

Innovative aspects of public services in Albania

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Abstract. Public services take up an important place in the economic activities of a country, which makes it crucial to deliver high-quality and efficient services to the public, cut down unemployment, and improve social welfare. Recent years have seen an increase in the use of innovative practices in the public sector to facilitate service delivery and increase efficiency in the Albanian public sector. The organizations of the public sector seek new ways to carry out their mission. The desire of providing better quality, faster, and lower-cost public services has prompted central and local governments to be oriented toward Internet usage, turning innovation into one of the greatest goals of recent times (Costake, 2008). The public sector aims to produce new innovative ideas in the field of goods and services, human resources, and economic development, as well as to implement them to create solutions and social value. Organizations offering public services need to be innovative to meet the constantly changing needs of their customers and build trust. There is no better option than concentrating on service innovation if the public administration wants to effectively deliver public services to citizens (Karagoz, 2013). Innovation is considered an essential condition for development processes at a time when public organizations face competitive and progress-related challenges (Koç & Gunal, 2021). **Objective:** The objective of this study is to emphasize the importance of innovation in public service delivery. Within the scope of this study, it is first defined the concept of public innovation, then its positive impact on public services is examined. It is also important to understand the innovation policies of public services in Albania. The literature will be supported by examples of innovative public services in Albania. This study is focused on offering a theoretical contribution by reviewing available literature. Innovation in public services is a topic with increasing interest in recent years that directly affects the quality of the delivered service, therefore the literature related to the topic is extensive. **Results:** The literature shows that the phases of the innovation cycle should be strengthened through collaboration with public and private stakeholders, through the empowerment of human resources, and by accepting feedback from the community/customers. The main factors that impact the success of innovation in public services are related to the integration of services, benefiting from partnerships, and increased citizen participation. In recent years the digitalization of public services has helped to reduce the time of delivering a public service, to reduce unnecessary bureaucratic actions, to increase transparency, and facilitate access to information. **Originality:** Innovation in public services is a topic of interest for many governments, thus this study will offer a point of view related to the importance of innovative public services together with some suggestions to overcome burdens during the delivery of innovative public services in Albania. Innovation in the private sector has a wide place in the literature, but more research is needed in terms of public administration. This paper focuses on innovation in the public sector, offering a contribution to the literature related to this sector that offers its services to the public. **Keywords:** innovation, public service, service delivery, public administration, organization **JEL classification:** O00, H40, H41

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1. Introduction

One of the basic requirements of the state is to meet the needs of its people arising from living together. This fundamental purpose has not changed since the early ages, and new ways of providing better services have been sought over time. In general, the state exists to serve its citizens, and according to this understanding, a state is strong to the extent that it serves its citizens (Özer & Yildirim, 2022).

Contemporary state structures try to develop and change themselves, just like organizations in the private sector (Rousseau & Have, 2022). They do this, either at their discretion or in accordance with the harmonization laws of the organizations they belong to, through the so-called reform efforts. However, it is exceedingly difficult for the public sector to modernize existing methods, introduce new methods, and realize projects with continuity. For this reason, it is a challenging task to produce a new idea, to adopt this idea, and to see the benefits at the end of a given period. Especially in the public sector, achieving this is more difficult than in the private sector.

In the private sector, many innovations find a place for themselves through a simple technology transfer, and all companies that want to maximize their profits compete to benefit from this innovation (Daglio, Gerson, & Kitchen, 2014). Customers, who are the target audience, follow the developments that will profit them from this process and choose the option that provides them the maximum benefit. However, the movement area of the citizen is a little narrower than the customer.

The public sector, which is under the umbrella of the state, which is the sole provider of public services, needs to be entrepreneurial in innovation, particularly to increase the applicability of service innovation in the public sector (United Nations, 2018). For this, it is necessary to conduct studies or projects aimed at determining and defining the status of existing services in the public sector and making process analysis.

Innovation is a widely studied topic in the private and public sectors, but there is a need for research on innovation related to public service. The importance of this paper lies within the lack of literature regarding the innovation of public services in Albania, thus trying to fill in the gap and pave the way to other research in this regard. Furthermore, the innovative aspects of public service in Albania discussed in this paper will allow service users to understand the importance of innovation in public service. Public servants, managers, government employees, or public service clients who will read this paper will be able to recognize the effort put into innovation to offer better and more efficient public services.

