only on technological availability but also on organisational capacity and governance culture (Batty, 2018: 115). In the Turkish context, these disparities are further influenced by the centralized administrative structure, in which local governments’ financial resources and technological investments are to some extent dependent on central government policies and fiscal arrangements. Consequently, digital transformation tends to mirror existing structural inequalities within the administrative system rather than progressing uniformly across municipalities.

The pandemic period constitutes the most transformative phase identified in the findings. The COVID-19 crisis functioned as a critical turning point that accelerated the digitalization of local public services. During this period, citizens increasingly relied on digital platforms for municipal services,

social assistance and communication with local authorities. This process not only expanded the scope of digital services but also normalized their use in everyday administrative interactions. The findings suggest that digital platforms became the primary communication channels between municipalities and citizens, particularly during lockdown periods. This supports the argument that crises often act as catalysts for digital transformation in public administration (United Nations, 2022; United Nations, 2020). In particular, the widespread use of online social assistance applications, digital complaint systems and remote administrative processes demonstrates how digital governance can enhance institutional resilience and service continuity during extraordinary circumstances.

The “suspended invoice” initiative in İstanbul illustrates how digital tools can go beyond administrative efficiency and function as instruments of social solidarity. Through this platform, financially capable citizens were able to support vulnerable households by paying their utility bills online. This finding is consistent with studies emphasizing the role of digital governance in fostering social innovation and collaborative governance models (Linders, 2012: 448). In this sense, digital governance should not be understood solely as a technological transformation, but also as a social and political process that reshapes the relationship between citizens and local governments. Digital platforms, in this context, become spaces not only for service delivery but also for collective action and solidarity.

At the same time, the findings highlight several structural challenges that limit the effectiveness of digital governance. One of the most significant issues is the persistence of the digital divide. Unequal access to reliable internet/broadband infrastructure, differences in digital literacy levels and socio-economic disparities prevent certain groups—particularly the elderly, low-income citizens and those living in rural areas—from fully benefiting from digital municipal services. This confirms previous research indicating that digital governance can unintentionally reproduce or even deepen social inequalities if not supported by inclusive policies (United Nations, 2020; Mergel, 2016: 49). Therefore, digital transformation processes must be accompanied by policies that address accessibility, digital literacy and social inclusion. Based on Dijk, the key determinants of digital inequality are summarised in Table 5.

**Table 5. Areas Where Digital Inequality is Visible**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Description/Opportunities</b>
Technological	Access to digital tools, infrastructure and technological tools
Intangible	Life opportunities, personal freedom, empowerment
Material	Capital, including economic, social and cultural assets
Social	Social status, influence and opportunities for participation
Educational	Developing skills, competencies and knowledge

Source: Dijk, 2006: 221-235.

Digital inequality should not be reduced merely to disparities in access to technological devices or internet speed. Rather, it reflects cumulative and structural inequalities shaped by educational background, socio-economic conditions and long-term social positioning (Mecek and Kocakula, 2019: 208).

Another critical issue identified in the findings is data protection and cybersecurity risks. The rapid expansion of digital services during the pandemic was not always accompanied by adequate infrastructural and institutional safeguards. This situation has increased concerns regarding data privacy, cyberattacks and the protection of personal information. Similar concerns are widely discussed in the literature, where the expansion of digital public services is often accompanied by increased cybersecurity vulnerabilities and governance challenges (United Nations, 2022; Anthopoulos, 2017: 118). These risks highlight the importance of developing robust cybersecurity frameworks and institutional capacities to ensure the sustainability of digital governance practices.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings suggest that digital governance in Türkiye is best understood through a hybrid model that combines elements of NPM, governance theory and smart city approaches. The efficiency-oriented aspects of e-municipality applications reflect the principles of NPM, while participatory tools such as online surveys and digital complaint platforms correspond to governance-based approaches emphasizing citizen involvement. Meanwhile, smart transportation systems, GIS-based planning tools and environmental monitoring applications align with smart city paradigms (Batty, 2018: 115). This hybrid structure reflects the broader transformation of public administration in Türkiye, where administrative reforms have been influenced simultaneously by global governance trends, European Union harmonization processes and domestic political dynamics.

The study also contributes to the literature by highlighting the role of digital governance in crisis management at the local level. While many studies focus primarily on national e-government systems, this research demonstrates that municipalities play a crucial role in maintaining service continuity during emergencies. The pandemic experience shows that local governments with advanced digital infrastructures were able to respond more quickly and effectively to citizens' needs. This finding supports the argument that local digital capacity is a key component of administrative resilience (United Nations, 2020).

Another important implication of the findings concerns democratic governance. Digital tools such as online surveys, complaint platforms and social media communication channels have expanded opportunities for citizen participation in local decision-making processes. This supports the argument that digital governance can strengthen local democracy by creating more interactive and transparent governance structures (Chadwick, 2006: 134). However, the persistence of digital inequalities indicates that these democratic gains may not be equally distributed across all social groups, which raises concerns about the inclusiveness of digital governance processes.

In the Turkish context, the central–local government relationship also shapes the scope and effectiveness of digital governance. Although municipalities are responsible for delivering local services, their financial and technological capacities are influenced by central government policies and regulatory frameworks. This institutional structure affects the pace and depth of digital transformation across municipalities. Therefore, digital governance in local governments should be understood not only as a technological process but also as an institutional and political one embedded in the wider administrative system.

