

# YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU! FOR A NEW POLICY OF PUBLIC SERVICE ATTRACTIVENESS TARGETING OUR NEXT GENERATIONS

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## Abstract

The neo-liberal era and its NPM-driven reforms being over, our polities confronted with terrible poly-crises and great transitions to handle, rediscover the importance of robust Neo-Weberian States and public administrations. Public employers are thus in great need of attracting the young talented people from the Z and Alpha Generations to join the Public Service. Alas, the public sector's attractiveness in the eyes of youngsters has dropped in almost all European countries, for many reasons that are diagnosed in the article's first section. This tricky situation calls for the setting up of a new, proactive public policy of attractiveness, whose target group, the undecided young people whose education does not predestine them to the public or the private sector, is identified in the next section. Then, a plea in favor of activating four pertinent levers of intrinsic motivation amongst these youngsters is presented in detail. The article concludes on the likely contribution of such an attractive policy to the overall objective of reconnecting (young) people with the State and the public institutions – a great need for our post-modern democracies.

**Keywords:** Public Service recruitments, attractiveness policy, public service motivation, youth, talent management.

## 1. Introduction

During half a century of New Public Management-driven administrative reforms in almost all OECD and EU Member States (for a critical analysis and assessment see Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017; Eymeri-Douzans and Pierre, 2011; Christensen and Læg Reid, 2017; Bezes, 2018), political leaders and reform coalitions brought systematic discredit on ‘old public administration’, alternatively or simultaneously denounced as bureaucratic and/or technocratic, and anyway low performing, non-accountable, and producing too heavy burdens on business that needed, in their views, to be removed to allow a new flourishing of market economy and globalized capitalism. In this period, reformers took their inspiration from neo-liberal slogans such as ‘Government is not the solution, Government is the problem’ (Ronald Reagan) and ‘rolling back the frontiers of the state’ (Margaret Thatcher), in an attempt to ‘reinvent government’ (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992) by enforcing a wide repertoire of neo-managerial tools and recipes (Eymeri-Douzans, 2011) and imposing a true ‘cultural revolution’ to the civil service. With variations in intensity from front-running Anglophone countries (UK and its former Dominions, USA) to some continental Europe ‘laggards’ (such as Germany), the ‘NPM for all seasons’ (Hood, 1991) paradigm favored a shift from a conception of the public servant as a State custodian, a Rule-of-Law steward and a Public Interest promoter, towards a conception of high and middle-rank officials as ‘managers’, accountable for their results in improving ‘the three Es’ (economics, efficiency, effectiveness) by means of generic organizational ‘reengineering’ and monitoring of performance indicators, while lower rank public agents were asked to become ‘client-oriented’ public employees, delivering high-quality services (in person and digital) to ever more demanding citizens-clients. One of the results was a terrible loss of trust within public administration, and between public administration and society (Bouckaert, 2012). In addition to such qualitative transformations, the neo-liberal agenda promoted taxes reductions, related public spendings’ cuts, and thus, since salaries of public servants are among the major costs on any public budget, came the ideas of controlling and even decreasing the total amount of their payroll by freezing salary increases, replacing only a proportion of public servants going on retirement, and/or replacing them by contractual agents (with fixed wages) more than by statutory (*titular*) civil servants enjoying a right to career progression. It is an understatement to say that this NPM era, combining all these practical and ideational/ideological factors, has reduced the prestige and attractiveness of careers in public administration in the eyes of the generations born after the ‘neo-liberal turn’ of the late 1970s-early 1980s in Western democracies (Hall, 1986; Jobert, 1994). With a ten-year delay, in Central and Eastern European countries, the path of State (re-)building in post-communist context (Ionescu, 2009; Meyer-Sahling and Veen, 2012; Randma-Liiv and Drechsler, 2017), combined strong politicization of the higher bureaucracy (Andrei, Profiroiu and Oancea, 2012) with massive political corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006; Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen and Schuster, 2018) and the private economy boom, also discouraged valuable young people from entering administrative careers.

