

# CITIZENS' PERCEPTION ABOUT PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORMS IN ROMANIA

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## Abstract

The present paper tries to assess the public administration reforms based on the opinions of the citizens – the ones supposed to be the beneficiaries of these measures. The paper has two main parts, the first one being a theoretical description of the factors and causes that influence reform processes, with a special emphasis on the feed-back impact generated by the perception of the results of the reform and the second one being a presentation of empirical data concerning the Romanian citizens' perceptions about the reform in the public sector.

Data comes from a national survey done by the Public Administration Department in December 2007. The main findings show us that citizens agree with the need for reforms but the results are not those expected. In their opinion the reform had lost its initial goal, that of improving the functioning of PA in order to provide better services for citizens.



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*Transylvanian Review  
of Administrative Sciences,  
24E/2008 pp. 111-122*

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## 1. Theoretical considerations

The reform process can be analyzed from many perspectives, all of which can be grouped in two major approaches: one that focuses on the internal workings of the reform (its trajectory, its pace, the instruments used, the goals, the objectives set at the beginning, the resources used, the organizations involved, etc.) and one that focuses upon the way in which the reform is perceived (by the public at large, by the actors involved in the reform itself, by its creators, etc.). This paper will take the second approach, focusing mainly upon the citizens' perception of the reform process in Romania.

This paper begins with a brief description of the factors and causes of any reform in the public sector, then continues with presenting two models that facilitate the understanding of the importance of perception for a reform process and help structure the analysis of the way in which the public views the reform in the public sector and ends with the presentation of empirical data provided by a research that focused on the perception of the Romanian public of the reform of the public sector.

The reform process has different causes and takes place in different circumstances, varying from state to state. Some of the influencing factors are:

1. The lack of trust of the citizenry in the public administration system. It is encountered in USA and many of the Western European countries where an increasingly pronounced drop in the level of trust of the citizens toward the governmental institution is manifesting. Consequently, a severe anti-bureaucratic rhetoric developed as well as numerous critiques regarding the size of the governmental apparatus and the level of state-involvement into several aspects of the social and economic life.
2. Ideology. There is an important ideological dimension of the reform process in many of the Western countries as proved by the election of conservative leaders like Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan or Brian Mulroney.
3. Democratization. In Eastern Europe, the fall of communism generated a profound political reform accompanied by a complex public administration reform.
4. Integration into the European Union. The original reforms in ex-communist countries were followed by a second wave of reforms required by the very process of integration into EU. This process is also true for several countries that were already members of the EU and had to adhere to its rules and regulations, thus they had to implement reforms in their own public administrative systems.
5. Development. In the less-developed countries, economic growth was and still is the main priority. Under the influence of financial institutions such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (which consider reforms in various fields a necessary requirement for development) new and innovative ideas spread into the countries that were their clients.
6. Economic crises. The often inadequate response of many countries to crisis situations generates (sometimes unintentionally) reforms. As examples we can mention the less than successful attempts of the Western countries to manage the crisis from the 70's, the numerous crises faced by countries from Latin America in the 90's and the economic debacle encountered in Eastern Europe after the fall of the communist regimes.

One can notice that there are many causes and combinations of factors that trigger any reform process, causes and factors that are both internal and external (financial institutions, EU, etc.) and that the public opinion and the political authorities begun to doubt the public administrative system's capability to administer and manage the crises of the past or the challenges of the future.

After discussing the causes that generates and the factors that influence any reform, the next step in our presentation is to analyze the contents and the dimensions of the reform processes.

