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changing the relationship between the central government and local governments**

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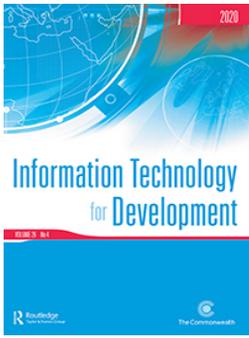
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# Structural changes driven by e-petitioning technology: changing the relationship between the central government and local governments

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## ABSTRACT

e-Petitioning is a type of information and communication technology for development that can be used by citizens to express their voices in society. Although much work is focused on government-citizen relationships, little is known about whether and, if so, how e-petitions technology might result in structural transformations in public administration. In this study, we investigated the effects of an e-petitioning system in the Turkish public administration from neo-institutional and transaction cost perspectives. In contrast to the expectation of reducing transaction costs due to ICTs use, the transaction costs increased. The changes have further strengthened the central government by transforming the current tutelary relationship into a more hierarchical structure. The change is not driven by lowering transaction costs; instead, the change mirrors the power structures. The use of technology changed the structures in such a way that political power structures are reinforced while empowering the citizens to make their voices heard.

## KEYWORDS

e-Petition; public input; intragovernmental relationships; neo-institutional theory; transaction cost theory; ICT4D

## Introduction

Studies in information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) field have shown that developments in technology not only can have profound impacts on administrative structure (Bolívar et al., 2016; Caffrey & McDonagh, 2015; O'Neill, 2009) but also on societal developments by transforming the institutional relationships among government levels. Actually, ICTs have transformed and impacted the way we communicate and interact in general as depicted by Roztock et al. (2019). These impacts might happen by adding new communication channels, dropping traditional procedures, or transforming the institutional structures of an administrative system. ICT4D use is particularly important for societal developments (Walsham, 2017, p. 18) as McGrath and Maiye (2010) assert that research on developing countries reveals the presence of a link between information and communication technology (ICTs) and development. For example, studies in the literature evaluate the presence of an e-petitioning mechanism among the criteria of e-government development stages (Chatfield & Alhujran, 2009). Among various technological tools, e-petitions constitute an important case of ICT-enabled networks, representing functionality for citizens to have an impact on government. Palmieri (2008, p. 132) asserted that e-petitions are assumed 'as a reflection of societal changes in modern information communication technologies'. While e-petitions enable

citizens to express their voices (Alathur et al., 2012), this process might have an impact on intergovernmental relations.

e-Petitioning technology is introduced by governments to enable citizens to express their voice. Although there is much research about how technology affects the relationship between governments and citizens (Bryson et al., 2012; Norris & Reddick, 2013), there is a void in our understanding of how technology, and e-petitioning technology, in particular, influences the relationships among government levels. In this paper, the relationship among government levels is investigated by analyzing the effects of introducing an e-petitioning system via the public administration system in Turkey from a neo-institutional and transaction cost perspectives. The research question in this study is as follows: how does citizen input via e-petitioning affect the institutional setup among government levels that impact societal development?

This paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we present conceptual and theoretical backgrounds as transaction cost theory (TCT) and institutional theory regarding intergovernmental interaction. In section 3, we describe the research methodology and then present the BIMER case in detail. In section 4, we discuss the implications and limitations of the study. Finally, in section 5 we draw the conclusions.

## The conceptual and theoretical framework

e-Petitioning is a form of e-participation. A petition can be defined as a 'formal request addressed to an authority' (Diaz et al., 2008, p. 204) and one can be prepared and delivered through either traditional or online means. Any petition can be signed by numerous individuals before being addressed to authority, although traditional petitions have a limited reach (Wright, 2012). Petitions submitted via electronic medium have the potential to mobilize large numbers of people to see, comment on, and sign the petition within a short period of time (Petray, 2011).

e-Petitions have been widely adopted. One of the most prominent e-petition mechanisms is 'We the People,' an initiative by the U.S. White House to encourage people to find and sign petitions that have already been started or to start new ones (The White House, n.d.). The White House promised that President Obama would respond to petitions with 100,000 signatures or more. In a similar vein, the government in the U.K. runs an e-petition portal that stimulates citizens to engage in signing petitions. Again, if 100,000 people sign a petition, it will be discussed in the House of Commons (UK Government and Parliament, n.d.; Chatfield & Alhujran, 2009). In Turkey e-petition was realized through various means including classical petitions to the Parliament and the BIMER system. e-petitioning through the BIMER system is different from most e-petitioning applications worldwide since administrative authorities were the respondents in the BIMER system under the mediatory role played by the Prime Ministry while the parliaments are the primary respondent in e-petitioning mechanisms. Moreover, classical e-petitioning systems represent the right to petition, while the BIMER system is a result of the right to information.

Any e-petitioning system provides input for the policymaking process, but it might also have effects on the relationships among public organizations. Although there is a lot of literature on citizen engagement and public participation (Bryson et al., 2012; Lawton & Macaulay, 2014), there is none on the impact of e-petitions on administrative systems. Rethemeyer (2007) stated that 'there is little work that examines the Internet's effect on policy processes' (p. 260). Since the goal of the study presented in this paper is to analyze the effects of e-petitions on the relationship between central and local governments and their repercussions on societal development, we have conducted an in-depth analysis of a case study to accomplish this goal. The case study is a communication center located in the public relations branch of the Office of the Prime Minister in Turkey titled as 'Prime Ministry communication center' (*Başbakanlık İletişim Merkezi*, henceforth BIMER). While it started in 2006 as a result of a Prime Ministry circular, currently, BIMER was incorporated into the CIMER (Presidency Communication Center) under the Turkish Presidency due to a constitutional change regarding the executive branch in Turkey. BIMER was initiated as an e-petitioning initiative

in the Office of the Prime Minister that combined physical and electronic petitioning systems. The BIMER case showed how technology adoption and implementation through e-petitioning in public policymaking influenced the existing relationships in public administration by those who were in power.

We first review the interrelation between public participation and e-petitioning and then discuss e-petitions and the e-petitioning process. We then provide an overview of TCT and neo-institutional theory, which we used as the theoretical lenses to analyze the effect of e-petitioning on the relationship between the central government and local governments. We used TCT to investigate the costs associated with managing the e-petitioning process and neo-institutional theory to explore the influence of organizations and wider social forces.