In this paper, the literature review discusses the concept of public service and its importance to the public. The concept of innovation and its role in public service is then discussed, which is followed by the methodology used in this paper and the results of the reviewed literature. Finally, the findings related to the topic are summarized, and several recommendations are offered for consideration.

2. Literature Review

What does Public Service mean to the public?

To better relate the innovation to public service it is best to first explore the meaning of public service and its importance to the public. The real content and importance of the concept of public service were realized with the establishment of the concept of "Public Services School" by Léon Duguit, Roger Bonnard, and Gaston Jeze at the beginning of the 20th century, within the framework of the studies aimed at explaining the transformations in public law caused by the development of state functions (Pektas & Derdiman, 2016). Public service is a complex concept, and the literature has many definitions of it. First, it is important to clear up confusion standing in the way. The public services and the public sector are not equivalent. While the public sector is owned by the government, the public service may not (Spicker, 2009). Many activities of the government like operating the functions of the government would not be considered as public service. While the term "public sector" refers to all government organizations and their employees, the term "public service" refers to "services which are provided by public or privately owned institutions under their supervision." According to the European Union these public services should be subject to a special legal regime (Camenen, 1996). For a service to be qualified as a public service, the relevant service must be directed to the public, be beneficial to the public, and must be continuously and regularly offered to the public (Denek, 2019). One of the most important

duties of the government is to provide effective and high-quality services to the citizens (Çarpar, Demir, & Yildirim, 2015). The public sector is constantly changing with the scope to modernize its structures and offer effective public services. This efficiency while trying to maintain high performance prompted public managers to turn to the private sector for solutions (Jurisch, Ikaş, Wolf, & Krcmar, 2013). Performance monitoring has increased concurrently with growing private sector engagement in public services, led by the transition to New Public Management, which involved bringing management strategies from the private sector to the public sector (Bell, Fourton, & Sowels, 2021). The concept of New Public Management, which basically offers a set of principles on how public services should perform or how these works must be organized and presented to citizens, is based on the thesis that bureaucracy is not the most effective way to manage the public sector and that contractual agreements or the public management approach that outsources public works to the private sector by contract, should replace bureaucracy (Boztepe, 2018).

The global economy made public sector organizations concentrate on the effective and proficient use of scarce resources (Antonucci, 2018).

Globalization has also contributed to the factors that lead to additional challenges for public service. The economic, political, and social systems interdependency has created a lot of complexity (Sowels, 2021).

Innovation of public services

The world is developing at a fast pace, hence the interaction between government and the public needs to be fast and accurate. The public demands to get excellent services, which is why the government strives to provide satisfaction to the public. It is not possible to separate services from human life, however, several research results indicate that there are some important issues related to service quality and public satisfaction (Frinaldi & Embi, 2015). Citizens are identified as the focal point of public service, therefore ensuring citizen satisfaction with public service has become an important matter. The institutions offering public services face the increasing demand for providing quality and efficient services to the public. It is the duty of these institutions to meet the requests of citizens for high-quality services (Lamsal & Gupta, 2021). In a time of fast-changing and increasing demands, governments must adopt new ways of doing things, which includes identifying new practices and taking into consideration the meaning of these practices to the public (OECD, 2019). If the productivity levels of the public sector are low, the growth potential and the provision of public services will be at risk. The role of government in this regard is to identify the problems, to create the right conditions, and to recognize processes that can accelerate innovation (OECD, 2017). While the literature has many definitions of the innovation (Tyler, 2017), (Koç & Gunal, 2021), they need to be suitable for the focus of the study undertaken. The general agreement about the innovation definition involves the initiation and realization of new ideas (de Vries, Bekkers, & Tummers, 2015).

According to the Oslo Manual, innovation refers to a novel or substantially enhanced product (good or service), or process; a fresh approach to marketing; or the application of a new organizational method in business operations, workplace organization or external relations (OECD & Eurostat, 2018).

