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ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM

Romania has undergone starting with 1989 a profound change process, evolving from a totalitarian system to a society most people viewed as democratic. The change was neither gradual (as in many other Eastern European countries) nor peaceful (the revolution in December 1989 was violent). After the initial euphoria faded, Romanians were confronted with realities that, very often, were beyond their understanding or control. The evolution of Romania after 1989 represents an interesting case with regard to the social, political, and administrative challenges that a post communist country has to cope with.

The Romanian administrative environment has not acted for a long period of time as a catalyst for change and reform. The poor condition of the economy (generated by the collapse of communist economic structures and relationships), uncertainty regarding the ownership of land or real estate, the legacy of a centralized and politically driven administrative systems, widespread corruption, an organizational culture based on values that are not compatible with a democratic society, the lack of viable administrative institutions able to plan and implement change and properly interact with the citizens, all represent a hindrance to a coherent and timely reform process.

All political parties in Romania claimed, at least formally and publicly, that public administration reform represents a priority for their policy program. Every government and cabinet announced programs for reform, for acceleration of reform, and speeding of acceleration of reform.

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

On the other hand, the Romanian administrative system had to make some very difficult choices with regard to the reform process: it had to evolve from a pre-bureaucratic system (in which issues such as the professional expertise of the civil service and the independence of the public administration from the political sphere were still questioned) directly to a post-bureaucratic one characterized by approaches based on New Public Management. This process has generated interesting effects with regard to the co-existence of structures, procedures and mentalities belonging to different eras within the same administrative system.

From an institutional point of view, reform and change are usually equated with in the Romanian administrative and political culture with the creation of new laws

and regulations. This reality, which is intertwined with historical trends in continental Europe, has generated reform strategies which linked the success of the administrative reform to the number and the span of the adopted laws. As Kickert and Stillman noted [1999: 257], "For a century, liberal European welfare states could routinely function with lawyers and the state law in charge. These states now find comprehending and responding to the rapidity of numerous transformations can no longer be trusted to lawyers and the law". As a consequence, the main issues public administration is confronted with are related to implementation. The Romanian decision-makers seem to struggle with the idea that laws do not get implemented by themselves and that an institution, once created, doesn't necessarily have to function.

The reform was stimulated by several factors labeled by Pollitt and Bouckaert [2000] as classical: economic (budgetary constraints, the pressure of the market, etc), political (the desire of the political class to be perceived as reformist), technological (IT revolution), cultural (the development of new mentalities among both public servants and citizens), internationalization (mostly the EU influence). Each of these "classical" pressures is present, to a larger or a smaller extent, in Romania. What is, however, particularly important in the Romanian reform case is the weight of the international factors [Hintea-Loessner 2005]. In the recent years, the pressures which had the highest impact concerning the starting of concrete reform actions in public administration were those coming on behalf of international organizations, the European Union in particular. Beginning with the elaboration of the Law on the Status of the Civil Servant, to the development of reform networks, one can observe a wide range of policies developed and promoted by the Romanian public administration due to international pressure, even though most of the time they comprised obvious policies needed for the development of a functional administrative system. This was due to a large extent to the lack of the strategic vision at the domestic level concerning the reform of public administration. On the other hand, one cannot forget that there are no clear and common criteria for measuring the administrative efficiency for the candidate EU countries. Therefore the issue of "strengthening administrative capacity" is often discussed but prone to wide interpretation.

A research conducted by the Public Administration Department at Babes-Bolyai University, 2006-2007, on a group of public servants responsible for the reform of local public administration, health care, and education showed the following findings:

- The adoption of most of the reform measures were triggered by the pressure exercised by external factors (mainly the European Union).
- Those in charge with drafting the reform proposals were in most cases politically appointed advisers or foreign advisers, thus civil servants played a very limited role.
- The support for reform proposals was often limited due to insufficient public debates regarding the reform measures. In most cases, when public debates were held, they took place under the influence of various interest groups whose members have their own agenda and are unwilling to compromise.

- The implementation process was extremely difficult. In most cases the deadlines were not met; also resources were not disbursed on time. A survey conducted in 2004 with civil servants (the survey concerned itself with the civil servants' perception of the reform) showed that they are not satisfied with the reform of the payment/benefits, measures meant to curb corruption and the increase in transparency in public administration. Forty-eight percent of the surveyed civil servants believe that the legislative acts adopted in the field of administrative reform are useful but face limitations when applied in practice, while 41% of the surveyed civil servants believe that the legislative framework was poorly drafted.

All these characteristics have profoundly influenced the process of administrative reform and have generated effects on the long run. The most significant strategic problems public administration in Romania has to face regarded the following issues:

LACK OF STRATEGIC PLANNING AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT CAPACITIES

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

SERIOUS DEFICIENCIES REGARDING LEADERSHIP

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

ISSUES RELATED TO ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

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

PROFILE OF THE CONSUMER OF PUBLIC SERVICES

Another interesting aspect with regard to the administrative reform in Romania, from the perspective of mentalities/organizational culture, refers to the profile of the consumer of public services (Table 1).

