

**THE REFORM OF THE HIGHER
EDUCATION PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
PROGRAMS IN THE CONTEXT OF PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION REFORM IN ROMANIA**

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Public administration reform is an issue that was often been mentioned within public debates in Romania since 1989. Unfortunately, a public debate has seldom been represented by a cogent analysis of the reforms undertaken in the field of public administration. Romania, like other European countries, has been strongly influenced by the legalistic approach of the public administration field; the reform has been often equated with passing of new legislation and regulations. Consequently, year-by-year, EU reports on the development of public administration have highlighted implementation issues (the lack of implementation capacity for legislation and public policy being a constant failure discussed in these reports).

The personnel is one of the problems which public administration reform has to deal with. The quality of the human resources is crucial. In many cases, modernization of public administration has been strongly encouraged by the appearance of a new generation of public servants who are results – oriented not procedures/process – oriented, and who have been trained differently. This paper analyzes the role that public administration programs of Romanian universities could play in the administrative reform process.

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The issue of public administration reform is not a new one for professional literature in Romania. Its point of origin stays with the analysis of compatibility, or lack of it, between the concepts of “reform” and “public administration”. Public administration is seen as one of the fields, which are least amenable to a consistent reform effort.

One of the main issues with which Romanian society was confronted after 1989 was the chronic lack of efficiency of administrative structures and institutions. Developed on an excessively centralist, rigid, and inefficient model, the administrative structures represented a major obstacle not only for the public sector itself but also for private entrepreneurs. Every year, monitoring reports, of EU or other international organizations, mentioned administrative capacity issues as a very serious issue for Romania. The topics noted varied from a lack of implementation capacity to corruption. In the 2003 Regular Report on Romania, the European Commission concluded that “...*the reform process is at an early stage. The Romanian civil service remains characterized by cumbersome procedures, limited transparency and a limited capacity for policy execution*” (European Commission, 2003:32)

All political parties in Romania claimed, at least formally and publicly, that public administration reform represents a priority for their policy program. Every government and cabinet announced programs for reform, for acceleration of reform, and of speeding of acceleration of reform. Presuming that the necessary political will existed, one can only wonder where all the problems in the functioning of the Romanian public administration have come from, after more than 10 years since the 1989 Revolution.

The reform of public administration cannot be approached seriously in the absence of a preliminary analysis of the environment where it functions. Political, economic, demographic and cultural conditions influence very strongly the efficiency of the administrative machine. One cannot ask for an efficient functioning of public administration in an environment that lacks a fully functional economy, with an immature political life, or in a society where values and social standards are far from being linked to competition and productivity. In spite of all the above, hardly any of the analysis of administration has been done on the basis of a comprehensive diagnosis.

Many of the politicians of Romania developed their discourse around the idea of “elimination of the bureaucracy”. A very important issue is, however, to what extent Romanian administrative system fulfils basic standards of the Weberian bureaucratic machine. The professionalization of the public function, implementation of a legal-rational model, elimination of political influence, and specialization are just a few of the concepts of “bureaucracy”. Many of the problems that Romanian public administration confronts today, such as instability of the civil service position, politicization, and widespread corruption, are currently ancient history for many Western administrative cultures. Therefore, Romania should make a spectacular leap from a somewhat pre-bureaucratic model to a post-bureaucratic model, characterized by approaches such as New Public Management or reinventing government etc.

Which would, therefore, be the main pressures stimulating the reform of Romanian public administration? They are very diverse and can be positioned at different levels (Pollitt., Bouckaert, 2000, p. 28):

- **Economic pressures** (budgetary pressures, market economy models etc)
- **Political elite pressures** (a political elite which wants, for various reasons, a functional public administration)
- **Social pressures: New expectations from the citizen.** In recent years, in Romania there has been a switch in the focus of the relationship between the citizen and the administration, due to such factors as increased mobility and to the increase in the level of education. Thus, one can note the movement from the previous paternalist/authoritarian model where the expectations of the state were focused on the citizen. In the recent years, the citizen, based upon available

comparisons with other administrative models, is the one manifesting different expectations towards the state and administration.