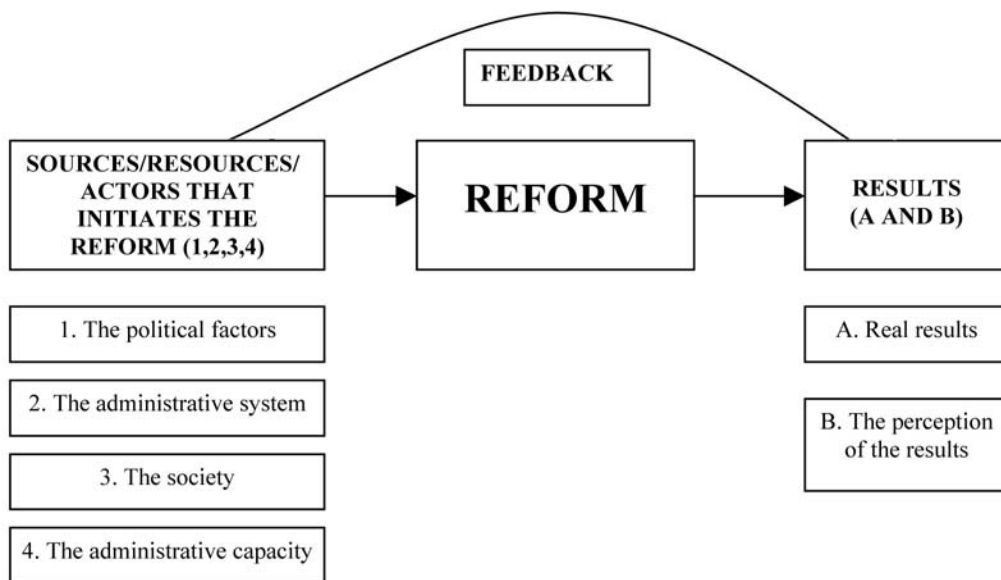
Generally speaking, reforms have six dimensions (Kettl, 2000, p.1-3):

- Productivity: How can we offer more services with the same amount of money?
- Market-related mechanisms: How can we import processes and structures specific for the private sector into the public sector? Several answers were offered here, among them privatization of the public services, sub-contracting of various public services, public-private partnerships.
- A client-oriented approach: How we can improve the connection and cooperation between the citizens and the public institutions? One possible answer is to change the way in which the citizens are perceived by the public administration: to see them as clients instead of objects-to-be-administered<sup>1</sup>.
- De-centralization: How can we increase the level of efficiency and accountability in the public sector? Several strategies were employed, all of them following the same principle: the transfer of the decision-making service-providing levels closer to the clients.
- Policies: How can we improve the design and evaluation of public policies?
- Responsibility: How can we improve the capability to deliver what was promised? The main change in this area is the shift from being accountable toward the law or superior hierarchical levels to being accountable toward the citizens and placing emphasis on results.

Until 1999, 40% from the first 123 biggest countries in the world underwent through at least one major reforming process, another 15% through sectorial reforms (Kamarck, 2000). Meanwhile, these figures increased. As Kettle said: "Maybe never before so many governments attempted to change so much, so quickly and in so similar manner" (Kettl, 2005, p. 60).

The results are still in the coming. In many cases the reform processes had a reverse effect – reducing the level of trust in the government (example: New Zealand, according to OECD, 2001) or are way below the expected level (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000).

Following this brief presentation of the factors that influence any reform process of the public sector we now propose a model that can bring together the various points of view in a simple and (hopefully) comprehensible and easy to use model. The purpose of this model is to offer a general view of the inner workings of a reform process and, in the same time, bring into full view the fact that reform strategies are influenced by various exogenous factors, throughout all their unfolding.



**Figure 1:** Factors that generate and influence the reform process

The figure requires a few explanations. The sources, actors and resources are:

1. The political factors (both executive and legislative): the political will that defines the philosophy, goal, direction, rhythm and the means employed in the implementation of the reform.
2. The administrative system: its contribution in terms of ideas, techniques, information, instruments that contribute to the implementation of the reform.
3. Society: the set of needs, wants and expectations that shape the political choices and the administrative interventions.
4. The administrative capacity: the level of training, skills and knowledge of the human resource involved in the reform process; the type of organizations (their organizational characteristics) and their ability to cope with change.

One more clarification: the reform process implements the intentions of the political factors, which are facilitated by the administrative system, wanted by the society and conditioned by the level of administrative capacity of the public sector.

The results are two folded: A. real results anticipated or not, intended or not and B. the perception of the results in the eyes of the political and administrative bodies and in the eyes of the society.

