

QUALITY OF PUBLIC SERVICES AND PROMOTION OF QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS IN EU MEMBER STATES

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***Abstract:** The objectives of this study concerned the following aspects: the highlighting of the main aspects which justify the need to implement a quality management system at the level of public institutions in the European area as a main way improving the quality of public services provided to citizens; the analysis of the quality of public services provided in EU member countries in view of the perception of citizens and the degree of digitalization; providing an overview of the convergence of quality management elements in the Romanian public administration and EU states. The main conclusion of the study is that, without denying the progress made by Romania in adopting measures to support the promotion and development of quality management in the public sector, this process must be tackled in a broader context, supported by concrete policies, strategies and actions to support the modernization of the public sector and improve citizens' access to quality public services. Research is based on a variety of bibliographical sources, such as: articles, reference papers, European documents and strategies developed in the field of public management. In addition, the information base for this study is represented by several studies, summaries, reports by the European institutions on promoting quality management in the public sector of EU Member states.*

***Key words:** public services, quality management, convergence, European Union, România*

***JEL Classification:** H11, H75*

1. Introduction

The concern of European citizens for access to quality public services is now higher than ever, and improving the quality of public services occu-

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pies a special position on the agenda of the European Union. At European level, the development of quality policies and strategies and the promotion of a quality culture in the provision of public services are key elements for improving performance and efficiency in the public sector. In recent years, most member countries of the European Union have made sustained efforts to reform their administrative system and improve the quality of public services by implementing a quality management system in public institutions and increasing activity performance. Through its institutions, the European Union supports these efforts, encouraging the member states to promote high-quality performance models in the public sector, designed to enhance the efficiency of business and the quality of public services. This is obviously a broad agenda, carried out over several years, which involves sustained efforts by governmental decision makers in the member countries, but also the active involvement of citizens as beneficiaries of public services.

With all the aspects insights taken into account, this study analyses the quality of public services in the member states of the European Union, pointing out the need to introduce the elements of quality management in the practice of public institutions. The objectives of the research have been achieved through the brief presentation of the issues aimed at the quality of public services and the implementation of quality management models in public administration in the countries of the European Union, as well as through the analysis the quality of public services from the perspective of European citizens and the level of development of digital platforms for accessing public services. Also, in our study we refer to the convergence of quality management elements in the Romanian public administration and EU member states, by identifying those aspects that support complementarity of policies, strategies, mechanisms and tools to promote and implement quality management in public institutions. We believe that the results of this work can be useful to public institutions in Romania, which seek to find sources of experience and best practices on the quality of public services and the implementation of quality management elements, inspired by the successful models implemented by the member states of the European Union.

The research was conducted using a variety of bibliographical sources, such as: statistics, surveys, reports made at the request of the European Commission on the quality of public services provided in the member

states and the introduction of quality management in public system institutions.

2. Considerations regarding the quality of public services and quality management in the public sector

Public services are defined as “services of general interest accessible to all citizens, at least at minimal level while the consumer is considered as “at the origin of the production public service, the one that legitimates the existence and evolution of public services in a competitive market (Tănăsescu, D., 2008). Improving access to quality public services is a requirement of the current society, which requires satisfying the increasingly complex and diverse needs of citizens and increasing the quality of life. In the literature there are various acceptations regarding the concept of the quality of public services, its content and characteristics. Although approaches are numerous and different, a number of common elements can be identified that they support. This is particularly the emphasis on meeting the expectations and needs of citizens and on the public sector's effort to improve their work and provide services that meet their increasingly demanding demands. Providing quality services, more efficient and accessible services requires the creation of an institutional framework that favors the development of quality strategies and policies as an expression of the implementation of the principle of guidance to citizens. In this context, all the commitments and actions of the representatives of the public management in terms of the quality of the services offered must be determined by the general public interest and the full orientation towards its satisfaction (Androniceanu, A., 2006, p. 256).

The public management model promoted through the programs supported at European Union level is designed to enhance the efficiency and quality of public services provided by increasing the level of efficiency and social responsibility of the institutions from the member countries. This perspective justifies the need to implement a quality management system at the level of public institutions as an integral part of enhancing commitment to public good and modernizing public management. The quality management must be regarded as an important element of public sector reform, designed to effectively support the work of public institutions by complying with

common quality standards, the optimum use of available resources, citizen orientation and satisfying its needs.

