

Editorial

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Evolutionary Dynamics in Italian Public Institutions Through the Eye of RIPM: From Emergency Management to Predictive Action

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The period between 2018 and 2026, from the first publication of *Rivista Italiana di Public Management – RIPM* – to today, cannot be read simply as a succession of reforms, decrees, plans, and compliances. Rather, it represents an extraordinary stress test of the institutional capacity of the Italian public administration (Pa): a test conducted under the pressure of external crises, European constraints, technological acceleration, and new social expectations. In recent years, the pandemic, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Nrrp) the national plan that translates NextGenerationEu, the large European fund created to relaunch the economy after the pandemic, into local actions, digital transformation, agile working, contract renewals, public contract reform, and the emergence of artificial intelligence have acted not as separate phenomena, but as convergent factors in rethinking the way public administration is administered and managed.

The crucial point, for a journal like *RIPM*, is not whether Italian administration has changed. The most fertile question is whether it has learned to change whether, that is, the innovations introduced during the emergency years and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Nrrp) have been capable of modifying organizational routines, skills, decision-making systems, relationships with citizens and businesses, accountability models, and performance evaluation criteria. It is this shift – from change that a reaction to change as a capability – that public management reflection must build upon.

A non-linear transformation

The 2018–2026 cycle opens at a time when many of the challenges facing the Italian

public administration were already evident: organizational fragmentation, weak coordination systems, high staff age, difficulty attracting specialized skills, regional disparities in service quality, and the often-unresolved relationship between regulation, organization, and results. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought these challenges to light with new intensity. It hasn't created them, but it has exposed them, one might say, demonstrating how the continuity of public services depends not only on the formal correctness of administrative action but also on the organizations' ability to adapt.

The health emergency undoubtedly served as a stress test of administrative resilience. The sudden spread of remote work, the need to deliver services under exceptional conditions, the use of accelerated procedures, and the growing reliance on digital infrastructure have led to uneven organizational learning. Some administrations transformed the emergency into an opportunity for innovation; others remotely replicated unchanged organizational models. A simple but not obvious lesson emerged: technologies cannot bring about transformation unless they are supported by processes, skills, responsibility, and coordination capabilities.

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Nrrp) introduced a second phase of acceleration. Significant financial resources, stringent deadlines, milestones and targets, European monitoring, and coordination between levels of government have forced administrations to adopt a management approach based on programs and results. In this sense, the Plan has acted as a learning

“device” and a mirror of disparities: it has rewarded institutions capable of planning, coordinating, reporting, and evaluating, and has highlighted the weaknesses of those lacking adequate human capital, processes, and organizational structures.

This trajectory is not linear. Alongside real innovations, inertia, procedural redundancies, and implementation discontinuities persist. The Italian public administration thus appears to be undergoing an ambivalent movement: on the one hand, it is experimenting with new public management tools; on the other, it risks incorporating them as additional levels of compliance. The most relevant editorial question, therefore, is how to prevent innovations from simply becoming new bureaucratic objects and how, instead, to transform them into stable governance capacity.

Administrative capacity as an infrastructure for recovery

In recent years, the concept of administrative capacity has returned to the center of public debate. It is no longer a technical formula reserved for insiders, but a fundamental condition for the effectiveness of public policies and coherent, adhocratic managerial actions in public companies. Administrative, organizational, and managerial capacity encompasses staffing, professional skills, quality of planning, use of data and information, interinstitutional coordination, information systems, procurement procedures, executive leadership, and a culture of evaluation. It is, in other words, a fundamental, invisible “infrastructure” without which even the best policy decisions remain fragile.

The Nrrp has highlighted this dimension. The very architecture of the Plan or, based on milestones and targets, invokes a “contractualized” performance logic: reforms and investments are evaluated not only for their regulatory provisions, but also for their verifiable progress and the achievement of measurable results. This approach has pushed many administrations to strengthen project management, reporting, monitoring, and coordination with implementing bodies, local authorities, and central structures.

