Towards an empowered 'Platform State'? Digital Platforms, Infrastructural Power, and the Transformation of State Authority

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Abstract. Over the last decade much of the scholarly discussion about the digital transformation of the state has focused on the notion of "platformization". This term serves to refer to the way in which governments and public services are ever more strictly associated with the operation of various digital platforms, thus seemingly acquiring some of their properties. Despite this centrality of the notion of platformization of the state, to date there has been surprisingly little theoretical reflection about the underlying organizational logic of the "platform state". Why is the state becoming "platformized"? Is it simply an attempt by government to update its functioning by absorbing the prevailing social logic of organization, as it has already been popularized by various companies; or is there something more structural and profound to this trend? We argue that in fact states and platforms – while pertaining to different categories and domains – share important organizational logics: an "ambient-making" power; a meta-organizational capacity; a centralizing drive; and most importantly a strong "infrastructural" power, to follow the terms of US sociologist Michael Mann. Using this concept we explain the reason why digital platforms appear to have progressively encroached on a variety of functions that tended to be typically state functions: functions that concern identification; the setting up of fundamental conditional operations of society; the affording of various "enabling" systems, lacking which individuals and collective actors cannot operate. Hence, the convergence between governments and platforms is not just a "marriage of convenience". Rather the process of platformization is for states an opportunity to reclaim some of their state capacity and practical power – and in particular infrastructural power – that they seem to have previously lost.

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1. Introduction

One of the fundamental aspects that need to be developed to capture the digital transformation of government concerns the trend of "platformization of the state". This phrase has often been used to capture the transformation of governments and public services in a direction similar to that of global digital platforms that have become a mainstay of the present digital society (see for example, Chevallier, 2018; Bender & Heine, 2021; Iaione, 2020; Tammpuu et al., 2022). It indicates how governments create a variety of interconnected online services, through which citizens can perform different tasks, such as filing their tax returns or claiming benefits, and the progressive integration between these variety of state functions. In this sense, the platformization of the state appears as a trend that parallels other processes of platformization that are taking place in other domains and sectors of what is generally described as a "platform society" (van Dijck and Poell, 2018).

This transformation of the state towards the model of digital platforms is a trend that evidently carries major consequences for society, given the centrality of the state in our social structure. In their review of the different trends of social transformation led by digital technology, Hendrikse et al. (2022) have highlighted that the rise of the "platform state" is one of the most significant factors. Yet, while we know much about the consequences of platformization in other social domains – such as consumption, social relationships, patterns of labour, media audiences (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2022), as well as forms of political organization (Gerbaudo, 2019) – we still know relatively little about the implications of the platformization of the state. More generally, we seem to lack a clear definition of what is meant by the phrase "platform state" or "platform government". The phrase's meaning has not yet been explicitly defined, rather it is mostly alluded to in a metaphorical way, by suggesting the existence of an analogy between the process of digital transformation of the state and a discussion of what happens in other domains. This lack of clear definition seriously limits our understanding of the term and our ability to deploy it in a rigorous way as an analytical category, to develop empirical research on the digital transformation of the state.

We aim at filling this gap by developing a definition of the platform state which draws on the similarities and convergences between the internal logic of states and platforms. We use the notion of infrastructural power developed by US sociologist Micheal Mann (1984) as a means to explain what state and digital platforms share. In so doing, we approach the *platform state as a historically specific manifestation of the state form which avails itself of the logic of the digital platform* (Cristofari, 2022) and that is the result of a proactive policy by state actors aiming at adapting the state to the challenges of the digital era (Chevallier 2018) as a *means of recuperating state capacity by tapping into the infrastructural potential of digital platforms*. It is in fact true that given the broad meaning of the word 'platform', the state can be considered as a platform *ante litteram*, given the way in which it has traditionally provided some key foundations for the functioning of society as a whole, which enable all sorts of other social functions. In turn commercial platforms have *de facto* come to acquire an infrastructural power, which we understand as a power of "ambient-creation" setting the environment for all sorts of other operations and transactions that traditionally was attributed to the state. Hence, the convergence between the state and digital platforms in the form of the platform state is more than a technical modification of the state form or a pure marriage of convenience, but as it were a redoubling of the fundamental logic of the state and its adaptation to the technological conditions of the digital era.