Table 1: The profile of public services consumer in Romania. Statistical data

- 89% consider that corruption is relatively highly spread in Romania.
- 61% consider that the current problems Romania faces are due to the functioning of public institutions.
- 42% discuss often and very often among themselves and with their relatives/close acquaintances aspects regarding the community they live in.
- 85% have enough trust or very much trust in the church and the army.
- 14% have enough trust or very much trust in the Parliament, 48% in the city hall/mayor of the community they live in, and 21 % in NGOs.
- 93% are not members of a non-profit organization or association.
- 93% have never taken part in a support campaign (signing a petition) and 70% declare that they would never support such an initiative.
- 15% believe that they can influence the strategic decisions that are taken at the community level while 12% believe that they can influence the decisions that concern the entire country.
- 48% consider that their lives are influenced by the decisions that are made by the city hall and the local council and 53% consider that their lives are influenced by the decisions that are made by the government, parliament, and the president.
- 84% agree that Romania needs a strong leader/president who would be able to manage things efficiently.
- 71% believe that things would be better if everyone would obey the decisions made by public authorities.

Source: Public Opinion Barometer, November 2007

So according to Table 1, the profile of public services consumers in Romania from the standpoint of the managerial reform is related to:

- lack of trust in the efficient functioning of public organizations;
- convinced of the importance of informal relationships in solving issues that involve public administrations;
- unsure of his/her capacity to influence the public administration and the state;
- conscious of the important role played by public administration in his/her life.

We may ask why has the public services consumer in Romania developed from the start a hostile attitude towards public administration. This hostile attitude towards public administration is based on the previous negative experiences of the citizen:

- excessive bureaucratic procedures;
- an improper management of the relationship with the citizens - improper spaces for public relations, an authoritarian approach toward the citizen, issues with communication, etc;
- slow functioning of the public administration in its relations with the citizens;
- total depersonalization of the relationship with the citizen;
- lack of interest in the assessment of the citizens' needs prior to the provision of public services;
- lack of a coherent measurement effort of the citizens' satisfaction vis-à-vis public services (lack of interest in the post-provision phase);
- expectations often belong to the public administration vis-à-vis the citizens and not the other way around.

COMMUNICATION INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE ORGANIZATION

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

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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

INITIAL BACKGROUND IS TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT TO A VERY LITTLE EXTENT AND CONTINUOUS LEARNING IS, IN THE BEST CASE, TREATED SUPERFICIALLY

Continuous learning classes are often designed based upon supply/quantity and not on expected results. Therefore, notices and announcements for training often look like tourism agency catalogues, and the impact of the invested money is usually minor.

LACK OF CAPACITIES FOR COORDINATION, CONTROL AND EVALUATION

The deficiencies regarding the understanding of the importance of evaluation within managerial systems in public administration refer to a broad array of problems related to the understanding of the role played by evaluation and difficulties in building functional performance measurement systems.

PROBLEMS RELATED TO THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF PROMOTING SERIOUS ETHICAL CODES BY THE MANAGEMENT

The problem of corruption is related both to the lack of ethical values and the lack of functioning of formal structures, in which case everybody will try to deal through informal structures.

THE LACK OF A CRITICAL MASS OF PUBLIC MANAGERS

There is a clear lack of a critical mass of public managers who are capable of developing an entrepreneurial spirit based on creativity and a quest for opportunities, in opposition with the "classical" type of manager, rigid, reactive and limited in choices.



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

All these problems belong to the lack of managerial capacity and to the quality of human resources in Romanian public administration. Interestingly enough, nobody seems to have made the connection between these deficiencies and the issue of the preparation of the body of civil servants. Every year thousands of civil servants graduate from public administration programs offered by universities. However, there was never a serious, concrete communication between these programs and the authorities with responsibility in the agencies and institutions the field. There are multiple reasons at the base of this situation and the responsibility is divided. However, the lack of strategic partnership has negative consequences at the level of the functioning of public administration. It is obvious that an administrative reform cannot be designed in the absence of a major evolution in the field of human resources. The reform cannot be implemented by civil servants who do not under-

stand it or who simply reject it. The building of a civil service body able to promote and support reform is a major task, and cannot be designed without involving universities.

Our research question is: where are universities positioned within this administrative context dominated by a discourse based reform but characterized by significant planning issues and implementation? Are they a factor capable to support the political and administrative class in defining and promoting change?

After 1989 Romanian universities have also undergone significant changes. During the communist era there were very few of them, having a reduced capacity to attract and train students. During this period we can only speak of public universities, completely subordinated from a political, financial and operational standpoint to the communist regime. Some of the mechanisms of that era are still visible today at the functional level. The communist period should not be overlooked and one needs to understand its complexity, due to the effect it continues to produce upon the effective functioning of the Romanian higher education system. From deviant characteristics (deciding that some specialization are "dangerous" therefore their functioning should be forbidden) to managerial mechanisms (money should always come from the state) universities were highly influenced by the totalitarian system they operated in.