Twenty years later, in a changing world where neo-liberalism and NPM appear to be nothing but obsolete solutions to ancient problems, any lucid observer of contemporary governance can easily notice, limiting ourselves to Europe, that the constant succession of crises such as the Eurozone crisis, the migrants' crisis, the Brexit crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the war back on our continent and its consequences (energy crisis, cyber-attacks, etc.) have provoked a necessary 'come-back of the State' or — better said — of the States, in the plural and acting in a coordinated manner, at EU level as well as at regional, meso-local and local layers of government and administration. As a matter of fact, to enforce a strict lock-down of our societies, to operate public hospitals under emergency, to distribute billions of masks and vaccines to our populations while boosting the restart of the economy by the biggest recovery plans based on public investment since the post-WWII Marshall Plan, public servants — from top officials who draft legislations to nurses who save patients' lives — have been, and are still at the forefront, handling with strong commitment, even with great abnegation, the main challenges facing our societies. Many crises are still to come, in a sort of enduring 'poly-crisis' (as former President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker coined it) which requires stronger resilience and robustness (Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing, 2021) of public authorities, and thus of public servants. And what about the even greater challenges that are on top of the public agenda for the next decades: saving the planet through the Green Transition, piloting successfully the Digital Revolution, redistributing its benefits to the many, and accomplishing these Herculean tasks in a democratic way that respects fundamental human rights? It is obvious that markets, or networks, are unable to succeed in such a complex endeavor without a proactive and hierarchical intervention of governments and public administrations, let us say of a post-NPM, Neo-Weberian State, as argued by several scholars for more than a decade (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011; Drechsler and Kattel, 2008; Eyméri-Douzans, 2010; Bouckaert, 2022). Thus, at all politico-administrative layers of government (United Nations, NATO, EU, Member States, regions, meso-local and local levels), skilful and highly committed elected political masters, as well as public administrators (senior officials as well as implementing agents on-the-ground), are highly needed. They may not possess 'the (one and only) solution' (which does not exist for 'wicked problems'), but they are indispensable, major actors who will continue to 'hold the pen' or the keyboard, writing the 'first draft' as well as the latest version of legislations and regulations, even in the arenas of interactive co-construction with networks of stakeholders (Torfing, Sørensen and Røiseland, 2019), since policy design is a complex power struggle (Peters and Fontaine, 2022) where State elites retain more 'chances of power' (in Weber's terms) than sometimes claimed by some radical wishful thinkers of 'New Public Governance'.

Expressed in a stylized and provocative way, this means: whereas in the neo-liberal/NPM era, a 'rolling-back' or even 'hollowing-out' State and a public sector being dismantled needed less and less young talents against a private sector, especially the net-economy, which needed more talents, on the contrary, the 'coming-back' State of nowadays and a public sector which remains, by far, the biggest employer in Europe, are in great need of

attracting again ‘the best and the brightest’ from the new generations who are about to enter the job market.

Alas! This swing of the pendulum occurs at a moment when the level of attractiveness of the public sector has dropped in almost all European countries, for many reasons that we shall diagnose in section 2. This situation calls for the setting up of a new public policy of attractiveness, whose target group must be well identified (section 3), and pertinent levers skillfully combined (section 4) to reach the overall objective to reconnect (young) people with the State and the public institutions (section 5).

## **2. Diagnosis: an increasing problem of attractiveness that requires action**

Let us briefly recall the history of public administration as an employer on European soil and consider the historicity still sedimented in our actual systems of civil service. Modern public administration has been progressively invented, in the first established Western European states (France, England, the Iberic Christian realms) from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, elsewhere in Europe in the following centuries, and until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for the Danubo-Balkan countries after liberation from the Ottoman yoke. During such a long-lasting State-building (Gellner, 1983; Rosanvallon, 1990; Hobsbawm, 1991), the *Lumières*/Enlightenment/*Aufklärung*, culminating with the French Revolution (1789–1799) and followed by the Napoleonic era (1799–1815) happened to be a crucial period, when was invented the modern notion of ‘*fonctionnaire*’ to define the permanent public servants who enjoy a full career within public administration (see Dreyfus, 2000). The word and the notion were soon exported to other Latin languages and cultures (*funcionario*), while Germanic cultures maintained but modernized accordingly the older notion of *Beamter* (and its variants, like the Dutch *ambtenaar*), meaning ‘officer’ as a tenant of a public office. To recruit these permanent, *titulaires/titular*/tenured public servants, our ancestors reinvented (since imperial China invented it far before to recruit its mandarins) a very specific mode of selection: the *concours* (Dreyfus and Eyméri-Douzans, 2012). Under similar names, *concurso*, *conkurs*, or with some important variants (like the Germanic *staatsexamen* or the British *Open competition*), this form of recruitment has been widespread in Europe. The *concours* is in perfect affinity with a civil service organized according to the ‘career system’, which remains the most frequent among the EU Member States (Demmke and Moilanen, 2010). But we all know that several Northern countries (in Scandinavia, on the Baltic, in the Dutch low lands) have opted, like the United Kingdom, and a few others, for a ‘position system’ in which each vacant position within public administration is filled by an individualized and *ad hoc* recruitment procedure similar to what happens in the private sector, with the exception, however, of the judiciary, the police, the diplomatic corps, and the military (for officers which are important islands of ‘career system’ and ‘concours’ within ‘position system’ countries, whereas, in the ‘career system’ civil service of countries like Germany, France or Spain, the increasing use of contractual agents (often of a high level) alongside *titular* civil servants, and

the freedom given to political masters of appointing almost whom they wish to the highest administrative positions of *politischer beamten* (in the sense of Max Weber), and their right to surround themselves with large entourages of politicized special advisors (ministerial cabinets, *leitungsstaab, gabinetes, ...*) (Yong and Hazell, 2014; Eymeri-Douzans, Bioy and Mouton, 2015; Shaw and Eichbaum, 2018) have led to the hybridization of areas of the ‘position system’ within ‘career systems’. The world is also becoming more complex in the sub-world of public administration!