Mulgan and Albury explain that successful innovation is the development and use of new procedures, goods, services, and delivery systems that significantly enhance results' efficacy, efficiency, or quality. Moreover, successful innovation is essential for developing better methods of addressing demands, resolving issues, and utilizing resources and technology in government and public services (Mulgan & Albury, 2003). Innovation in public services is defined by Osborne & Brown (2011) as the introduction of new components such as new knowledge, new organizations, and new management styles. One of the main requirements for a successful innovation is related to the knowledge of the organization and the management of this knowledge. It is important that this information comes from different units, individuals and groups within the organization and is created with the participation of the parties with whom the organization interacts and cooperates (Sati, 2019)

Drivers and barriers to innovation in public and private sectors

Innovation is an important factor in offering high-quality services to citizens and businesses (Bloch, 2011) Innovation helps create more public value and better societal challenges and it can lead to increased efficiency and new product development. It is possible to accept that the progress in both public and private sectors is driven by innovation. Innovations can be successful if the ideas are

incubated to allow better cooperation between members of an organization and act for avoiding losses from an earlier release of services/products onto the market. The literature indicates that the process of innovation in the private sector is influenced by various factors, such as internal or external (Agolla & Lill, 2013). Among the internal drivers of innovation, are the company's strategy concerning innovation, the internal structure of the organization, the innovation culture, the organization's size, the organization's decisions (such as R&D conduct) competencies of the employees and their educational background, human resource management, financial capacity, ability to set achievable goals and the attitude of managers towards innovation (Cankar & Petkovšek, 2013). The external factors in the private sector are the economic climate, labor market, public policy, society and the natural environment (OECD/Eurostat, 2019), links with academic and research institutions input costs for production, the maturity of the industry in focus (Cankar & Petkovšek, 2013), and market competition. Companies innovate to gain a competitive edge and respond to changing customer demands (Tidd & Bessant, 2020).

The report of the Expert Group on Public Sector Innovation of the European Commission (2013) identified three types of drivers of innovation in the public sector: internal factors, external factors, and political factors. According to the report the most important internal factors are human resources management and organizational structure, bureaucracy, and internal innovation culture. While public-private partnerships, users' involvement, international good practice, and national award schemes are among external factors. Existing research has indicated that factors like the political and administrative environment, the public sector legal culture, and resource planning can either stimulate or impede innovation (Lewis, Ricard, & Klijn, 2018).

Other apparent drivers of the innovation in public services are also the economic crisis and demographic changes (Desmarchelier, Djellal, & Gallouj, 2019).

One of the key distinctions between the public and private sectors is their objectives. While innovation for firms brings a competitive gain in the market and supports profit generation, the public sector has multiple and competing objectives and often requires a balance to remain between competing values (Natário & Couto, 2022). Public organizations are considered less innovative than private entities. However, it is possible that innovations have always existed in the public sector, albeit in different forms than those seen in the private sector. Innovations in the private sector are supposed to be based on employees and pay attention to the needs of users, while in the public sector innovations are related to the initiative of policy and senior managers who operate in a top-down approach (Fuglsang & Pedersen, 2011).

The literature shows that barriers to innovation include organizational culture, lack of organizational strategy, failure to see opportunities, and harsh attitude towards innovation. Other barriers to innovation in the public sector are related to a shortage of skills, and a lack of external funding. In his study, Emre Cinar (2019) explained that the most common barriers are related to organizational capacity. Process administration was considered the most significant barrier of the category. The Public Sector tries to successfully deliver innovation by building relationships, in this regard interaction is considered important, taking in this way the second place as an influential barrier to innovation. The innovation content takes up the third place which has been called as perceived characteristics.

Innovation barriers in literature sometimes are seen as obstacles that prevent innovative activities in businesses, while for others, innovation barriers are seen as obstacles that can be overcome with effort. In general, the barriers of innovation are divided into internal and external. Insufficient internal funds, perception of employees on risks and costs of innovation. External barriers on the other hand arise from the interaction with other businesses and institutions in the economic and innovation system and can be subdivided into supply, demand, and environmental barriers (Demirdogen, 2019).

