

# E-Devlet: Service to the Turkish Citizen or a Tool in the Hand of a Centralized Government?

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## Abstract

*E-Devlet (officially E-Devlet Kapisi) is the Turkish equivalent of E-government. It is a digital environment that facilitates the relationship and the problem solving procedures between the Turkish citizens and their government. Citizens can subscribe with their identity number or TC kimlik numarasi using their mobile devices or computers in order to obtain diverse documents ranging from health care or student status verifications to real estate ownership certificates. Though the E-Devlet seems to be a magnificent invention for the ordinary people that lets them arrange these papers hasslefree, and this method is also widespread in the Western hemisphere, in the frame of a more and more centralized and authoritarian rule under the Muslim conservative AKP governments, it is feared to be a way of controlling the Turkish nationals. As the system is not only willing to serve the citizen but also tries to collect the maximum amount of data on them, the gathered information could be misused and turned against the taxpayers. This effort of congregating all personal facts and figures is likewise a challenge for those responsible of the technical background of the project as shown by a 2018 incident of breakdown when the site could not resist the Turks interested in their family trees published by the government on E-Devlet.*

**Key words:** Turkey, government, e-governance, digital transition.

## Introduction

The Turkish public administration has gone through significant changes under the two-decade rule of the Islamist-modernist Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the presidency of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. At the same time, catching up with Western models reveals all the contradictions of a two-faced development model. On one hand, the extensive usage of state-of-the-art tools democratizes the participation of the citizens. They can express their views and opinion more easily and might intervene in domestic politics more frequently than in the past. On the other, these contemporary high tech applied sciences might contribute to a stricter government control in an already more or less authoritarian style of ruling.

The usage of modern infocommunication system is not only a government vs. citizens „game”, it is also a mutual method of processing and proposing ideals, ideas and precise decisions and implementations. This is not only an abstract area of study, but also a modern

way of propaganda for both government, opposition, civil society and the Turkish citizens. Several questions can be asked concerning the establishment of modern infocommunication technologies in Turkish politics:

- a) Who do use these tools more frequently from among the political actors?
- b) What platforms do they use?
- c) What messages do they try to pass and how they present these directives and information?

The correct answers to these and similar questions can permit the researcher to detect the online presence of the politicians and the citizens. Not only the presence itself, but also its frequency and efficiency. This way, it will be possible of speaking of the quantity and the quality of the online presence of Turkish politicians, political parties, civil society organizations and other non-governmental actors as well as ordinary Turkish citizens.

The information obtained during the study of the online presence of political actors in Turkey can also lead to an obvious option to compare it with the presence in real life. So, real life interactions can be contrasted to the dialogue on the Internet.

In fact, Turkey as many other nations worldwide are moving from an old fashioned form of governance towards the modern concept of digital government where the interaction between the state run agencies and the citizens is organized on online platforms. Electronic democracy and electronic government can have an influence on real life democracy and government. Again, this impact might be double faced: might spell more participation from the side of the citizens and civil society organizations, but can also enforce tight government control on the population. The situation in China in this regard is very alarming, so being too naive in this question is not an option.

## **1. Development of pre-conditions for e-governance**

From a political point of view, the basis for the development of e-governance was created by the neo-liberal turn observed at the global level in the 1980s. While in the 1970s the governments of the world were forced to deal with the economic crisis caused by the rise in oil prices, the period before the fall of the Berlin Wall, especially in the West, favored the development of the social market economy. Within this framework, the leaders of the developed countries tried to bring state services as close as possible to the population. The same period, i.e. the 1980s, also brought rapid changes in the IT world. The rudimentary personal computers appeared and became widespread, the first networks were built, and the world wide web, which was still limited at the time, was launched in the United States. (Akcagunduz, 2013:129)