However, the *concours* (under different names) remains, so far and in most countries of the European continent, the most frequent recruitment technique for public servants, and thus the one that is best known to all citizens, and the one that is most symbolically significant to them. Such a ‘meritocratic’ system, which claims to select ‘the best and the brightest’, creates a strong symbolic cut between the public employer and the mass of its potential future employees, these modest ‘candidates’ who compete for the honor of perhaps being ‘laureates’ of the *concours* and for the chance to obtain a career for life at the service of the noble *Res Publica*, with a guaranteed pension at the end. Why and how, in this traditional system, would public employers have been bothered about their attractiveness in the eyes of candidates?

Moreover, there was no need for such a concern. In macro-quantitative terms, the public sector global attractiveness, in each country, is a dependent variable of two macro-variables, namely demographic pressure and the national rate of unemployment. In a very simplified way, one can observe that, from WWII to the 2000s, demographic pressure was first very strong, caused by the famous post-war ‘baby boom’ in Western democracies and strong natalist policies in the Soviet camp, and then, after the oil shocks of the 1970s, the ‘stagflation’ with mass unemployment maintained the pressure in another way. The result was, for half a century, a continuous flux of numerous young candidates willing to join our public administrations (e.g., in France, a stable ratio of ten applicants for one available position offered to recruitment by administrative *concours* was observed during several decades). As a result, a high level of selectivity was guaranteed for administrative *concours*, high enough to ensure the prestige of the civil service, and to exempt public employers from being concerned with their own attractiveness.

But, since the turn of the Millennium, a radical change in the situation has occurred, due to the demographic decline, the aging of European societies, and the global interconnection of job markets, within the European Single Market and across continents. The truth is that demographic decline started in the 1980s in some countries, in particular Germany where the issue of public administration attractiveness has been on the agenda for a long time. Then, in the years 1990s–2000s, Central and Eastern European countries, in the post-communist context of great uncertainty, stopped having children for a while, before the situation improved. Nowadays, Southern European countries have the lowest fertility and natality rates within the Union. Moreover, and especially for well-educated young graduates from Central and Eastern European countries, the globalization of job markets with the ‘brain drain’ practiced by Western Europe richest countries (including the EU institutions) or the lucrative job offers from major Anglophone consultancy

companies to young talents (even if they stay ‘at home’) are also undermining the already low attractiveness of public employers, in countries like Romania and its neighbors.

The new, but unfortunately the long-lasting situation is therefore that of a very tense youth labor market, where a sort of ‘war for young talents’ is beginning (see UNESCO and OECD (2020) surveys and publications, *inter alia*). Young people from the so-called ‘Z’ and, tomorrow, ‘Alpha’ generations are now being sought after by both private and public recruiters. The attractiveness of public careers for the younger generations has become a very salient policy issue.

The problem is compounded by changing mindsets: the influence of inherited family models tends to weaken among young people. Many studies show that in countries as different as Germany, Spain and France, there were strong family traditions of serving the State, at both high and modest levels (Joly, 2005). This is now on the decline. The young people of the Z Generation are driven by many other influencers than their family backgrounds. In short, the State, and the public sector in general, will no longer be able to rely, as they used to (Singly and Thélot, 1989) on atavistic identifications and family traditions to secure their future new recruits.

Thus, a real Copernican revolution is now needed: the rather condescending ‘wait-and-see’ attitude of public employers towards candidates must be banished everywhere. Proactive, consistent, and sustained measures and programs aimed at promoting the attractiveness of public careers and at motivating youngsters (and others) to join public administrations are indispensable, in almost all European countries, and to the benefit of the various layers of government (from municipal services in rural areas to central ministerial departments in the capital city). Even though the topic of employers’ image and organizational attractiveness is very complex and full of counter-intuitive loops (for a critical review of literature, see Lievens and Slaughter, 2016), it is a genuine public sector attractiveness policy that shall be cleverly conceived and sustainably implemented, in accordance with the specificities of each national or sectoral context.

### **3. Which target groups for the new attractiveness policy are to be invented?**

The young people of the Z (and forthcoming) Generation are far from being an undifferentiated whole. Sociologists, psycho-sociologists as well as communication and marketing experts insist upon the great diversity of their lifestyles and of their belief systems (Miles, 2000), which happen to be more pluralized and evolving than the more stable moral, social and political attitudes/identities of their parents and grandparents.

