

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN ROMANIA. PRELIMINARY RESEARCH RESULTS

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Abstract

This paper presents the preliminary results of a complex research conducted to identify relevant issues concerning the quality of management and governance in Romanian public administration, in terms of understanding and applying the principles of modern management, reform and change needed to occur in the management of these institutions and respect with the criteria and requirements of a modern administration efficient and honest in relation to final beneficiaries, i.e. local communities, and society as a whole. Based on a survey conducted among 38 representatives of local public administrations (mainly mayors) in North-Western Romania, we have investigated their opinion on the strengths and weaknesses of local public administration, and then compared them with the results of previous researches on the same topic, to reveal some evolutions and developments that may have been registered in the last decades in Romania. Preliminary conclusions show that among main strengths are considered flexibility and promptitude, while main weaknesses come from financial and bureaucratic constraints.

Key words: local administration, Romania, survey results

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Introduction

In this paper we present preliminary research results of a complex investigation aiming at revealing issues concerning the public administration, understanding and implementation of modern management principles, and changes required to occur in the management of public institutions. The main aim is to enrich the review of theoretical approaches and to outline several proposals for solutions and policies to improve the governance of public institutions, especially of local government bodies. The paper is organized as follows: after presenting some general considerations regarding local government performance, we focus on the description of the specific administrative

units which underwent our analysis. In the second part, we describe local government by highlighting its strengths and weaknesses, and the main findings and discussion. Finally, we present the conclusions, and the main limitations and further studies.

1. A brief review of the literature related to the performance in public administration

Performance assessment in public administration is a wide-used concept but also a subject of disputes and ambiguity, not only among practitioners, but also in academia and politics. The performance of (local) government has become a key concept in New Public Management (Brown & Repucci, 2009), (Bačlija, 2012), even if in this framework neither much light was not shed on the topics nor it raised unanimous appraisals (Boyne & Walker, 2010), (Farazmand 2012, p. 497). Most often the assessment of public administration is done either by reference to the expected result following measures to reform public administration (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004), or by reference to benchmark levels in terms of efficiency, effectiveness or resources (Berman, 2006) or as a link between "the organizational capacity (inputs) of public institution to performance (outputs) as a connection between organizational resources, management system characteristics and policy results" (Profiroiu, Țapardel, & Mihăescu (Demeter), 2013, p. 186).

As public administration clusters several bodies of the executive power which are directly subordinated to political power (Bossaert, Demmke, Nomden & Polet, 2001), it is clear that the achievement of administration goals relies on both the capabilities and resources available (Berman, 2006) (Hou & Moynihan, 2008), (Brezovnik & Oplotnik, 2012), the localization (Preston, 2009), regulation, management and organizations, considered as internal determinants, but also on external factors. Among the latter, there are highlighted the local and central political factors (electoral cycle, political alliances in shaping the centre of political power) and socio-economic determinants (national or international context and commitments, crises, legislation). The pressures put on public administration are considerable: accountability and commitment for results, adaptation to change, competition and stakeholder's interests (Boyne & Walker, 2010, p. 191). As institutions, the public administration bodies operate in a complex, shifting environment and not necessarily for the better. The internal and external influences and bias they face, changes at the level of legislation or

government policy are all not incentives for shaping some long-term plans or for ensuring the cohesion and performance of employees and management teams in public institutions. In this regard, the public managers have the responsibility to lay the basis of their strategic plans on management performance "by shifting from strategic planning to strategic management, moving from performance measurement to performance management" (Profiroiu, Țapardel, & Mihăescu (Demeter), 2013).

2. Research insights

In order to fulfil the research aim, we drew the sample by using a two stage sampling technique. In the first phase we inventoried all local government institutions and bodies in the two counties (i.e. Bihor and Sălaj) in North-Western Romania. The choice was based, in particular, on the accessibility and availability of respondents in the two counties to fill in the questionnaires we had sent previously. In the second phase we applied the questionnaire during February - May 2014. We received a total of 49 questionnaires filled in by local public administration managers from 38 municipalities, as follows: 37 mayors, 6 mayoralty secretaries, 4 chief economists / chief accountants and 2 heads of budget and local taxes units. In terms of geographical area, the settlements surveyed are located in the North-West Development Region of Romania, namely 24 settlements in Bihor county: 4 cities and 20 municipalities and, respectively 14 settlements in Sălaj county: 2 cities and 12 municipalities. In terms of population, the surveyed settlements cover 23.17% of the total of the two counties.

The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part contains a total of 13 questions regarding the respondent data, the type, size and the peculiarities of public institutions included in the study, the public services provided, infrastructure and possibly the provisioning of new online public services. The second part of the questionnaire relates to the implementation of the principles of public management and modernization of local administration institutions of which, for this paper, we selected two questions concerning the weaknesses and strengths of the local governments from the point of view of representatives and managers of these institutions and bodies.