However, administrative, managerial, and organizational capacity cannot be reduced to the ability to execute the Plan. The most significant challenge concerns the post-Nrrp period: understanding which skills, methods, and practices will remain the ordinary assets of administration and which, instead, will be dispersed with the conclusion of the extraordinary cycle. The risk is that the Nrrp will produce dual-track administration: one part oriented towards European projects, indicators, and deadlines; another part organized according to sectoral, compliance-related, and fragmented logics.

From this perspective, the capacity must be viewed as a dynamic dimension, not as a static endowment. It grows when administrations learn from experience, when mistakes become organizational knowledge, when data fuels decisions and not just reporting, when skills are mapped, developed, and used consistently. This is where public management thinking can offer a specific contribution: shifting the focus from reform as an act to reform as a process of institutional learning.

Organizing change: a new trajectory

Organizationally, the 2018–2026 period demonstrated a constant tension between traditional and extraordinary structures. The pandemic emergency imposed new ways of working; the National Recovery and Resilience Plan favored the creation of mission units, task forces, cross-functional groups, and monitoring units; digitalization required cross-functional roles and new forms of collaboration between offices; simplification prompted faster procedures and more integrated decisions.

These innovations have produced positive effects. Many institutions have adopted a language more closely aligned with management by objectives, integrated planning, project responsibility, and multilevel coordination. The experience of smart working, albeit with varying outcomes, has forced organizations to question trust, autonomy, activity measurement, and the quality of coordination. The Integrated Activity and Organization Plan (Piao), a single planning and governance strategic new approach for performance management for Italian public administrations introduced in 2022, has pushed for greater integration between performance, organization, needs, anti-corruption and legality actions, and smart working, although its implementation has not always transcended the “document-based” approach.

The question is whether these tools are destined to remain superstructures or can become opportunities for organizational redesign. Mission units of Nrrp, for example,

have allowed skills and responsibilities to be concentrated on complex objectives. However, if they are not connected to ordinary structures, they risk creating a separation between project management and routine management. The issue, therefore, is not whether to preserve or eliminate extraordinary structures, but how to transfer the planning, coordination, control, and learning skills they have developed into ordinary operations, ultimately, how to capitalize on innovation, and therefore how to create public value.

RIPM has often emphasized, in recent years, the needs to move beyond the formal legal, or better bureaucratic, approach and experiment with new approaches to knowledge. Applied to organizational matters, this means viewing offices, units, not simply as branches of expertise, but as work systems. Administrations must be analyzed for their interdependencies, decision-making chains, available skills, and response times to collective needs. Only in this way can organizational reform move beyond the description of organizational charts and become capacity management.

People, new contractual arrangements, skills

The public administration transformation of recent years has dramatically brought human capital back to the forefront. After a long period marked by hiring restrictions, a freeze on turnover, and a progressive increase in the average age of staff, public companies have found themselves faced with a dual need: renewing their workforce and updating their skills. The issue is not just about the quantity of staff,

but also the quality of the relationship between people, roles, technologies, and, above all, responsibilities.

The employee contract renewals in the public sector, including those relating to central functions, have sought to intervene not only on the remuneration level, but also on professional regulations, skills development, agile working, organizational welfare and valorization of professional skills. The revision of classification areas and systems can be interpreted as an attempt to make the relationship between actual activities performed, skills possessed, and opportunities for professional growth more coherent.

However, a qualitative leap cannot be achieved through contractual employee innovation alone. Professional systems must be linked to needs planning, training, internal mobility, evaluation, and process design. The Syllabus platform, with its skills self-assessment and training programs on digital, ecological, and administrative transitions, points to an important direction: training not as a requirement, but as a permanent infrastructure of organizational capacity.

The challenge is also reputational. Attracting qualified professionals – digital, managerial, economic, technical, statistical, legal, hybrid skills means making each individual public administration a place where it is possible to exercise responsibility, produce public value, and grow professionally. Recruitment cannot be separated from the quality of the organization welcoming new hires. Without clear processes, leadership, digital tools, and development

paths, even generational change risks becoming a numerical replacement, not an administrative renewal.