By the beginning of the 1990s, the bipolar world order had ended. Due to the lack of political, economic and military rivals, the developed western countries found themselves in a favorable situation, which made it possible to put the info-communication tools, which were

becoming more and more available to the general public at the time, at the service of the state and the citizens alike. For several political and economic reasons, Turkey has left behind Western countries in the democratization of governance. This cannot be explained simply by the fact that, both economically and technologically, it has accumulated a significant lag compared to the West, serious, systemic problems were also observed in the country throughout the 1990s. One of these problems was the complete lack of political stability, which is very well illustrated by the fact that the multi-party coalition governments were only able to lead Turkey for a very short time. The political crisis was further deepened by the fact that extremist parties were able to gain power and tried to achieve political goals contrary to the ideal of a secular republic. Staging a so-called postmodern coup in 1997, the army also intervened in politics and forced Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan to resign. The political uncertainty was further deepened by the corruption that permeated the entire Turkish state, thus corruption became a systemic source of economic problems. Since Turkey wanted to be a member of the European Union, the Brussels reports on the country found these points to be the most serious challenges. (Akcagunduz, 2013:131)

Indeed, there was a well visible gap between the level of development of the EU member states and Turkey as far as the development of the IT sector was concerned. This difference was, in fact, due to a lower GDP-level, the underdevelopment of the indigenous electronics sector, the lack of support from politicians and lack of consciousness among the general public, and more specifically the public administrators. (Kutlu & Sevinc, 2010:2)

The European Union not only forced the Turkish government to act politically, but also set a good example for the leaders in Ankara. At this time, EU member states not only used e-governance tools separately, but also started to connect their systems. We can call this development E-Europe. E-Europe is „qualified as a network governance in accordance with its own administrative mechanisms”. (Aktel et al., 2017:773)

Turkey was also in great need of European good practices because the Turkish public administration system itself lagged behind global trends due to the turbulent domestic political period of the 1990s. At the turn of the millennium, the majority of the buildings of Turkish central bodies were not yet connected to the Internet, and they did not have their own websites. Before the AKP came to power, roughly at the end of 2000, the turning point occurred and the digital supply of the Turkish public administration began to grow rapidly. At that moment 599 central level government organizations were connected to the web; this figure increased to 830 on November 2001, 858 on December 2001 and to 990 on April 2002. (Bensghir & Yildiz, 2001-2002:43) The complete technological development of the e-government system also required significant development in the communication methods. Instead of cables, which were considered increasingly obsolete by the 2000s, the Turkish government platforms used and continue to use the TURKSAT Turkish satellite. (Yeloglu & Sagsan, 2009:22)

After solving the problem of equipping the central state administrative bodies with the Internet and homepages of these institutions were born, the left-wing government led by Bulent Ecevit took the first steps towards e-governance. The Turkish Informatics Council was convened on May 10, 2002, and it was decided to launch several major projects that laid the foundation for the later "e-devlet kapişi" system. Developments started by the left, such as the E-Europe+ initiative, the National Individual Information System, the Tax Collection Agencies Automation System and the Turkish National Information Infrastructure Main Plan put Euro-Atlantic integration in the focus of political thinking regarding e-governance. The Justice and Development Party, which came to power in November 2002, and its first leader, Abdullah Gul, could already rely on the basic concept that had been developed by the Ecevit cabinet. (Bensghir & Yildiz, 2001-2002:44)

Not only Ecevit, but also other left-wing politicians of the turn of the millennium were enthusiastic about info-communication tools and advocated their use when interacting with citizens. For example, the head of state, Necdet Sezer, known for his secular and Kemalist views, explained that he finds it very entertaining to be able to communicate with voters by email. Mesut Yilmaz, who served as prime minister twice in the 1990s, even called on IT professionals to lobby for the new government to introduce e-governance as soon as possible. (Bensghir & Yildiz, 2001-2002:45)

Over time, in addition to government services, similar initiatives of local governments also appeared on the Internet and on mobile devices. One of the very first mayoral offices to take steps in this regard was the traditionally left-wing and Kemalist Izmir. In the third largest city of Turkey, three developments were started already at the end of the 2000s. Through one, the residents of the settlement had access to local government services in the virtual space, on the other platform they could get to know the announcements of the local authorities, and on the third they could make payments in a completely secure form. (Uste & Guzel, 2012:54)