The goal of this model is to emphasis two things: first, the fact that results, once achieved (intentionally or not) influence and modify the attitude and activities of the four initial factors, making them to redefine their positions. Thus, the reform process changes underway. Sometimes, the changes are so numerous that the reform process undergoes a systemic change, resulting in a new reform format or a new trajectory. Other times, specific changes generated by this feedback mechanism are so important that generates a systemic change by themselves, creating again a new type of reform. Either by quantitative accumulation or through qualitative leaps, the “trajectory” of the

reform changes, with everything that this entails: values, priorities, modes of action, specific goals and objectives, etc. Second, we wanted to underlie the importance of perception when we are talking about reform. The way in which various reform processes and actions are perceived by the political forces, by the public opinion and last but not least by the people whose job is to implement the reform, influence drastically the future shape of the reform process.

The present paper is concerned mainly with this latter aspect: how citizens perceive the reform efforts implemented in Romania and to attempt and to explain of why do they see the reform in this way. In order to facilitate the analysis we employed the same seven-dimension model used in a previous article (Şandor and Tripon, 2008). The seven characteristics are as follows:

1. Financial de-centralization;
2. Managerial/administrative de-centralization;
3. Legislative improvement;
4. Human resources development;
5. Customer relations;
6. Co-operation with the community;
7. Organizational culture.

## **2. Methodological aspects**

This article is based on a research done within the framework of the National Research Programme CEEEX CERES type 1, no 86/1.08.2006.

The survey took place in December, 2007. It was a quantitative research, based on a questionnaire and it was conducted at a national level. The sampling procedure had three stages, along 8 cultural areas grouped by historical provinces, residential environment (urban-rural) and size of localities. The interviews were taken in the homes of the respondents. A number of 809 interviews were done.

Other data included in this paper, concerning the opinions of public servants about public administration reforms, were previously presented in an article (Şandor and Tripon, 2008).

## **3. General views about the reforms**

The first finding of this research is that the Romanian public considers that, after 1989 until the present day, a lot of reformative actions occurred in the public sector: 54% of the subjects consider that, after 1989, many changes happened in the Romanian public administration. This is important information that can explain the rest of the findings: the reform actions were so numerous that they greatly influence the everyday life of the citizenry; therefore they pay a lot of attention to the reform in the public sector and have clear-cut views about it.

**Table 1:** Characteristics of the PA reforms

Question	Citizens	Public Servants
1. The reforms made sense	2.69	3.64
2. The reforms were efficient	2.95	3.28
3. Each new ministry came up with a new reform plan	3.38	3.53
4. The citizens benefited little from reforms	3.77	3.48
5. The reform attempts were too little explained	3.96	3.74
6. The reforms are influenced by the political factor	4.14	4.39
7. The reforms are influenced by the economic factor	3.82	3.52
8. Those in charge of implementing the reforms are not real professionals	3.59	3.44
9. The employees oppose the reform plans	3.40	2.34
10. There are misunderstandings between the government and the local administration	3.79	3.14
11. The reform efforts were not coherent	3.98	3.53
12. The legal framework is too complicated	4.12	4.45
13. The laws are not enforced	4.04	3.29

From comparing the two sets of data we can observe that the biggest difference between the answers given by the citizens and those of the public servants regards the attitude of the latter toward the reform plans (questions 1 and 2). The citizens think that the employees of the public institutions are disrupting the reforms – this could mean either active opposition (not likely to occur) or a behavioral pattern that simply is not consistent with the goals and objectives of the reform strategies. In other words, the public servants are perceived as not doing their jobs properly and thus impeding the implementation of the reforms.

Another significant factor is the high score for statement number 6 – the influence of the political factor. Both the civil servants and the citizens consider that politics represents the main influence over the reform process. This statement is also supported by the scores registered at question “in your opinion the reforms in public administration occurred at the request of: EU, Citizens, political parties, lobby groups, mass media”: 52.5% of the citizens consider that reforms in the public sector are influenced by political parties and lobby groups (which are, in Romania, closely associated with political organizations).