This leads to a public management implication: people management is not an ancillary aspect of reform, but rather the place where it is decided whether reforms become organizational behavior. Skills are not merely individual attributes; they are collective capabilities that arise from the interaction between people, technologies, rules, and responsibilities.

Public management and results orientation

No administrative transformation can be consolidated without rethinking the role of public management. In the 2018–2026 period, managers were called upon to operate, as already noted, in a context of increasing complexity: emergency management, implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, new procurement procedures, digitalization, agile working, a shortage of specialized skills, time pressure, and a growing demand for accountability.

The skills required no longer coincide solely with mastery of the regulatory framework. Legality, impartiality, and compliance with procedural guarantees remain fundamental, but these are complemented by leadership skills, people management, network coordination, data use, risk assessment, interinstitutional negotiation, and an impact-oriented approach. Managers are increasingly becoming interpreters of complexity: not just office managers, but builders of connections between political

objectives, administrative resources, regulatory constraints, and social needs.

The new Public Contracts Code, with its results-based principle, highlights this transformation. Administrative legality is not undermined by a results-oriented approach; on the contrary, its function is redefined. Results are pursued in the community's interest and in compliance with transparency, competition, and good governance. This requires management capable of using discretion responsibly, motivated and oriented toward the effective implementation of interventions.

The issue of evaluation remains unresolved. Too often, performance systems have been perceived as formal tools, weakly linked to organizational improvement. The post-pandemic phase and the Nrrp have demonstrated the need to move from an evaluation focused on compliance and metrics, often self-referential, to an evaluation capable of supporting learning, resource reallocation, skills development, and service quality. Evaluation is not simply about measuring what has been accomplished but about creating the conditions for improvement.

Public management, therefore, is one of the key areas for measuring the maturity of change. If it remains trapped in a "defensive" responsibility, every public institution will continue to prioritize compliance. If, however, it is supported by clear rules, adequate skills, reliable information systems, and improvement-oriented evaluations, it can become a decisive lever for institutional innovation.

Digital, data, and artificial intelligence

Digitalization has been one of the main transformational drivers of this challenging time. Digital identity, electronic payments, national platforms, cloud computing, interoperability, online services, and dematerialization have progressively changed the interaction between administrations, citizens, and businesses. The point, however, is not just the growth of digital tools, but their ability to change the way governments produce knowledge, make decisions, and report.

The European Commission's Digital Decade Country Report 2025 recognizes Italy's significant progress in public infrastructure and services.

It highlights the importance of digital transformation but also highlights persistent challenges in the adoption of artificial intelligence and the growth of the innovation ecosystem. This assessment confirms a central tension: digital transformation does not simply mean the availability of platforms, even the most innovative, but rather the ability to use them to streamline processes, integrate data, personalize services, reduce inequalities, and improve decision-making quality.

Data is now at the heart of the matter. Artificial intelligence, as repeatedly highlighted, is the issue that calls into question the very notion of data (Ai) as a proprietary asset of a single office. Predictive systems, virtual assistants, automatic classification tools, document analysis, and algorithmic data flow management require reliable,

interoperable, and governed information bases. Without data governance, Ai risks amplifying errors, opacity, and inequalities; with mature data governance, it can support more timely decisions, more accessible services, and better resource allocation.

The European and national framework has meanwhile evolved. Regulation (Eu) 2024/1689 established harmonized rules on artificial intelligence; Italian Law no. 132 of 2025 introduced provisions and delegations regarding Ai; the Three-Year Plan for Information Technology in Public Administration and the Italian Strategy for Artificial Intelligence 2024–2026 identify principles, objectives, and tools for the public adoption of Ai. In this context, administrations cannot limit themselves to experimenting with isolated applications: they must build governance, skills, standards, risk assessments, and transparency criteria.

Ai will not solve the systemic, ancient, long-standing problems of public administrations. If anything, it can make them more evident. If a process is confusing, if an archive is disorganized, if responsibilities are unclear, if data is incomplete, automation does not lead to modernization but rather accelerates error. Digital innovation must therefore be interpreted as public institutions reorganization: process redesign, data curation, staff training, human responsibility for decisions, impact assessment, and the protection of fundamental rights.