Shortly after the AKP came to power, in 2004, Law No. 4982 was introduced, which regulates the government's data management system. This legislation created the legal foundations of e-governance, and referring to this normative text, the supply of state bodies with computers and Internet access was accelerated, and from then on, every state and local government organization had its own website. (Carikci & Yavuz, 2010:103)

Essentially, the criticism coming from the EU and the leftist opposition led to a situation, starting in 2005, in which Turkish ministries and state bodies began preparing for the transition to e-governance. In other words, the development of the E-Government Gateway system, called "e-devlet kapişi" in Turkish, can be explained not only by technical progress, but also as a reform of a poorly functioning state organization hit by corruption and political division. A total of 35 different government agencies started to promote not less than 334 various services in the mid-2000s. (Akcagunduz, 2013:131)

The relative backwardness of Turkey at the end of the mandate of the first AKP government, i.e. in 2007, was clearly demonstrated by the e-readiness study organized with the participation of 69 countries, according to which Turkey was ranked 42nd, well behind the majority of developed countries. (Cayhan, 2008:4) Between 2005 and 2008, one can only talk about sporadic development, the Turkish state's digitization experiments finally came together in 2008 into a coherent system, known to the Turkish public as "e-devlet kapisı", i.e. E-Government Gateway. (Bozaslan, 2019:3278)

## **2. E-devlet as a means of frugal governance**

The introduction of e-governance in its initial phase brought many advantages for both the government and the population, so at that time, i.e. in the late 2000s and early 2010s, few people dealt with the possible dark sides of the system. As long as the AKP governments were able to govern without major social tensions, the voters accepted the change more easily. Just as the popularity of the AKP began to decline with the large-scale protest actions in 2013 related to an urban planning project in the famous Gezi Park of Istanbul, a part of society also became increasingly critical of e-government.

Nevertheless, until 2013, it can be said that several positive features of the "e-government" dominated the public discourse about it. The Turkish population was more optimistic, the political elite also believed that this tool would make the Turkish state more democratic, inclusive and cheaper.

In the second half of the 2000s, the Turkish state apparatus accumulated a lot of useful experience in the field of e-governance in a very short time. Thanks to the above-mentioned 334 digital services, the state saved significant amounts of money, which the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government typically spent on infrastructure development. The latter significantly contributed to the fact that, after 2002, the Islamist political formation overwhelmingly won the parliamentary elections in 2007 as well. Economical governance was therefore of interest to the AKP government at this initial stage of their rule because they tried to use the state budget in a manner as to stabilize the economy and raise the standard of living of ordinary citizens in such a way that they would want to vote for the AKP again and again. By 2011, the "e-devlet" system had reached the level where the Data Collection Directorate (Bilgi Toplu Dairesi) belonging to the Ministry of Development was able to carry out a comprehensive cost-saving study and draw up a cost-saving report. This 2011 report showed that since the introduction of the "e-devlet", the state has made demonstrable savings on the operation of the social welfare and the police, and the introduction of electronic invoicing systems has also resulted in significant revenues. (Akcagunduz, 2013:131)

Savings can be demonstrated not only in terms of material gain, but also in terms of environmental protection. According to the 2011 report of the Ministry of Development, only

the SOYBIS e-governance subsystem, which serves state bodies dealing with social support, saved funds in the amount of 205,583,491 Turkish liras. By the way, by not printing the necessary documents out, the lives of 42,053 trees were also spared. (Akcagunduz, 2013:132)

A very good example of cost-effective operation is the National Judicial Network Project (UYAP), within the framework of which 23 different databases were connected between 2008 and 2011 and then integrated with the digitized population registration systems. Thanks to this, a state survey conducted in April 2011 showed that 1.6 billion Turkish Liras were saved in this sector alone. This amount is 16.6% of the IT development budget of Turkey between 2002 and 2011. (Erdem, 2014:740) In addition to the above examples, it is also clear that the Turkish government prioritized the economic operation of the system. In the initial stages of e-government, it is evident that the most basic consideration was not the interest of the citizens, but rather that the state administration processes that generate the most revenues could operate as cost-effectively as possible. (Ogurlu, 2014:24)

