

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM IN ROMANIA: ASSESSING THE PAST AND LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

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Abstract

This article provides an account of the transformational capacity of Romanian public administration in relation to four main aspects: (1) human resource performance and integrity; (2) territorial, functional and institutional decentralization; (3) public policies and (4) capitalizing on the digital and innovative component. The Romania case study highlights the gradual transformation of public administration in the last 30 years, as a reaction to the emergence of economic, social and political crises. For an imperative and irreversible change, we have identified directions for capitalizing on opportunities and good practices in the matter, in the context of the intensified integration process in NATO and the EU. We have analyzed the strategic documents on strengthening and accelerating the transformation of public administration and highlighted the need for the interconnection and interdependence of its four pillars to meet the specific objectives of Horizon 2030. For decision-makers, practitioners and researchers, this article aims to stimulate and contribute to the dedicated public debate and consultation of coherent, predictable and sustainable legislation and practices in the matter.

Keywords: public administration reform, civil servants, decentralization, public policies, digitalization, Romania.

1. Introduction: investing in public administration

At the European level, public administration investments aim to continuously improve the cost-effectiveness, quality and efficiency of public services. Increasing citizens' trust in state institutions, strengthening social cohesion and the attractiveness of the public sector as a major employer are the main objectives of modernizing and transforming public administration (Gottschall *et al.*, 2015). Substantial change in public administration remains focused on boosting performance, effective coordination, and meeting sustainable governance indicators (e.g., strengthening executive capacity as well as participatory and supervisory powers).

In this scenario, the transformation of the state and public administration is located at the intersection of constitutional, institutional and cultural continuity on the one hand, and adaptation and change in response to economic, social and political crises and pressures on the other (Pierre and Ingraham, 2010, p. 4). The current challenges faced by public administrations at the national and European level are anchored in the paradigm of the need to adapt public services to demographic, technological, social and economic changes in order to meet the standards of quality, equity and efficiency at low cost and accessible to all citizens (Durant, 2020; Liou, 2001; Caiden, 1991, 1999).

In this article, we argue that to overcome the consequences of the economic and social crises that have hampered and reduced the pace of development and modernization of states, it is necessary to provide better services in support of increasing social cohesion and encouraging innovation and competitiveness. The need to rapidly digitalize and integrate smart solutions, in order to reduce the regulatory burden, represents a real opportunity to diversify and expand the interaction between clients, suppliers and beneficiaries of public services. The digitalization of the 2022 population and housing census is the first step, indicating the potential for people's digital skills and public administration's capacity to adapt and innovate.

We propose that the transformation of public administration cannot succeed in the absence of a correct diagnosis and institutional mechanisms and practices compatible with the moral, democratic and modern dimensions of good governance (Raiu, 2013, 2015). The culture and ethics of public administration have the role of setting up and adjusting the process of transformation and modernization, which is why orienting its goals towards results and performance needs to be completed with stimuli and tools that emphasize the promotion of integrity, professionalism and devotion to the fulfillment of legal and moral tasks and responsibilities. In the Romanian space, the transformation of public administration needs to be calibrated simultaneously on the fulfillment of the standards regarding legality, ethics and managerial performance (Blackman, Buick and O'Donnel, 2021, p. 294).

2. Research design of the study

2.1. Rationale

The horizontal dimension of public administration highlights the need to develop and capitalize on human potential, the main challenge being the attraction and retention of well-qualified personnel (Christensen, 2012; Beck, 2021).

We believe that in the case of Romania the new dimensions of the transformation process emphasize the need to integrate and capitalize on good governance in the institutional architecture fairly and efficiently, in order to boost the quality of public services and institutions, and to optimally manage the available resources (Raiu, 2013, 2015). As a catalyst for economic growth, the transformation process at the central and local level needs to be adapted to both changes in the global economy and sanitary and security challenges (Liou, 2001; Lampropoulou, 2018).