For RIPM, this is a natural area of research that is integral to its institutional mission. Artificial intelligence forces business analysts, lawyers, economists, organizational

scholars, computer scientists, sociologists, occupational psychologists, and, of course, public managers to engage with a common goal. This highlights the need for a multidisciplinary approach – another challenge stated in the RIPM statement – that combines efficiency, fairness, accountability, expertise, and trust in institutions.

Simplification: a crucial and urgent challenge to achieve results beyond the norm

Simplification policies have consistently accompanied the 2018-2026 cycle. From emergency management to the implementation of Nrrp investments, legislators have sought to accelerate procedures, authorizations, service conferences, procurement, and oversight. Simplification has become a key word in the reform lexicon. But its very recurrence demonstrates how difficult it is to transform it into concrete experience for citizens, businesses, and administrations.

The critical point is the gap between planned simplification and implemented simplification. Regulations can reduce steps, shorten deadlines, introduce silent consent, or concentrate responsibilities. However, if administrations lack the necessary resources, inputs, and essential conditions for the provision of public services, simplification remains a regulatory design that does not change the timing and quality of administrative action. This gap is particularly visible in smaller public institutions and in areas with smaller administrative resources.

Public procurement contracts are the area where this tension is most acute. Legislative

Decree no. 36/2023 introduced principles of results, trust, and market access, strengthening planning, the qualification of contracting authorities, and the digitalization of the contract lifecycle. The Italian National Anti-Corruption Authority (Anac) has indicated that, starting January 1, 2024, the new Code's provisions will require the digital management of the entire contract lifecycle through certified platforms and a national digital procurement ecosystem, also based on the National Database of Public Contracts and on interoperability.

This transformation is important because public procurement is no longer simply a set of procedures for purchasing goods, services, and works. It is a lever for public policy. Through procurement, administrations can drive innovation, sustainability, project quality, territorial development, and digital transition. But for this to happen, qualified contracting authorities, competent Rups, and design teams are needed.

Quality governance, reliable data, proportionate controls, and the ability to manage implementation, not just procurement.

Simplification, therefore, cannot be thought of as a reduction in rules, but rather as capacity-building. Simplification means clarifying who makes decisions, on what data, with what responsibilities, within what timeframes, and with what effects. From this perspective, legality and results are not opposites: administrative legality is fully realized when it enables the production of public value, not when it is limited to the preservation of the procedure.

From the Nrrp to the post-Nrrp: the question of impact

The final phase of the Nrrp raises a crucial question: what will remain of the organizational, managerial, and digital innovations implemented in recent years? The answer cannot be sought solely in meeting deadlines or in expenditure reporting. The true test is impact: the ability of interventions to sustainably improve the quality of services, accessibility, trust, administrative productivity, territorial cohesion, and the state's ability to guide development.

The Nrrp has introduced a more explicit monitoring culture within government institutions and agencies. It has disseminated indicators, targets, deadlines, information systems, and reporting responsibilities. But monitoring is not the same as impact assessment. Measuring progress is necessary; understanding the effects is another matter. The post-Nrrp phase requires shifting attention from implementations to outcomes: not just how many projects have been completed, but how they have changed the experience of citizens, the capacity of institutions, the quality of public work, and the resilience of local communities.

This perspective requires a cultural shift. Government must develop *ex ante*, ongoing, and *ex post* evaluation capabilities; they must use administrative data, empirical evidence, and listening to users; they must be able to learn from failures; They must connect organizational performance and public impact. Without this evolution, the risk is that the Nrrp season will be dismissed as a financial hiatus, without having a lasting impact on governance.

Impact assessment is also a democratic issue. In a context of scarce resources, complex transitions, and growing expectations, public institutions must be able to explain not only what they do, but why they do it, with what results, and for whose benefit. This requires transparency, but also narrative capacity and political and administrative accountability. Public value is not simply produced; it must be recognized, discussed, and made verifiable.