The positive effect of the e-governance system on the Turkish economy and budget does not stop at the fact that less has to be spent on running the state administration, but it also helps the country's development in other ways. According to some estimates, the operation of e-government contributes to the growth of GDP in the long term. The use of e-devlet systems over several decades can increase productivity by 1.4% and employment by 0.6%, creating quality jobs. With this, the cheaper and digitized public administration can increase the Turkish domestic product by 2%. (Gokmen & Hamsioglu, 2010:259)

Since the founding of the republic in 1923, Turkey has been rocked by a number of serious corruption scandals. It should be remembered that between December 17 and 25, 2013, the prosecutor's office initiated joint proceedings against a number of leading Turkish politicians, their relatives and their business partners. Since e-governance is more transparent due to its method of operation, it would be expected that the introduction of e-devlet would effectively counter this problem and make the operation of the Turkish state cheaper. In this regard, it is difficult to judge how well this theoretical proposition is realized in practice. (Zangana et al., 2020:1164)

At one point, however, e-governance definitely increases the costs of the Turkish state, and this point is the issue of cyber security. Protecting sensitive and confidential data stored on digital surfaces is more complicated and expensive than protecting paper-based databases. During the construction of the system, it was necessary to spend money preventing the creation of fake user accounts and all similar fraud. The system had to be secured so that foreign spies could not access it. A special mechanism was also developed to ensure that no one can obtain citizens' data for commercial use, and the integration of banks and citizens' bank accounts required special precautions. (Efendioglu, 2007:229)

### **3. E-devlet as a means of social integration and advancement**

It can be said that at the time of the introduction of the "e-devlet", the system was not discriminatory and aimed at society as a whole. At that time, society as a whole still included the bottom decile, the most underprivileged people. This is well exemplified by the fact that the acquisition of the family allowance and the achievement of entitlement were also carried out through e-government tools. In Turkey, the poorest 6% of the population can get extra cash support if they take care of their children's regular health check-ups and send them to school. After 2005, pediatrician visits and school attendance were also registered on the "e-devlet" interface. With this, the AKP, which was still emerging at the time as a ruling party, simultaneously achieved that even the poorest joined the technological leap that was taking place at the time, and that the operation of the social care system placed less and less burden on the central budget. According to the survey, 11,773,127.40 Turkish liras were saved with this step alone. (Akcagunduz, 2013:132)

The extension of "e-devlet" services to the lower classes of society really points in the direction of cohesion, but it should not be forgotten that as of 2019, nearly two million illiterate people still live in Turkey. Unfortunately, they are largely excluded from the system, since the spread of "e-government" is not accompanied by an educational program for the illiterate and digital immigrants. (Bozaslan, 2019:3279)

During the general spread of e-government services, the Turkish government tried to open up to a wider audience. They soon realized that different communities of people with disabilities have special needs and expectations from the system. In order to meet these needs, the AKP governments created the policy called "No Barriers to the e-government Project". Within the framework of this, more than three million hearing impaired people had access to state services. This also means that the sign language version of the e-devlet has also been completed, and a special frequent questions and answers page has been created for deaf people. (Kilic et al., 2019:160)

In 2012, the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) conducted another major public opinion poll, with which it wanted to test how the spread of "e-government" systems affected the digital culture of the Turkish population. This Household Information Technologies Usage Survey (Hane Halkı Bilişim Teknolojileri Kullanım Araştırması) proved that the opening of e-governance interfaces was also a significant step from the point of view of social integration. In 2012, a little less than half of Turkish households had Internet access, to be exact 47.2%. At that time, 48.7% of the adult population regularly used a computer, and the vast majority of them, 97.3% of computer users accessed the World Wide Web. The survey found a clear correlation between the spread of Internet government services and the use of the Internet by the Turkish population. (Akcagunduz, 2013:138) This means that during the long decade between 2001 and 2012, the number of Turkish Internet users increased tenfold in absolute

terms, and eightfold in percentage terms. Turkey joined the World Wide Web in 1993, but even in 2001 there were barely four million users nationwide (this was 6% of the population at the time). Based on TUIK's 2012 survey, it can be stated that this figure was around 40-42 million people in 2012. (Bensghir & Yildiz, 2001-2002:43)