The payroll and the continuous evaluation of the officials working for public institutions and authorities generate considerable effort and resources (financial and time); in particular, an increased responsibility to maximize and capitalize on the expertise and the broad and complex dimension of human resource. Applying integrity and performance criteria to over 1,200,000 budgetary employees (according to the data of the Ministry of Finance, July 2022), of which more than 60% are employed in central public administration, requires a significant sustained effort from public institutions and authorities. In order to boost the continuous training of the human resource and stimulate professional ascent on the basis of merit, performance and professional integrity are needed, as are concrete, predictable and transparent mechanisms, and tools.

Directly related to the quality of public services and their ability to adapt to new opportunities and challenges are economic growth and improved living standards in the country (Pollit and Bouckaert, 2011). Intensified modernization and Europeanization of public administration are preconditions for sustainable development, and a stimulus for the private environment, by promoting a model focused on stimulating and rewarding performance, innovation and the fulfillment of legal and moral responsibilities and duties. For Romania, we consider it a priority to connect in depth to the opportunities and advantages of digitalization, in urban and rural areas, through the digitalization of public services (e-government), integration of human capital in the digital economy and development of technologies and infrastructures (European Commission, 2022).

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) is today the most important development project for European Romania in the green and digital age. In order to strengthen the resilience of public administration to new challenges and increase preparedness to crisis situations, the capacity for adaptation and innovation, as well as the potential for growth, the NRRP principles aim at: (1) balanced allocation of resources to mitigate polarized territorial development; (2) intensifying the process of decentralization in response to subsidiary challenges of communities; (3) proximity to citizens and beneficiaries through greater involvement of local authorities. Based on these objectives, measures are to be uniformly

applied at the central and local level, in a predictable, substantiated and participatory manner, reflecting the needs of citizens and businesses and driven by investments into efficient human resource management resulting in a body of expert civil servants. The transformation of public administration thus occupies a central place in the architecture of the opportunities enjoyed by Romania, as an EU Member State, through the NRRP.

2.2. Hypotheses and aims

Our main hypothesis highlights the need for a coherent, uniform and predictable approach at the central and local level to facilitate a deep and broad transformation of public administration to a high standard, characterized by stimulating performance and increasing the quality, efficiency and yield of public services. In Romania's case, the interconnection and interdependence between the main four pillars of public administration transformation is a requirement to overcome the dysfunctions and discrepancies that have characterized the development and modernization of public institutions and services until now. We believe that the perspectives and objectives for transforming public administration in the next ten years need to be articulated in relation to these four pillars, namely: (1) improving the mechanisms for recruitment, motivation, evaluation and promotion of civil servants; (2) increasing decentralization; (3) increasing the efficiency and quality of public policies; (4) digitalizing, diversifying and expanding alternative tools geared towards seizing opportunities.

The secondary hypothesis captures the sequentiality of the process of transformation and modernization of public administration, as it reacts to a succession of economic, social and political crises and new challenges and opportunities. Today, this reactive approach needs to be complemented with a defined vision in order to strengthen the ability to anticipate and diagnose, at all levels, the current stage of the development and modernization of the public administration, as well as its trajectories.

The examination of strategic documents and the case study analysis of the transformation of public administration in Romania, from 1990 to the present, aim to highlight the qualitative dimension of the complex process of the development and modernization of public institutions and the administrative apparatus. This study will be relevant to decision-makers, practitioners and researchers, through the macro-level analysis of sequential changes made in response to crises and challenges. They have highlighted the need for better use and allocation of human, financial and institutional resources in order to provide efficient and equally accessible public services at the central and local level. Our analysis aimed to identify the imperative and irreversible changes needed in the organization and operation of public administration to stimulate both citizens and businesses, as well as civil servants and the public and political elite. Within this paradigm, our analysis aimed to recognize the internal capacities of public administration to provide predictability, coherence and rational resource management.

2.3. Methodological framework and its limitations

The transformative capacity of public administration requires a methodological framework adapted to investigating institutional practice and changes in institutional design and functionality over time at central and local levels (Rihoux and Grimm, 2006; Creswell, 2014; Brown *et al.*, 2016). In order to conduct a reliable analysis, we structured our research in relation to the four most representative pillars for the organization and coherent functioning of the public administration, presented above. Their complexity and relevance to the transformation of public administration to high standards of performance allowed us to carry out a macro-level assessment of the capabilities and opportunities for change in terms of institutional and legislative needs, and good practices.