In our analysis we contend with those authors who see the power of the state as declining or bound to decline in the digital era, as a result of the power of digital platforms and the way in which they are stealing away forms of sovereignty that were previously the preserve of the state (Castells, 2000; Owen 2015; Zuboff 2019; Ledonvirtha, 2022). We suggest that the platform state embodies a reassertion of authority of government power by means of digital platforms. We make this argument in a two-pronged way. First, we propose that while private platform companies acquired forms of "infrastructural power" that were previously the preserve of the state, they have done so under the auspices of the governments of their country of incorporation and often serving implicitly as a means of state projection – as seen most clearly in the case of the US, and the relationship between Silicon Valley corporations and the defence and security apparatus of the state. Second, we suggest that now many states have realized the infrastructural importance of platform technologies and are trying to deploy it in the territories they control, leading to new forms of control, surveillance, and direction which raise new political and ethical issues. We conclude arguing that these changes call for a fundamental redirection of debates on the state and on digital transformation.

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2. The state as a platform *ante litteram*

To make sense of the nature of the "platform state" entails approaching this phenomenon as one of many historical manifestations of the state form and exploring the similarities between the logic of the state and that of digital platforms. In this sense, the platform state is a concept whose logic of signification is analogous to notions such as the "welfare state" or the "regulatory state" (Moran, 2002, Pildes and Sunstein, 1995), or the "carceral state" (Weaver and Lerman, 2010); namely it is a term that indicates a specific logic of statecraft. More specifically, the platform state is a form state whose nature is fundamentally defined by the information communication infrastructure (ICI) that enables it.

Speaking of the general organizational logic of the state seems at the outset to be an almost insurmountable challenge due the almost all-encompassing power of the notion. The term is customarily utilized as a short-hand to define the varied complex of public institutions, ranging from government (sometimes used as a more reductive synonym) to the other fundamental public powers such as the legislative and the judiciary; police and the armed forces various public services, such as education, health, and the sprawling welfare state that emerged during the post-war decades. What matters for the understanding of the "state-form" is not just an identification of its disparate functions, but also an appreciation of their overarching logic. For Italian political scientist d'Entreves there are three ways we can approach the state as force, as power and as authority (1967). The first one is the most obvious; it is the definition embedded in Max Weber's famous assertion that the state possesses the "monopoly over legitimate violence". The second level, power instead focuses on the nature of the state as an organization bestowed with legitimacy emanating from the laws which the state itself emanates and based on which the state operates: the state is not just power; it is legitimate power. Finally, the element of authority instead highlights the political nature of the state, the fact that it relies on a certain ability to persuade its citizens and mobilize public opinion.

From Hobbes's discussion of the Leviathan as a centre of authority, to Locke's discussion of government and later Max Weber's discussion of bureaucracy, a variety of authors coincide in attributing to the state this centralizing power of control over a territory and population, which is usually condensed in juridical debates by the notion of *sovereignty of the state*. However, when it comes to developing an understanding of the historical transformation of the state-form in a digital era, what is most interesting is not much the principle of sovereignty as a normative entity, but rather its practical application and its enabling conditions, or what is often described as "state capacity". This is where Michael Mann's notion of "infrastructural power comes particularly handy.

The notion of "infrastructural power" was first put forward by Michael Mann, who understood it as the "institutional capacity of a central state […] to penetrate its territories and logistically implement decisions" (1984, 113). This concept has been traditionally associated with the state, but we believe that it also applies to platforms because of their dual roles as service enablers and as regulatory authorities. In the case of Mann, he distinguished the 'weberian' concept of infrastructural power from 'despotic power' and raw coercion linked to the marxist tradition. Building on Mann's work, Hillel Soifer defined infrastructural power as 'the aspect of the state that determines how far its bureaucracy can reach to exert control and regulate social relations' (Soifer 2008, 234). Mann (2008) presents income tax as the purest form of infrastructural power, "whereby our salaries are assessed and taxed 'at source' every month without our being able to intervene in the process." He further observes that income taxes only became major sources of state revenue in the twentieth century, whereas earlier, states were largely limited to "taxing things that visibly moved around" (Mann 2008). Similarly, other examples of infrastructural power include state practices of identification, employing technologies such as fingerprinting, retinal scans, and passports (Soifer, 2008).