In the member countries of the European Union concern for the application of a quality model manifests itself predominantly from the second half of the '90. The most popular quality models used in public administration in the countries of the European Union are: Business Excellence Model-BEM, ISO standards model, CAF model (Common Assessment Framework). The European Union has continuously supported the application of quality models in member states' administrative systems through: funding, analysis, technical assistance, development and the transfer of good practice.

The ISO quality standards model is the most commonly used tool of quality management in public administration and is based on the application of international quality standards ISO 9000. The public institutions are also applied to the environmental norms ISO 14000, ISO 17020 and ISO 17025 and technical rules in the field of public administration (Matei, L., Lazăr, C., 2011, p. 71). The model is based on the idea that the activities of an organization can be standardized on a certain number of defining characteristics for a quality management system so that, this system can become effective for improving the different aspects quality (Casadeus, P. and Karapetrovic, K., 2007, pp. 120-136). The assessment of organisation is carried out by third parties and certificates are issued for a limited period of time (www.iso.org.).

The Business Excellence Model-BEM was developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management. The philosophy which is the basis of the model proposed by EFQM is "excellence" and the promotion of "best practices" (efqm.org). In public institutions was introduced for the first time in health organizations in Germany and expanded in several EU member states. The model involves the application of own assessments from the organization to identify, based on the nine criteria of the model, the strengths and weaknesses of the institution and the highlighting of the improvement solutions.

The third model mentioned, the CAF (Common Assessment Framework), was designed specifically for the European institutions operating in the public system, presented in 2000 in Lisbon, at the first European Quality Conference in Public administration of EU member states. The model was

developed to create a common framework for assessing and improving quality policies and tools for the public administration sector in EU member states as well as the model of business excellence, the CAF is based on self-assessment of the activity of public institutions, by appealing to a set of standardized criteria used in the European area. The model allows changes in the functioning of organizations in order to implement an integrated quality management system and strengthen a quality culture in order to improve the quality of services provided to citizens. The CAF model has been promoted in many EU member countries, simplifying the transfer of best practices on the implementation of quality management between public administration institutions in EU member states. In Romania, the CAF has been promoted since 2005 in the process of preparing the country's integration in the European Union, but without a character mandatory. The actions to promote the model were coordinated by the Ministry of Administration and Interior (MAI) and consisted in the publication of implementation guides, brochures explaining how the CAF applies, presenting the successful experiences of public institutions that have implemented the CAF, training and improvement programs for official public in the field of quality management.

3. Analysis of the quality of public services in EU Member States from the perspective of citizens and the level of digitalization

Public services play an important role in every citizen's everyday life. As tax payers, the beneficiaries of public services must be more informed and aware of their role in supporting the public sector, and the public institutions must be more responsive to their needs to provide quality public services.

The citizen's position towards public institutions has evolved to the "customer" status of public services, increasing the pressure for the activity of public institutions to be more efficient in resource management and more operative in the provision of quality public services. Moreover, most points of view in the literature place the citizen at the heart of public service discussions as an integral part of modernizing public management. From this perspective, Potter (1988, p. 151) expresses the view that the consumerism pursues a balancing of the balance of power between the supplier and the

beneficiary by improving citizens' access through freedom of choice, clear possibilities for information, the existence of remedies and the possibility of representation. Therefore, the citizens are the ones who need to be actively involved in influencing public decisions affecting their quality of life, through constant attention to the actions of decision-makers and the careful assessment of the quality of the services provided. Besides, a greater involvement of citizens in assessing the quality of services can contribute to improving the performance and efficiency of the public sector. To allow ordinary citizens to assess the quality and efficiency of basic services, to express their needs and preferences and to engage in innovation provides an opportunity to allow for better use of public funds, and to improve the provision of services (Ringold et al, 2013).