The focus on Romania highlights and explains the model of sequential changes driven by reactions to economic, social and political crises. The external incentives of public administration have, until now, set the size of the transformations that occurred in the periods defined by the moments of transition, pre- and post-accession to NATO and the EU, together with the capitalization of the member state status, and management of both the economic crisis and the coronavirus pandemic.

Our analysis of public administration transformation thus has a prominent qualitative dimension (Miller and Yang, 2008; Ashworth, McDermott and Currie, 2019). We used document analysis (Bowen, 2009) and the case study approach (Garson, 2002) to focus on the development and modernization strategies of public administration. We selected the projects of the National Strategy for Sustainable Development and the government's programmatic documents for consolidating and accelerating the transformation of public administration, according to the scope of the objectives anchored in Horizon 2030. This approach has been useful in evaluating the quality of the legislation related to constitutional and European requirements, and transatlantic in matter.

The methodological limitations of this study derive from the low level of completeness and interoperability of the available databases on legislative and institutional activity specific to public administration, therefore we could not add a quantitative dimension to our analysis (Balnaves and Caputi, 2001; Gray *et al.*, 2007; Groeneveld *et al.*, 2015). The high volume of regulation, however, aimed at the punctual solution of dysfunctions and administrative deficiencies, which gives us a representation of the sequential process of transformation and modernization. A faithful, accurate evaluation of the capabilities and opportunities for transformation, development and modernization of public administration requires an in-depth analysis of the status of the civil servant, the efficiency of decentralization and the efficiency of public services — a necessary requirement to overcome the methodological limits.

3. Directions and objectives of the transformation of public administration

3.1. Human resources: architects and builders of the transformation

The architects and builders of institutional transformation are the leaders of public authorities, internally imposed norms, informal practices, principles and values. Equally,

however, civil servants *de facto* draw a line between institutional resistance and integration of directions of change (Thynne, 2010, p. 68). Cooperation between managers and officials is therefore important, and this common approach needs to be calibrated and geared towards overcoming the structural dysfunctions that have characterized public administration to date.

In order to achieve better performance and efficiency, it is important to concentrate efforts on two main directions: (1) integrating specific, measurable, relevant, time-bound and easily attainable objectives for civil servants and public administration in defining competencies, requirements and results, and (2) motivating and continuously training civil servants, in direct relation to management mechanisms, preliminary and advanced testing, career prospects and possibilities of time and work schedule management.

For Romania, the first step is the capitalization of findings and recommendations formulated by the World Bank within the technical assistance for the development of a uniform management system of human resources in public administration. Also, our document analysis shows that important directions to reduce the risk of deprofessionalization and politicization of the civil service are found in the guides and textbooks co-financed by the EU from the European Social Fund through the Operational Programme Administrative Capacity 2014–2020. Among these are: (1) a centralized process, planned and carried out at the national level by the National Agency of Civil Servants (ANFP) to pre-select eligible candidates for the competitions on the post; (2) carrying out more extensive advertising campaigns to inform and encourage registration for the competition, the condition and stimulus of the competition; (3) ensuring appropriate evaluation panels composed of expert evaluators selected based on professional experience and academic education; (4) managing the group of admitted candidates; (5) developing skills through feedback and coaching; (6) annual performance planning and evaluation, etc. (General Secretary of Government and World Bank, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

Competence and management tip the balance towards efficient public administration, as does a human resource management model centered on competition, involvement and effective development of competencies and performance evaluation (Raiu and Mina-Raiu, 2022). The criteria for recruiting and promoting civil servants who will excel in terms of institutional ethics should reflect their training, work and progress, as well as their integrity and involvement (Dickinson and O’Flynn, 2021, p. 163). At the same time, measuring the performance of civil servants, advisers and other staff requires knowledge of work tools, individual and collective responsibilities, results according to efficiency, quality and resource management (Dickinson and O’Flynn, 2021, pp. 159–161).