#### **4. E-devlet as a means of simplifying government administration**

The technical development experienced since the introduction of the e-devlet kapisi in 2008 has not only made administration simpler and faster, but the procedure itself has also become more logical. In Turkey, the clearest example of this is the spread of the so-called MERNIS system. Before the MERNIS plan, every Turkish citizen had some different registration numbers. The Ministry of Justice, the police, the Social Security, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Defense, as well as many other sub-systems of the government, registered the Turks under a separate number. Within the framework of the MERNIS project, the General Directorate of Population and Citizenship Affairs (Nüfus ve Vatandaşlık İşleri Genel Müdürlüğü) used the personal number (kimlik numarası) as a basis from 2017, and built a new and partly decentralized registration system using it. As part of this, the data of Turkish citizens is collected at the district level. In order for this to function without problems, the district population registers were modernized and their databases digitized. Data management and data storage related to individuals have been standardized in these district centers. If necessary, this is the level that provides data about the person concerned to other government bodies. (Bozkurt, 2017:94)

The unification of population register data is logical and practical in many cases, but it can sometimes be alarming for the average citizen. These district data providers not only know whether the citizen has already completed his military service or whether he pays for his health insurance, but they can also have information about the person's major purchases, statistical analyzes can be carried out without the person's knowledge, and they can offer targeted government services to the person's attention. According to the narrative of the government, this is of course not about stronger control, but simply about bringing the government and the citizen closer to each other. (Bozkurt, 2017:94)

If we take stock of who benefits from the MERNIS system introduced by the AKP government in 2017, it is clear that the government is the one that gets the most. Thanks to MERNIS, it has become easier to collect taxes and contributions, control tax evaders, and expose fraudsters abusing land registry and bank documents. Based on the MERNIS databases, the government can plan investments and infrastructure developments financed by the central budget in an easier and more targeted way. The public administration is aware of where citizens are and who are crossing the national border. The army organizes the conscriptions with the help of MERNIS, and the Ministry of Education checks here whether the



compulsory students attend school. In contrast, the citizen does not get much. Maybe it's just that now they don't fill out your ID card by hand, so they can't write your name wrong. (Bozkurt, 2017:96)

## **5. E-devlet from the users' side**

It is clear that the political leadership of the country operating the e-government system can and wants to achieve many social, political and economic goals with the digital transition. It is also evident that the system is much more important to the political elite than to the average citizen, but it cannot be denied that the latter are also making more and more use of the convenience provided by the system. A questionnaire survey in 2010 tried to map who and how this opportunity was used during the year or two after the development of the e-government gateway. At this initial stage of the project, the most popular service was the request for information about personal identification numbers. 57.2% of the surveyed users utilized the digital government platform for this purpose. It is not surprising that the young people were the ones who understood the importance of the system the earliest, as the second most common digital interaction with 42.2% can be found in connection with university entrance exams and the results of semester exams. In addition, quite a few people used state databases to access phone numbers, health insurance or tax information. (Carikci & Yavuz, 2010:113)

The users of the initial era made it clear in 2010 that the Turkish state was not sufficiently prepared for the digital transition either at the national or local level. According to the above-mentioned questionnaire survey, neither the expertise nor the infrastructural capabilities of the state bodies were at the level that citizens expected, and they complained that the government agencies and their employees did not help them with the electronic processes. Internet users believe that the Turkish state does not have enough trained and experienced IT staff, and that they do not want to support citizens who are less experienced in informatics. The situation can also be described as the fact that at the beginning of the 2010s, the infrastructure for IT developments was not yet in place. At the same time, the majority was still optimistic and believed that the AKP would be able to cure the childhood diseases of the e-devlet kapisı. (Carikci & Yavuz, 2010:115)