A RIPM agenda for learning public administration

The reconstruction of the 2018–2026 dynamics suggests a research and action agenda consistent with the RIPM mission. This can be summarized in a few guiding questions, not as a closed list, but as an invitation to discussion among scholars, managers, professionals, and stakeholders.

The first question concerns institutional and administrative. managerial capacity: how can it be measured, developed, distributed across level of governance, and how can it be prevented from remaining concentrated in already stronger institutions? The second concerns organization and management: what mechanisms can transform the extraordinary experiences of the Nrrp into routine project management, coordination, and evaluation? The third concerns people: what recruitment, training, professional development, and leadership models can make the administration attractive to hybrid skills and new generations?

The fourth question concerns digitalization and Ai: what governance models allow for the use of technology and data

without weakening transparency, accountability, and rights? The fifth concerns simplification: how can we bridge the gap between regulation and implementation, especially with the most fragile local authorities? The sixth concerns procurement: how can we transform public procurement from a procedural safeguard to a strategic lever for innovation, sustainability, and development? Finally, the seventh concerns impact: how can impact evaluation – which measures the long-term effects generated by a public activity, the outcomes, for the creation of public value – be made a regular part of the policy cycle rather than a final appendix to reporting?

These questions confirm the need for a journal capable of bringing together theory and cases, law and management, organization and technology, levels of government and stakeholders, Italy and international comparison. RIPM can be a place where reforms are not merely described but analyzed; an arena in which administrative cases become opportunities for modeling; a space in which the experience of public managers engages with scientific research and societal demands.

Administration as an organized common good

The 2018–2026 cycle teaches the Italian public administration a crucial lesson: administration is not merely an apparatus of execution, but the public infrastructure of collective living. In times of crisis, it ensures continuity; in investment programs, it transforms resources into interventions; in the digital transition, it makes rights

and services effective; in regulation, it builds trust; in procurement, it guides development; in people management, it safeguards public skills and motivation.

This is why administrative modernization cannot be entrusted to a single level. Regulations, technologies, hiring, platforms, or plans are not enough. We need a management culture capable of integrating these dimensions into a long-term vision. The transition from a Pa of compliance to a Pa with the capacity to decide and to act does not imply abandoning legality and guarantees; on the contrary, it means reconnecting them to their purpose: reducing inequalities, supporting development, and making rights effective. Ultimately producing public value,

From this perspective, this editorial interprets the 2018–2026 period not as a “cloud” where all reforms are stored, but as a true and fundamental laboratory of institutional learning. The final question is not whether the Italian public administration has changed enough, but whether it will be able to consolidate what it has learned. This question is the starting point for a reflection consistent with RIPM’s mission: to innovate public administration through analysis, discussion, multidisciplinary, and proposals capable of transforming knowledge into public action.

This volume confirms, like its predecessors, the value of the “Dialogues” section as a favorable arena for discussion on public management issues, offering new tools for dialogue and analysis.

The first article, “Artificial intelligence and public governance: limits and functions of Criminal Law”, begins with the question: “What role can Criminal Law play in regulating artificial intelligence and in the governance of its related risks?” First, the characteristics of Ai relevant to policy makers and the associated risks are described. The limitations and potential of criminal law as a governance tool are analyzed, exploring potentially applicable criminalization techniques. Finally, the Italian case and the regulatory strategies adopted (including Law no. 132/2025) by policy makers in our country are considered, focusing on the challenges posed by the use of Ai by public administration. The author (Ricci) concludes by reaffirming the thesis put forward from the outset, namely, “Criminal Law is not suited to play a central role in managing issues related to the advent of artificial intelligence”. With one clarification: criminal intervention is not excluded a priori but rather placed in “a subsequent and possible phase where sectoral instruments (...) prove insufficient to guarantee effective and adequate protection of the legal interests involved”.