Operationalizing strategic plans into clearly defined and delimited responsibilities for civil servants, advisers and other staff categories, as well as meritocratic criteria for employment and promotion, budgets and performance-based audits, are prerequisites for integrating market and marketing mechanisms into institutionalized instruments. In order to prevent and manage the dysfunctions and suboptimal circumstances, but especially to overcome the structural problems that have accompanied the transformation process of public administration in the Romanian space, it is important to *be aware of and assume*

the irreversible character of the change process (emphasis added). The public service performance agenda has become common to OECD countries in the current governance context of efficient and effective management of human, financial, natural and institutional resources (Bouckaert, 2010, pp. 54–56).

Thus, the paradigm shift in the current institutional architecture is represented by promoting and articulating a profile of the public official that reflects both the internal values and principles integrated in the Administrative Code, and imposes an adequate, efficient and professional institutional conduct and practice appreciated and respected by the society. A body of civil servants dedicated to the sacrosanct principles of the Constitution will spur public institutions and authorities to serve the public interest, and represent a moral and professional benchmark for the political class and the entire society.

3.2. The territorial, legal and institutional dimensions of decentralization

The focus on integrating and coordinating the approaches towards change in the public sector, with emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness, in the Romanian space requires a better mapping of the competencies and duties of the newly established, or redefined, autonomous entities, in order to adjust the impulses generated by centrifugal and centripetal forces within the institutional architecture. The reversal or completion of institutional roles poses a potential risk of bottlenecks or overlaps, to the extent that the process of decentralization still presents flaws of illegality and unconstitutionality that erode legal certainty – the foundation of the institutional architecture (Bouckaert, 2010, pp. 51–53). Specialization and separation of administrative units need to be integrated into the objective of facilitating administrative responsibility while redefining the mechanisms for coordinating managerial autonomy (Harlow and Rawlings, 2009, p. 55). A basic component of decentralization is the increased involvement and commitment of all institutional and societal actors (Bouckaert, 2010, pp. 54–56).

The impact of decentralization on public administration is a direct one, with visible results in (1) the management and allocation of resources in response to the prevailing needs at the local level; (2) the quality of management; (3) exploiting the potential for development in relation to the cultural, economic, social and environmental dimensions; (4) stepping up communication and interaction with public service beneficiaries.

Firstly, the transfer of authority, as well as administrative and financial responsibilities to the local level, allows for a better understanding of the expectations existing at the level of local communities. In-depth knowledge of institutional and administrative needs, resources and capabilities subsequently translates into a direct increase in the quality and efficiency of public services at the local level.

Secondly, the continuous evaluation and monitoring of the performance, quality and yield indicators, based on the results obtained and the feedback from beneficiaries, allows to identify and localize good practices, but also vulnerabilities generated by poor management. This greater accountability of public administration at the local level, correlated with improved recruitment practices and continuous training and motivation of human

resources, increases the attractiveness of the local public administration for experts and boosts their migration to the new local development centers.

Finally, decentralization of authority is a prerequisite for streamlining the decision-making process thanks to the consultation and participation of citizens. The importance of decentralization for transforming public administration derives from the much more efficient mechanisms of control, monitoring and sanctioning of the results recorded at the local level. For the members of each community, the performance and management of local authorities are criteria for permanent evaluation that are reflected in the daily activity of public administration.

Romania needs a real, coherent and constitutional decentralization, predictable and adapted to the needs at all levels, which will streamline the activity of public administration and ensure its functioning. At both local and central level, the process of reorganization, delimitation and transfer of competencies and responsibilities needs to be integrated into a macro-level approach to cooperation, coordination and control relations, in order to effectively prevent and solve the situations we are currently facing. This change needs to be calibrated in relation to the financing mechanisms that public authorities and institutions can access from the national and European Union budgets (Mowles and Norman, 2022, p. 194).