### ***Public participation and the e-petitioning process***

Governance among government levels is interrelated with public participation in political and administrative matters. Countries from all over the world have been practicing public participation in the decision-making process for some time now (Edelenbos & Klijn, 2006; Panagiotopoulos & Elliman, 2012), specifically at local levels (Charalabidis et al., 2010; Puri & Sahay, 2007). For the institutionalization of the public participation process, however, Bartels (2013) argued that ‘public encounters, face-to-face contact between public professionals and citizens, was first identified as a key issue in public administration 80 years ago, but never developed into a subject area of its own’ (p. 469) due to bureaucratic type of organization. e-Petitions can overcome the hierarchical and bureaucratic structure of public administration with the help of new governance relationships (Farazmand, 2012) and improve the public’s trust in government (Kim et al., 2017; Mahmood et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2006; Welch et al., 2005).

e-Petitioning practices might have many effects on governance in public administration and, for example, stimulate public participation. Although ICTs serve a critical role in the formation of the information society, the way that technology is used affects public participation (Anduiza et al., 2010). Furthermore, Carman (2014) argued that e-petitioning systems might help to decrease the costs of mass participation that arise from the grass-roots level. Lindner and Riehm (2009) stated that e-petitioning systems are ‘beyond the experimental stage’ and have ‘a high level of institutionalization and procedural maturity’ (p. 1) referring to late developments in e-petitioning systems compared to other e-participation mechanisms in public institutions.

Petitioning mechanisms feed the public service provision process back with the requests, complaints, and proposals raised by citizens as inputs into the system. Hansen and Prospero (2005) expediently asserted that ‘improved decision-making is perhaps the most promising element’ (p. 627). In addition, in the U.S. context, Jaeger and Bertot (2010) interconnected the transparency notion with ‘an informed citizenry that is able to engage in political discourse and shape the future directions of the government’ (p. 374–375). In a similar vein, Kim and Lee (2012) found that citizen perception of satisfaction with e-participation processes is directly related to the perception of transparency. Likewise, Abelson et al. (2003) pointed to ‘a more informed citizenry’ (p. 239) in the context of complicated decision-making processes.

### ***Information technology for development: progressive and disruptive transformation***

ICT4D is assumed to function as catalyzers for change and does not bring organizational changes per se (Mthoko & Khene, 2017). Avgerou (2009) and Heeks (2010) found that there are two types of ICT applications with regard to development, e.g. progressive and transformational. According to Heeks (ibid, p.636), progressive applications cause substantial impacts without changing the underlying structural systematic, whereas, transformational applications might produce a fundamental change by yielding new implementations, modifying ‘the existing balance of power’. Under normal circumstances, government and citizen interactions are neither assumed to tackle the power relationships

within the constructed system nor to have any intentions to transform the existing power balance among government levels. Petitions in general and e-petitions, in particular, are no exception. Palmieri (2008) asserts that 'whatever form or context, petitions were usually written in a deferential style, showing that the petitioner did not intend to question the established power structure' (p. 122). Thus while e-petitioner seeks remedies to what she/he sees as injustice or irregularity (Alathur et al., 2012), these efforts would also reflect an impact over public administration's inner structure as we have argued in the previous sections. In conclusion, citizen demands using ICTs might affect and disruptively transform existing power balance in intergovernmental relations; in return, the central government progressively fosters a societal development yielding more citizens to speak up.

### **Transaction cost theory (TCT)**

Although developed for economic exchange relations (Coase, 1937), TCT is also functional for analyzing government business. e-Petitions can be viewed as a transaction among organizations and citizens and can be used to compare the cost alternatives to e-petition arrangements.

Transaction cost scholars argued for the indispensability of costs associated with the smooth functioning of interrelated entities (Williamson, 1981). Organizational entities look for alternative ways to conduct transactions. ICTs can be used to reduce transaction costs since uncertainty and limited information result in transaction costs (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1981). TCT deals with two main types of costs: production costs and coordination costs (Riordan & Williamson, 1985). Sarkar et al. (1998) argued that 'transaction cost models focus on a firm's choices between internalizing an activity and relying on external market agents' (p. 216) for the sake of cost reduction. According to Sarkar et al. (1998), the decision regarding the channel structure to use for communication is dependent upon transaction costs. In government, the central government either communicates with all government agencies separately, which consumes more time and more effort or all government agencies, including local governments, are directed to one place to communicate about that particular issue. The latter can save coordination costs and communication efforts. Ciborra (1993) and Cordella (2006) asserted that the impact of ICTs on transaction costs in organizations should not be evaluated only in quantitative terms, as there are also qualitative dimensions regarding the structuration of organizations. Qualitative aspects refer to trust, power, and social aspects of transactions. Gathering and keeping power is the intersected theme linking TCT and neo-institutional theory. Cordella (2006) argued that price and hierarchy have functionalities to reduce uncertainties that increase transaction costs. Unlike market mechanisms, hierarchy plays a key role in minimizing transaction costs.

### **Neo-institutional theory**

The neo-institutional theory is functional to explain the behavioral change in organizations (Hu et al., 2007). The institutional theory views social structures in which the institutionalized behavior deeply affects expectations of the elements within the social structures, including schemas, beliefs, rules, norms, and routines about them, as authoritative guidelines for social behavior (Scott, 2004). Covering many studies in social science disciplines (i.e. economics, politics, organizational science, and/or sociology) with many contributions (Currie, 2009; Scott, 2008a); institutional theory with its 'old' and 'new' conceptualizations (i.e. neo-institutionalism) is functional in analyzing and explaining events occurring on a continuum with modifications in time. With regard to the use of ICTs in organizations, institutional theory helps to understand how ICTs often reinforce existing power structures and practices (e.g. Avgerou, 2000; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; McGrath & Maiye, 2010; Weerakkody et al., 2009).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) explained the similarity, or institutional reproduction, of behaviors and structures among organizations by means of three isomorphic mechanisms, namely coercive, mimetic, and normative processes. Fountain (2009) used the term 'institution' as 'regularized patterns

and processes that simplify and order cognition and behavior at the individual, group, organizational, and societal levels of analysis' (p. 100). Kim et al. (2009) defined institutionalization 'as the process that maintained and reproduced the existing structures' (p. 43). Focusing on organizational perspective in politics, Peters (1999) stated that the use of 'new institutionalism' (referring to neo-institutionalism) in organizational matters is driven by the study by March and Olsen (1984), who argued that the central focus of modern politics is overly concentrated on societal reflection-based individualistic interests.