- **Technological pressures** (for instance, the impact of information technology)
- **Globalization pressures.** 9 out of the first 45 globalized countries are located in Eastern Europe and Romania occupies number 40 (Foreign Policy, 2003, pp. 60-72). The activity of multinational companies, new models of functioning of the society have an increasingly higher impact. The impact of globalization is also stronger due to the fact that the citizens in Eastern Europe, as opposed to the majority of the developing countries, are educated/used to having a job and expect to have social benefits after retirement. (World Bank, 2000, p. 32).

Each of these “classical” pressures is present, to a larger or a smaller extent, in Romania. What is, however, particularly important in the Romanian reform case is the weight of the international factors. In the recent years, the pressures which had the highest impact concerning the starting of concrete reform actions in public administration were those coming on behalf of international organizations, European Union in particular. Beginning with the elaboration of the Law on the Status of the Civil Servant, to the development of reform networks, one can observe a wide range of policies developed and promoted by the Romanian public administration due to international pressure, even though most of the time they comprised obvious policies needed for the development of a functional administrative system. This was due to a large extent to the lack of the strategic vision at the domestic level concerning the reform of public administration. On the other hand, one cannot forget that there are no clear and common criteria for measuring the administrative efficiency for the candidate EU countries. Therefore the issue of “strengthening administrative capacity” is often discussed but prone to wide interpretation.

Political declarations, often well intentioned, were not supported in post 1989 Romania by knowledge and skills needed for a true implementation of the reforms. What can possibly be the reason of this lack of capacity of “operationalization” of the intentions? Romanian public administration suffers from several major deficiencies, which influence in an essential way its functionality. We will try in the next sections of the paper to discuss several of them.

Like other European countries, Romania considered for a long time administrative reform as being exclusively of adopting new rules and regulations. The “Law” was often considered as being the only instrument to promote change in administration, and the lack of concern for the implementation stage of the policy process, not to mention the lack of use of the framework of the policy process in itself, led to a maintaining of rigid structures, prepared in a very small extent to work within the coordinates of efficiency and effectiveness. As Kickert and Stillman noted (1999, p. 257), “For a century, liberal European welfare states could routinely function with lawyers and the state law in charge. These states now find comprehending and responding to the rapidity of numerous transformations can no longer be trusted to lawyers and the law”.

Romania often faces the presence of modern laws and regulations which are hardly ever implemented, are selectively implemented, or with the existence of institutions which look very good on paper, but in practice are totally unable to define their own objectives, not to mention reaching these objectives.

The lack of serious preoccupations at the implementation level led to serious problems concerning managerial capacity in administration. Romanian public administration is not yet able to assume a managerial logic of the reform and to overcome the juridical rationality. The transition from a logic based on a strict following of procedures to a logic based on results is still in evidence.

Managerial deficiencies are visible at different levels:

Lack of strategic planning and strategic management capacities. Romania represents, unfortunately, a very good illustration of the proverb “the best way of not reaching goals is to not

have them". In the best-case scenario, strategic planning is viewed as a purely formal activity, whose only goal is to produce huge documents to be presented, upon request, to various domestic and international organizations. This attitude leads to a total waste of resources and energies not only on very wide, unclearly formulated, fluctuating, divergent objectives, but also to the impossibility of defining priorities.

Serious deficiencies regarding leadership. The image of a successful leader in the field of public administration in Romania is still centered on an image developed around hierarchic authority, privilege of structures, as opposed to personnel needs (Blake and Mouton, 1985), on concentration and guarding the power, as opposed to delegation of responsibilities and subsidiarity. The myths in the field are still concerned with the boss "Jack-of-all-trades", omnipresent and who must control the tiniest details of the organizational life, like all myths, they are far from being real and/or applicable). Leadership can be defined as being a process of influencing the group (Yukl, 1994). Although there are a variety of possibilities to do it in practice, Romanian leader tends to rely heavily on authoritarian approaches and pressure (controls, punishment, threats etc). More than that, the image of the successful leader is often associated with the image of historical characters renowned as authoritarian and/or bloody, and not at all connected with the profile of the modern leader as a participant and flexible character. Another example is connected to the promotion of the "savior" leader, on whom the organization relies, to the disadvantage of the rational functioning on the long term of the structures, once that this leader disappears. The organization has major problems in functioning, because it cannot manage to keep up with initial performances.

