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Original Scientific Article

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Dilemmas and Polarized Attitudes of Public Sector Managers Regarding AI

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Abstract: *The public sector, characterized by structural inertia, strict regulations, and a low level of flexibility, faces additional challenges in relation to the major technological transformations of recent years, particularly those associated with artificial intelligence (AI). The research aims to investigate the perceptions of managers in the Romanian public sector regarding the opportunities and risks brought by the implementation of AI in organizations. The study employs a mixed-method design, combining two complementary approaches: a survey of 188 managers from public institutions and a focus group involving 7 managers from various public administration organizations. The results reveal a set of recurring trends. In the absence of a clear institutional vision, AI is perceived more as a source of risk than as a strategic opportunity. The study makes an important contribution to understanding this complex landscape by highlighting both the barriers and the opportunities perceived by public administration managers in relation to AI.*

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Public management, Technological transformation*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer perceived as a static collection of rigid algorithms, but as a dynamic system capable of learning and adapting, redefining the way organizational processes - including those within public management - can be designed and optimized in the digital era. AI represents one of the most spectacular technological transformations of recent decades, with major implications for how organizations operate, make decisions, and adapt their internal processes. However, the magnitude and direction of these changes are difficult to anticipate, and their concrete effects depend both on the organizational context and on the capacity of institutional actors to integrate new technologies. The public sector, characterized by structural inertia, strict regulations, budgetary constraints, and a low level of flexibility, faces additional challenges in relation to these transformations. At the governmental level, responses regarding the use of AI in administration have varied radically - from temporary bans on AI use in public institutions to initiatives that actively encourage accelerated adoption, such as subsidizing AI subscriptions for the entire population. Similarly, at the level of managers and employees within public institutions, perceptions are highly fragmented. A deeper understanding and critical analysis of how managers form their perceptions of AI-based technologies represent important prerequisites for ensuring transparent, sustainable, and ethically aligned adoption within management processes. Managerial perception influences not only the decision to implement AI but also the degree to which it is accepted and integrated institutionally. Trust in the benefits and accuracy of AI systems can act as a catalyst for effective institutional integration; by contrast, skepticism or distrust may slow down or even block the implementation of these advanced technologies. AI has the potential to increase efficiency, reduce costs, and optimize processes; it can also support managers in data-driven decision-making and contribute to greater transparency and compliance with internal policies (Chukwuka & Dibie, 2024). The main concern, since the large-scale operationalization of AI tools, remains the potential reduction - at least partially - of certain jobs. In this context, an important aspect to consider is employees' level of awareness regarding human–machine collaboration (Nawaz et al., 2024; Onea Neculăesei & Manolescu, 2024; Pratiwi, 2024). Managers at all organizational levels will increasingly need to adapt to the world of intelligent machines in order to maintain competitiveness (Yawar & Hakimi, 2025). The major challenge remains achieving a functional and ethical balance between the two dimensions (Pelea, 2019). This may lead to a complete reconfiguration of human resource management strategies, with implications for employee reskilling, digital competence development, and the formulation of new institutional policies adapted to the AI era. The automation of HRM decisions through AI can raise issues of fairness and transparency, as decisions such as recruitment, promotion, and evaluation may be influenced by algorithms that are opaque to employees and community members, increasing suspicions of manipulation or discrimination - issues already present in the public sector. The specialized literature highlights potential risks associated with AI use, one of the most significant being its potential to perpetuate or even amplify existing biases (Chatterjee et al., 2024). Despite ongoing initiatives, AI implementation remains insufficiently regulated. Thus, the foundations for mechanisms that ensure the ethical application of AI are still lacking (Stuss & Fularski, 2024).

The relevance of this research topic stems from the following rationale: without examining perceptions at the grassroots level, a disruptive technology is unlikely to be effectively adopted. Consequently, there is a risk of bypassing essential developmental stages. For instance, in certain municipalities, the lack of attention to employees' resistance to change has resulted in computers still being used merely as typewriters, with digitalization remaining largely unfamiliar. Within such a context, attempts are being made to introduce AI tools even though the prerequisite stages of technological adaptation have not yet been completed. The failure to acknowledge and address resistance to change thus emerges as a critical factor contributing to the unsuccessful implementation of major transformation initiatives.