It is obvious that robust, big-N, quantitative surveys by questionnaires, complemented by fine-grained qualitative research (panels and semi-directive interviews) should be commissioned by the authorities in charge of HRM in the public administration of our various European States, in order to better contextualize the cultural variants and intercultural invariants characterizing the attitudes and expectations (or not) of our young generations towards the opportunity to join public administration and the public sector at large.

Pending the results of such research, we can nevertheless, using logical reasoning, propose tentative, exploratory reflections, which will require to be substantiated and amended by empirical results to come. Thus, in pure logic terms, the young adults who are considering their future occupation and main source of income can be divided analytically into three main categories, unequal in size, and whose members certainly have no subjective consciousness to constitute a category.

Our first category is composed of young people who feel a strong attraction for specific occupations or professions, often referred to as a ‘calling’ or ‘vocational’ activities — whatever ‘vocation’ means in psychological and sociological terms, a rich debate in which we will not enter here. Some of these activities with vocation are outside the State area, such as priesthood. But many of these vocational occupations are only offered by the Public Service, and are often related to sovereignty missions: diplomacy, judiciary, military, police, secret services, tax administration, labor inspection, fire and emergency services, etc. For instance, the young guy who dreams of becoming a general has little choice except to compete for the entrance concours of the military academy. That youngsters who are already very motivated by some very specific occupations and careers in the public sector are not to be the main target group of the future attractiveness policy, and related communication campaigns, since they are already ‘convinced’. Yet, what is of the utmost importance is to prevent sending them wrong and demotivating messages, which can relate to two main aspects: if salaries in the considered vocational career are notoriously too low and/or careers known as too slow to allow realizing their dreams, youngsters may turn away from these specific careers.

A second category comprises those young people who have already developed a strong aversion against public administration and do not envisage ever becoming public servants or public employees. The reasons for this dislike can be manifold and vary in relation to the social backgrounds and socialization of the individuals: for some young people, often belonging to economically disadvantaged social categories with low cultural capital, the reason might be a fundamental distrust towards everything that has to do with official institutions, even to the extent of having anti-system attitudes and behaviors. Other youngsters, belonging to upper social categories with lots of economic capital and strong neo-liberal beliefs in the absolute superiority of private enterprise and the free market against the State and the rule of law, are certain that everything is better than a life of ‘bureaucrat’, and they have been told many times that, for the same level of diploma, they will always get better financial rewards in the private sector than in public administration. That second, heterogenous category, is not a pertinent target group for an attractiveness policy, whose communication campaigns would, at best, elicit the irony of these hopeless people for the Public Service.

It is the third category of people that must be recognized as the main target group of the future attractiveness policy: it is composed of all these youngsters who are studying and graduating in (modest or long) curricula that do not predestine them for the public or the private sector since these paths lead them to ‘job families’ existing in both sectors. Some of these ‘job families’ embrace generic managerial or functional occupations: lawyers/jurists,

accountants, and auditors, HRM officers, IT specialists, secretaries, chauffeurs, etc. Some of these ‘job families’ are more specialized occupations: teachers and professors of various levels, scientific researchers, diverse sorts of engineers, physicians, surgeons, and health professionals, to quote a few. The youngsters who are about to embrace such professions or occupations are precisely the people whose public/private orientation is *a priori* undetermined, that must be targeted by attractiveness campaigns and motivated to apply for administrative concours, or other sorts of administrative recruitment procedures. As for electoral campaigns, the undecideds must be targeted.

To succeed in such an endeavor, it is essential to use the pertinent tools.

#### **4. A plea for activating the pertinent levers of motivation amongst the undecided youth**

Research in behavioral psychology has, for a long time, refined the distinction between extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. The former is when human beings are motivated to behave in a certain way by external *stimuli*, of the ‘carrot-and-stick’ sort: either the desire to earn a reward (especially a ‘tangible’ one, money) or the will to avoid a punishment, always arbitrated by some sort of cost-benefit calculus. The latter, intrinsic motivation, is activated when a person engages in a certain behavior or activity on his/her own, because s/he finds it interesting and enjoyable: the activity itself becomes its own reward (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Since the highest and most sustainable organizational performance, especially when non-commercial activities are concerned, is usually obtained by maximizing the intrinsic motivation among the staff, it would be consistent to focus the future strategies of attractiveness to the Public Service on the possible intrinsic motivation of future public servants.