The increase in the number of universities after the revolution was significant; in 1991 there were 56 universities with approximately 257 faculties and 192 810 students; in 2006 there were 107 universities with 770 faculties and 716 464 students. This evolution took place in the context characterized from a demographic standpoint by a decrease in population (between the 1992 and 2002 censuses a decrease of 1 million people took place, based on both massive migration as well as a decrease in the birth rates); also it is estimated that approximately 2 million people work abroad (mostly within the EU counties). This increase in the number of universities is on the one hand natural, a response to the limited access to education that existed during the communist regime. On the other hand this increase has generated a series of problems regarding the quality of the education process and the way in which universities function.

The research undertaken by the Public Administration Department at Babes-Bolyai University in 2007 showed that 31.3% of the citizens consider that the Romanian higher education is less qualitative than 10 years ago and that 57.9% trust the universities very little. On the other hand the interviewees believe that the number of universities is too high (70%) while others consider that they are more interested in collecting fees than in teaching and research (48.2%).

In Romania the evaluation of universities is carried out by a National agency - ARACIS (The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance within Higher Education). This agency was created in order to continue the work of a previous agency with similar competences in this field. Universities, both private and public, in order to stay on the market, need to have their programs accredited by this agency.

Among the problems universities in Romania are confronted with the following are most important:

Developments related to students. They include demographic changes, diversification of the profile of the students and their expectations. The number of high

school graduates (the traditional recruitment pool for universities) is shrinking. Starting with the 1990–1991 cohorts a major decrease in the number of students is expected. On the other hand, increased mobility, raising welfare, accession to the EU, are leading toward a change in the expectations of students and parents towards the quality of educational programs in Romania. Also, in addition to the typical students, other groups emerged as potential students. This group consists of adults who are seeking life long education both in the public and private sectors.

Developments related to economic sustainability. Universities in Romania are nowadays forced to look beyond traditional financing sources (state) and search for alternative ones [Johnstone 2002]. Their capacity to identify new financing sources is in direct connection with their position on the market. Universities have however serious problems regarding their advocacy capacity.

Community outreach. Until now universities acted upon the belief that they should stay in their "ivory towers", isolated and above the community. Today they need to imagine new ways to reach out. Traditionally, universities have been more interested in emphasizing their role of keepers of traditional and cultural heritage rather than catalysts for change in the society [Hintea-Loessner 2005].

Managerial capacity. Managing a university is no longer a quest for achieving prestige and status among other universities. It is also related to the pressure to get results and to achieve a good position in a market that is becoming very complex, with both private and public actors, national and international. Human resources management can no longer be based on traditional methods of recruitment, promotion and payment.

Capacity to internationalize. Universities no longer have the monopoly over the national territory. They are competing with other universities within an international arena, in the context of mobile students, and therefore they need to reevaluate and take into consideration both the international competition and international quality standards.

Research capacity. Romanian universities have long been focused rather on teaching than on research. They have favored for a long time a non-competitive functional model, based mostly on the transfer of knowledge to the students and are nowadays confronted with the need to rapidly develop their research function.

UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN ROMANIA – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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

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

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

Relationship between theory and practice. Very often universities are viewed as being unable to overcome a very theoretical general framework. This distinction between theory and practice is very dangerous, because it fuels a conservatory administrative mentality, based upon the proverb "theory as theory, but implementation kills us", and leads to a costly ignoring of administrative models and experiences already validated in practice [Barth 2002].

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

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

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

Involvement in continuous learning programs. Academic programs of public administration, together with other public/private actors have major capacities, both quantitatively and qualitatively, regarding continuous training, and they should seriously and vigorously pursue it. Even though the market in the field is becoming increasingly diverse, the lack of coherent strategies at national levels has led to results with little impact regarding the quality of the civil service body.

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

relationship with the "beneficiaries" of public administration, which allows a better adaptation of the programs to the requirements of the market.

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

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

The development of a modern academic management ("practice what you preach"), based upon efficiency and effectiveness and on a strategic approach to development. It is difficult to teach others management courses in public administration if the university itself is not capable to function according to the principles it preaches.

Jenei and LeLoup [1999] propose a fivefold classification for international cooperation activities at the university level; according to their model there are five different hierarchical stages of cooperation, namely: *Exchange of Contacts and Information, Systematic Exchange of Knowledge and Experience, Joint Action, Mutual Cooperation and Institutionalized Partnerships.*

We consider that PA university programs in Romania need to overcome the *learning/survival stage* (setting basic elements of the program: objective, curriculum, initiation of international cooperation programs, etc), as well as the *institutional development stage* (the formal structures are stable, staff and faculty is growing, new programs are created, the position of the national level is more powerful, etc) and focus on achieving "*internationalization*" and *qualitative consolidation stage* (capacity to respond promptly to international challenges and opportunities, capacity to compete and cooperate within a high quality environment, international benchmarking, etc. The responsibility of Romanian universities within the process of public administration reform is tremendous; they can and should become part of the national and international reform network, together with other relevant actors/stakeholders, public or private.

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