2. THE CONTEXT OF AI IN THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The general context begins with the opinions of renowned figures in the field of technology, many of whom expressed strong negative views as soon as AI became a quasi-universal paradigm. Although opinions have been divided, this underlying negativity has the potential to generate resistance at both organizational and individual levels. Negative narratives about AI have spread across multiple domains - unlike previous innovations, whose effects tended to remain more contained within specific sectors. The implementation of AI in public management is a relatively new and little-known trend in Romania. Consequently, research on this topic remains scarce - a search in the Web of Science database reveals only 16 articles focused on AI in the Romanian public sector. As with any disruptive change, AI brings both opportunities and challenges, requiring careful analysis of managers' perceptions regarding trust in AI systems and the adaptability of institutions to technological advancements. Managerial perceptions of technology vary depending on experience and accumulated knowledge, the institution's infrastructure, and the existing regulatory framework - the latter playing a key role in ensuring an atmosphere of trust and security within managerial processes (Maragno et al., 2023). Context is therefore crucial in shaping AI implementation plans. The benefits (efficiency, cost reduction, decision-making objectivity) and the challenges and risks (poor infrastructure, lack of digital skills, resistance to change, algorithmic bias) form the main pillars underpinning arguments for proposed transformations. The specific context of the Romanian public sector with respect to AI implementation is not a favorable one. The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) indicators consistently place Romania at the bottom of the EU ranking, at a considerable distance from the European average (Figure 1). Although a national AI strategy exists - with a dedicated chapter for the public sector (Autoritatea Națională pentru Cercetare, 2024) - subsequent sector-specific regulations are still missing.

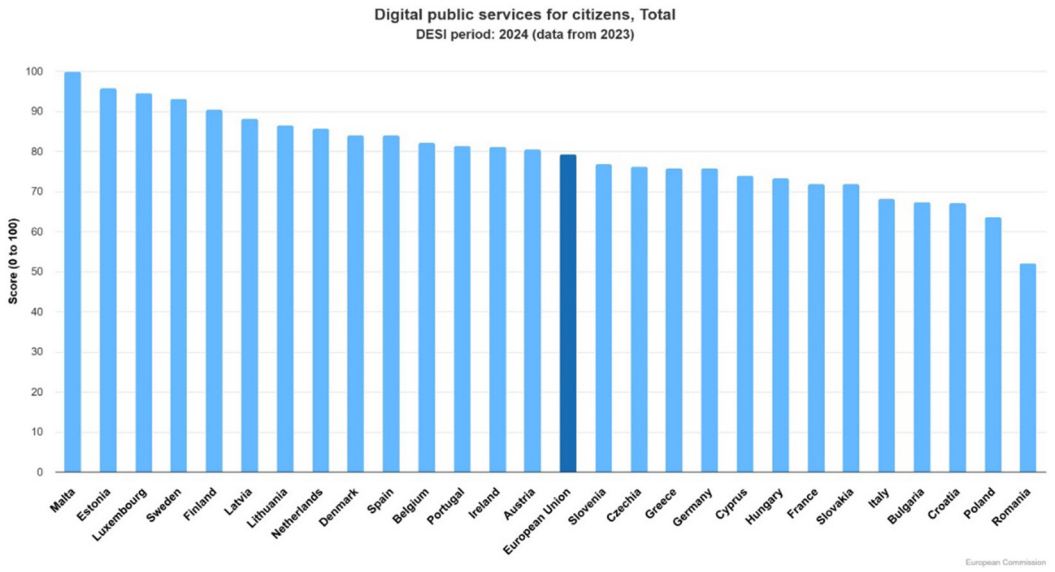

Figure 1. The hierarchy of EU countries by the relevant DESI indicator
Source: European Commission (2025)