Looking at the way in which the citizens and the public servants are considering the efficiency and purpose of the reform efforts we can see that the citizens are much more skeptical (questions 1 and 2). They consider the reform process less efficient and coherent. This is a good indicator of the difference between the perception of those actively involved in the reform process (employees of the public institutions) and the “clients” or “beneficiaries” of the above mentioned process (the citizenry). A closer look at the data shows that the worst scores are for the coherence and sense (or lack thereof) of the reform process. Thus, one can say that reform of the public sector is considered to be mildly effective (the scores are near the theoretical mean of 3.0) but is perceived as being chaotic, unstructured and uncoordinated over longer periods of time. In fact, this observation reflects the reality: every government came up with its own reform plan, its own priorities. The only continuous threads of the reform

process were those imposed by the EU during Romanian's effort of integration. This observation is also consistent with many theoretical models (Ingraham, 1997; Osborne and Gaebler, 1993; Light 1998; Bouckaert and Pollit, 2004) that see the reform process as a systemic change that has different rhythms, different forms and trajectories in accordance with the variance of different characteristics (internal and external) of the social system within which it is taking place.

When analyzing the legal framework of the reforms in the public sector we observe that both the citizens and the public servants consider the legal framework too complicated (4.12 and 4.45 out of 5) and agree that the laws are not enforced properly. In other words, there is too much legislation, too many complicated rules and laws and too little attention given to the implementation of the legal provisions. As expected, the citizens' perception is more negative: 70.2% agree that laws and regulations are not properly implemented, fact that is consistent with their views regarding the roles of the civil servants in the implementation of the reform. The civil servants, on the other hand, are more reserved ("The laws are not enforced" receives a score of 3.29 out of 5) but they basically agree that the legal framework is too complicated and, thus, making the implementation of the reform quite difficult. The civil servants' attitude is easily explained: they are, after all, some of the persons that are responsible for the implementation of the reform. In this context the score of 3.29 is highly interesting: it can signify the frustration of the civil servants with the unwieldy legal framework, frustration that leads them to even formulate self criticism in an attempt to enforce their negative perception of the legal framework.

#### **4. The reform measures**

##### **4.1. Financial de-centralization**

As a general opinion about the way in which public money is spent, 42.3% totally disagreed that they were efficiently spent, 24.6% somehow disagreed, and 18.2% were neutral; only 14.9% had a better opinion on public spending. This shows a strong feeling about public waste of financial resources and a negative perception concerning the way in which the public institutions administer their funds.

Regarding the financial de-centralization dimension, 49.2% of the subjects agree that the money obtained from local taxes should remain all at the local level, which is under the management of the local institutions. This figure (and the fact that only 21% disagreed) proves that there is wide-spread support for financial de-centralization, statement supported also by the data concerning managerial de-centralization (see next paragraph).

##### **4.2. Managerial/administrative de-centralization**

Overwhelmingly, 69.4% of the subjects consider that as many problems as possible should be administered and managed by the local authorities instead of central authorities (the government). Again, de-centralization has the support of the majority of the population. Nonetheless, when asked if they think that the managers of the public institutions should have greater authority in dealing with and solving

problems and making decisions, 46.4% of the population disagreed. Apparently, this is a contradiction: the citizens want de-centralization but they do not want to give greater powers and responsibility to managers of public institutions. In fact, when we take into consideration the poor view most of the citizens have regarding public servants, this contradiction can be explained: the majority of the people want de-centralization but they do not trust the current senior public servants, thus they do not want them to have greater authority. It is a mechanism similar to the attitude exhibited toward reform: the people agree with the necessity of reform but do not like the way it is implemented or designed, nor do they trust the employees of the public institutions that are responsible with translating the reform procedures into practice.