Such an orientation would also be opportune, considering the delicate situation of public finances in many European countries. The chronic public deficits and huge sovereign debts (severely increased by the post-COVID-19 recovery plans), combined with the aversion to tax increases of the citizens/taxpayers and the political parties they bring to power, will not allow, in the short to medium-term, to use on large scale the main tool of extrinsic motivation; that is a substantial and general increase of salaries for all public servants, in a proportion of 10 to 15%. Such a generous scenario, which would not be sustainable in the long term and would fuel inflation, which has already restarted in the EU, is excluded.

This is regrettable, since wide comparative surveys on salaries in Europe show, in most countries (but not all), much lower wage increases in the public sector than in the private over the past decade (EPSU, 2018), while smaller-N surveys in a specific country or branch show that, for a same or equivalent level of qualification, competencies, and responsibilities, the gap in favor of the private sector against the public is also growing when seniority and responsibilities increase throughout life. As for top profiles of excellence, the disconnection gets even worse: a senior consultant or associate working in one of the Fat Four auditing companies or any other consultancy firm easily earns two, three, or four times



more than a senior civil servant. And there is no doubt that the young people educated in the best faculties, business schools, engineering schools or schools of government are well informed of that gap by the recruiters and head-hunters from the private sector.

In that competitive but unfavorable context for the Public Service, it is mainly by using non-financial, intrinsic incentives that governments may succeed in attracting ‘the best and the brightest’ amongst the Z Generation to join public administrations, for a couple of limited contracts or for a life career.

In our view, there are four main levers of enhanced attractiveness that can be activated.

#### ***4.1. An effective and symbolic policy that promotes the value and values of the Public Service***

As exposed in the introduction, governments and public administrations are and will remain major policymakers and implementers of the indispensable collective strategies, especially the Green Transition, necessary to save the possibility of human life on our planet, and more precisely to realize the UN Sustainable Development Goals, while revitalizing our democracies and ensuring social concord within nations and peace amongst nations.

On all these issues, public servants positioned at all levels of the administrative hierarchies, and active at all territorial layers of governance, shall be the modest but indispensable inventors, in interaction with democratically elected political leaders and all stakeholders from civil society and the economy, of ambitious, innovative, and co-constructed public policies. This is an enthusiastic and inspiring agenda for those among our young people who are guided less by money or greed than by a strong civic and ecological consciousness – which are more and more the new form of political engagement for the Common Good in their generation. It could easily become a fruitful source of renewed ‘Public Service Motivation’, in James L. Perry words (Perry and Hondelghem, 2008; Perry, Hondelghem and Wise, 2010), provided youngsters are led to believe that they will be truly able to ‘make a difference’ about nowadays major policy issues, much more than if they would join the private sector and act as militants in their limited leisure time.

To appeal to such a renewed Public Service Motivation in the mind and the heart of youngsters who hesitate between working in the private or the public sector, the attractiveness communication strategy will be consistent if, and only if it completely turns its back on the remnants of the NPM discourse, by affirming the founding values of the Public Service and by assuming that working for public administration is not ‘an occupation like any other’, but a true dedication to the Public Interest/*Intérêt general/Gemeinwohl*.

However, as young people are extremely sensitive to marketing, images, and ‘storytelling’, since they need to convince themselves and their classmates of the rightfulness of their orientation and avoid being stigmatized among their peer groups as ‘losers’ who want to become ‘bureaucrats’, it is crucial to ‘sell’ them a credible form of newness. Public administration must become the new ‘place-to-be’ for those who really want to ‘give meaning’ to their professional lives, and a source of pride for them. This symbolic transformation of public administration can only be achieved if modernization programs are strengthened and accelerated, and widely broadcasted towards the citizens, with the digital revolution

and the Green Transition, in all their dimensions (from the reasonable, humanist use of Artificial Intelligence in daily work to the transformation of public buildings in ‘energy-zero’ working environment), serving as the two driving forces and flagship products. Future candidates to administrative concours must be deeply convinced that a self-transforming public sector is a front-runner in the global race towards the main ongoing ‘transitions’, and that joining it to serve as public servants will allow them to take part in this great adventure.

But is that all? No.

#### ***4.2. Ensure public employers’ exemplarity on equal opportunities, diversity, and inclusion***

The most recent research, gathered in the *Research Handbook on Motivation in Public Administration* (Stazyk and Davis, 2022) shows that the persons who are attracted to the Public Service, today as it was in the past, attach less importance to the notion of competition than the ones who join the private sector, and go on placing, on the contrary, a very high value on the principles of equality and justice. Consequently, the future attractiveness strategy of the Public Service should strongly mobilize these two values and elaborate messages that target these two moral preferences in the mind of the undecided youngsters who hesitate between private and public careers.