Issues related to organizational culture. Although organizational culture represents a strategic reform instrument, the Romanian manager is still far from understanding its value. The lack of a coherent effort to develop organizational culture and of using it in a positive way, and its dominant elements is still connected to obsolete administrative models. Even though at the declaration level the values of Romanian public institutions are connected to professionalism, subordination towards the citizen, efficiency, and transparency, the reality often contradicts these declarations. Often the values and mentalities promoted are opposed to those officially professed. Often the civil servants are requested to display a flexible and coherent behavior towards citizen, behavior that they themselves have hardly ever met in the relationship with their manager and the organization to which they belong. A primary application of an analysis grid for organizational culture (Hofstede, 1993, p.89) showed that in Romanian public institutions there is:

- a) A high degree of acceptance of the inequality of treatment in the field of public sphere;
- b) High values attached towards collective action, as opposed to individual action;
- c) Promoting of "masculine" values. Statistical data available also shows that, even though women comprise a large part of the workforce in the civil service, men usually hold managerial positions
- d) People prefer unstructured situations to the structured ones; therefore they tend to interpret as "flexibly" as possible official rules and regulations.

Communication inside and outside the organization. Excessive use of vertical communication and ignoring of horizontal ones, lack of external communication capacity and of public marketing skills are just a few of the deficiencies in the field.

Human resource management. The valuation of human resource is still far from being acceptable. The Romanian public manager tends to value primarily material resources and to look superficially upon issues related to the quality of human resource. There are obvious problems at all levels, from recruitment and selection of personnel, often done on criteria other than competence, to preparation and training of the civil servant.

Initial background is taken into account to a very little extent and continuous learning is, in the best case, treated superficially. Continuous learning classes are often designed based upon supply/quantity and not on expected results. Therefore, notices and announcements for training often looks like tourism agency catalogues, and, therefore, the impact of the invested money is usually minor.

Lack of capacities for coordination, control and evaluation.

Problems related to impossibility of promoting by the management of serious ethical codes. The problem of corruption is related both to the lack of ethical values and the lack of functioning of formal structures, in which case everybody will try to deal through informal structures.

All these problems are compounded by the problem of the influence of politics upon administration in Romania. Even though this influence does not mean only a negative element (considering the needed control upon bureaucratic machine and representativeness of politicians), its negative effects are known and visible. One can observe here the personnel selection based upon political criteria, massive changes in the civil service body, continuous changes of objectives and policies etc. The theory of “de-politicization” must be supported by a mentality of “professionalization” of the civil service body, which is an essential condition for administrative reform.

All these problems belong to the lack of managerial capacity and to the quality of human resources in Romanian public administration. Interestingly enough, nobody seems to have made the connection between these deficiencies and the issue of the preparation of the body of civil servants. Every year thousands of civil servants graduate from public administration programs offered by universities. However, there was never a serious, concrete communication between these programs and the authorities with responsibility in the agencies and institutions the field. There are multiple reasons at the base of this situation and the responsibility is divided. However, the lack of strategic partnership has negative consequences at the level of the functioning of public administration. It is obvious that an administrative reform cannot be designed in the absence of a major evolution in the field of human resources. The reform cannot be implemented by civil servants who do not understand it or who simply reject it. The building of a civil service body able to promote and support reform is a major task, and cannot be designed without involving universities.

In 1989, the schools in public administration were non-existent in Romania. Nowadays there are more than 20 academic programs in the field, both in public and private universities. Below are described the main challenges faced by them:

The development of a distinct identity of schools in public administration. Given that these schools were developed in absence of a tradition in the field, they seemed at the beginning as “annexes” of departments of law, political sciences, economics etc. This fact slowed the development of a personal identity, and made it a very lengthy process.