Carikci and Yavuz's 2010 survey also looked for the answer to how the typical profile of users could be drawn. They found that the most active citizens are from the age group of university students to the age of 50, with the demand for digital services falling drastically after the age of 51. By definition, most of the people involved were still among those with a higher education. They were very happy with the possibilities and highlighted the fact that the state administration uses less paper and protects the environment. (Carikci & Yavuz, 2010:116)

In 2015, Celik and Kabakus examined, within the framework of a quantitative analysis, how Turkish users of e-governance relate to the system itself. They were mostly interested in whether the respondents thought the e-devlet would make their lives easier. The result shows that the majority of Turkish users believe that official administration is easier with this new method, but only 15.59% said that they strongly believe that we are facing a positive change. The most skeptical about e-devlet are urban residents, people with primary school education and people working in the public sector. It is shocking that about 48.2% of public employees believe that digital government services do not make our lives better. (Celik & Kabakus, 2015:189) A survey conducted in a rural hospital in 2013 shows better results within the health care professional layer. Within this educated and partly intellectual stratum, the e-government is better known and popular. 58.5% of the respondents were happy that such services exist and that some of them are also available on mobile devices. 88.2% of the people involved also highlighted that the system provides them with useful feedback information and enables them to communicate with their colleagues and patients on different platforms. (Naralan et al., 2013:50)

From the users' point of view, it is a very important consideration that their sensitive and personal data stored in the system is safe. During the construction of the e-devlet system, there were several cases that upset public opinion for a reason. Such was the case in the middle of the 2000s, when the computer of the head of the local government was stolen in the Batikent district of the Turkish capital, Ankara, along with the data of about 45,000 citizens. The case, which also came to light in the mid-2000s, and according to which some municipal and government computers were connected to foreign Internet providers, not Turkish, for economic reasons, also caused a great uproar. In this case, there was a risk that the sensitive and secret data of Turkish citizens could have been leaked out of the country, and some people could even have misused it. (Efendioglu, 2007:227)

In some e-government applications, as a result of an inquiry process, many personal and corporate information unintentionally emerge and this situation poses a significant danger in terms of information security. (Seferoglu et al., 2011:298) This is why some Turkish citizens have approached digital government services with suspicion since the early 2010s, saying that they do not feel the security of their data is guaranteed, and they have complained that the sanctity of their privacy is or may be violated. Many people were reluctant to conduct financial transactions on these platforms. (Kervenaoel & Kocoglu, 2012:359) Although Turkish citizens are remarkably suspicious of those who govern them, in fact the legal environment is given as the 2010 constitutional amendment states that every Turkish citizen is the owner of his own data and that only they can decide on its usability. However, beautiful theory does not always match the practice. (Mamur Isikci, 2017:1903)

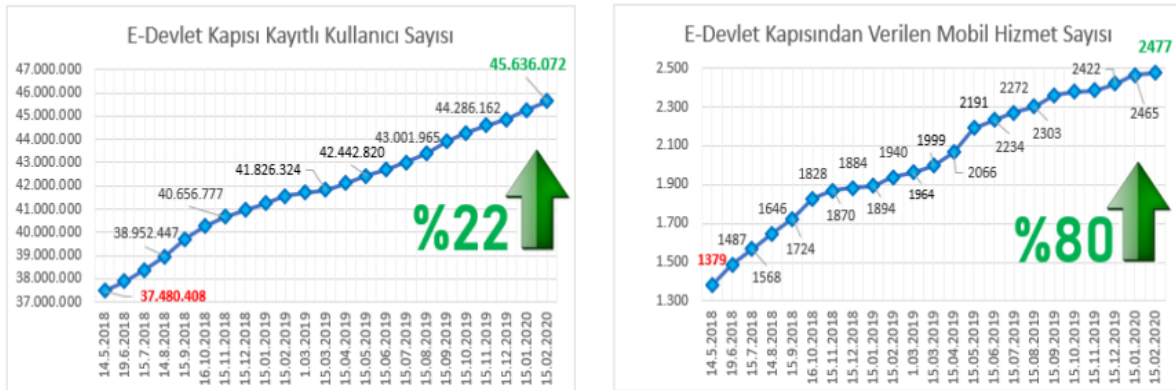
Every two years, the European Union examined the development of e-governance in the member states of the community and in the candidate countries. Both the 2013, 2015 and 2017 reports state that the Turkish e-government gateway is user-friendly and provides a good service to the citizens, but in almost all cases the Turkish digital government is criticized from the point of view that communication between the Turkish system and European countries is not well resolved, which would be one of the basic conditions for European integration. (Ekinici, 2018:343)