A highly publicized initiative that contributed to widespread distrust in the effectiveness of AI at the national level was the introduction, for the first time in early 2023, of an AI-based government adviser named *ION*, designed to enhance transparency and communication with citizens

(Autoritatea Națională pentru Cercetare, 2023). The initiative, however, was insufficiently prepared and poorly adapted to the specific administrative processes. After a year marked by numerous controversies, the AI adviser was ultimately "dismissed." The impact of this initiative was significant - it generated public distrust on the one hand, but also helped to mitigate fears regarding the potential replacement of human resources by AI tools. Nonetheless, there are examples of good practices in other countries that could be considered and adapted to the Romanian context. The main directions for using AI tools in the public sector, as outlined by Van Noordt and Misuraca (2022), include policy development, service delivery, and internal management. AI is used to detect social problems, simulate policy scenarios, and evaluate their implementation. In public service delivery, the most common applications are chatbots and virtual assistants, which help personalize services, automate repetitive tasks, and create proactive service models. In internal management, AI is employed for human resource allocation, fraud and corruption detection, cybersecurity, and public procurement. Collaboration with the private sector is essential for successful AI adoption in the public sphere, as the synergy between the two paradigms enhances the feasibility and effectiveness of results (Talmaciu et al., 2023).

The factors that can stimulate AI adoption in Romania are technological (increased access to open-source and cloud-based AI solutions, accelerated digitalization of public services), organizational (pressure for efficiency, reduced staff), and environmental (European requirements for digitalization and interoperability, availability of EU funds). However, these same factors can also hinder progress (Alamäki, 2025) - with the lack of digital skills and collaborative environments being among the most critical obstacles. National strategies related to AI tend to emphasize efficiency and service delivery (Hjaltalin & Sigurdarson, 2024) while paying less attention to citizen engagement and democratic values. Prioritization remains the key approach to improving the efficiency of the public sector under significant budgetary constraints (Manolescu et al., 2024), and AI implementation stands as an unquestionable global priority.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research aims to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of managers in the public sector regarding the opportunities and risks brought by the implementation of AI in organizations. The study focuses on several key questions concerning the integration of AI into managerial processes. The investigation was structured around several specific research goals: (1) Identifying managers' perceptions regarding the potential benefits of AI implementation in Romanian public institutions; (2) Identifying perceptions of the challenges and risks associated with AI implementation; (3) Assessing the level of preparedness of Romanian public institutions for integrating AI-based technologies into management processes, from the perspective of managerial perception.

The study employed a mixed-method research design, combining two complementary approaches: a survey administered to a broad sample of 188 public-sector managers and a focus group involving 7 managers from diverse public administration organizations. The purpose of using this methodological mix was to capture not only the level of preparedness and general attitudes but also the nuances of internal debates concerning the implementation of this technology, including concerns about potential workforce reductions due to automation. The main data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire designed to capture both relevant demographic information and existing or potential opinions, attitudes, and practices related to AI use in the public sector. The questionnaire consisted of 24 items, varying in format to ensure comprehensive data collection: closed-ended questions, multiple-response questions, Likert-scale items (1 to 5) and an open-ended question. The target population consisted of managers from Romanian public

institutions, ensuring the relevance of the collected opinions for the study's objectives, given their decision-making role in technological adoption processes. Data collection was conducted online via Google Forms, with the questionnaire distributed to over 10,000 email addresses belonging to various types of public institutions across Romania. As a result of this process, conducted between January and June 2025, a total of 188 valid responses were obtained and used for statistical analysis. While the response rate was relatively low (below 2%), which may represent a limitation, the heterogeneity of the sample and its final size nonetheless support the robustness of the findings. The sample structure was diverse in terms of institutional representation - most respondents were from municipalities (56.5%) and educational institutions (22%), while others represented county councils, deconcentrated agencies, central institutions, healthcare units, and national or international missions. Regarding institutional environment, the distribution was relatively balanced, with a slight predominance of respondents from rural areas (53.7%). Most organizations had fewer than 50 employees (52.2%). The respondents' age and managerial experience were also evenly distributed, with the majority falling within the 46–55 age group (37.8%) and having 6–15 years of managerial experience (33.9%). The focus group was conducted in July 2025, with the voluntary participation of seven managers from different public institutions (Table 1), all attending a professional development program. The sample size was deliberately set to ensure a range of organizational perspectives while maintaining adequate time for individualized intervention. Two discussion sessions were held over one week - the first focused on framing and problem-setting, and the second on debate and reflection. The key discussion themes mirrored those addressed in the survey (level of knowledge and use, benefits and risks), while also providing deeper insights into organizational and individual approaches.