Biolcheva (2017) examined innovation barriers in medium-sized furniture businesses. The study states that businesses need to innovate more products and technologies to ensure their development, and that legal obstacles create barriers to innovation. It has been suggested that the external barriers that the businesses face are related to the environment where a business operates, such as political and legal components, socio-cultural features, technologies used and macroeconomic characteristics. On the other hand, the internal barriers are related to company culture, management interpretations on development, and risk management.

Overcoming the barriers to innovation is necessary for creating a culture that generates solutions that will bring competitiveness for the business and help with the process of innovation.

3. Methodology

Secondary data has been used for the realization of this study. As a first step, peer-reviewed research articles were chosen with the help of academic search tools, such as digital databases, public administration journals, and articles. The author searched the digital databases for articles published from 1995 to 2023 using terms such as “innovation”, “innovative”, “public service”, “innovation in public service”, and “service delivery”. The articles were then organized and analyzed according to the context, characteristics, and relevance to this study. Around 25 % of the used literature includes studies published between 1995 and 2012, while the remaining 75% included studies between 2013 and 2023. Documents from official governmental online sources were also used to determine the innovative public services in Albania.

4. Results

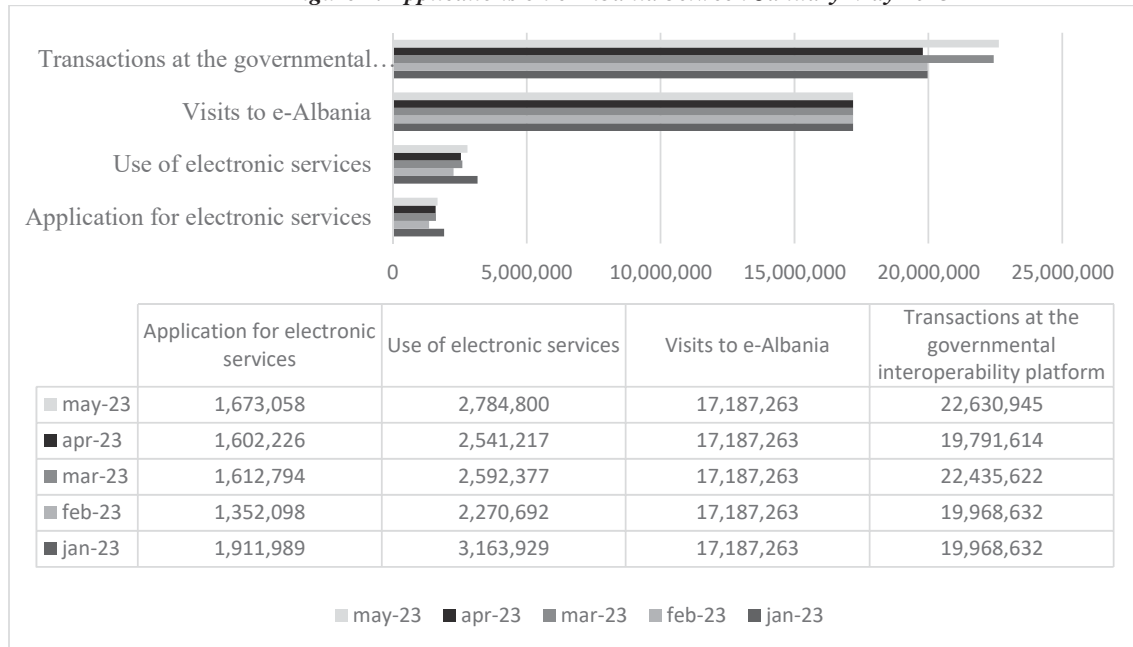
The literature shows that the phases of the innovation cycle should be strengthened through collaboration with public and private stakeholders, through the empowerment of human resources, and by accepting feedback from the community/customers. The main factors that impact the success of innovation in public services include, among other things, effective relationships between local and national levels of the government, proper institutional coordination, policy unity, context-specific adaptation, collaborative engagement of beneficiaries and civil society, proper consideration of digital and technological opportunities, transparency in budgeting and expenditures, public-private partnerships, and accountability towards customer-centric models (Hafeez, 2015). In recent years, the digitalization of public services has helped to reduce the time of delivering a public service, to reduce unnecessary bureaucratic actions, to increase transparency, and to facilitate access to information. From the perspective of public policy, digitalization facilitated the approach to innovation in administration and public services and brought services closer to the citizens. Since 2005, the use of information technology for the advancement of public service management innovation assumed a heightened significance in Albania, which was supported by the establishment of new institutions and setting new standards, policies, strategies, and laws (Kamberi & Xhindi, 2021).