Respondents were asked to indicate the number of operational companies/businesses located in their communities (Table 1), in order to assess the economic potential of their settlement and the how the size and diversity of public services offered (or planned) takes into account the specific needs of the local economy sector. We

found that with a few notable exceptions, most settlements have few businesses able to diversify rural businesses, to create opportunities for local people and to generate revenues to the local budget.

Tab. 1: The distribution of localities included in the survey, by main features

Area and size of the settlement	Number of options
a. Commune /village (up to 5,000 inhabitants)	29
b. Commune /village (5,000 - 10,000 inhabitants)	3
b. Small town (up to 30,000 inhabitants)	5
c. Municipality (over 30,000 inhabitants)	1
Number of active companies based in that community	
Up to 10	4
10-50	14
51-200	7
Over 200	4
Non-response	9
Number of PCs / employee	
Under 25%	5
25-49%	14
50-90%	15
Over 90%	4
What is the percentage of them having needs tailored based configuration?	
Under 50%	9
51-85%	11
Over 86%	17
Non-answer	1

Source: answers to questionnaires

Regarding the ICT equipment (i.e. no. of computers per employee), 19 institutions (half of the total) presented a computer coverage ratio (per employee) below 50%. In terms of technical capabilities, the situation is considered as satisfactory: 74% of the representatives of territorial administrative units consider that most computers used have a configuration adapted to their needs, and 44% of them consider that almost all computers they are equipped with meet all their needs (Table 1). Over 75% of them

have a working Internet connection. In about 13% administrative units, no more than a quarter of the computers used have a configuration adapted to the needs, this fact not only questioning the plans to introduce new on-line services, but even running the business as usual. In these circumstances it is not surprising that some municipalities' representatives do not even raise the question of introducing new services, especially online. Thus, to the question: *What kind of new services / facilities are you planning to develop in the next 12 months?* 40% of all questionnaires submitted did not record any response. This may mean either that those institutions already have a modern and comprehensive portfolio of services (unlikely) or indifference, lack of skills or availability to the modernization prerequisites. Affirmative answers are considering developing online services, databases, fiscal obligations, on-line payments, followed by community services, agricultural registers.

In the second part of the questionnaire we asked the respondents (managers) to mention the main strengths or weaknesses when it is about characterizing the public institution they manage. Thus we tried to find out whether respondents invoke external conditionality in the modernization of their activity or they just ignore the requirements of modern administrative activities.

Question 1: *Please mention the strengths of the local public administration, including the institution you work in*, led to a number of alternative responses, with the notice that respondents were allowed to give more than one answer and even they could add their own assessments (Table 2).

Tab. 2: Distribution of answers on the strengths of local administration institutions

Strengths of local administration institutions	Number of options
Focus on quality	22
Promoting decentralization	12
Modern profile, adapted to EU requirements	14
Flexibility and promptness	34
Other	-
No answer	-
Total	82

Note: As this is a multiple-choice question, the total of replies may exceed the total number of respondents (49) or the settlements they represent (38).

Source: answers to questionnaires

The large majority of respondents chose two or three characteristics (i.e. an average of 2.15) and, rarely, only one or all four. We note that out of a total number of 82 options, the most common strength of the local public administration most frequently cited is the *flexibility and promptness* - with 34 options, followed at some distance by *focus on quality* (22 choices). Next in ranking is the *modern profile, adapted to EU requirements* and *promoting decentralization* (with 14, and 12 choices, respectively). In other words, the administrative-territorial units are (from the perspective of elected officials / representatives), without exception, focused on flexibility and promptness, in a largely manner oriented towards quality but also modern, EU tailored and quite interested in decentralization (!). All the above were stated despite of the fact that, at the beginning of the analysis, we showed the mismatch between the staff supply and demand, and the inadequate facilities or a reserved interest to the development of new on-line services. This means that modernization could be a dream rather than a reality, or that local representatives do not see a link between the human and material resources, and the quality of public benefits. On the other hand, we should consider the context of the interview, respondents' profile and response options. First, the question was addressed to representatives of those settlements (mostly mayors) and promoting his/her good public image and of his/her locality is an (informal) part of the "job description", and a prerequisite for keeping him/herself active in the local political and administrative life. Secondly, the fact that we used a scale with predefined answer categories, all in an obvious optimistic note, guided somehow the choice.