## **6. E-devlet in the era of mass consumption**

Although Internet use spread worldwide in the 2010s and the web became accessible to most citizens in almost every situation and moment of life in most countries, Turkey still lags behind developed nations. Based on the E-Government Index introduced by the United Nations, Turkey belongs to the middle range of member states. The first such survey was conducted by the UN in 2008. At that time, out of the 192 countries examined, Turkey was in 76th place with a development index of 0.4834. After eight years, in 2016, the international organization showed a higher value, but an index of 0.59 was only enough to take 68th place. (Ekinici, 2018:339)

The fact that Turkey does not occupy a prominent place in the ranking of countries in the world does not prevent the dynamic development of the system, and even in recent years experts have noticed that the number of users is constantly growing, and that access is increasingly transferred to mobile devices. Between May 2018 and February 2020, for example, the number of registered users increased by 22%, which exceeded 45 and a half million people at the beginning of 2020. In the same period, the number of mobile applications connected to the e-devlet Kapisi system increased by 80%. (Karasoy & Babaoglu, 2020:125) The reason for the late spread of applications for mobile phones is that the Turkish government could not start early dealing with the integration of different IT systems, which is a prerequisite for websites running on computers to be stably available on mobile devices as well. One such challenge that Turkish professionals had to solve during the 2010s was that there are dozens of mobile data providers operating in the country, and thanks to them, more than 60 mobile Internet browsers are available to Turkish users. (Kervenaoel & Kocoglu, 2012:357) One of the barriers to interoperability is that Turkish state bodies and the average Turkish citizen often do not use the same file formats due to the fact that the government operates large, comprehensive networks, in which the rapid flow of data is difficult to solve using the extensions that ordinary mortals use. It is in the interest of the Turkish state that in order to protect sensitive data from an economic and IT perspective, the country's system can be independent from worldwide structures. On the other hand, most people prefer the most globally

widespread IT tools. This means that there is a clear difference of interest between the government and the citizens. (Medeni et al., 2009:3)



**Table 1: The number of users of "e-devlet kapisi" and the quantitative change of mobile applications connected to the system in Turkey between 2018 and 2020.**

Source: Karasoy and Babaoglu, 2020:125

The transition to the presidential system significantly influenced the legal background and operation of e-devlet gateway. As in other areas of the Turkish state administration, a strong centralization can be observed in the case of digital services since the 2018 constitutional amendments. A Digital Transition Office was established within the presidential office of the republic, which receives instructions directly from the head of state, i.e. Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself took charge of this key area. (Duman & Aktel, 2021:636)

By the 2020s, e-governance services have become completely natural for Turkish society as a whole. The usefulness and functional errors of the system were mostly demonstrated by the closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the overloading of the healthcare system and the virtualization of some healthcare services in 2020, at the peak of the disease. According to the Turkish government portal's own data, out of the estimated 84,740,000 Turkish citizens in 2021, 57,276,122 users have registered for 6,161 different electronic services or use the 3,300 available mobile applications. Although the Turkish "e-devlet" system today offers a wide variety of e-services for doctors, institutions and patients, statistics show that users use only a fraction of them. It is a given that Turks can receive digital prescriptions, but they could also handle matters related to obstetrics, sports medicine or even disability-related procedures on the Internet, prior to the epidemic they were mostly only interested in their general health information, and would like to know what data the system stores about them. (Bostanci et al., 2022:273)