Citizen's Charter for the Benefit of Public Services, approved by the Decision of the Council of Ministers of Albania no. 623, dated 26.10.2018, defines the primary rights of citizens and businesses throughout the process of providing public services by state administration bodies. These are rights that the administration that provides the public service must guarantee to citizens and enterprises during this process (Agency for the Delivery of Integrated Services, 2022). Even though Albania approved the Citizen's Charter in 2018, the first citizen charters in European countries date from the early 1990s. These charters define several minimum standards citizens should have while accessing a public service. They have been used to improve or modernize public services. The content of these charters generally includes commitments regarding transparency, openness, and non-discrimination. Technology offers many opportunities for using the Citizens Charters, and many countries have adopted technology and e-services as a crucial method for delivering public services (European Public Administration Network, 2018).

The Albanian Government has set three main directions through its objectives which include: 1. The promotion and the increase of electronic services, 2. The use of ICT in education to bridge the digital gap and empower youth, and 3. The consolidation of the digital infrastructure throughout the country. For this reason, the Albanian government has created the e-Albania portal with the vision of becoming the main channel of online services for public administration. E-Albania is an online channel that offers public services 24/7. It delivers electronic services of the first and second level (according to UNPAN 2014), where anyone can get information about public services, procedures that need to be followed, the necessary documentation, and much more. It also offers third and fourth level (according to UNPAN 2014) services through the latest technological standards, with the possibility of online payment for the delivered service. The graphs below show a summary of applications for electronic services on e-Albania and the users of electronic services for January – May 2023. As the graphic shows, there is a drop in the number of electronic services applications from January to May, with a difference

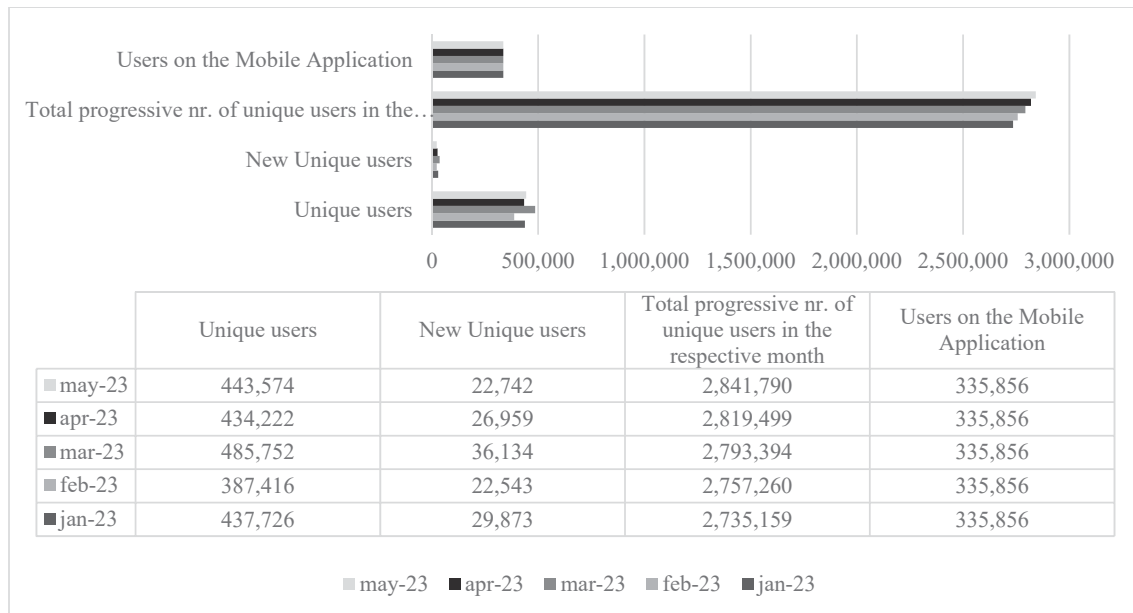
of 238.931 applications. Regarding the number of new unique users of the online platform, it is noticed that the highest number of new unique users was presented in March.