Neo-institutionalism focuses on institutional change, rather than the institutional persistence that old institutionalism argued (Currie, 2009). Argued that most studies of information systems prioritize technical or rational perspectives and disregard the socio-political dimensions. Technology has impacts on institutional structures but does not necessarily bring about positive developments. Gong and Xiao (2016, p. 1) found that isomorphic pressures, if institutionalized, has the potentiality to form informal institutional practices that could contradict to formal legal norms. Tseng (2008, p. 409) argued that neo-institutionalism does not assume institutions as given; rather, it sees them as a result of social processes that produce organizational actions and processes. Similarly, Leonardi and Barley (2008) argued that 'there is general agreement that information technology and organizations both arise at the intersection of social and material phenomena' (p. 160). Social phenomena are psychological factors and social interactions or power conflicts occurring in organizational structures, whereas material phenomena are physical factors that shape the human action, such as 'geography, biology, climate, and technology' (ibid, p. 160). Finally, Ganapati (2011) stated that there are barriers to the use of ICTs for higher-level decision-making and that these barriers seem institutional rather than technological.

## Research methodology

An in-depth case study on BIMER was carried out on the basis of secondary resources (i.e. analyses of the BIMER website and legal documents and processes related to BIMER). We started by analyzing the website, which is shown in Figure 1. The website showed that citizens, as real or legal persons, can make their appeals (henceforth submission) to BIMER by using traditional and online tools, including telephone, regular mail, and in-person submissions. On the BIMER website, new submissions could be made and the status of previously made applications could be monitored. In the middle of the



Figure 1. BIMER website.

website were the dynamic photos of Prime Minister with some announcements promoting citizens to make their submissions. In the lower left-hand corner, citizens were also directed to a particular phone line, namely 'ALO 150' (Dial 150) for making their submissions.

We then performed a policy document search through Turkey's policymaking and legislation related to the introduction of BIMER. Details of the policy analysis are given in section 3.2. Finally, we performed a process analysis to show how BIMER affected the functioning of the public administration system by presenting when and how any submission to the system was processed before and after BIMER.

## **BIMER case study**

### ***The public administration system in Turkey***

Turkey has shaped its public administration system under a centralist state rooted in its Eastern and Western heritage. Having roots in late periods of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish Public Administration (TPA) is shaped by both Eastern and Western dynamics. TPA is led by one party-in-power and a strong leadership since 2002, excepting a short term of temporary government in 2015. During the Erdogan administration, we have to note that TPA has been deeply transformed, if not a complete type of change. These changes got momentum since June 2017 election. After this election, TPA is to be governed under presidency rule, where the authority and duty of executive functions are solely bearded upon the President. Establishing all the executive powers under the presidency, central administrative agencies of TPA are important from several aspects. First of all, Turkey is a unitary state and the administrative structure is categorically divided into two main sections: the central administration (capital administration and provincial branches) and the local administrations. Having a centralized administration tradition, we experience that considerable duties and powers were transferred to the local governments with various reforms carried out since the 2000s. Yet main decision-making and implementing powers are still vested into the presidency due to bearing one-and-only executive power. However, in implementing the policies designed at the presidency level, the central administration and its field branches take the front as the provincial extensions of the central administration.

Turkey's public administration system has two main levels: centralized and decentralized administrations. This dual structure is due to the need to provide public services according to focus and locus. Thus, local public services are provided by local governments, whereas national services are provided by the district (provincial and regional) agencies that are affiliated with the central government. Local governments are defined as being legal persons and have partial administrative and financial autonomy to protect them from central government intervention. Nonetheless, the public administration system constitutes an entity as ordered by the 1982 Constitution. This entity is provided with two mechanisms, namely tutelage and hierarchical control. The tutelary relationship (i.e. administrative trusteeship) is over decentralized governments and is different from exerting hierarchical control. In hierarchical control, the central government can inspect decisions and actions taken by institutions with regard to their legality and propriety. However, in a tutelary relationship, the central government can inspect the actions and processes taken by local governments with regard to legality as required by the constitutional principle of the integral unity, but not with regard to propriety. The central government cannot control the propriety of actions and processes performed by local governments. Because they have elected representatives, local governments perform duties stipulated by relevant laws and the Constitution and determine policies that are consistent with the principle of the integral unity. This tutelary relationship produces a status whereby the central government cannot supersede local governments but can check decisions and actions for the public interest.

Kapucu and Palabiyik (2008) argued that Turkey's central government, which is also called the general administration, has an extremely powerful administrative system. The central government behaves as though it were hierarchically superior in its relations with local governments. Made up

of two hierarchical levels – namely the central institutions (e.g. ministries and other auxiliary institutions in Ankara) and their provincial branches – the central government operates on the principle of de-concentration (*Yetki Genişliği*). Provincial branches comprise governorships, district governorships, and regional directorates that are directly connected to central institutions. The main district branch is the province, which is headed by an assigned official called the governor (*Vali*). Vali has authority over all the provincial branches of the central government, including the police but excluding the military and the law courts. The head of a sub-province or district (the *Kaymakam*, or district governor), is the second main central agent in districts. Most of the district branches of central institutions are located in the provinces and districts, although some are located at the regional level. District branches, or field administrations, carry out their duties under the direct orders, directives, and observance of governors, who represent the government and the state. Yet, there is a hierarchical dominance of central institutions over provincial governors. On the local side of the Turkish administrative system, there are municipalities, metropolitan municipalities, special provincial administrations, and villages as spatial local governments.

Given the above circumstances, the balance of power between the central and local governments in the Turkish administrative structure is not at equilibrium. The Turkish Constitution of 1982 presumes central government superiority over all other administrations. This imbalance is diffusive to fiscal shares, duty shares, and related competencies. As a unitary state, the relationship between the central government and local governments is authoritarian and paternalistic (Ersoy, 1992). Similarly, Köker (1995) stated that local governments in Turkey are established by and for the central government, contrary to counterparts in the Western tradition. This authoritarian and paternalistic characteristic is still dominant, although a decentralization process that would restrict the authority of the central government was on the government's agenda (Parlak et al., 2008). The decentralization process had been started and was viewed as having a strong relationship with potential EU membership (Çelenk, 2009; Öniş, 2003; Özcan & Turunç, 2008). However, due to format and the structure of the negotiation process with the EU, the decentralization process that would lower the centralistic pressure over local governments could not run till the end.