The promotion of an interdisciplinary model. Initially, higher education in the field of public administration was considered as being only a form of administrative law. The attitude displayed by CNEAA (National Evaluation and Accreditation Counsel) in the 90's was primarily directed that way, and it managed to be overcome only in the second part of the decade. The interdisciplinary approach for public administration is, perhaps, the most important common characteristic in all democratic countries. The diversity of curricula, which can focus on various broad areas, depending upon the specific orientation of the school, is a normal and logical consequence. ASIAP (Romanian Association of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration) defined, in this spirit, the recommendations for development of curricula in light of the Bologna reform.

Relationship between theory and practice. Very often universities are viewed as being unable to overcome a very theoretical general framework. This distinction between theory and practice is very

dangerous, because it fuels a conservatory administrative mentality, based upon the proverb “theory as theory, but implementation kills us”, and leads to a costly ignoring of administrative models and experiences already validated in practice. (Barth, 2002)

Changing the teaching process/educational experiences. Public administration schools in Romanian universities must provide a teaching process/educational experience, which goes beyond mere transmission of information towards developing skills and abilities. Using modern teaching methods, (case studies, simulations, internships etc), is essential in this regard.

Promoting quality standards. In the context of a very active market for the provision of education and training by an important number of providers, the issue of quality standards becomes essential. In the case when universities are unable to promote and respect these quality standards, both in terms of teaching and of research, the impact upon academic and administrative systems can be huge.

Internationalization of programs. Globalization and European integration are two major factors showing that public administration schools must focus on “internationalization”. The lack of this component can be extremely dangerous when they get into competition with Western universities in a very active market. Joint and/or dual degrees with international partners, offering degrees in international languages, and development of distinct sections concerning European integration represent possible solutions.

Involvement in continuous learning programs. Academic programs of public administration, together with other public/private actors have major capacities, both quantitatively and qualitatively, regarding continuous training, and they should seriously and vigorously pursue it. Even though the market in the field is becoming increasingly diverse, the lack of coherent strategies at national levels has led to results with little impact regarding the quality of the civil service body. Although INA is a governmental agency with goals concerning continuous learning, it seems to have major difficulties in defining its strategic objectives. Currently it seem to exist somewhere between an academic institution of PA and of a provider for continuous learning, concerned with the defining of a coherent definition of an area for action, and of promoting an efficient management.

Development of research/consulting activities. The traditional model of discourse and behavior which favors the isolation in the “ivory tower” of the university still offers an attraction for many academics, and for many civil servants and politicians. This model must be replaced with one of involvement in community, in the schools of PA through preparation programs, applied research, debates on public interest issues etc. In addition, it is very important for PA programs to promote research, as well as teaching, which is a very important component of any modern university. Another issue is related to the necessity of developing a strong relationship with the “beneficiaries” of public administration, which allows a better adaptation of the programs to the requirements of the market.

Development of a new type of relationship with the students. Students must become increasingly attentive to the quality of the programs, infrastructure available, extracurricular activities, and relationship with faculty members. Many of them now have the possibility to travel and they make comparisons. Moreover, they represent the image of the program upon graduation, and provide a very active component in terms of positive and negative publicity. The student no longer represents only a “subject” or “object” but also a “client” and “participant”, in the full meaning of the terms.

Program evaluation. Program evaluation represents a very important part in the functioning of the PA programs. Without it, we will never know the true impact of PA institutions upon the various levels, fields and structures of administration that require improvement, nor the actual results of the programs. The evaluation process should not stop at the quantitative level, but should also include a qualitative component.

The development of a modern academic management, based upon efficiency and effectiveness and on a strategic approach to development.

These challenges are directly addressed now to all academic PA programs in Romania. Their capacity to answer them coherently is directly linked to the success, in both the short and long term. However, it is clear:

The responsibility of universities in the reform of public administration is a major one;

Universities can and should become part of a national network for reform, together with other interested actors, both public and private;

If Romanian authorities and academic PA programs understand this, the results can be spectacular.

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