Figure 1. Applications on e-Albania between January-May 2023



Source: Adopted from <https://opendata.gov.al/?item=statistika-te-portalit-e-albania>

Figure 2. Users of e-Albania between January-May 2023

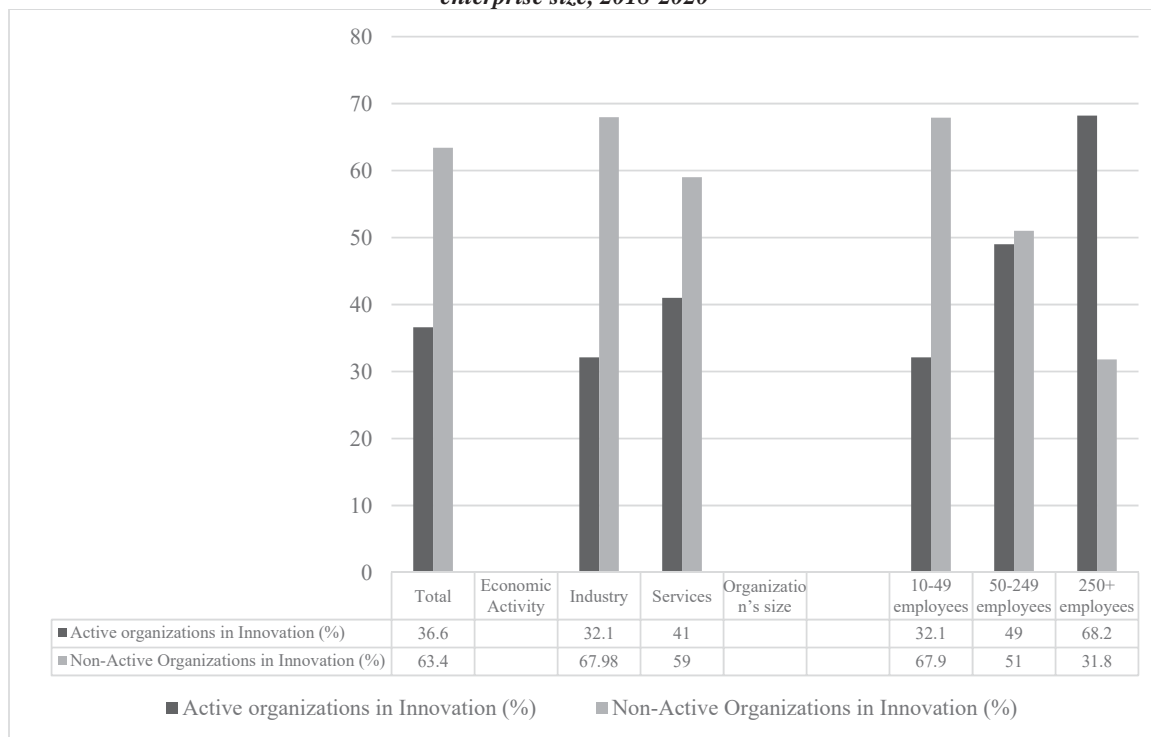


Source: Adopted from <https://opendata.gov.al/?item=statistika-te-portalit-e-albania>

According to INSTAT (Institute of Statistics of Albania), during 2018-2020, 36.5% of organizations in Albania have undertaken at least one innovative activity, which was noted to be higher in the services sector than in industry. Albania became part of the European Innovation Scoreboard for

the first time in 2022, and it is ranked as an Emerging Innovator as it shows a performance that remains at 41.7% of the EU average.