### **Examples of BIMER e-petitioning mechanism in practice**

To show the working of BIMER we will discuss some examples showing the use of the information collected using BIMER and the resulting decisions. The BIMER enables 'an informed citizenry' and 'improved decision-making'. According to official meeting records of Saliqli Municipality laid in South Western Turkey, the Mayor, indicating to a particular e-petition submitted to BIMER, says that there is an imminent need to make a regulation on the healthy passage of the citizens through the pavements just laid on the storefronts:

My dear fellows we want to touch a sore spot that you will see soon. We have three avenues as Avar Avenue, Şüheda Avenue, and Atatürk Avenue. I will give an example on Atatürk Avenue right away. There is a continuing issue regarding the use of 5-meter space in front of the commercial stores in such a density that there are ongoing complaints submitted to the BIMER. I have an e-petition, complaint devoted to the a to z of the Atatürk Avenue, sent to the BIMER in my hand right now. It is about all the stores laid over the Çınarlı Avenue and Atatürk Avenue, that I can name the stores here, have been complained about. The complaint is that the pedestrians could not get benefitted from the healthy passage (due to unlawful occupancy by the stores). (The Municipality of Saliqli, 2016)

In another example, according to the Municipal Commission of the Municipality of Küçükkuuyu in Northwest of Turkey, there is a decision made based on the input from a BIMER submission. According to the decisions taken on March 17, 2017, the commission says in the decision that there is a reconstruction fine to be applied on an extension made by a building owner after a submission made to the BIMER. The commission says that the officials in the municipality have taken action to the so-called building upon receiving the complaint provided by the BIMER system and sealed the extension made in front of the building due to it is against the regulations (The Municipality of Küçükkuuyu, 2017).

The BIMER can be used by the central and local governments. However, the examples show the influence of the central government on local decisions. According to the Turkish Constitution, local governments are not under the direct or indirect hierarchical control of either the central government or its branches in the district. However, an example of a decisive step in the municipal decision due to submission to the BIMER is clearly seen in an advisory jurisdiction taken by the Ombudsman Institution of Turkey. In the advisory decision taken on January 11, 2019, it is said that while the applicant submitted an e-petition to the BIMER on October 10, 2008, there was another application made on the very subject to the Municipality of Bağcılar that was already in internal processing (The Ombudsman Institution of Turkey, 2019). It is very clear that the applicant used the BIMER system as extra pressure on the Municipality in the direction that he/she desired. Thus, though there was an application already processed by the very same Municipality, the applicant made a submission to the BIMER on a local reconstruction issue on which neither the central government nor its district agencies have jurisdiction. But using the BIMER system the Prime Ministry was able to influence the local government in this case.

### ***BIMER e-petitioning mechanism***

Established as a traditional public relations tool and now serving as an e-petitioning mechanism run via traditional and online means, BIMER was designed for citizens to make their submissions to the government irrespective of the nature, scope, and content of their submissions, and is for issues at both the local and the central government level. BIMER was defined by Office of the Prime Minister of Republic of Turkey (OPM) as “Prime Ministry Communication Center is a sophisticated public relations service through which citizens could submit any requests, complaints, opinions and proposals and applications for information directly to the Prime Ministry or if required, to other relevant authorities with the help of Prime Ministry by means of communication channels” (OPM, 2015, p. 10). OECD (n.d.) saw this mechanism as an innovation since this e-petitioning mechanism served as a central point in directing citizens’ submissions. Through BIMER, the government provided a means for constituents to make all kinds of submissions (i.e. requests, complaints, denunciations, and proposals) to the public administration system. After making a submission to the system through BIMER, the submission was evaluated at the communication center and then was forwarded to the relevant authority. Fifteen days later, the submitter was informed of the result of the submission.

One clear reason for the introduction of BIMER was to get all public institutions, irrespective of their level, to behave in the same manner as though public administration were a unique, indivisible, and aggregate entity with regard to citizen submissions. Yet the rule of tutelage clearly orders that the central government can only check local governments to ensure that their actions and processes are in line with all legal and administrative regulations. Governance mechanisms guide citizens’ submissions to the central government and local governments through the same portal. By governance mechanisms, we mean that all submissions to the government irrespective of their nature are gathered at and then forwarded from the very same center, which enables all governmental levels to work together to gather and process citizens’ inputs. All public institutions irrespective of their nature must have had an electronic link to the centralized BIMER interface on their websites, and must exhibit informative posters in official buildings that citizens cannot fail to see.

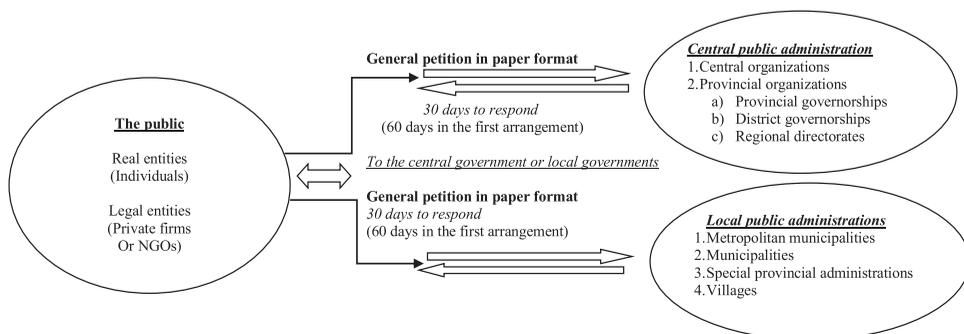
There were already interactions among government levels before BIMER. In the first section of Article 123 of the Turkish Constitution, it is stated that ‘the administration forms a whole, with regard to its constitution and functions, and shall be regulated by law’. The rule of integral unity covers petitions from citizens irrespective of the institutional addressee (i.e. if a citizen improperly submits to a public agency, the agency in question must forward the submission to the appropriate agency on behalf of the submitter, as stated in article 5 of Act No 3071). There was also a chain of submission in BIMER in terms of the addressee. However, what was distinctive about BIMER was the attempt to institutionalize and to reproduce a new governance structure. In this governance structure, the central government unit transformed the traditional hierarchical and tutelage

relationship (*vesayet denetimi*) between centralized and decentralized governments into a new type of governance interaction. As a result of the structural change, BIMER had brought about a change in the power structure between the central government and local governments, inferring the emergence of a new governance model in the Turkish administrative system. In this type of governance model, the boundaries and differences between the central government and local governments were blurred, as though it were the overall public administration system that responds to citizens' submissions. The BIMER case, as a governance model among government levels in Turkey, might have addressed some shortcomings highlighted by the previous studies.