3.3. An administration that generates public policies

Setting the agenda in relation to internal and external stimuli of public administration, by encouraging connections and feedback, is a prerequisite to maximizing management results and satisfaction among the public. The renunciation of control over the complex and dynamic process of state transformation and its replacement with monitoring and evaluation, while simplifying bureaucratic procedures and requirements, represent the new foundation on which the activity of public administration will be able to become more efficient and oriented towards results (Gerrits, Eppel and Rhodes, 2021, p. 162). Relations between administration and policy are reconciled under the concept of governance, defined in relation to a flexible network of actors and participants in policy-making and decision-making, following consultations and deliberations (Overeem, 2021, pp. 7–13). The balance between control and subordination reflects the constitutional art of separation and complementarity between public administration and politics, being an indispensable element of constitutional governance (Overeem, 2021, p. 15).

Adapting the institutional and administrative capacity to the magnitude of the transformation and modernization process cannot be achieved if the rigidity of specialized structures is emphasized and the importance of expertise and professionalization of the civil service minimized (SIGMA, 2007, pp. 23, 36–37). The peculiarity of better regulation is today represented by the integration of the assessment of ‘legal risk’ into the culture and institutional practice, in order to reduce the need for the subsequent adoption of additional (recurrent and significant) regulations (Raccach, 2016, p. 3). The rationality of strategies dedicated to public policies thus becomes dependent on the processes of communication,

consultation, coordination, and obtaining consensus on the transformation of the state and public administration (Metcalf, 2000).

Harnessing expertise and involving public administration in consultation and public policy-making are indispensable requirements for achieving real, concrete results in improving the legislative technique, and the legislative process as a whole (Profiroiu *et al.*, 2005, p. 5). Experience in public administration is an important resource for identifying mechanisms for cost-efficiency and having legislation characterized by effectiveness, clarity, precision and simplicity (Xanthaki, 2018, p. 31). The involvement of public administration officials and experts in the cost-benefit assessment is a prerequisite for reducing the administrative and legislative burden, which will anchor the decision-making process in the administrative and institutional reality, by facilitating a more applied understanding of the mechanisms, practices and capacities of public administration at all levels (Weatherill, 2007, p. 84).

Citizens also have an important role in this process, as users, payers and clients of existing public services, but also as participants in, and beneficiaries of, state and public administration transformation. To become active partners of the Government and public administration at all levels, citizens must be part of a broader governance system, transparent and open to society (Mina-Raiu, 2014, 2015; Bouckaert, 2010, pp. 54–56).

3.4. Digital and innovative component of public administration

Responsiveness towards innovative social initiatives, together with a more applied and closer orientation towards public service users and beneficiaries, contribute to calibrating the pace and direction of modernization of public administration, reflecting changes occurring in society and in all sectors of activity, and gearing public services more towards the user, in particular vulnerable groups and consumers (Demir, 2022, p. 2). Supporting pilot projects provides the opportunity to assess the impact of innovative solutions in rethinking services, rebuilding trust and redesigning the roles and skills of public sector employees (Demir, 2022, pp. 15–21). However, the ongoing digital and information revolution in public administration and governance remains limited and shows significant discrepancies between the central and local levels.

Currently, Romania ranks last at the European level according to the DESI index of human capital, connectivity and integration of digital technologies. To bridge this gap, public administration needs tools to strengthen digital governance through national platforms that facilitate distance and online communication between citizens and public authorities. Consultation and direct involvement of beneficiaries allow for a better identification and management of citizens' needs and expectations (Demir, 2022, p. 71), while digitalization and innovation offer new tools and ways of interacting with them, in real-time and at low cost.

The main directions of digitalizing public administration are the protection of personal data, ensuring security and confidentiality, integration of all administrative activities and procedures within a national platform, and the use of clear, accessible language and tools for all clients of public services. Integrating digitalization and artificial intelligence into the

work of public administration at all levels requires focusing efforts on the protection of citizens' fundamental rights, supporting vulnerable groups and people, as well as encouraging participation and innovation in all sectors of activity.