As it is already the case in many front-running countries in North America and Nordic and Western Europe, but with still a great room for improvement in Southern and Eastern European countries, public administrations as employers must be exemplary and make it known widely, in the very domain of equal opportunities and equal treatment guaranteed to all their employees, especially:

- Strict equality between women and men;
- Strict equality between heterosexual and LGBTQIA+ persons;
- Strict equality between people with and without disabilities;
- Strict equality between people from upper and lower social backgrounds, or from metropolitan areas and peripheral regions;
- Strict equality between people mainstream, dominant ethno-racial and/or religious groups and racialized people (often) with an immigrant background;
- Etc.

It goes without saying — but this very delicate topic is not for the present article — that, in many cases, considering the inherited situations of continued domination, the ‘glass ceiling’ phenomenon, the often unconscious nature of cultural biases and stereotypes, a policy of strict equality of treatment is not sufficient to overcome inequalities, and pro-active policies of diversity promotion, or even ‘positive discrimination’ may be needed to obtain rapid and visible integration successes, which are necessary to transform the social representations in the mind of possible candidates from disadvantaged groups.

It is also important to underline that such an integration exemplarity of public administration as an employer requires the combination of two different dimensions. On the one

hand, public employers must fight a relentless battle against all forms of discrimination (misogyny, class disdain, antisemitism, racism, xenophobia) within their personnel, and ensure a ‘zero tolerance’ towards any kind of misconduct, in particular ordinary sexual and sexist violence which must be eradicated, so that the public sector becomes a real ‘safe zone’, a place to live and work in peace. On the other hand, the HRM services must enforce a proactive policy of diversification and inclusion in initial recruitments as well as in the promotions of colleagues throughout their career, which commands to accelerate the transformation of stereotypes and criteria of professional excellence. To put things bluntly, the real and visible result of such a policy should be that much more women, racialized persons, homosexuals, and persons from a modest social background are appointed to the highest administrative positions, and can serve as paragons, true models whose example emulates young people bearing the same characteristics to follow their way with confidence.

#### ***4.3. Improve Quality of Work Life (QWL) and offer a better combination between work and private life***

Many convergent empirical surveys in different countries and contexts, West (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017) and East (Kovac and Bileišis, 2017), as well as the twenty-five-year experience of this article’s author as a French civil servant and an expert in many administrative reforms and technical assistance projects in 14 countries, oblige to recognize that neo-managerial novelties have been, sometimes bizarrely, combined and hybridized with continued forms of neo-bureaucratization (Eymeri-Douzans, 2011; Hibou, 2012; Bezes, 2020) and also with very resilient forms of Merton’s ‘ritualism’ or Allison’s ‘standard operating procedures’, which makes the ‘bureaucratic phenomenon’ (Crozier, 1963) still alive. To take only one example of such remaining, or renewed, organizational and processual rigidities in the daily work of public administration, it is amazing how the usually fixed and immutable working hours, at the front-desk and in the back-office, are both inadequate to the citizens/customers’ needs and to the personnel wishes, and thus unsatisfactory for all. Everybody, from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy, is aware of the situation and agrees (in private) that it should be drastically improved, but very few significant changes occur. Since such rigidities are felt by any citizen who interacts with any public service, and are highlighted by the media and social networks, they are devastating for the global image of public administration in the eyes of the public. Fortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic, with the necessity to ensure Public Service continuity during lock-downs, has shown — as often crises do in the domain of public policies by opening windows of opportunity (Kingdon, 2003; and on the recent pandemic crisis Joyce, Maron and Reddy, 2020; and Hınçea, Klun and Nemec, 2022) — by real-life, large scale experimentations how much flexibility was possible to introduce in the organization and production of administrative work with, e.g., the massive development of teleworking from home (which could have been much wider with better IT-literacy and equipment, in many countries).

Building on that dramatic experience, and taking into account the many weak or strong signals indicating that the young people of the Z and forthcoming Generations pay lots of

attention to their quality-of-life and are accustomed to all sorts of ‘individualization’/‘customization’ in the way they are treated by the organizations with which they interact, it would be highly recommendable for public employers who want to attract and retain these young people to really put imagination in power and strongly innovate in the related domains of work organization. The objective would be to do whatever possible to improve the Quality of Work Life (QWL) of (future) public servants, especially to offer them a better combination of their duties at work with their private lives. In that regard, focus groups and brainstorming sessions that the author of this article has been conducting, for three consecutive years, in a Master 1 seminar on the ‘management of rewards in the public sector’ given to students at the Faculty of Public Administration — Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies (ASE) — a young audience well representative of the target group for an attractiveness policy — have already produced shared ideas and wishes that could be considered carefully by public employers as possible innovations:

- Systematic introduction of extended working hours (for the public) ...
- ... thanks to an individualized, flexible working program for each employee, negotiated in accordance with their special wishes and needs (combining ‘early birds’ and ‘late-comers’, or a concentration of working time on 4 days, with 9 or 10 hours per day for those who wish it, or on the contrary a wider spread of 6 shorter continuous days at work with no midday break, etc.), and evolving throughout the career (employees with young children having very different obligations than sixty-year-old ones).
- A right to telework from home one day a week, for occupations whose content allows it (also good for the carbon footprint and the planet).
- The generalization of time savings account schemes (as they exist in Germany and France since 1994), which allow employees who wish to accumulate paid leave entitlements for future vacations or training periods, in compensation for periods of leave they have not taken.
- Since a majority amongst public employees are female, and since the natality rate is an issue in many EU countries, support young mothers who work for the public sector by opening public owned nurseries/childcare facilities where public employees enjoy priority to enroll their infants.
- Etc.

Many other practical innovations in the domain of QWL could be envisaged and would certainly contribute to raising the interest of youngsters in the Public Service. Yet, there is a latest and maybe most decisive lever of attractiveness...

#### ***4.4. Reversing the stigma of life-time employment: offering life-long training and mobility as a life-insurance against boredom***

The most recurrent negative stereotype about Public Service is that life as a ‘bureaucrat’ would be immobile, repetitive, and terribly boring. Even though this is often not factually true, the public believes this common misconception. As a result, many young people are horrified by the prospect of spending forty years of their lives in the Public Service, while

they feel that taking a job in a company for a while does not commit them to anything permanent and leaves their future wide open. This comparison, implicit or explicit, between private employment and public careers, creates a comparative disadvantage for the public sector in the eyes of the abovementioned target group. The negative stereotype must therefore be energetically confronted, and even reversed. Two strategies can be developed to do this, each of which would combine objective HRM innovations with proactive communication aimed at making these innovations well-known to all.

The first strategy should focus on the period prior to definitive recruitment (in the civil services which belong to the career system model, of course). As it is frequent in Germany in the frame of the preparatory service to the two State exams for instance, and as it is promoted by EU policies, worked-linked training and apprenticeships schemes, should be offered to 16 or 18+ young people, at all levels of technical and higher education, by public employers of all sorts. This would allow teenagers/very young adults to ‘put one foot’ into public administration, to have a direct experience of it for three or four years, in parallel with their academic curriculum, to get a decent revenue ‘from the State’ in a compensation of a real work (differently from the too often observed internship syndrome), to get rid of their preconceived clichés, to freely decide if they want to join public administration (or not), and thus to run for the highly competitive entrance concours with much more familiarity with the administrative world and much better chances of success. Being even more innovative, the authorities in charge of the Public Service in the many countries with a ‘career system’ could instore a form of limited hybridization with the ‘position system’: offering new recruits a first three-year trial contract of employment that could be terminated at the employer’s or employee’s initiative which is less engaging for young people (“Come and try, and in case you don’t like it, you can quit at any moment!”), and thus postponing the definitive recruitment ‘for life’ by concours at the end of the trial contract. In fact, such a *modus operandi* already exists in practice (for instance within EU institutions in Brussels): it could be systematized and widespread, thus contributing to reducing the practical and symbolic obstacle of the concours and attracting more young recruits.

The second strategy — analytically distinct, but it would be opportune to combine it with the first one — would be to turn the constraint into an asset: since public administration offers a life-long career, it means that public employers, on the contrary to so many private businesses which cannot really offer future career perspectives beyond five years, should highlight that they can and want to invest in (their) people to ensure them a life-long trajectory of professional and self-development, with two guiding principles: mobility and training. To combat the fear, and the reality of a ‘boring bureaucratic life’, all public employees should be offered and guaranteed what British Senior Civil Service ‘fast-streamers’ or French *hauts fonctionnaires* enjoy: genuine paths of orchestrated functional, thematic, or geographical mobility (with a turnover every 5-to-7 years), with a chance to occupy 7-to-10 different positions during a 40-year-long career. A true remedy against boredom!

Undeniably, such individualized trajectories should be negotiated, co-constructed between employees and HR divisions: never conceived as ‘punishments’, they should be opportunities for self-transformation. This implies that proactive staff mobility schemes

should be combined, in a systematic and sustained manner, with much more life-long training for all public servants. Very frequent short training programs should be offered to them, based on their training needs identified during their annual appraisal interviews, as well as longer training periods on the occasion of major career ‘turning points’ and promotions (with sabbatical leave semesters, exchange programs with other regions or foreign countries, ‘executive Masters’ for those reaching managerial positions, etc.). Such a decisive investment in training should be part of a global strategy of staff competencies management for the Public Service, as it already exists in some countries (e.g., the French *GPEC-Gestion prévisionnelle des emplois et des compétences* then *GEPP-Gestion des emplois et des parcours professionnels*, the forward-looking/provisional management of jobs and skills).