The closures due to COVID-19 changed people's lives to a great extent and forced those who were averse to them until the outbreak of the epidemic to use Internet solutions. Not only did the demand for "e-devlet" services increase, but more and more people ordered

food, made purchases and communicated with their loved ones on the Internet. COVID-19 not only separated people from each other, but also created a serious health risk, especially for the elderly, who until then had less use of the opportunities provided by "e-devlet" services. In 2020, in the changed circumstances, it might be slightly exaggerating, but it is safe to say that these systems were the key to survival. The specialists saw that the Turkish citizens massively generated for themselves the so-called HES code to access digital government information for their own security. (Bostanci et al., 2022:275)

The panic surrounding the pandemic greatly contributed to the fact that the AKP government was able to increase its control over its own citizens from 2020. In this given year, a total of 66,254,113 HES codes were generated on government websites and mobile applications. With their help, users were not only able to filter out risk factors, but also provided sensitive data about themselves to the government, the healthcare professionals and other citizens. The situation became even more acute with the upsurge of vaccination campaigns. The Turkish social security was also able to use the fear and tension in people due to the disease to find a solution to the problem of those who were not paying. 243,258 Turkish citizens who generated codes on the internet and in mobile applications were able to settle their debt to the government on the digital interface. Even more successful was the campaign in which the Turkish social security tried to collect charitable donations from residents in the framework of a central action, the Social Protection Shield. A total of 2,056,442 individual donations were received, which is an outstanding number even in the already generous Turkish society. (Bostanci et al., 2022:276)

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the next challenge that was faced by the Turkish government and the e-government was the gigantic and devastating earthquake that occurred on February 6, 2023 in the Pazarcik and Elbistan districts of Kahramanmaraş County. The government received a lot of criticism for not reacting quickly enough and for the slow progress of the rescue work. At the same time, the e-devlet system tried to introduce certain services as soon as possible. On the fourth day after the earthquake, an application was already available, in which Turkish citizens could search for the technical and static condition of their residential properties with the help of address and personal ID number. In addition, the government has created an internet interface at [hasartespit.csb.gov.tr](https://hasartespit.csb.gov.tr) where the official damage assessment takes place. (Hurriyet, 2023)

## **Conclusion**

Since the introduction of the presidential system, a dual process can be observed in Turkey. On the one hand, due to globalization and the general development of technology, more and more Turkish citizens have access to electronic and mobile devices, more and more people are also registering for the e-devlet system, so thanks to digitalization, everyday reality

and access to information seem to be more and more free and democratic. At the same time, caused by the powerful centralization efforts of politics, not only the citizen learns more and more about the state, but also the state about the citizen. And the experts expect that the government's digital control will only increase in the coming years.

For the Turkish political leadership, the e-devlet system is not only about controlling the citizens, but also about being able to operate the state administration system as cost-effectively as possible. It is expected that this will also be one of the main motivations in the future. The only question is whether the money saved by the citizens will return to the citizens' pockets or whether it will increase corruption and prestige investments.

The e-government systems in Turkey can be said to be quite developed at the national level, but with the exception of a few wealthier metropolitan municipalities, this is not yet the case everywhere at the local level. It is expected that in the coming years the situation will improve in this area as well and "smart cities" can be built.

The 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquake also proved that Turkey cannot avoid building disaster prevention digital systems that respond to natural catastrophies at record speed. The systems of the government agencies working in the area have not yet been unified, so the system cannot provide an adequate response even in the event of a significant flood or wind disaster, much less during devastating earthquakes.

Above all, the Turkish government must increase the reliability and transparency of the system. Turkish people are inherently critical, so it is not surprising that they have doubts about the functioning of the e-government. The political future of the current AKP government and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also depends on whether it can prove that in the greatest emergencies, the Turkish government stands with the people and not behind them.

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