The way citizens appreciate the quality of public services is an important indicator for the level of development of a nation, for the well-being of its citizens and their confidence in the public system. Thus, according to a recent survey conducted at the request of the European Commission and published on the EU open data portal on how European citizens appreciate the quality of public services, the results show that there are important differences in perception of respondents on the quality of public services provided (figure 1).

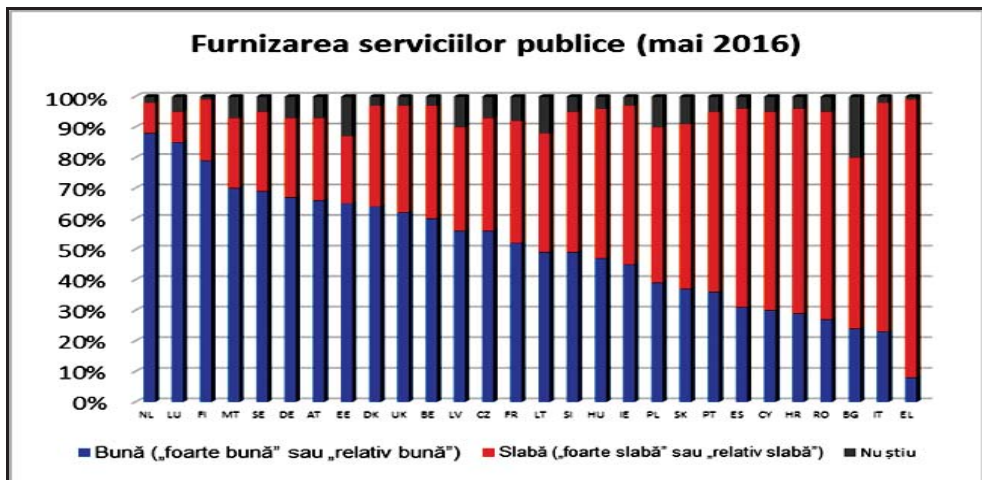


Figure 1. Perception of the european citizens on the quality of public services (The European Commission, Portalul European de Date, Eurobarometru 2017)

As we expected, most favorable assessments (“very good or “relatively good quality) have the citizens of the North-Central European Union: The Netherlands, Luxembourg, Finland, Sweden, Germany and Austria. Among them a pleasant surprise is Malta, with a percentage of almost 90% on the positive perception (*very good* or *relatively good*) of citizens regarding the quality of public services. At the opposite pole, with predominantly negative perceptions of the quality of public services provided (*very poor* or *relatively weak*) are the citizens of: Romania, Bulgaria, Italy, Greece. Regarding Romania, the proportion of Romanian citizens satisfied with the quality of public services is reduced, around 25%. In much greater proportion, around 60%, Romanian respondents highlighted the poor or relatively poor quality of public services.

The current challenge of the public sector in terms of providing services is to bring information technology into the public administration. The citizens’ needs and expectations are increasingly complex and the public sector needs to adapt to new digital technologies. The development of the e-government platform for public services simplifies citizens’ access to information and services, reduces the waiting time for providing services, improves the quality and efficiency of public service provision (Dragomir, C., Panzaru, S., 2012). The use of new communication technologies allows for another type of community participation, opening up new possibilities for interaction between citizens and public institutions. At the level of the countries in the European Union there are still large disparities in terms of the level of digitization of society and public administration. The comparative analysis report on 2017 regarding the electronic government highlights these differences (figure 2). The best results are recorded by: Malta, the Baltic countries, the Nordic countries, Austria and Germany.

In the lower tailpipe we retrieve the states from Southeast Europe. Romania ranks in this report on the penultimate spot before Greece. The level of digital performance of EU member states was analyzed in a study conducted by the European Commission using a composite index (DESI). DESI it summarizes five relevant indicators on Europe’s digital performance and pursues the evolution of EU member states in digital competitiveness. The five dimensions of DESI clue taking into consideration to track the position of EU member states in digital competitiveness are the following: connectivity, human capital, internet use, digital technology integration, public services digital.