All in all, since life-employment is a constraint for public employers and causes anxiety to hesitating future employees, decision-makers should, in all countries and sectors, drive the employers of the public sector towards a Copernican revolution which puts staff mobility and training at the core of the HR strategy, and makes it widely known. Next generations of candidates for entry into public administration need to be convinced that their future employers will invest to offer them a continuous upgrading of their skills and competencies over the years, throughout a dynamic pathway, in which they will never get bored! Honesty obliges us to recognize that there is still considerable room for improvement, in the public administrations of many countries and policy sectors, in this respect. But it is a very stimulating challenge for all.

## **5. Conclusions and perspectives**

Obviously, academic research in comparative public administration, as well as cross-border administrative cooperation experiences, mobilizing experts and practitioners in benchmarking exercises and peer-to-peer knowledge transfers, under the auspices of the EU, the OECD or both (in the case of SIGMA projects) show us how crucial is the national, regional or local context to comprehend and explain the forms of State-Society relationship, or better said ‘State-in-Society’ (Migdal, 2001) in different, even if neighbor countries like EU Member States. Different trajectories of State-building or ‘stateness’ (Linz and Stepan, 1996) and their related various ‘administrative traditions’ (in the sense of Peters, 2021), different trajectories of administrative reforms (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017), and legacies (Meyer-Sahling, 2009), different socio-economic situations between EU Member States whose levels of prosperity remain so disparate, different political regimes, party systems, and political lives must be taken into great consideration when addressing, as in the present article, the scientific and practical issue of how young talents from our new generations can, or cannot, be attracted to serve into the Public Service — a challenge which, precisely, has lots to do, both as a ‘medium and a result’ (in the terms of Giddens, 1984), with the changing nature and quality of the relationship between ‘the State’ and ‘the civil society’ in each national context.

However, since the comparative method focuses as much on commonalities as on differences, on common trends or convergences as on remaining or renewed differentiations, it is also undeniable that many ‘European perspectives in public administration’ (EPPA) identified and analyzed in the excellent program, and edited volume, recently led by Geert Bouckaert and Werner Jann (Bouckaert and Jann, 2020), apply across contexts, with some variants and acclimatizations. The risk of the younger generations turning away from public employment, with the consequence that our public administrations would quickly run out of the talents — brains and arms — they need so much to co-pilot, and realize for themselves, the Great Transitions that are on top of the political and policy agenda, is one of those cross-cutting issues in Europe. This is why we assumed that it was legitimate and purposeful, in the present article, to adopt a deliberately generic approach to that common threat and to advance prospective, strategic reflections on how to design possible attractiveness policies to solve that problem. Of course, if and when decision-makers turn these ideas into practice, these attractiveness policies will have to be conceived and implemented in the plural, in a very context-sensitive manner, tailor-made for every national, sectoral or territorial case.

If and when doing so — the sooner the better, in our view, since the drop in candidacies to administrative recruitment procedures is observable everywhere —, the politico-administrative elites of our European Member States should be aware that the challenge they tackle is much wider than the solving of a technical problem of recruitment. Helping today’s young talents (of all levels of education), who will be the change leaders, change (middle) managers and change implementers of tomorrow, to find their way towards public administration and devote for decades their energy and goodwill to serve and promote the Public Interest could be the most cost-effective and efficient strategy to reconnect State and society in practice, to rebuild a relation of trust between government and people that has eroded in all countries. As a matter of fact, in a time when anti-elite, anti-vaccine, anti-system opinions, combined with conspiracy theories, are ever more frequent and contribute to the growing electoral successes of populist parties and leaders who seek to exert power in an ‘illiberal’, if not anti-democratic manner, while ethno-religious communitarianisms also foster socio-political entropy by contesting the universality of the rule-of-law, one of the best antidotes against such pathologies of our post-modern democracies could be to make sure that a constant flux of talented newcomers, representatives of all the diversities existing in the population, joins the State apparatus and all the other public institutions, becoming their loyal servants — provided they are well treated, of course. Such an active integration process should contribute, in a decisive manner, to deeply reconnecting the State, and other public institutions, with all the social classes and social groups of the civil society, thanks to the link of trust and confidence rebuilt with the most active and talented human beings pertaining to these classes and groups. Definitely, we can conclude: our countries need them!

**Note:** This article develops and systematizes ideas that were first presented, under the title ‘How to tackle the challenges of career attractiveness in public administrations for

future generations?’, at the inaugural conference ‘What common challenges for public administrations in Europe?’ of the EUPAN network Summer University, in Strasbourg, on 9 May 2022, proposed by the European Group for Public Administration (EGPA/GEAP), upon invitation by the French Presidency, Directorate-General for Public Administration and the Civil Service (DGAFP). Our gratitude goes to DGAFP.

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