Citizens' submissions to the government, in general, are arranged around articles 26, 40, and 74 of the Constitution (Authors). We know that the Constitution has no regulating power unless implementation acts for all the provisions are enacted by Parliament. The basic implementation act regarding citizens' recourses to the administrative system is the 'Act on the Exercise of the Right to Petition' dated November 1, 1984, with Act No 3071 and amended by Act No 4778 dated January 1, 2003. Thus, submissions to the public administration system before the 'Act on Information Acquirement Right' and BIMER were made on paper and within the framework of Act No 3071 (Figure 2).

Parallel to the developments in ICTs, the right to petition was modified by the 'Act on Right of Information Acquirement' dated October 9, 2003, with Act No 4982, organizing citizens' submissions to the government in new ways, including submissions using ICT tools. Thus, submissions to the public administration system after Act No 4982 are made within the framework provided by Act No 4982 in addition to the framework previously provided by Act No 3071 (Figure 3). In other words, following the advancements in ICT, citizens' submissions to the public administration system could include petitions for information and demands for documents. In contrast to previous arrangements, the framework provided by Act No 4982 enables the public to appeal to the public administration system for information and documentation, in addition to other submissions made by submitters either on paper or via e-forms embedded in institutional websites.

In line with the aforementioned acts, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) issued a circular on 'the exercise of the right to petition and access to information' to enable citizens to exercise their right to access information (OPM, 2004). The aim of the circular is to force public authorities to comply with the regulations and to respond to citizens' needs, as expressed through requests, claims or proposals if they are submitted via the appropriate procedure. This Prime Ministry Circular (henceforth PMC) on right to petition and access information clearly states that citizens shall apply to the relevant public authorities if they have requests, claims, or proposals related to the functioning of public administration, including public service provision. The utilization of rights to petition and to access information about themselves and matters related to the public institution concerned shall be treated as the requirement of a democratic and transparent administration built upon the principles of equality, neutrality, and transparency (OPM, 2004). Through BIMER, the central government interfered with the interactions between local governments and citizens; however, according to the



**Figure 2.** Citizens' submissions to the public administration before BIMER.

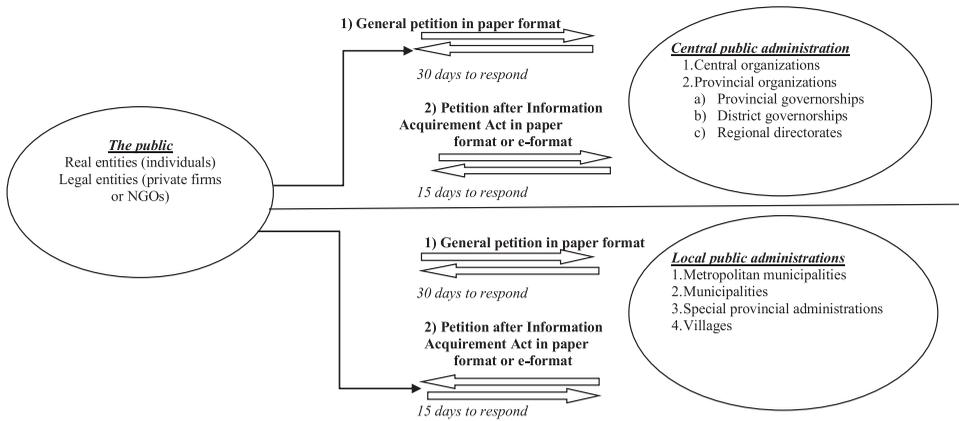


Figure 3. Citizens' submissions to the public administration after Right to Information Acquirement Act.

Constitution, the central government is not allowed to direct local governments or to interfere with the political autonomy of local governments vested through the Constitution. Yet in a framework that ranges from the provision of local services to human rights violations via e-petitions from citizens to the OPM, the central government interfered with all of the public administration systems, including local governments. In this context, BIMER, symbolically located at the OPM, served as a common governance interaction point among different stakeholders ranging from citizens to NGOs (see Figure 4).

Having proven itself as a preferred interaction channel, BIMER had recently introduced a recommended e-petition interface for all public administration authorities in Turkey, as laid down by the PMC on BIMER (OPM, 2006). The BIMER website offered separate interfaces through which citizens are directed to submit claims, demands, or denunciations regarding the provision of all kinds of public services produced by all central and local government institutions. The PMC on BIMER urged all public administration authorities to deal with all the submissions directed to them via the BIMER interface (Authors). Thus, consecutive processes of submitting, evaluating, and responding to the applicants were under the governance of the OPM.

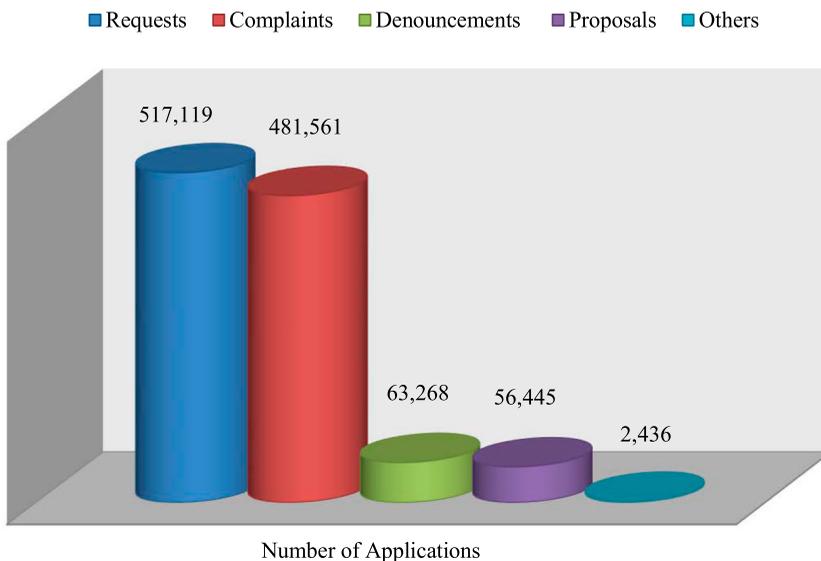


Figure 4. Submissions by appeal type in 2013.