Table 1. Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Type of organization	Position	Gender	Managerial experience (years)
Rural Municipality	Department Manager	M	5
Urban Municipality	Service Manager	F	22
County Council	Department Manager	M	14
Regional Development Agency	Department Manager	M	7
Water Management System	Office Manager	M	8
County Administration of Public Finances	Department Manager	F	12
County Environmental Guard (National Environmental Agency)	Team Manager	M	2

Source: Own processing

The data processing and analysis integrated both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The results were then compared with those of other studies addressing complex issues related to the use of AI in the public sector. The analyses were limited to descriptive statistics (means, skewness, and kurtosis). Inferential analyses, such as correlation analyses, were not conducted, as the primary aim of the study was exploratory and focused on characterizing the data distribution.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis provides a complex and nuanced picture of respondents' perceptions and attitudes toward AI, while also revealing a series of recurring trends (Table 2). The key findings are as follows: almost all respondents (83.5%) identified at least one benefit of AI in recruitment; more than half of the surveyed managers reported having already used generative AI tools; the average level of knowledge about AI was approximately 3.05 on a scale from 1 to 5, indicating a

general familiarity with the concept; nearly half of the interviewed managers (48.4%) expressed willingness to implement AI but emphasized a lack of adequate resources or competencies; support for data-driven decision-making had the most significant impact among the perceived benefits related to employee motivation and job satisfaction; a well-defined regulatory and ethical framework enhances the willingness to adopt AI; managers who view AI as a complementary tool supporting specialists rather than replacing them are considerably more open to organizational change; approximately 70% of respondents expressed skepticism or distrust toward the idea of a centralized national AI-based system - this indicates a preference for gradual and decentralized implementations, with direct institutional involvement; over half of respondents (56.9%) reported obtaining information about AI primarily from informal sources (such as social media and popular news outlets) rather than formal or scientific ones. Managers informed through validated, science-based sources exhibited significantly more positive and responsible attitudes toward AI implementation.

Table 2. Summary of the descriptive analyses of the core variables of the study

Analyzed variable	Frequency / Percentage analysis	Descriptive indicators	Interpretation
Level of Knowledge about AI	Mean score is 3.05 (on a 1–5 scale)	Mean = 3.05	Respondents have a medium to good level of familiarity with the concept of artificial intelligence.
Sources of Information about AI	56.9% Informal sources, 43.1% Formal sources	Mean = 1.57, Skewness = -0.282	A slight preference for informal sources of information is observed, indicating a need for professionalization and access to academic or specialized sources.
Use of Generative AI	52.1% have used it, 10.1% intend to use it, 37.2% have not used it	Mean = 1.59, Skewness = 0.847	High degree of adoption and technological openness. The positive skewness shows that although many have used it, there is still a significant segment that has not.
Perception of AI Benefits	83.5% identified at least one benefit (multiple responses, with each option transformed into a distinct binary variable (0 = no, 1 = yes).	Mean = 1.16, Skewness = 1.821	Very high receptiveness. The vast majority of respondents recognize AI's advantages, and the strongly positive skewness shows that very few saw no benefit at all.
Perception of AI Risks	Balanced distribution: Low Risk (28.7%), Medium (27.7%), High (27.1%)	Mean = 2.31, Skewness = 0, Kurtosis = -1.204	Opinions regarding risks are polarized and dispersed, with no dominant trend. Negative kurtosis confirms the lack of concentration around a single opinion.
Opinion on a National AI System	69.7% are skeptical or disagree, 30.3% are confident	Mean = 1.70, Skewness = -0.863	The majority tendency is skepticism towards a centralized solution, despite the general openness to technology.