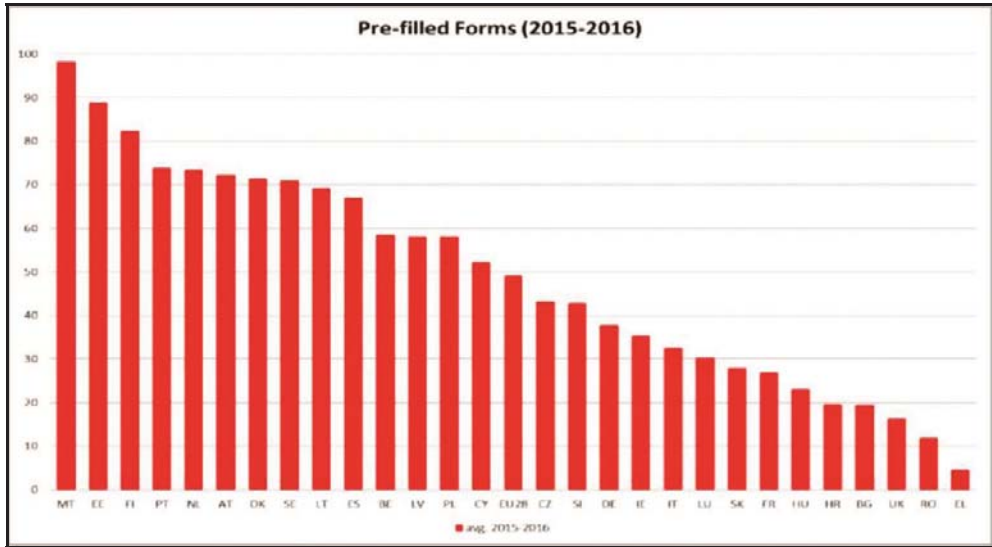


Fig. 2. Europe's Digital Progress Report 2017 – Digital Public Services (eGovernment Benchmark Report)

As it can observe in the above chart (figure 3), Estonia had the highest score for digital public services, followed by: Finland, the Netherlands and Denmark, Austria. In these countries more than half of the population chooses an online channel for accessing public services.

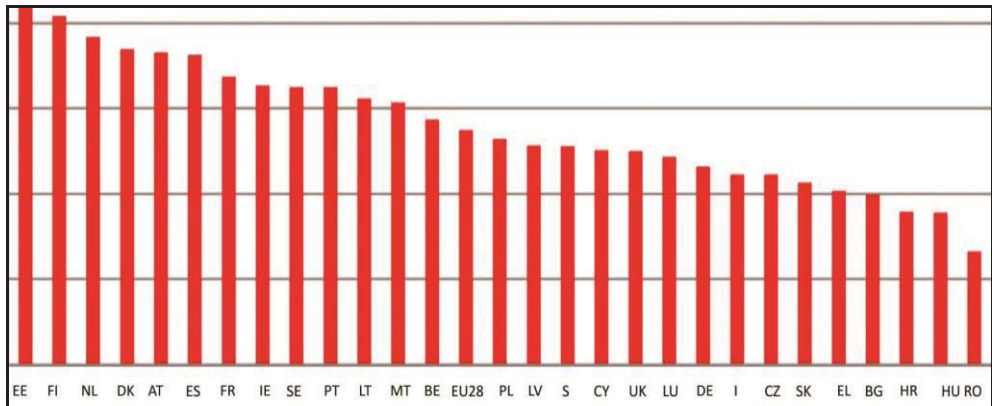


Fig. 3 . Evolution of EU member states according to the digital public services dimension, DESI ranking (European Commission, Digital Scoreboard)

At the opposite pole, Romania is the last to be ranked in terms of digitization of public services, following Bulgaria, Croatia and Hungary. Among the causes that could explain the weak score of Romania include the low level of digital education and lack of competences in the use of online portals to access public services, poorly developed technology infrastructure, in especially in rural areas and small towns, lack of concrete actions on implementation of the measures set out in the Digital Agenda 2014-2020. Although we cannot deny the progress made in recent years in terms of electronic government (in the year 2018 there has been an increase in the number of services offered online compared to 2017), Romania must make more effort towards the implementation of the digital strategy in the public sector and the development of online platforms for the public services.