Any submission directed to BIMER was processed at this communication center by specialist volunteers, instead of by a functional division. There was no work division among the personnel with regard to dealing with the submissions. This prevented the volunteers from gaining in-depth expertise in a certain area. After they have been processed, submissions were forwarded to the relevant public institutions regardless of their administrative level. BIMER retained the responsibility to keep the applicants informed about the progress of their inquiries. This new relationship between local administrations and the central administration was not a result of a legal arrangement in the form of an act enacted by Parliament; rather, it was a form of administrative action in the form of a PMC, a very low-level administrative arrangement in the 'hierarchy of norms' regarding its legal structure.

BIMER was established as a public relations division of the OPM but had been transformed into a novel type of mediation service between citizens and all public institutions. Although the OPM was not in a legal position to give direct orders to local governments, this was what happened in practice.

Judging by the volume and workload of BIMER, the impact of this governance mechanism was increasing year by year (see [Tables 1](#) and [2](#)). The number of submissions processed exceeded the number of submissions made in each year because a submission could be sent to more than one institution, or submission could be processed more than once at the same institution, which increased the transaction costs. On the other hand, requests and complaints far outnumbered the other types of submissions. Requests and complaints could be regarded as citizen inputs directed to the public policymaking process for public service provision. The number of denouncements was relatively low, in compliance with the aim of BIMER, as the system aimed to collect wishes directed to the administration, not citizen vs. citizen cases. The very low number of proposals compared to the number of requests and complaints was disappointing, and citizens should be actively encouraged to submit their proposals regarding public service provision (see [Figure 4](#)).

### **Old and new governance relationships: the Turkish administrative context**

The principle of hierarchy is at the center of the traditional relationship between the central government and its provincial branches. The hierarchy principle empowers the central government to give direct orders to its district branches and to hold public officials responsible for their superiors. Having a *primus inter pares* position in the Cabinet, the PM in the Turkish political system held a position to which all the ministers were personally and institutionally responsible for the smooth operation of their ministries and regarded district branches. Yet there was no hierarchically, politically, and administratively superior position of the PM to ministers. The *primus inter pares* position of the PM originated from his or her right to form and to dissolve the government. Moreover, the PM had the right to dismiss ministers and to reshuffle the Cabinet at any time.

**Table 1.** Number of applications made to BIMER 2006–16.

| Year         | N° of applications | N° processed      |
|--------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| 2006         | 129,297            | 172,470           |
| 2007         | 137,716            | 208,899           |
| 2008         | 217,859            | 343,627           |
| 2009         | 384,852            | 583,697           |
| 2010         | 649,115            | 926,955           |
| 2011         | 822,287            | 1,415,336         |
| 2012         | 866,885            | 1,743,293         |
| 2013         | 1,168,853          | 2,592,057         |
| 2014         | 1,124,005          | 2,766,360         |
| 2015         | 1,267,665          | 3,859,240         |
| 2016         | 1,729,952          | 6,159,734         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>8,498,486</b>   | <b>20,771,668</b> |

Source: BIMER (n.d.).

**Table 2.** Number of applications made directly to BIMER 2009–14, by application method.

| Type of application                   | Jan.-Dec., 2009 | Jan.-Dec., 2010 | Jan.-Dec., 2011 | Jan.-Dec., 2012 | Jan.-Dec., 2013  | Jan.-Dec., 2014  |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| In person                             | 3,860           | 4,169           | 3,901           | 4,508           | 6,324            | 7,995            |
| Via the Net                           | 239,471         | 412,115         | 564,913         | 587,414         | 768,914          | 659,650          |
| By regular mail                       | 47,417          | 49,869          | 59,498          | 54,511          | 52,676           | 46,400           |
| By phone                              | 12,705          | 14,815          | 32,544          | 36,477          | 63,898           | 116,341          |
| By email                              | 61,683          | 133,915         | 137,614         | 120,332         | –                | 20,307           |
| Through e-Government Gate             | –               | –               | –               | –               | 229,231          | 293,619          |
| By fax                                | 2,483           | 1,823           | 1,836           | 442             | 347              | 928              |
| Through Information Acquirement Right | 17,233          | 32,409          | 21,980          | 6,041           | 47,463           | 24,060           |
| <b>Total</b>                          | <b>384,852</b>  | <b>649,115</b>  | <b>822,286</b>  | <b>809,725</b>  | <b>1,445,894</b> | <b>1,169,840</b> |

Source: Obtained from BIMER via email.

Since there was hierarchical control over lower ranks and district branches, BIMER could be regarded as an evolutionary step in the inner functioning of government. However, when evaluated from the relationship between local administrations and the OPM, BIMER could be seen as a revolutionary step, since prior there were no defined administrative ties between the PM and local governments in administrative terms except for tutelage control. Using BIMER, the OPM collected all kinds of input from citizens and sends it to all levels of government irrespective of administrative boundaries (Figure 5).

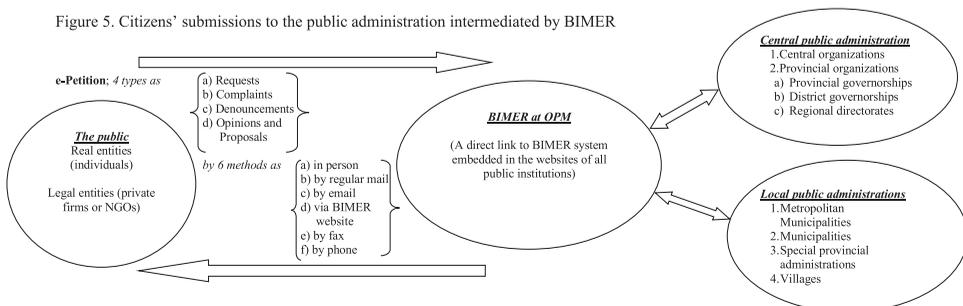
### Analyzing the changes

The institutional theory predicts that technology reinforces existing structures by reproducing them through actors (Scott, 2008b). In the BIMER case, the structure and the relationship between the central and local administrations were reasserted for the benefit of the central government by the introduction of a new arrangement based on technology use. The institutional theory assumes the formation of new codes, arrangements, or routines for a successful organizational context to be developed.

BIMER might have accelerated the e-participation process by creating clear timelines and introducing control mechanisms to monitor progress. The technical infrastructure was a necessity, yet other factors including social and cultural aspects shaped its use. It is still crucial to increase awareness of the opportunity to participate, promote and sustain citizen participation in political and administrative matters.