An interesting fact is the attitude toward the issue of regionalization and the concept of “regions”. Although de-centralization is perceived as desirable and altogether good, 66% of the subjects disagree with the statement “as many problems as possible should be solved at a regional level”. This is another apparent contradiction. In fact, this situation is due to the misunderstanding of the “region” concept and of the regionalization process. “Regions” are perceived as vague notions, another layer of bureaucracy between the local and the central government. This misinterpretation owes a lot to the poor information efforts from public institutions about these issues. Local level of government, central institutions – these notions are clear and well understood. After all, they exist right now and everybody knows (more or less...) what they are doing (or supposed to do...). But regions and regional institutions (which are implemented in Romania only at the request of the EU and only for development purposes); they are vague and unfamiliar, with unspecified attributes and responsibilities, thus not to be trusted.

### **4.3. Legislative improvement**

A clear indicator of this dimension is represented by the opinion of the public about the amount of paperwork necessary for any action of public institutions: 51.5% think that there are too many papers requested by the public institutions. This finding is consistent with what we discovered about the population’s opinion about the legal framework: that is too complicated and ungainly.

Concerning the dimension “legislative improvement” we noticed that the population considers that the prefect is influenced by the party from which he/she was a member of before taking the actual position (51.9% of the subjects take this view), although, as the head of the prefecture, he/she is supposed to be politically neutral since 2004, a step seen at that time as a major measure in building a professional high civil servants corps. This perception is consistent with the opinion (analyzed earlier in this article) about the fact that the political factor represents the most important influence concerning the evolution of the reform process. The involvement of politics is considered to be very strong and present at all levels.

### **4.4. Human resources development**

Citizens are in a great measure skeptical about the quality of the public servants. 32.7% agreed that “there are too many persons employed in public institutions”, while

37.6% disagreed. The figures may look as approving the size of the government, but we should observe that in Romania fighting against big government is not on the agenda of any significant group or party.

Payment, an issue on which public servants usually do complain, is seen as being quite fair, 45.2% agreed that “public servants are well paid” while 32.9% disagreed.

The level of corruption was considered to be diminishing by the public servants. Citizens feel differently, only 8.3% disagree with the fact that “most public servants are corrupt”, 14.8% neither agree, nor disagree, while an overwhelming 76.9% agreed with the statement (50.9% strongly agree). This is showing a bleak perspective on public administration, in which corruption is widespread up to the level in which it is hard to find an honest public servant. This type of perception situates Romania at the top of “the most corrupt public administration system in the EU” ranking. Transparency International computed for 2007 in the case of Romania a Perceived Corruption Index of 3.7 (10 meaning no corruption) – the worse for a member of EU. The average for EU is 6.51.

This opinion is also consistent with those expressed above about the negative role of the public servants in the implementation process of the reform.

#### 4.5. Customer relations

This is a dimension for which we addressed the most questions

**Table 2:** Customer relations

No	Statement	Mean
1.	Your problems were solved in a satisfactory way	2.96
2.	Public servants are courteous	2.00
3.	Public institutions provide all the necessary information	2.29
4.	The service delivery is prompt	2.32
5.	You were treated in the same way as other citizens	2.93
6.	The time spent in line is short	2.88
7.	We can rely on what public servants are saying	3.29
8.	The working hours of public institutions is convenient	3.00

These data are clearly showing poor customer relations. We can moderately rely on what public servants are telling us, the working hours are acceptable, we do not spend that much time sitting in line in front of a public servants’ desks. There are a significant number of people feeling that they were not treated in the same way as other citizens (41.9%) – an indicator of possible discriminations based on social status. The service is slow, public institutions seldom offer all the necessary information, which in the case of complicated procedures may harm the chances to see citizens’ problems solved in time. Courtesy seems to be lacking in the case of Romanian public servants.

In these conditions it seems surprising that 38.4% agreed that their problems were solved in a satisfactory way. It is quite clear that dealing with administrative problems is not a pleasant experience for the huge majority of Romanian citizens – an issue in which the current reform measures are far from improving the situation.

The answers of public servants showed a moderate orientation towards the customer – maybe more at a declarative level, and definitely, this is not felt by the citizens.