We can use the notion of infrastructural power as a key term in exploring the similarities between the state and digital platforms (Tab. 1). As we show, there are key parallelisms between the operations of the state and digital platforms as sources of infrastructural power. The state, following Mann's discussion, typically provides key infrastructural services such as roads, security, and information, which then enable the operations of other actors, such as individuals and companies. Digital platforms also typically deploy an infrastructural function as they provide various affordances that allow individuals to perform various actions, to complete transactions, to identify themselves in front of other parties. This in turn is supported by different notions of authority and specific forms of infrastructural power. The infrastructural power of the state is concerned with using tools like taxation and identification which in turn stems from notions of citizenship as membership in a corporate organisation. In partly similar though also significantly different ways, the infrastructural power of platforms instead relies on socio-technical affordances such as ID systems, user profiles, databases and algorithms as a means to organise user behavior. In the continuation of the chapter we will develop this discussion further: first by looking at how infrastructural power found traditionally in the state is now mirrored by the infrastructural power of platforms, and then approaching the platformization of the state as an interpolation of the infrastructural logic of both states and platforms.

Table 1 – Parallelism between infrastructural features of the state and features of the digital platform

Aspect	State	Digital Platform
Service Provision	Provides essential infrastructure (e.g., roads, public data) and enables private sector services	Provides digital infrastructure (e.g., APIs, app stores) enabling user-created services and app
Authority over Population & Territory	Exerts authority over physical territory and citizens, setting laws and regulations	Exerts authority over a digital territory and users through terms of service and reprogrammable software
Infrastructural Power	Uses tools like taxation and identification (e.g., passports) to regulate and track citizens	Uses data collection, digital IDs, and algorithms to monitor and influence, redirect user behavior

3. The digital platform's "ambient power"

The rise of digital platforms is by now widely considered as one of the most important trends of socio-economic transformation in contemporary societies. It is a trend associated mainly with the rise of global corporations—often referred to as "GAFAM" (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) and "BATX" (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Xiaomi)—which play a pivotal role in the lives of Western citizens. These platform companies have achieved dominance in specific markets and have leveraged this success to expand into other sectors, creating interactional ecosystems of users and producers of services (Srnicek, 2016; Petit, 2020). The unprecedented dominance of platform companies has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Some have highlighted how these entities now perform roles traditionally associated with public authorities (Pollicino, 2021; Golia, 2023); others have noted that they increasingly resemble administrative bodies, issuing self-enforcing authorizations (Ranchordas, 2023) or even functioning as "autonomous global legal orders" (Bassan, 2021), and as agents implicated in an "infrastructural transformation of the public sphere" (Nosthoff & Maschewski, 2024).

While there are many definitions of platforms across various disciplinary perspectives (Cristofari, 2024), most researchers now agree on a 'minimal definition.' This defines platforms as intermediary organizational forms that connect two or more sides, providing the infrastructure necessary to facilitate interactions between different groups that build their services upon it (Schüler & Petrik, 2021). Classical examples of platform companies are Google's search engines, Uber, and Amazon Marketplace. From a technical perspective, platforms utilize technical standards to centralize control over their infrastructure (Bratton, 2016) and operate through a feedback loop between data collection and infrastructure reprogrammability. In other terms, the platform activity consists in organizing interactions—encompassing both users and service providers—by systematically collecting, processing, monetizing, and circulating data through algorithmic processes (Poell et al., 2019).

The platform can be viewed essentially as a *cybernetic form of government* that combines legal rules (terms of services) with actionable software. Like the modern state needed a grid to make sense of its citizens (Scott, 1998), the platform form of government is based on a certain legibility of users and on intense datafication. This ability of creating a controllable environment, act on users and reprogramming affordances has been variously described as algorithmic governmentality (Rouvroy & Stiegler 2016), governance by infrastructure (Musiani et al. 2016), regulation by design (Hildebrandt, 2013), and technological management (Brownsword 2016). This power relies on technical tools such as Application Program Interfaces (APIs), which determine the conditions under which data is collected from smartphones by apps and related services. APIs also enable bi-directional flows of data between platforms, facilitating the ongoing control and organization of interactions within the platform ecosystem (Maruping & Matook 2020; Lamothe et al 2021). As a consequence, platforms present what could be called an "ambient-making" power: organizing social relationships and determining who is connected or disconnected within specific spatial and temporal contexts. In so doing, platforms create a clear distinction between their "inside" (users and producers connected via devices) and the "outside" (the social and institutional environment in which the platform operates).