4. The convergence Romania-European Union regarding the quality management elements in public administration

Regarded as a common model, the administrative convergence implies, according to specialists, a reduction in the degree of difference and disparities of administrative structures (Pollitt, 2001). The level of convergence is high when there are several elements, mechanisms, structures that support similarities between different entities in several states and is reduced when the differences, the disparities are higher. Basically, we can talk about convergence when the basic ideas, the competence, the resources and institutional structures in several states match. In this case, the probability for convergence is increased, and when the inconsistencies are strong, the convergence has a small degree or there is even divergence (Matei, Dogaru, 2010, p. 5).

In our study, we refer to the convergence of the elements of quality management in the Romanian public administration and the EU states by identifying those aspects that support complementarity of policies, strategies, mechanisms and tools to promote and implement quality management in public institutions. In line with the approach and principles of the European Union, Romanian legislation has been harmonized with that at European level in certain sectors of public services. In this sense, we can identify the first element of convergence from the legislative aspects adopted at European level, and appropriated by Romania, in terms of the quality and ac-

cessibility of services provided by the public sector. Several legislative steps have been undertaken at national level that have pursued the increase in the quality of public services. Romania has also developed national programs to reform public administration in line with EU requirements and objectives. In the field of quality management, strategies and strategic documents were drawn up aimed at aligning the public sector with European quality standards. Romania has mastered its main objectives related to quality management in public administration, objectives supported in the practice of EU states and aimed at: decentralization of public services; decision-making transparency, citizen orientation; increase efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector; professionalization of public function, provision of digital public services, assessment of citizens' satisfaction with the public services provided. Looking from this perspective, we can say that there are similarities between Romania and the member states of the European Union on the development of quality policies and the implementation of quality management in public administration.

We also note that there is a certain degree of convergence Romania – the member states of the European Union and in relation to the application of quality models in public administration institutions. The application of ISO 9000 quality standards is one of the most widely used quality models in public institutions in EU member states. In turn, the CAF is included in the strategies for the modernization of public administration in Romania, as in most EU states there are also elements of convergence and in terms of ways of promoting quality models. In Romania, the promotion of the CAF model has been achieved, just as in the member states, through implementation guides, brochures explaining how the CAF applies, presenting the successful experiences of public institutions that have implemented the CAF, programs training for officials public in the field of quality management. However, in view of the application about a quality performance models in the Romanian public administration, we cannot speak of real convergence with advanced EU states in the development and implementation of quality management tools in public sector. Applying cumbersome and lacking support from the governmental and managerial level of the CAF model in the Romanian public administration institutions is one of the examples that support the above statement.

Conclusions

Improving the quality of public services meant for the European common space a major and permanent concern, a key factor in the administrative reforms of the member countries. Providing quality, more efficient and accessible services, requires the creation of an institutional framework that favours the application of quality management tools as an expression of the implementation of the principle of guidance to citizens.

The most important conclusion of the research is that, although Romania has scored at legislative level the regulatory activities of issues related to the development and implementation of quality management systems in public administration and improvement of the quality of public services, there is still, as seen, large gaps towards the EU states with notable experience and results in terms of the quality of public services provided and the level of digitization of public administration. These deficiencies arise both from the lack of coherence in the implementation of an efficient system of quality management and the difficulty of implementing systems for assessing the quality of public services provided. The insufficient attention given to the essential principle of quality management, that of the orientation to the citizen, the beneficiary of public services, can only increase disparities in the majority of member states of the European Union and reduce, as a consequence, the level of convergence in terms of quality management elements in public administration. The analysis confirms that from the point of view of the quality of public services provided to citizens and the process of implementing quality management tools in public institutions, Romania is still in a developing area.

Without denying the progress made by Romania in adopting measures to support public sector reforms, there are still problems especially in terms of real connection to citizens' needs and expectations, application of performance models and stay in public institutions and the insufficient involvement of human resources in the system. We believe that, unfortunately, the public institutions in Romania have not yet developed a real culture of respect for citizens of public service users and, even less, a culture of assessing citizens' satisfaction with the public services that provided to them. Therefore, the challenges remain for the Romanian public sector, which must act coherently and sustained, primarily at governmental level, to increase convergence level with advanced European countries in implement-

ing the management quality in public institutions, assimilating good practice developed by them.

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