Figure 3. Percentage of active and inactive enterprises in Innovation according to economic sectors and enterprise size, 2018-2020



Source: adopted from INSTAT. https://www.instat.gov.al/media/8635/inovacioni_2018-2020-final-shqip.pdf

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in its “Technology and Innovation Report” (2023) highlights the preparedness of countries in using frontier technologies. According to the report, Albania is ranked 88th out of 166 countries. In 2021, Albania ranked in the 85th place, which shows that it has dropped 3 positions in the rankings. The data shows that countries with high-income economies such as the United States, Sweden, or Singapore are the readiest countries for frontier technologies.

Since 2013 Albania continued to expand its digitalization process for the provision of online services, supporting it through policies. Through the provision of online services, the aim was to remove administrative barriers, increase transparency, and minimize corruption (Satka, Zendeli, & Kosta, 2023).

Albania is carrying out its 2017 National Innovation and Technology Strategy. To link Albanian innovative organizations, including universities, businesses, and start-ups dedicated to addressing urban issues, a program on urban partnership acceleration was also adopted. Albania finally passed the Law on Startups in March 2022, the Law on Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) in April 2022, and the Grant Scheme for Startups in July 2022 (European Commission, 2022).

5. Conclusions

Innovativeness is regarded as both a competitive tool for the public sector and one of the main levers of providing services with full (or complete) satisfaction. In this context, it is known that all public administrations take initiatives to be innovative, allocate significant resources and spend time in this regard, and even participate in Research & Development-like studies from time to time. Therefore, innovation is not an organizational skill and/or dynamic that develops or emerges on its own. In that case, it can be stated that some factors, internal and external to the organizations, are quite determinative

in promoting innovation in the public sector. Factors such as the competencies of the managers, their preparation, their determination, their ability to cooperate, and the abilities of the employees come to the fore within the scope of internal incentives. In addition to these, there are also studies stating that the ethical culture of the organization has an effect that motivates innovation. Social and economic needs are the factors that drive innovation from outside the organization.

The factors that hinder innovation are the lack of such an atmosphere and/or motivation in organizations, budget constraints, and lack of inter-organizational cooperation. In addition, external factors such as political factors and centralization, which are proposed to be changed by the new public administration school and which are independent of the functioning of organizations, are also general obstacles to innovation.

For innovation to be used in the public sector, public administrators and officials should be encouraged to develop original innovations, leadership, political support, organizational climate, and culture that will enable this innovation, therefore, allocation of necessary resources and removal of other constraints is recommended. Process innovation (administrative process innovation, technological process innovation), product or service innovation, governance innovation, and conceptual innovation are among the types of innovation applied in the public sector. The public sector must ensure regulations and support to achieve as much success in innovation as the private sector. The ability to create and use an entrepreneurial social network, the existence of incentives to be involved in the innovation process, and institutional arrangements that exemplify the important forces in private sector competitive markets, are among the main regulations and supports that require adequate legal and administrative support to create and sustain these changes. Policies related to public administration innovation, including e-governance through the digitization of online public services, face various problems and challenges. The establishment and operation of the Ministry of Information Technology and Communication from 2009 to 2013 and the Ministry of Innovation and Public Administration from 2013 to 2017 were significant institutional developments for Albania. This demonstrated the continuity and sustainability of public policies in fostering and supporting innovation, particularly in terms of modernizing administration and public services. The Albanian government continues to prioritize innovation in public services. While there have been evident successes, the challenges faced by the innovation process highlight the need for a robust broadband internet network infrastructure and the assurance of fast and affordable access for all citizens seeking to access these services, especially in the context of expanding online services and the concept of e-government. The offering of online services, however, has impacted the elderly population that were used to taking the services in contact with the administration and are now forced to use the help of a relative or private service offices. In Albania, there are also concerns regarding the protection of personal data, which necessitates careful consideration and enforcement through legal amendments. In this regard, it is recommended to establish manuals, detailed procedures, and control mechanisms for the storage and management of personal data belonging to individuals who utilize platforms such as "E-Albania."

Authors' contribution: "Introduction, I.S.; Literature review, I.S.; Methodology and data, I.S.; Research results and comments, I.S.; Conclusion, I.S."

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