4. Lessons learned from attempts to transform public administration in Romania

During the transition period, severe financial constraints, reduced experience of alternative administrative structures and inadequate or incomplete definition of the responsibilities of public staff and institutions limited and slowed down the process of extensive transformation of public administration (Government Strategy for Accelerating Public Administration Reform).

The UN Development Assistance (UNDP) spurred the national expansion of the Local Agenda 21 program and contributed to the intensification of the dialogue and cooperation between citizens and public administration (Romania's National Strategy for Sustainable Development. Horizons 2013–2020–2030). The partial incorporation of sustainable development principles represented the first step towards replacing the traditional vision of managing resources and interacting with beneficiaries with a modern, pragmatic, results-oriented approach, adapted to the needs of clients-citizens.

The pre- and post-accession steps towards NATO and the EU have been oriented towards fully appropriating the transatlantic requirements and the European *acquis*, by connecting public administration to governance mechanisms that are resilient and able to provide quality public services (Mavrot *et al.*, 2021, p. 13). Public administration occupied a central position in the development and Europeanization approaches; important investments were made to increase the management, adaptation and response capacity of public institutions and authorities.

In order to conclude the negotiations, normative acts and strategic documents were adopted, emphasizing clarity, coherence and predictability in public administration activities (Framework Law on decentralization; Local Public Finances Act; Law on the prefect and the prefect's institution; Status of local elected officials; Code of Conduct for Civil Servants, etc.). The revision and improvement of the civil servant status, along with the Law on local public administration, have contributed to regulating incompatibility and conflicts of interest in the public sector — a necessary step towards the trajectory of ethical, sustainable development and modernization.

The impact of the crisis was also felt by public sector employees, through reductions in salaries and posts, as well as institutional reorganization. In order to attract or motivate the experts, already employed or newly recruited, public management aimed to identify alternative solutions to compensate and alleviate the budgetary constraints.

The rapid response and adaptation to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 followed the same pattern of adjusting institutional behaviors and practices to internal and external stimuli, thus strengthening the resilience of public administration (Profiroiu and Nastacă, 2021).

The impetus towards top-down change has prevailed — an aspect that emphasizes the responsibility of the architects and builders of the transformation: the political and administrative elite in charge of designing and carrying out the process at both national and European level. For this reason, the focus has been on coordinating, clarifying and delimiting competencies and responsibilities, while stimulating and encouraging the participation of clients and beneficiaries of public services highlighted the complementary dimension of the institutional transformation process (European Commission, 2018a, 2018b).

4.2. Good practices

The current challenges for public administration are to increase the attractiveness and accessibility of highly skilled young people through methods of recruitment, selection and promotion that emphasize meritocracy, continuing professional and academic training, and specialization in public service. The accession to NATO and the EU has given Romania the opportunity to take over and adapt good practices regarding the transformation of the public administration, benefiting from technical support and financing in the pre- and post-accession stages. The continuous dynamics of public management and the needs regarding the management and distribution of public services, however, require a permanent adaptation of public policies and the activity of public administration in order to select and capitalize on innovative and alternative solutions. The identification and evaluation of the efficiency of innovative and alternative practices require a comparative analysis on two levels defined by: (I) the horizontal dimension that gives us a representation of the approaches used in the member states at the same reference point; and (II) the vertical dimension that allows us to identify the dynamics and chronological evolution of the transformation process of public administration in Romania.

In an economic, social and institutional context, where crises and disruptive events occur in an (apparently) unexpected manner and of unknown duration, volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity are defining characteristics of the dynamic operating environment coordinated by the public manager (Van der Wall, 2017, p. 28). In order to perform successfully and contribute directly ‘to create and deliver ‘public value’ (Benington and Moore, 2011, p. 2; Van der Wal, 2017, p. 32), the ideals of the public manager have undergone significant changes in the specialized literature: from the archetype of the traditional bureaucrat who respects the rules, to the (businesslike) manager focused on performance, to finally be described as networking, a collaborator focused on (inter)institutional relations (see Weber, 1978; Pollitt, 2003; Lynn, 2006; O’Leary and Blomgren Bingham, 2009; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2015; Van der Wal, 2017).