Source: Own calculations

The majority of respondents are key decision-makers in institutions with ongoing digitalization initiatives and recognize the advantages of AI, which indicates a solid potential for adoption. However, despite the clear willingness to implement AI, barriers related to resources and competencies continue to hinder progress. Moreover, opinions regarding AI-related risks are polarized, and skepticism toward a centralized national AI system remains dominant, suggesting a preference for decentralized solutions or a greater need for trust and clarity in national-level implementation. Managers emphasized the lack of necessary resources for effective implementation - from technological infrastructure and financial support to dedicated training programs. This discrepancy is also reflected in the literature; for example, in India, while 89% of public organizations had ongoing AI projects, only 25% possessed advanced technological infrastructure (Kulal et al.,

2024). In the absence of a clear institutional vision, AI tends to be perceived more as a source of risk than as a strategic opportunity. Another phenomenon observed is technological determinism - the implementation of AI driven by technological availability rather than by actual institutional needs (Mergel et al., 2024).

The qualitative research also identified specific areas in which managers perceive immediate advantages. These include the automation of repetitive processes, improvement of service quality for citizens, and enhanced internal efficiency through reduced administrative workloads. Such benefits could serve as starting points for a gradual implementation strategy, provided that obstacles related to professional preparedness and resource allocation are addressed as priorities. The analysis shows that although public managers are individually adopting AI to strengthen citizen trust, large-scale implementation is hampered by skepticism toward centralized systems, with success depending critically on formal education and transparent trust-building strategies. The results reflect a major concern regarding the impact of AI-based technologies on citizen relations, administrative control, and data protection, while underscoring the importance of clear, transparent, and balanced public policies for AI adoption in the public sector. The findings offer a clear perspective on general trends and a growing consensus around the idea of responsible AI use. The results of this research outline a nuanced picture of Romanian public managers' perceptions of AI implementation, highlighting both alignment with global trends described in the literature and specific local characteristics. Broadly, the findings support existing studies suggesting that efficiency-related immediate benefits are the main driver of AI adoption in organizational management. The managers surveyed expressed particular enthusiasm for automating repetitive tasks and accelerating recruitment processes - findings consistent with numerous studies emphasizing AI's potential to handle large volumes of administrative work and free up specialists' time for strategic or creative activities. The fact that long-term cost reduction and improved accuracy in candidate selection did not appear as strongly influential in managers' perceptions may seem surprising at first, since the literature often emphasizes these benefits (Talmaciu & Manolescu, 2023). A possible explanation lies in the time horizon and tangibility of benefits - managers tend to be more responsive to immediate, concrete advantages than to diffuse or future gains. This pragmatic orientation is also evident in their approach to risk: most managers acknowledge a moderate number of risks, adopting a realistic but not alarmist stance toward technology adoption. They anticipate potential challenges but do not appear fundamentally discouraged by them, reflecting an openness to innovation tempered by rational caution. A key finding of the study is the perceived importance of AI-supported decision-making, with managers valuing AI's ability to provide better information for decisions. This aligns with a growing body of literature viewing AI in organizations as a form of "augmented reality" (Onea Neculăesei & Manolescu, 2024) - an instrument that complements and enhances human decisions rather than replacing them. The fact that AI benefits related to managerial decision-making had the strongest impact on openness suggests that public managers are willing to become "augmented managers", using AI-based tools to increase the accuracy and effectiveness of their decisions. Conversely, AI benefits oriented toward employees (such as personalized training or objective evaluation) were less convincing to managers. This may indicate that, at the current stage, managerial culture remains more focused on structural efficiency than on employee development. As public managers are accountable for organizational performance as a whole, they may perceive AI adoption primarily in relation to personal satisfaction and motivation rather than workforce empowerment. Additionally, in the public sector, certain constraints may shape how AI influences employee experience.