Also in the same section, a second contribution explores the topic of the integration and implementation of artificial intelligence. Specifically, as the title suggests: “Artificial intelligence and public administration: the context of Eu regulation and the case of the Italian Revenue Agency’s three-year personnel requirement Plans”. The authors (D’Arrigo & Interdonato), after briefly outlining the evolution of the European regulatory framework in the area of technological innovation, address – with reference, at the national level, to

the three-year Plan for information technology in the public administration and the Strategy for artificial intelligence – how the introduction of Ai impacts “the personnel planning processes of public administrations, influencing the redefinition of required professional skills, work organization, and (...) staffing levels”. The Italian Revenue Agency was selected as a paradigmatic administration, a case study, due to its involvement in “technological innovation processes, automation, data analysis, and the use of machine learning tools in operational procedures and control systems, as well as the availability of public data, organizational documents, and three-year personnel needs plans”. The analysis conducted appears to demonstrate how the introduction of Ai-based tools “also progressively impacts personnel planning models, leading to a transformation in the qualifications of required skills and a revision of the traditional logic for defining employment needs in public administrations”.

The third contribution, “Comparative analysis of asymmetries in human resources management: public manager vs private manager, starts from an “integrated re-reading” – also through a reference to the literature on Strategic Human resource management (Shrm) – of the structural differences in human resources management between public and private managers. And “to deconstruct and understand the underlying mechanisms” of this approach in the public sector, the author (Aguanno) adopted the Amo (Ability, Motivation, Opportunity) model – originally developed by Appelbaum *et al.* – “demonstrating how the effectiveness of administrative

action depends on the alignment of these three systemic dimensions”, explored through concrete cases. The investigation concludes by stating that the “transformation of the public manager (...) into a true interpreter of management and guardian of public value (...) is achieved by developing solid analytical skills, safeguarding the vocation to serve the community, and designing flexible organizational architectures, free from market idealizations but firmly anchored to the institutional peculiarities of the state”.

The fourth article, “State transfers and performance analysis of local services: two case studies” addresses the issue of measuring the performance of local public services, highlighting – also through references to economic and administrative literature – the “limits of a system based primarily on expenditure and volume indicators of services provided”. The authors (Agasisti & Vecchi) suggest integrating these measures with indicators capable of capturing the quality of services, thus more effectively supporting both public policy planning and resource transfer mechanisms. Through two empirical surveys, conducted between 2021 and 2025, they assessed the role of objective quality indicators for municipal services, with particular reference to those for childcare services (nursery schools) and home care assistance. With regard to these “crucial local welfare services”, policy implications are provided on the basis of the findings of the two surveys conducted. Policy implications for these “crucial local welfare services” are also provided based on the results of the two surveys. Despite voluntary participation and the limited number of entities

involved, the evidence emerging with respect to the two research questions shows that these (objective quality) indicators are generally detectable through administrative data available from municipalities, although not always in usable form; they allow us to highlight significant differences between territorial contexts, management models, and service configurations, providing useful information for comparative analysis, benchmarking, and organizational learning. In light of what has been observed, and bearing in mind the limitations noted, adding objective quality indicators to existing information systems can “support more selective and informed national planning” and “improve resource allocation criteria”.

The fifth and final contribution (from the “Dialogues” section), “Basic disability assessment as a public management tool”, broadens the scope of reflection with a focus on public policies regarding disability. The authors (Croce & Di Cosimo) propose basic disability assessment as an “advanced laboratory of applied public management, intertwining rights, resources, skills, and institutional responsibilities”.

They argue that “providing this hub (of multilevel governance) with adequate tools is not just a technical choice, but also a political and administrative decision that impacts the quality of citizenship and the credibility of the state in guaranteeing fundamental rights”. From this perspective, the Relevance Coefficient (Rc) – a synthetic index expressing the relevance of a disability condition for the purposes of disability recognition, access to benefits and provisions, and the implementation of a personalized, participatory, and individual life plan, pursuant to Legislative Decree no. 62/2024 – operationalized through the single Questionnaire for the evaluation of disability (Quvd), is presented as a “policy implementation tool” capable of strengthening the administrative capacity of the welfare system institutions involved.

The contributions to this volume, regardless of their placement in the two Sections, have engaged and connected scholars and experts with different disciplinary approaches, thus renewing the Journal’s “mobilizing ambition” to “propose scenarios for projecting the entire public system into a future society”.

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