The second question in this section dedicated to the general aspects related to the implementation of the principles of public management and modernization of local government institutions addresses the weaknesses of institutions analysed. The question provided both alternative answers and the possibility for the respondent of adding his/her own assessment. Distribution of answers to this question (Table 3) has a profile significantly different to the previous question (Table 2). Thus, the majority of responses focused on the lack of financial resources (i.e. 27 choices) followed by insufficient human resources (i.e. 21 choices) shaped most often as the impossibility of hiring them. Together, these two choices comprise over 70% of all options. It is a cluster of options marked by realism which is known by both the managers and employees of local public institutions, but also by the beneficiaries i.e. the local community members. This cluster of options contrasts with the optimism and positive statements from previous question (i.e. on strengths). How do they do, however, the

representatives of these public institutions to provide highly "promptly", "flexible", "focused on quality" services given the precarious material and human resources placed at their disposal? Our second observation concerns to extremely low adherence to the possible incidence of some negative aspects in the public institutions the respondents manage such as *tolerating and even promoting corruption* (one choice), *favouritism* (zero options), *political clientelism* (one choice) *interference from outside* (3 choices). Perhaps due to prudence or practical spirit, local government's representatives preferred not openly admit these problems exist but rather they try to keep them under control.

Tab. 3: Distribution of the weaknesses in local public administration institutions

Weaknesses of local public administration institutions	Number of options
Tolerating and even promoting corruption	1
Favouritism	0
Political clientelism	1
Interference from outside	3
Financial constraints	27
Impossibility of hiring competent people	21
Other:	3
- excessive centralisation	1
- impossibility of recruiting on vacancies	1
- granting performance based incentives for staff	1
Not the case, no problems, no answer	5
Total	61

Note: As this is a multiple-choice question, the total of replies may exceed the total number of respondents (49) or the settlements they represent (38).

Source: answers to questionnaires

However, phenomena such as tolerating corruption, favouritism, clientelism and outside political interference are not some accidental situations in Romanian public institutions. This statement is confirmed by numerous research studies and reports over the past 10-15 years. Perception that bribery and relationships are, in most cases, the easiest ways to obtain public services is shared by 80% of respondents in Romania, Bulgaria, Spain, Poland and Latvia, and this perception is wider spread only in Greece (93%), Cyprus, Slovakia and Croatia (92%) (EC, 2014). According to World Bank (2016), the importance of "petty corruption" expressed in Bribes indicator (% of firms gave gifts to public officials "to get things done") recorded a percentage of 22.20%.

In 2010, 70% of mayors answered “yes”, 20% answered “no”, and the rest did not respond to the question "Do you consider corruption a real problem of public administration in Romania?", and about 56-58% of Romanian citizens believed that local public institutions are subject to corruption, while the government and central institutions were affected in an even greater extent of about 80% (Badea & Copoeru 2010). Thus we find an interesting similarity between the perception of local representatives on the performance and image of local government and the citizens' perception on petty corruption in public institutions. According to Hosu et al (2012), petty corruption seems not to affect the functioning of these institutions and does not have negative valences. For a citizen (and probably for a public manager too) it appears as "the way in which we fix the everyday problems more quickly and perhaps safer, and in doing so we can give support to the *good* public servant of local institutions" (Hosu, Deac & Moşoreanu 2012, p. 80). The data should not surprise: 71-73% of the people surveyed stated they were *very satisfied and quite satisfied* with the *Honesty, Kindness*, and the *Competence* of local administration public servants (Hosu, Deac, & Moşoreanu 2012, p. 83). Under these circumstances, we are reluctant to exclude corruption among the weaknesses of local institutions. We can explain this either by the excessive prudence of respondents or by the failure of the question construction in such a delicate matter as the corruption in public institutions. Finally, among the responses analysed we identify some elements raised by respondents themselves i.e. *excessive centralisation, impossibility of recruiting on vacancies*, and *granting performance based incentives for staff* (an option for each), but also answers such as – *no problems* or *non-response* (5 options). Given that local administration units are facing lots of challenges, the option "no problem/non-response" may reveal either that question was ignored or that there is a lack of knowledge of the locality problems. Therefore we may raise the issue of the respondent' mismatch with the public positions hold and the locality they represent.

Conclusions

This paper presents some aspects in terms of the perception of mayors and local government representatives on the strengths or weaknesses of the local public administration. Thus, the flexibility and promptness in serving citizens, focus on quality, modernizing public administration as well as decentralization are considered as strengths of public administration. At the same time, amongst weaknesses there are

listed rather external restrictions or difficulties, such as lack of financial and human resources, and the lack of possibility of recruiting new staff. It is also worth mentioning the absence of any remark on the real problems the local government are facing with, such as increased tolerance to petty corruption, favouritism and political clientelism. There is no doubt one have a biased, triumphant picture, lacking an objective and critical view on the realities of the system. However, these results give us a view from inside on how the system is working and how the representatives of the system "perceive" themselves as such. Moreover the research we have undertaken goes much more in depth and in a future papers we will present an in-depth analysis on the issues of the local government in Romania. This is all the more important as the economic, social, business environment development projects, etc. cannot be made operational without a flexible, transparent and professional public administration system.

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