#### **4.6 Co-operation with the community**

In the eyes of public servants, the community plays a reduced role in the functioning of public institutions. Citizens feel the same. Active participation is hindered by the perception that “ordinary citizens do not have a saying in the problems that directly affects them” – 51.7% agreed, 24.0% neither agreed nor disagreed, only 24.3% disagreed. Based on this data we can state that both the involvement of the community in the works of public institutions and the involvement of the community by the public institutions are low.

#### **4.7. Organizational culture**

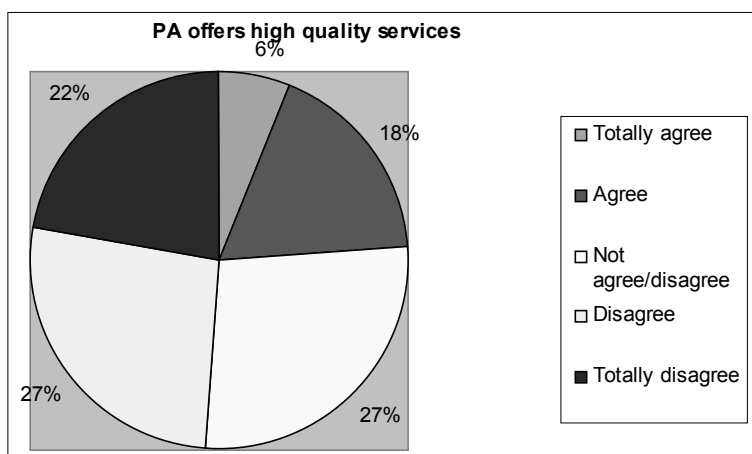
The public servants offered an image of an organizational culture based on following rules and procedures, oriented towards task completion based on clear objectives, in which a smooth activity is all that matters – typical for public institutions, but also portraying the image of a dynamic and competitive place which accommodates change easily and in which people support each other and (in a moderate fashion) are willing to take chances. It was almost too good to be true.

Citizens, while not asked about the inner dealings of public institutions, offered us a perspective from the outside. In their opinion, public institutions are not transparent (63.7% agreed with that image), are organizations in which politicians have a strong influence (65.9% agreement), and for solving your problems you should offer bribes (72.0%). The visual aspect of institutions is good (56.6% considered them to be clean and well taken care of). Another aspect is that citizens agree that “In most cases the errors of public servants are punished” (74.8% agreement). In order to explain this last fact we should take into consideration the larger perception about public institutions: organizations that though perceived as complicated bodies, with not-so-efficient employees and altogether with too much red tape hindering the proceedings, are also perceived as ordered, structures systems. Or, in such systems, one would expect mistakes to be noticed and corrected and those responsible to be punished. However, if this question would have been followed by another one, concerning the severity of the punishment or the positive effect of such measures regarding the efficiency of the institution we think the answers would have taken a different tone.

### **5. Conclusions**

The public servants saw the administrative reform as a needed but very complicated process, with relatively clear and accepted goals. Inside the triangle central authorities-local institutions – citizens/community, the reform was seen to have better results at the local institution level, 56% being satisfied with the way in which their institution is working (Şandor and Tripon, 2008).

On the other hand, the perception of the Romanian public is quite different, as shown in the figure below.



**Figure 2:** The perceived quality of public services

The fact that only 24% agreed that Romanian PA is offering high quality services is consistent with the vast majority of the opinions expressed and analyzed through this paper: the citizens considered that public funds are not well administered, want de-centralizations but do not trust the public servants to have more decision-making power, have a poor opinion about the professional quality of the human resource involved in administration, feel disconnected with the activity of public institutions and consider these organizations as being non-efficient and corrupt.

Citizens agree with the need for reforms but the shape of the past and present reform efforts is unclear and the results are not those expected. In their opinion the reform had lost its initial goal, that of improving the functioning of PA in order to provide better services for citizens. Therefore, if the theoretical model from Figure 1 is an accurate description of the reality of the reform process, the future reform measures should be tailored to take into account the present perceptions of Romanians.

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<sup>1</sup> The same thing was done in social work in the 80's: changing the way the subjects of any social work activities were perceived from patients to clients.