At the level of the member states of the European Union, the strategies for training and strengthening the skills of public administration personnel have varied, focusing on: the formation of professional bodies (France), development in stages (Germany), selection based on the ‘course-competition’ (Italy), postgraduate training in the field of strategic management (Ireland), but also on the complete liberalization of the training system for civil servants (Netherlands and Finland) (Ministry of Regional Development and Public

Administration, National Agency of Civil Servants, Professional Training Strategy 2016–2020, pp. 5–6).

In Romania, the transformation of public administration has highlighted the need to prioritize professional training to improve the performance of human resources and adapt it to best practice standards at the European level. Continuous evaluation of the human resource according to criteria regarding competence, performance and conduct has become dependent on the existence of a system of standardizing competencies in strategic fields, for each category of functions, adapted to institutional needs. The resizing of public administration and the need for adequate funding continue to pose a challenge for ensuring unitary and efficient mechanisms of control, monitoring and evaluation (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, National Agency of Civil Servants, Professional Training Strategy 2016–2020, pp. 6–9).

The foundations of the first wave of public administration transformation were laid in the period 2002–2004, to respond to the need to strengthen administrative capacity at the central and local level, in the context of taking over the EU *acquis* (Profiroiu *et al.*, 2005, p. 17). The monitoring of the European Commission indicated that the Romanian public administration ‘had made a major step forward towards adequate quality and control in programming’ (European Commission, Evaluation Report 2004). For the first time, in 2004, multi-annual programming was included through the Public Administration Reform Strategy, which sought to solve the shortcomings represented by cumbersome procedures, lack of professionalism, inadequate remuneration and faulty management of human resources (European Commission, Evaluation Report, 2004). The improvement and efficiency of the public service, decentralization, de-concentration and coordination of public policies offered ‘a good basis for future reform’ (European Commission, Evaluation Report, 2004).

During this period, the Government of Romania started a major recruitment exercise to fulfill the requirements for additional personnel. The efforts were doubled by the revision of the internal legislation applied to the civil service, the changes aiming at: (1) recruitment and promotion based on merit, through open competition; (2) the adequacy of remuneration based on a transparent and predictable salary scheme, in order to attract and retain competent civil servants, through a two-stage salary reform (intermediate in the short term and comprehensive termination in the medium term); and (3) improving human resource management with a focus on better training and building the body of public managers (European Commission, Evaluation Report, 2004).

In 2003, the Central Public Policy Unit was established, with the role of collaborating with relevant ministries to promote the modernization of public administration. In order to strengthen the operational capacity, the staff allocation of the Unit was increased, and the results contributed to a better assessment of the feasibility, impact and estimation of the budgetary implications of the normative acts (through the adoption of the Guide and Manual for the elaboration of public policies during 2004–2005). The inclusion of procedures for the development, monitoring and evaluation of public policies in the process of transformation of public administration represented a commitment undertaken

by Romania in the PAL (Programmatic Adjustment Loan) program of the World Bank. Thus, in 2004, the pilot phase of the CAF instrument (Common Assessment Framework) was started and applied in EU member states at the level of central and local public administrations (Profiroiu *et al.*, 2005, p. 13). The Twinning projects carried out in the period 2002–2006 and the establishment of Public Policy Units (2006) within the relevant ministries contributed to better regulation and planning of costs and estimation of the impact of adopted measures (General Secretary of Government, ‘Elaboration of public policies in Romania’).

Initiatives such as YPS (Young Professionals Scheme, 2003-2009) and BSGR (Special Scholarship ‘Romanian Government’, 2004–2008) have contributed to accelerating the pace of modernization of public administration, by forming a core of experts trained to carry out structural transformations of public services. Special positions in public administration dedicated to young professionals have been created to modernize public services. From the beginning, these newly created positions were profiled for a specific category of civil servants previously trained in the new paradigm of resource management in the public system (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, National Agency of Civil Servants, 2015, p. 5). INA (National Institute of Administration, during 2001–2009) and ANFP (National Agency of Civil Servants, after 2009) exercised the role of ‘professional training provider for various categories of civil servants’ (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, National Agency of Civil Servants, Professional Training Strategy 2016-2020, pp. 6–8).

