Chapter V
The European Administrative Space and E–Government Policies: Between Integration and Competition

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ABSTRACT

The challenge of convergence has becoming a core issue in the European agenda, as the existence of «widely accepted administrative standards» represents one of the most important preconditions to promote socio-political development and to reinforce the single Market. Indeed many initiatives have been launched by European institutions to ensure uniformity in terms of administrative action and structures, and several communications by the European Commission have considered the impact of new technologies in creating systems of integrated and interoperable administration in the Old Continent. In this chapter it will be investigated the role of communication and information technologies in the formation of an European administrative space, the process for which administrations become more similar and close to a common European model. The contribution will consider ICTs as a key element of Europe’s economic competitiveness agenda as well as the interconnection between e-government programs and the social dimension of development. In addition to this, in the final part of the chapter it will be also analyzed the nature and implications of the process of uniformity produced by the new digital infrastructures, a peculiar mix of attractiveness and imposition.
INTRODUCTION

The on-going difficulties in defining and developing the European Union landscape seem to have been overcome due to the widespread Image/metaphor of the so-called ‘Common Space’. Aimed at describing the integration process within the European context, such metaphor is easily found in official documents and field research as well. Used under slightly different definitions — European constitutional space (the realm of shared constitutional values between member States and the EU itself), European judicial space (the cooperation existing in courtrooms and within an ‘area of Security, Freedom and Justice’), European public space, and European space of research (Hofmann, 2006)—such metaphor is enabling the public discourse and its related policies, with a performing ability in a moment when it seems so difficult to define the EU boundaries and identity.

Even if under different names, the “challenge of convergence” has becoming a core issue in the European agenda. From the end of 1990s the construction of a “common information area” based on ICTs has been considered the key element of significant community programmes (i.e., IDA [Interchange of Data between Administrations] and TEN-TELECOM [from 2002 renamed eTen]). Moreover the so-called “Lisbon strategy” ambitiously stating the European aspirations “to become the most competitive and dynamic economy based on knowledge in the world”, represents a decisive step to joint the Member States in a single “information society” (European Council, 2000). More recently an initiative has been launched by the Commission (the so-called i2010) to ensure uniformity across the new technologies policies in Europe, so demonstrating the value of standardization as a political value: “policy makers need to ensure that the legislation impacting on converging sectors provides the legal certainty needed for stakeholders to innovate. The aim is to respond to technological changes in a way that promotes competition, consolidates the internal market and benefits users. A review of the main policy issues at stake indicates that the overall legal and regulatory framework is favourable for the further development of convergence” (European Commission, 2007: 4).

Above all the need of a homogenized setting concerns prospects of strengthening the single Market and exploiting the industrial opportunities offered by new technological instruments (i2010 High Level Group, 2006: 5). In a workshop on the theme of the “single information space” for environment in Europe, it is complained the absence of «widely accepted standards» (Coene and Gasser, 2007: 6), as EU Member States have often failed to establish a common framework allowing technology companies to replicate the case for example in the USA or Japan: «this perpetuates a fragmented European market and therefore generates numerous obstacles to European competitiveness, as companies simply cannot implement strategies or solutions on a European or global scale. Such fragmentation reveals the Member States’ tendency to continue to think and act based on national instead of European considerations» (Eu task force report, 2006: II). On the other hand, the European Union as supranational entity has considered harmonization and coherence among regulatory architectures as the basis of its own existence — and success.

The creation of interoperable infrastructures mainly respond to economic objectives, as they are directed to enhance competition, improve the quality/price ratio and stimulate innovation and investments. Nevertheless implications of the new administrative space formation do not only regard market considerations. Efforts in such field have concerned the achievement of general interests involving social and political objectives and the new standards for administrative action. As it will been shown in the following chapter, the definition of a common administrative “architecture” affects fundamental domains for future European development such as citizens rights, political authority.
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