Future research could expand the empirical scope of digital governance studies by incorporating mixed-method designs, including interviews and survey-based data to capture user experiences and institutional perspectives more comprehensively. Additionally, comparative analyses involving smaller and medium-sized municipalities would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of digital transformation across different administrative scales.

In addition, future research could explore the long-term institutional effects of pandemic-driven digitalization. While many digital applications initially emerged as temporary crisis responses, their permanence and impact on administrative structures remain uncertain. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into whether these digital practices lead to sustainable institutional change or remain short-term adaptations.

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that Türkiye’s local governments has evolved from a technology-driven service model into a broader governance paradigm that affects transparency, participation, crisis management and institutional capacity. While digital applications have improved service delivery and administrative efficiency, structural challenges such as digital inequality, cybersecurity risks and institutional capacity differences continue to shape the trajectory of this transformation. Therefore, the future success of digital governance in local governments will depend not only on technological investments but also on inclusive policies, institutional reforms and citizen-oriented governance strategies.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the transformation of local governance in Türkiye within the framework of digital governance, with particular emphasis on e-municipality applications and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on digitalization processes. The findings indicate that digital governance has become a central component of local public government, reshaping service delivery mechanisms, administrative structures and citizen–government interactions.

The analysis shows that digital governance practices have enabled local governments to deliver faster and more accessible public services while simplifying bureaucratic procedures. E-municipality platforms have supported service continuity and improved institutional performance. At the same time,

digital tools such as online service portals, mobile applications and electronic document management systems have enhanced transparency, accountability and citizen participation. These developments indicate that digital governance represents not only a technological transformation but also a broader process of institutional and administrative restructuring.

The COVID-19 pandemic has functioned as a critical turning point in this transformation. Restrictions on physical mobility accelerated the adoption of digital public services, increased the diversity of online municipal applications and strengthened the role of digital platforms in crisis management. During this period, municipalities used digital tools not only for routine service delivery but also for social assistance, public communication and emergency coordination. This experience has revealed the strategic importance of digital infrastructure and institutional preparedness in ensuring administrative continuity during crisis situations.

However, the study also highlights several structural challenges associated with digital governance in local governments. Issues such as digital inequality, limited infrastructure in certain municipalities, insufficient digital literacy and concerns over data security continue to affect the effectiveness and inclusiveness of digital public services. These challenges indicate that the success of digital governance depends not only on technological capacity but also on institutional coordination, social inclusion and regulatory frameworks.

From a broader perspective, digital governance in local governments represents a shift toward more participatory, transparent and flexible administrative models. The integration of digital technologies into public services has strengthened local democracy, improved administrative responsiveness and enhanced public trust in local governments. Nevertheless, the sustainability of this transformation requires continuous investment in digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, institutional capacity and citizen-oriented digital literacy programs.

This study contributes to the literature on digital governance and local public administration by examining digital transformation at the municipal level within a public policy perspective. While much of the existing research focuses primarily on technological infrastructure or service efficiency, this study demonstrates that digital governance in local governments should also be understood as a broader institutional transformation affecting policy processes, governance structures and citizen participation mechanisms. By linking e-municipality practices with the public policy cycle and governance theory, the study provides a policy-oriented analytical framework for understanding digital transformation in local governments.

The Turkish case also offers important insights for the comparative literature on digital governance in centralized administrative systems. Local governments in Türkiye operate within a highly centralized institutional framework, which makes the development of digital governance capacities particularly significant. The findings show that despite institutional and financial constraints,

metropolitan municipalities have increasingly adopted digital tools to improve service delivery, crisis management and citizen interaction. In this respect, the Turkish experience illustrates how digital governance can emerge as a strategic policy instrument even in administrative systems where local autonomy is relatively limited.

The findings of this study also have several policy implications for municipalities and public administrators. Strengthening digital governance capacity requires not only technological investment but also institutional coordination, cybersecurity frameworks and the development of qualified human resources. Municipalities should prioritize inclusive digital policies aimed at reducing digital inequality and improving citizens' digital literacy. In addition, the development of integrated digital platforms and open data practices could further enhance transparency, citizen participation and policy responsiveness in local governance.

Future research may focus on comparative analyses between different types of municipalities, quantitative evaluations of user satisfaction and the long-term institutional effects of digital governance practices. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital transformation reshapes local governance structures and democratic processes.

In conclusion, digital governance has become an indispensable element of contemporary local government in Türkiye. The pandemic experience has accelerated this transformation and demonstrated both its potential benefits and structural limitations. Ensuring the sustainability and inclusiveness of digital governance will remain a key priority for local governments in the coming years.

Finally, the findings indicate that digital governance has become a structural component of contemporary local administration in Türkiye. Digital municipal platforms, smart city technologies and online participation mechanisms have significantly transformed the relationship between citizens and local governments while improving administrative efficiency and service accessibility. At the same time, challenges such as digital inequality, institutional capacity differences and cybersecurity risks continue to shape the trajectory of digital transformation. Addressing these challenges will be essential for ensuring that digital governance contributes to more resilient, inclusive and citizen-oriented local governance systems in the future.

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