This requires continuous efforts to manage and organize its ecosystem, and scholars have theorized this activity into three key components: regulation (establishing standards), moderation (e.g., the process of monitoring, reviewing, and managing user-generated content), and curation (determining the relevance of content by deciding what and how to present it to users) (Poell et al., 2021). As such, the platform's "ambient-making

power" lies in its ability to create a structured field of action where a variety of tasks can be executed. In cybernetic terms, the platform performs 'selection of selections', reducing the complexity for other actors.

The implication of such a new organizational form primarily deals with the creation and organization of markets. The platform is indeed *more than a market* in the coordination of people, money and services in space-time. Platform marketplaces create interactional ecosystems that can be, to a certain extent, centrally controlled. These are recursive markets within the 'Market' in which social groups are coopted by turning them into scalable assets (Chicchi et al. 2022; Birch 2017). Attention to the forms of political planning on the 'inside' is essential to understanding the innovation of the platform model. Platform corporations make plans within their own ecosystem of complementors, to the point that ven liberal thinkers have criticized the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge created by platforms, disrupting the Hayekian ideal of an "equal amount of ignorance about the market." Surveillance capitalist platforms, as Zuboff (2019) argues, can "see the invisible hand" of the market and actively manipulate it. In this sense, the platform represents an organizational form that transcends the traditional dichotomy between centralization and decentralization—assuming such a dichotomy ever truly existed. It occupies a space between market and government: centralizing data collection, infrastructural reprogrammability, and political planning, while simultaneously decentralizing decision-making through the widespread distribution of reprogrammable interfaces. As such, the 'platform' should be considered a new organizational or institutional form that represents a historical break from traditional structures like hierarchies, markets, and networks (Cristofari 2024; Bratton, 2016; Van Doorn, 2020; Vallas & Schor 2020).

According to some authors this growing power of digital platforms leads to a weakening of the state. Three pivotal works—Manuel Castells' *The Rise of the Network Society* (2000), Taylor Owen's *Disruptive Power* (2015), and Vili Lehdonvirta's *Cloud Empires* (2022)—each argue that states, once powerful central authorities, are increasingly challenged by the rise of networked structures and global platform corporations. Castells saw a rise of a "network state" that collaborates with and competes against other global actors. In this new model, the state shifts from exercising absolute sovereignty to acting as a flexible node in a multi-layered governance system, constantly negotiating authority with non-state actors (Castells 2000).

Taylor Owen has pointed to examples such as Anonymous, Bitcoin, social media-fueled protests, the rise of Pirate Parties and open-source mapping platforms like Ushahidi to illustrate how digital technologies and networks disrupt the state's traditional monopoly on information and influence (Owen, 2015). He noticed that "collecting data and publishing maps were once the sole privilege of the state" (p. 125). This weakening of the state is the product of the disruptive power he attributes to social media in which the state's "institutionalized structures and norms that lead to lethargy, waste, inefficiency, and a lack of innovation" (p. 8) are easily out-maneuvered by the flexible, mobile and sprawling nature of networks. Thereby, "enabled by digital technology, disruptive innovators are now able to influence the behavior of large numbers of people without many of the societal constraints that have developed around state action" (p.9).

In *Cloud Empires* (2022), Vili Lehdonvirta takes this argument further, positing that tech giants now act as "virtual states" with power comparable to that of traditional governments. Lehdonvirta argues that the CEOs of major tech firms have, in many ways, become more powerful than national leaders, exercising control over vast digital territories without democratic accountability: "the chief executives of leading tech companies are now by many measures more powerful than most countries' heads of state" (p. 3). All in all, in this situation, "the authorities in charge are not nation states but digital platform companies" (p. 6). Our contention is that the situation is more complex. While platforms have *de facto* acquired functions that were typical prerogatives of the state, they have done so with the consent of their state of incorporation as seen most evidently in the US. Further, the current drive towards a platformization of the state as well as the growing efforts by other world regions other than the US, to recuperate some degree of digital sovereignty (Pohle and Thiel, 2020), may well be seen as a pathway to recuperate state capacity by means of digital technology, as we shall expound in the ensuing section.