Through BIMER, citizens participated in the design and implementation of public policies, thus in public service provision. This dimension was directly related to the aim and functioning of BIMER. BIMER was just a frontrunner of this kind in the Turkish administrative system and based on

Figure 5. Citizens’ submissions to the public administration intermediated by BIMER



**Figure 5.** Citizens’ submissions to the public administration intermediated by BIMER.

BIMER, other systems were developed (for example 'CIMER' at the Turkish Presidency). The organizational design and execution of BIMER were exceptionally important for the administrative system. BIMER strengthened the political power structures established by those in power. Furthermore, the inter-organizational design and functioning of BIMER were executed by means of a PMC, which is a low-rank administrative arrangement compared to other administrative ordinances issued by the executive or laws passed by the legislature. Additionally, BIMER's exceptionality was highly visible in the input (i.e. citizen requests, claims, or proposals), collection, and feedback system among all the public institutions.

The most striking dimension of BIMER, however, was the reinforcement of the power shift from local governments to the central government. This dimension of control centralization is expressed in the regarding PMC as:

... Thus, it will be provided that written and oral submissions are to be delivered swiftly to regarded public institutions or units in order to be processed, that submissions are to be replied as soon as possible, that all regarded institutions are to be warned if being late, that all these processes are to be prosecuted in an automated system, that statistical reports are stored and that all are controlled by center (OPM, 2006, p. 1).

Amongst all other contributions, BIMER could be regarded as the strengthening of control by the central government over local administrations. In this reassertion process, ICTs served as the main pillar of the empowered control. By using BIMER, the central government agencies in districts could have exerted pressure on local governments.

Although changing the administrative structure does not seem to have been the initial objective of BIMER, the change in the central-local relationship in administrations has been accomplished by the opportunities provided by ICTs, which reinforces the political landscape. Such a transformation is actually in line with the propositions of neo-institutional theory, which argues that organizations are not passive pawns, but active players (Scott, 2008a), which can explain the strategic use of technology to strengthen the existing structures and to change the power balance to the advantage of those who are already in control.

Selznick (1957) argued that there is 'a close relation between 'infusion with value' and 'self-maintenance' (p. 21). As an organization acquires a self, a distinctive identity, it becomes an institution. This involves the taking on of values; ways of acting and believing that are deemed important for their own sake.' The personal engagement of the President in founding BIMER was crucially influential on both parties, for the submitters and the institutions they make submissions. As Scott (1987) asserted, much more attention was given to one social structure compared to the others, and thus what is valued becomes what should be valued.

From a TCT perspective, the Turkish Prime Ministry mainly dealt with coordination costs rather than production (public provision) costs. Following Sarkar et al. (1995), we argue that the introduction of an e-petitioning system has reinforced the existing power structure as two-fold:

- (a) It first reduced the number of transactions, since it collected all the submissions from all external stakeholders including citizens, then collected them in one center and directed the aggregated inputs to the relevant government agencies. After all, it collected the responses from the government agencies and returned them to the submitters, which in return increased the total number of transactions. It also yields a new role played by the central government as an intermediary under the supervision role played by the Prime Ministry.
- (b) By standardizing the intercommunication patterns, BIMER helped to reduce the transaction costs among government agencies that would otherwise communicate with each other and with the central government through traditional channels, which would take more time and extra human effort to work as efficiently and smoothly as it does following the introduction of ICTs (see Figure 6). Thus, it is plausible to argue that the introduction of ICTs, though the relative reduction in transaction numbers, resulted in reinforcing the power of the central government contrary to an expectation that it would reduce transaction costs.

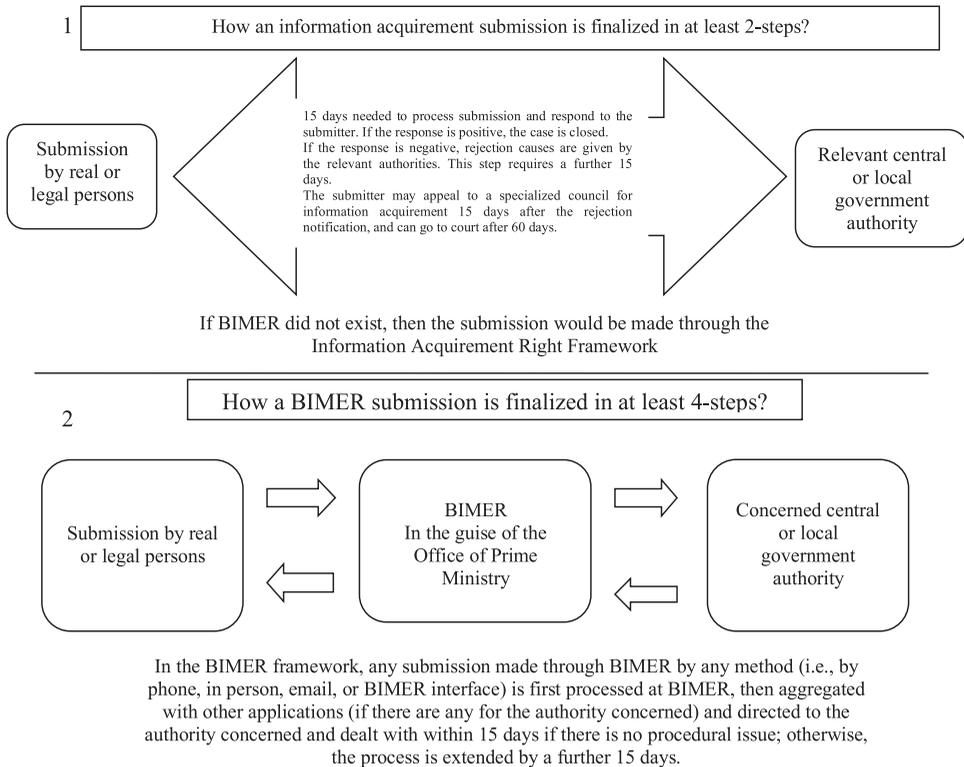
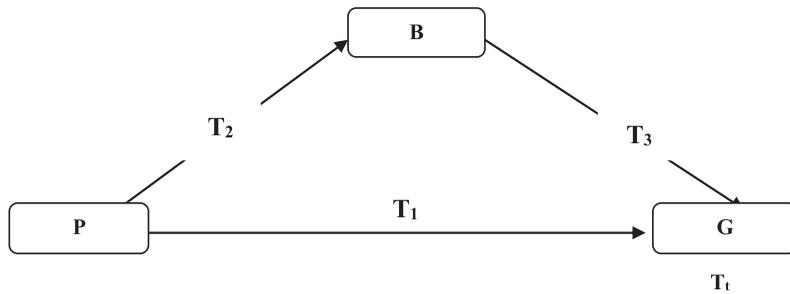


Figure 6. Transaction costs associated with the e-petitioning process through BIMER.