In the Romanian context, the data indicate that public policies focused solely on technological acquisition or superficial digitalization will have limited impact unless accompanied by an innovation-oriented culture and human capital development within institutions. This underscores the

need for integrated organizational change strategies (Bulat et al., 2024). One of the most interesting and relevant findings concerns the ethical and regulatory framework. Managers conveyed a clear message of willingness to implement AI - but in a responsible and secure manner. Consequently, developing explicit institutional ethical codes could accelerate AI adoption. The focus on sustainability and avoidance of unprepared initiatives was another strong theme, consistent with prior research (Manolescu & Talmaciu, 2021; Wilson & Van Der Velden, 2022). Five essential boundary conditions for social sustainability in AI were identified: diversity, learning capacity, self-organization capacity, common meaning and trust.

Findings on resistance to change suggest that the narrative of AI as a threat is losing ground among elected public leaders, being replaced by a more positive, collaborative outlook. Managers who perceive AI as a tool that complements their teams and believe in human–machine co-creation are far more likely to implement AI successfully. While many studies describe AI as a threat to the workforce due to its increasingly advanced capabilities, paradoxically, these same capabilities are also perceived as benefits (Ban et al., 2024). The fact that fear or potential losses no longer dominate managerial discourse - replaced instead by narratives of collaboration and opportunity - signals a maturing perspective. AI can upskill employees and improve decision-making processes, but may also generate resistance to change and trust deficits (Maragno et al., 2023). However, recent global research shows that employees still experience high levels of anxiety about AI: approximately 77% of workers are concerned about job loss due to AI (McGraw, 2024). In this context, public managers must navigate the pressures associated with the pace of institutional change. The Romanian results indicate that reluctance toward AI is no longer primarily driven by fears of job cuts or the pace of transformation, but rather by how change is communicated and managed. Institutional resilience and individual adaptability can be fostered through proactive communication and human resource development policies. The greatest concern expressed in the focus group was a realistic one: that recruitment and selection might place excessive emphasis on AI-related skills, leading to the loss of other complementary and essential competencies. Perceived risks resonate strongly with current academic and public debates. These concerns should be interpreted not as opposition to AI, but as areas requiring attention during implementation. Managers did not reject AI because of these risks but instead outlined a set of conditions they deemed essential. Similarly, the perceived risk of technological dependence underscores the importance of backup plans and redundancy, with managers implicitly signaling that their institutions are not yet ready to become fully digital overnight. Instead, capacity should be built gradually - supported by reliable infrastructure, manual backups for emergencies, and preservation of internal competencies.

5. CONCLUSION

In the public sector, perceptions of AI oscillate between a desire for modernization and a fear of the unknown. The lack of a coherent institutional and national direction amplifies uncertainty, and without concerted interventions - through clear public policies, investment, and professional training - there is a risk that this sector will lag behind others in adopting new technologies. Romanian public managers are generally prepared to adopt AI, but success depends on a responsible approach to implementation, the provision of necessary resources and competencies, the promotion of an innovative organizational culture, and the establishment of a clear ethical framework. The successful and sustainable integration of AI in the Romanian public sector requires a holistic, human-centered, ethically grounded, and strategically coordinated approach. This goes beyond mere technological adoption, involving an organizational and cultural transformation within each institution. Given the open yet cautious attitude of public managers toward artificial intelligence in human resource management, several practical and strategic recommendations are proposed for decision-makers in the

Romanian Government, the Authority for Digitalization of Romania, public administration bodies, and other relevant institutions: prioritize investments in resources and competencies; develop and communicate a robust ethical framework for AI; promote the tangible operational benefits of AI; foster an innovative and adaptable organizational culture; invest in reskilling and human–machine collaboration programs; exercise caution and ensure consultation in developing centralized national AI-based recruitment and selection systems; promote formal information sources about AI. These recommendations synthesize the overarching framework derived from the detailed analysis of Romanian public managers' perceptions. By taking these into account, public institutions can fully harness the transformative potential of artificial intelligence in public administration, ensuring a responsible, efficient, and citizen-centered digital transition.

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