4. Infrastructural power as the logic of the platform state

Both the state and digital platforms, in their respective domains, establish foundational infrastructures and create conditions that allow various stakeholders—citizens and other institutions in the case of the state, and users and complementors in the case of digital platforms—to engage in productive, value-generating activities. Examining this analogy helps clarify the role of government as a "platform provider," as described by Tim O'Reilly (2011). Both states and platforms create incentives and opportunities for external entities to contribute value. In the case of the state, infrastructure investments in areas like transportation and communication lay the groundwork for private sector growth. Roads enable businesses to operate across regions, and public data sets, like those from the National Weather Service, become critical resources that drive innovation in weather forecasting, logistics, and beyond. Similarly, digital platforms provide APIs, developer tools, and marketplaces that enable entrepreneurs to create apps, content, and products, effectively expanding the platform's value and reach.

For instance, platforms like Apple's App Store allow developers to create applications that enhance the iPhone's functionality, expanding the ecosystem and, in turn, increasing the device's appeal to users.

Much like roads, power grids, and other state-built infrastructure facilitate economic activity, platforms create indispensable digital infrastructures—cloud computing, app ecosystems, and marketplaces—that shape how businesses and individuals interact and create dependencies that resemble those between citizens and state infrastructure. As Morgan Ricks and colleagues argued in their fundamental treaty on networks, platforms and utilities by quoting Felix Frankfurter (1930), the services provided by platform enterprises are "as truly public services as the traditional governmental functions of police and justice" (Ricks et al, 2022). A second analogy can be drawn by building on the work of the legal scholar Julie Cohen (2019). Global platforms can be seen as international actors in their own rights besides other states not only because of their global reach but also because they have an authority, a population, and a territory with clearly demarcated spaces. The territory produced by digital platforms is of course not a contiguous physical space but that is instead is designed via the software architecture and defined using protocols, data flows, algorithms, and can be reprogrammed. Cohen sees the platform authority as 'network power' as well as the 'power to create networks' that originate from a combination of legal documents such as terms of services (ToS) and the control of the software infrastructure.

Ultimately, it is the platform that enforces the decisions via its infrastructure by reprogramming the code and the interface. Some examples in the realm of social media platforms include accounts suspensions and shadow-banning; in the case of delivery platforms, prioritizing those platform workers that stick to their parameters (Aloisi & De Stefano 2022); in the case of the Amazon marketplace, that of giving relevance to vendors (Khan, 2018). This view of the platform as analogous to the legal order of the state can lead us to approach the platform as an organizational logic which exercises its power over a population and a territory (Sassen 2006; Foucault, 2007). However, if the population of a certain state implies citizenships and humans are considered subjects in the sense that they are subjected to the law of the state, the platform ecosystem is instead constituted by the status of users. The distinction between the two is crucial, because a user is not a juridical entity, but a position within a system, so that the relations of those users are organized and orchestrated cybernetically via standards and protocols.

Here the parallel with the core innovations of the platform model is evident. Today, there are approximately 6.5 billion smartphones worldwide, produced and controlled primarily by two American companies—Apple and Google. These companies not only dominate smartphone production but also hold a monopoly over their respective app stores, levying a 30% tax on every transaction. Like the state, platform marketplaces not only allow direct 'taxation' and capture of value production at source, but they also imply a large visibility of the behavior of users and their choices, and they act to modify that behavior (Zuboff 2019). Moreover, similarly to the postal address, the platform reach extends to the IP address of the users (Bratton 2015).

As for identification practices, nowadays, all the main platforms facilitate digital identification, enabling users to log in seamlessly across services, echoing the state's efforts to extend infrastructural power through efficient, centralized identification. This centralized control over digital identities allows platforms to verify users, track behaviors, and link activities across different services, much as states track citizens' movements, credentials, and records across various domains. With single sign-on systems, platforms establish themselves as identity providers, exerting influence over users' access to the broader digital landscape. The analogy between the infrastructural power of platforms and that of the state reveals how platforms exercise control over digital spaces much like states regulate physical territories. Just as states use taxation, identification, and surveillance to manage and shape society, platforms use data collection, digital identities, and algorithmic oversight to control user behavior and extract value within their ecosystems.