BIMER was a kind of electronic intermediary between the central government and decentralized governments and between the citizens and all government agencies. BIMER collected all the input from external actors, rather than government agencies and forwarded them to the relevant government agency as an aggregated entity. This increased the transaction costs because an additional institute was introduced mediating between all transactions and adding to the production costs, as additional activities concerning the reading and distribution of requests were introduced. Having such a middleman could help to reduce the uncertainty of having no response. Without BIMER, there would likely be a decrease in the number of transactions between citizens and government, as shown in Figure 7.

Transaction costs differ in the scenarios with and without BIMER. In Scenario 1, where B does not act as an intermediary, there is a 2-way interaction (but a single transaction as T1) between citizens and governments that could either produce the desired results for the citizens or be concluded with a rejection of the citizens' demands. Note that either the acceptance or the rejection of the citizens' demands has no effect on the power relationship between the central government and local governments. However, in Scenario 2, where BIMER acted as an intermediary between citizens and government institutions, we see two 2-way interactions (T2 and T3) that could also produce what is sought from the government institutions by the OPM. This is because BIMER intermediated and could influence the direction. Both the rejection and acceptance could increase the power on the OPM's side, irrespective of the government level concerned. While T1 is equal to Tt in Scenario 1, Tt is composed of T2 + T3 in Scenario 2, amplifying the total transaction costs in Scenario 2 where Tt stands for total transactions. Despite the potential to have lower transaction costs, the alternative with potentially higher transaction costs is chosen due to the increasing role of OPM with BIMER.



Possible transactions among people, BIMER, and the public administration as an entity, composed of central and local governments, where  $P$  = people (real or legal),  $B$  = BIMER at the Prime Ministry as an intermediary,  $G$  = central and local governments, and  $T_1$ ,  $T_2$ , and  $T_3$  = transaction costs, and  $T_t$  = total transactions.

**Figure 7.** BIMER and transaction costs. Possible transactions among people, BIMER, and the public administration as an entity, composed of central and local governments, where  $P$  = people (real or legal),  $B$  = BIMER at the Prime Ministry as an intermediary,  $G$  = central and local governments, and  $T_1$ ,  $T_2$ , and  $T_3$  = transaction costs, and  $T_t$  = total transactions.

BIMER fundamentally changed the inner functioning of public administration. Public administration in Turkey is an indivisible entity whose integrity is ensured through the constitutional principles of hierarchy and tutelage. The central government supervises its agencies through the hierarchy principle. The same integrity is assured by the principle of tutelage over local governments. In the tutelary relationship, the central administration does not give direct orders to local governments but supervises their actions in terms of their appropriateness with regard to legality. In other words, the central government is not in a position to inspect the expediency of local decisions and actions except for the legal appropriateness, as ordered by the tutelage principle.

Local governments might not dare to speak up, as an important part of local governments' budgets comprises direct transfers derived from tax liras collected by the central government. The central government may interfere with the allocation of tax collected when transfers to local governments are at stake. Consequently, it seems unreasonable not to obey the central government, even if mayors affiliated with the party in opposition-run the local governments. In addition to this, as BIMER was enforced by the relevant PMC under the guise of OPM, all local governments were supposed to obey this regulation irrespective of party affiliation.

There is a mutual interaction between citizen submissions and intergovernmental relations. In the first relation of this interaction, citizens were expected to make submissions to public administration. Ensuring the validity and success of the submission process, the central government urged all level of governments to take care of submissions directed to them as a mediator. Yet the central government played an extra role that passed beyond traditional mediation since citizens took for granted the central government as their guardians for their submissions, even including the submissions that only could be handled by local governments. The guardianship played by informal channels imposed by the central government took the attractions of citizens and ensured the increasing rate of submissions. Yet the central government used citizens' gratitude as an increasing factor of its control over local governments. This inter-institutional influence is of crucial importance because it has an impact on whether and how citizens submit their input to administration, yielding repercussions on social and administrative developments in return. As a result of these interactions, it has to be asserted that there emerged new institutional structures enabling developments, or improvements in societal life.

The main limitation of this analysis is the lack of data to be provided by BIMER that would enable us to make a strong quantitative analysis to support our arguments further. After many attempts including personal communication with BIMER's head of the department, we could not reach the data about the submissions due to privacy and security concerns. Therefore, it could be argued

that the qualitative rigor of the case study could be enhanced further if the data could be opened. After all, we repeat that the methodology of this paper builds itself on secondary sources and document analysis rather than a quantitative analysis based on original data about the submissions.

## Conclusion

Research on e-petitioning often focuses on facilitating technological infrastructures and the effect on participation, whereas scant attention is paid to the impact of such petitioning on public administration systems. The BIMER case was an example of an unexpected way in which e-petitioning changed the functioning of the overall public administration system. The BIMER system reinforced the political power structure by changing the local–central public administration relationships. Although it was launched as a means to gather citizens' opinions, BIMER actually allowed the central government to exert additional control over local governments.

The BIMER case showed that although e-petitioning was introduced as a technology-driven project, changes in the public administration system occurred that might not have been envisaged in advance. TCT shows that the use of ICTs lowers coordination costs, but that the chosen arrangements are likely to have higher transaction costs than a decentralized arrangement. Although technology lowers transaction costs which in turn enable new ways of e-governance, transaction costs are not the dominating reason for selecting the new alternatives that have become available. Institutional theory revealed that social and political powers were the decisive factors. ICT is used as an enabler for change, whereas the changes in structure reinforce political power. The e-petitioning initially served the interests of both local governments and the central government. However, the relationship between the central and the local level was influenced, whereby the central level gained more control over the local level. BIMER was a pragmatist and accelerated case that is driven by executive forces, without a change in legislation. After its incorporation into the CIMER system following a constitutional change in 2017 and its realization in 2018, the expectation is that e-petition is even more used to empower the central government. This type of impact is given scant attention in the literature but might become more important with the development of new technologies and changing power relationships.

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