Later, the important progress made by Romania in the pre-accession stage to the European Union was not complemented by efforts to transform public administration at the same pace and direction. Public organizations did not learn the ability to learn, and strategic management at the level of public institutions remained anchored in the discrepancy between the provisions of the legal framework and informal practices that limited the change and modernization of public administration.

In order to improve the managerial capacity in public administration, it is necessary to further clarify and develop the framework of competencies and attributions for the specific public function of public manager (Government of Romania, Emergency Ordinance no. 56/2004 and 92/2008; Government of Romania, Decision no. 78/2011). Fulfilling the role of a change agent at the strategic and operational levels requires strengthening and expanding the body of public managers.

In October 2022, the share of public managers in relation to the total number of public functions allocated in public administration at the central, territorial and local level is 1.69% (for filled positions), while 35.61% of the 365 positions of managers civil servants are vacant (ANFP, Situation of public functions — open data). At a micro-level analysis, we note the tendency to arrange positions at the central level, with a reduced presence of public managers within the local public administration: 187 positions occupied at the central level, 33 positions at the territorial level, and 15 positions at the local level ($\approx 12:2:1$) (National Agency of Civil Servants). Coordinators of Public Policy Units and with duties in the field of programs with external funding, public managers directly boosted the

transformation and modernization of public administration at the level of Government institutions (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, National Agency of Civil Servants, 2015, p. 34).

In addition, the fast-track scheme initially used to facilitate a career in public administration needs to be complemented today by an approach that provides more predictability through the early training of public managers and the establishment of new posts for them, especially at the local level (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, National Agency of Civil Servants, 2015, p. 7). The assimilation of public manager with the executive functions limits their placement in key positions of the public administration, by making the management and coordination activity difficult and implicitly denying the title of the position (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, National Agency of Civil Servants, 2015, p. 13).

It is important for public institutions to be aware that the resources allocated to external evaluation and an adequate remuneration of public managers according to performance and added value represent a medium and long-term investment, to ensure the continuous reconfirmation of public manager status and professional promotion (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, National Agency of Civil Servants, 2015, p. 18). The continuous need for professionalization of the civil service and the public manager implies the revival and development of new training programs, adapted both to the new generations and to the body of civil servants and managers, to develop the legal, economic and management knowledge, together with linguistic and digital skills and competences (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, National Agency of Civil Servants, 2015, p. 35).

5. Conclusions and prospects

Allocating significant strategic investments to the transformation of public administration is a guarantee for the modernization and sustainable development of the state and of the entire society. A binder for efficient interaction and collaboration between state institutions, citizens and the business environment, public administration is an integrated and indispensable part of public service provision and distribution. The intensity and depth of change within public administration is both a landmark and a stimulus for citizens and businesses alike. Compliance with legal requirements and the fight against unfair practices depends on examples of good practice and incentives that public administration offers in the process of organizing, operating and providing public services.

For Romania, placing public administration at the center of the architecture of development opportunities and perspectives is an imperative and irreversible approach to maximizing and developing human and institutional capabilities. In order to provide a coherent, predictable and sustainable transformation of public administration, a new framework and public management focused on integrating and seizing development and modernization opportunities (e.g., EU funds for investment, recovery and resilience, innovation and digitalization) are necessary.

The interconnection and interdependence between the four pillars of the transformation of public administration (human resources, decentralization, public policies, as well as innovation and digitalization) give us an overall representation of the efficient functioning and orientation towards a wide-ranging and profound change. This approach thus aims to highlight the role, importance and contribution of each pillar in capitalizing on the architecture of development opportunities and perspectives enjoyed by the Romanian public administration. At both national and European level, funds and investments aimed at reinvigorating public administration at all levels need to be used rationally and pragmatically, depending on the expectations of citizens and businesses.

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