In this light, platforms wield a new form of infrastructural power— pervasive and deeply integrated into users' lives—that resembles the power traditionally exercised by states. This parallel raises questions about accountability, sovereignty, and public welfare, as platforms become quasi-state actors in the digital domain. This point is shared by Kelton and colleagues (2022), who analyzed the reach of the infrastructural power of private digital platforms in the United States. They claimed that digital platforms acquired powers across the virtual territories by exercising aspects of infrastructural power defined previously as the prerogative of the sovereign territorial state. Building on the work of Weiss and Thurbon, they claim that there are two components of infrastructural power. First, 'extractive power' (what we have called taxation of the ecosystem), which is the 'capacity to permeate society, and extract and deploy resources with social consent and legitimacy'. Second, 'transformative power', which is the capacity to initiate, sponsor and harness substantial technological innovation for state benefit. According to the authors, we are witnessing another 'social contract' between users and private platforms that challenges the social contract between citizens and the state.

Kelton and colleagues conceptualize this shift in terms of 'virtual sovereignty'. While we can question whether we should speak of virtual sovereignty or instead of platform sovereignty, as perhaps is more adequate, what is apparent is that what is at stake here indeed is a new form of sovereignty, a new form of control over population and territory. Regardless of the difference in terminology, what matters is that the platformization of the state carries with it itself. Digital platforms have essentially acquired an infrastructural power that was previously typical of the state and a practical exercise of its condition of sovereignty.

5. Case studies of the platform state: Italy, France and Estonia

Having explored how global digital platforms exhibit a form of infrastructural power traditionally associated with the state, this section focuses on the concept of the platform state. As a historical manifestation of state governance, the platform state is best understood as a theoretical abstraction. However, its characteristics should also be rooted in the tangible platformization processes of public administrations worldwide. To this end, we compare patterns of state platformization across diverse contexts, including Estonia, Italy, France and India. Despite the vast social, political, economic, and cultural differences among these countries, we argue that their efforts to platformize public administration are based on common principles and promise to deliver similar results. In particular, the platform state promises to increase the legibility of citizens, regain infrastructural power and enable the creation of what might be called 'welfare ecosystems'. In this framework, the concept of the platform state serves as a unifying lens to bundle together the multiplicity of terms used to describe the digitization of public administrations, such as e-government (Jaeger, 2002), one-stop government, and open government (Cordella, 2019). In what follows we shall see how some of these tendencies apply to different European countries that have engaged in programmes of digital transformation of their governments.

5.1 The Italian case: connecting public institutions

Over the last ten years, the Italian government has put forward many projects that incarnate the idea of Government as a Platform (Gaap) with the aim of improving the services offered to citizens and businesses by simplifying administrative action. Three main interconnected 'enabling platforms' have been developed to allow individual public administrations bodies to log in into a shared software that enables them to perform foreseen actions. The three platforms are the 'SPID' (*Public Digital Identity Service*) as the national identification system; second, 'PagoPA', an electronic system that allows citizens and businesses to make standardized payments to public bodies; third, the app of public services 'AppIO' as a single access point for public services that allows to make requests, download documents and can that send push notifications to users (for example, when a deadline for payments is approaching of the ID document is expiring) (Esposito, 2024).

In a true platform fashion, this centralized approach is complemented by The Developers Italia (DevIt) and Designers Italia (DesIt) initiatives. These projects aim to standardize and modernize public administration (PA) digital services. DesIt focuses on spreading a design culture in the PA by providing practical tools, including guidelines, templates, and UX/UI kits, to create inclusive, accessible, and citizen-centered digital services. It supports smaller PAs with limited resources by offering standardized website templates and service archetypes aligned with national regulations. DevIt complements this effort by equipping IT developers with open-source software, libraries, and documentation to integrate enabling platforms and reduce development time and risks. Both projects promote collaboration and resource-sharing through platforms like Docs Italia, Forum Italia, and GitHub Italia, advancing a unified and consistent digital transformation framework across the Italian state. (Esposito 2024)

According to Cordella and Paletti, the Italian case of platformization of public administration enhances the efficiency of public services by reducing silos and avoiding duplication of core functionalities. This approach enables services to evolve more seamlessly and facilitates the integration of interdependencies between different service provisions, allowing for improvements and new service offerings. By adopting the GaaP model, public agencies can achieve better coordination, delivering greater value to citizens without requiring additional resources. However, this shift also redefines the operational capabilities of public administration, reshaping its organizational structure and capacity to create and deliver public services, ultimately transforming how public value is generated (Cordella & Paletti, 2019).

5.2 The French case: renovating administrative relationships

In France, the concept of the "platform state" has sparked significant debate following the publication of O'Reilly's article on government as a platform. Nicolas Colin and Henri Verdier introduced this debate in France envisioning a future where digital platforms revolutionize public service delivery:

> Imagine that 100 applications offer taxpayers different interfaces and innovative experiences for declaring their income and paying taxes online. [...] Imagine that 100 applications combine resources from distinct administrations to provide a unified service integrating multiple functions: declaring a birth, enrolling a child in school, scheduling a hospital appointment, or filing a police report. Imagine these same services blending with others unrelated to administration: being able to shop for groceries, share opinions on movies or books, and, within the same application, request housing assistance from the family benefits office (Colin & Verdier, 2018, 250-251).

France has emerged as a focal point for this discussion due to its distinctive administrative tradition and the active involvement of public authorities. In tracing the development of the debate of the platform state in France, Jeannot (2020) reported that the expression was first used in 2014 within the public administration in relation with the project FranceConnect. It was then discussed in a series of report produced by public institutions such as the *Conseil d'État* (2017) in a report on public power and digital platforms, as well as by public authorities like then-Minister Franck Riester (2011) and the *Cour des Comptes* (2018). Overall, these reports have advocated for an interventionist role for the state in developing public services inspired by the innovations of private platforms. These discussions extend to related topics, such as open data and open government, underscoring the complex transformation of public administration.

Jacques Chevallier (2018) describes the platform state as a strategy for a global transformation of the administration and public services, a paradigm shift from traditional bureaucratic systems to more agile, horizontally integrated platforms, fostering citizen co-production and administrative efficiency. Chevallier emphasizes how digital tools, data sharing, and Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) are central to this transformation. Pauline Turk (2020) examined the platform state through the lens of public law, arguing that its core objective is to pursue a form of voluntaristic politics grounded in pragmatic realism. This approach reflects an ambition to adapt the state's role to the challenges of contemporary governance while maintaining its commitment to delivering efficient, high-quality public services. Central to this vision is the transformation of the state from a direct provider of services to an enabler of service delivery through the development and maintenance of critical infrastructure. The state is operating like a platform insofar as its primary function becomes the facilitation and coordination of various actors—public, private, and civil society—in delivering services. Rather than relying on traditional, hierarchical methods of administration, the state adopts a model of outsourcing that leverages digital tools and technologies to optimize service delivery. According to Turk, this marks a profound mutation in the state's role, signaling a move away from direct intervention toward a platform-oriented governance model that prioritizes flexibility, efficiency, and citizen-centric solutions.

The case of FranceConnect serves as a prominent example of France's platformization. As Alauzen (2019) ethnographic research explains, FranceConnect operates as a decentralized authentication system based on the OpenID Connect protocol, which enables secure and interoperable digital identity management. Its architecture is designed to allow users visiting a government website to choose between using a local account or logging in through FranceConnect, providing a unified, streamlined experience across various public services, simplifying administrative processes for citizens. The system also exemplifies the concept of digital sovereignty, as emphasized by its developers. In interviews, the technical director of the FranceConnect project described it as "like Facebook, but it's the state," highlighting its role as a state-owned alternative to commercial platforms (Alauzen, 2019). A defining feature of FranceConnect is its decentralized design, which ensures that there is no centralized database where all public administration data converges. Instead, data remains distributed across the respective administrative entities, with FranceConnect as a facilitator of secure interactions. This approach underscores the importance of ensuring that French citizens authenticate with public services via a government-controlled system rather than relying on private platforms.

5.4 The Estonian case: a borderless state-based platform

Another prominent case of platform state is that of Estonia. Even if the process of platformization of Estonia was developed before and independently from the 'platform state' concept, its case is widely quoted as the cornerstone example of government as a platform and of a proactive approach to the digitization of the public administration. This transformation is particularly significant given Estonia's historical context: following its independence in 1992, the country transitioned from a centrally planned economy to a market-based system, becoming a model of innovative public administration grounded in principles of openness, simplicity, and citizen participation (Espinosa, 2024).

For our purposes, what matters is that the Estonian government developed a three-tiered platform architecture to support its digital ecosystem. At the core lies X-Road, with registries and a data exchange system that enables seamless data sharing departments and agencies.By 2016, X-Road enabled interoperability across 1,700 services and 900 organizations, processing over 500 million transactions annually and more than 1 million requests per day (Margetts & Naumann, 2017). The second tier is a universal eID system adopted by over 90% of the population aged 15 and above, ensuring secure identification for public and private services. The final tier consists of a service layer, accessible through portals like eesti.ee, which integrates these systems into a cohesive, user-centric interface. These interconnected layers underpin a wide range of digital services utilized by citizens, professionals, and businesses to interact and conduct transactions with both public and private sectors.The basic infrastructure – X-Road, eID and the official state portal eesti.ee - are managed and developed by the Estonian Information Service Authority, a central agency with about 120 personnel.

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Tammpuu et al. (2022) expanded the conversation by explicitly applying the platformization framework to analyze the Estonian case, focusing particularly on its e-Residency program. Drawing on interviews conducted with non-Estonian residents, their work investigates how the concept of platformization, typically associated with private-sector platforms, can be adapted to state functions. The researchers highlight how the Estonian government discursively frames e-Residency as a "platform," "gateway," and "one-stop shop" for accessing public and private e-services, particularly for commercial activities. This framing underscores the state's dual role as a service provider and a transactional platform. Tammpuu et al. 's (2022) reveal how Estonia's e-Residency program supports a novel platform-based relationship between the state and individuals. It is transactionality, a hallmark of digital platforms, that now defines the interaction between e-residents and the state. In this sense, the process of platformization can lead to perceive the state as a "market actor" introducing its digital solutions to the global economy but also as a "membership organization" extending its community beyond territorial borders. Through its digital ID infrastructure, e-Residency program, and vision of a "borderless digital state," Estonia exemplifies the transformative potential of platformization in redefining the role of the state and its relationship with territory in the digital age (Tammpuu et al. 2022).

6. Platforming *et impera*

The cases of France, Italy, and Estonia exemplify a broader trend of state platformization, wherein governments seek to become enablers of digital services rather than remain dependent on private platforms ultimately tied to foreign states. It signals how limited is the dominant narrative of a "weak state" in digital times (Owen, 2015; Lehdonvirta, 2022), and how in fact platformization are unlocking new ways for the state to control its territory and population. To develop this discussion, we have shown how a key strategy in this transformation is the utilization of APIs and public digital identification systems, which facilitate the integration of public institutions, enhance interactions between the state and citizens, and move beyond the siloed approach to administration that has historically fragmented governance structures. By adopting a multi-sided logic, akin to private digital platforms, the platform state reconfigures service delivery, replacing traditional bureaucratic models reliant on physical offices and extensive public employment with reprogrammable digital interfaces that optimize administrative functions. At the core of state platformization is automation and the redistribution of administrative labor. Algorithms increasingly streamline bureaucratic processes, reducing the need for manual oversight by public employees, while platforms shift administrative tasks to citizens themselves—whether for tax payments, permit applications, or welfare access.

We can outline two reasons why the platformization of the state is likely to intensify. First, from an evolutionary perspective, the state cannot ignore the organizational advantages provided by the platform model. This is not simply a matter of delivering more efficient and distributed public services while integrating existing institutions; it is also rooted in the technocratic essence of the platform itself. Second, this shift reflects the broader crisis of governance in an era of global complexity. The platform model allows the state to address its overextended capacity by embracing a distributed, recursive structure. It integrates diverse institutions into a unified framework while preserving their autonomy and facilitating dynamic interactions.. The platformization of the state, therefore, is not only a response to technological advances but also an adaptation to the structural pressures of globalized governance. By internalizing the evolutionary logics of the platform model, the state navigates its inherent limitations and continues to evolve in line with the complexities of modern society. This intensification of platform logic reflects both the constraints and possibilities of governing in an interconnected world.

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