SARS-COV₂ as Trigger for Reviewing Strategic and Operational Public Administration Frameworks

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Abstract: Administration as complex field of science, expertise, and research has accompanied economic, social, and cultural development from ancient times up to now. Public administration is the most visible component as it has multiple facets as expression of the political, legal, and managerial context inside a country. It ensures permanent direct or indirect links between government and individuals, and is relevant for several related fields like employment, education, health, and environment. The current ongoing pandemic has confronted public administrations all over the world with multiple challenges, and one of them stands out – the necessity of reviewing policymaking processes, policies, measures, and intervention frameworks of public administration to make them more flexible, responsive and fit for operating in a digitalized environment. In this respect, Romania is faced with multiple challenges regarding policymaking and public administration policies, and as regards decision-making and proper functioning at the two main levels, respectively operational and strategic.

Current uncertainty needs to be addressed not just by immediate action, but also requires outlining some future directions for policymaking as regards public policies at strategic level, and improvement of skills and capacities at operational level at both national and European level. It should address main fields public administration has to deal with, from education and health, to employment and environmental issues as global crises like the SARS-COV₂ pandemic or other unexpected force majeure events might change priorities and endanger certain aspects of established policies thus being both threat and opportunity for convergence and cohesion at European and national level.

Keywords: *Public administration; operational and strategic level; policymaking; policies; pandemic; SARS-COV₂.*

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1. Introduction

Administration is a concept evolving permanently in time, and shows multiple facets indicative for the development and modernization potential of a country, or of a group of countries joined by common interests and goals, requiring thus coordination and collaboration that is achieved by administrative decision and action. Administration is relevant in both public, private and non-governmental sphere, and as regards the proper functioning and operation of the society, according to established constitutions, laws, norms, rules, and regulations public administration takes a particular type of precedence. It is the framework expressing best the political, economic, legal, and cultural performance of a country, and is the first to indicate whether *good governance* is present or needs further improvement.

Over time there were several debates related to the relevance, role, and extent of power that public administration should, or should not have as regards its interactions, interconnections and interlinks with the private or non-governmental administration, as public administration in its entirety is still a relatively young field of study, dating from about the last half of the nineteenth century.

Public administration is defined, in general, by considering the environment in which it operates, as it is the expression of the ongoing policymaking process pertaining to governments and parliaments. As such, it is first the reflection of the dominant ideology, values, and culture in a country. It is shaped by the ongoing policymaking processes, the policies implemented and which subsequently are further monitored, improved, as the process resumes, based on the information gathered before, and during the time the respective policy/policies are operating and generating effects.

Public administration has as first and dominant environment, the political one, this being applicable whether we talk about governance at national or European Union level and expresses the more or less democratic values governing the hierarchically leading structures (for instance, governments, parliaments). These political bodies are in charge with the policymaking processes that result in policies to be implemented by the immediately subordinated structures central, regional, and/or local.

This context emphasizes the fact that policy and public administration will increasingly need knowledge that is more global, in both responses, and remedies. At the same time, the current pandemic has shown that public administration plays a key-role in managing critical health issues in a country, by all its levels.

The other environmental level is the economic-social level at which the public administration unfolds its activity either directly or indirectly. Actually, this is the level targeted as it encompasses economic, social, cultural, and traditional values and gives information about the performance of the governance, in general, and about the effectiveness of the public administration reflected by both the strategic level and the operational level of public administration

2. Administration – brief theoretic state of affairs

Public administration has currently about three basic administrative levels of operation: government, central authorities, and regional and/or local authorities. Within the EU, these are represented by two or three administrative tiers, with some exceptions that have four or five administrative tiers (see Table 1). These levels are interlocked in a permanent process of coordination, cooperation, and communication in setting out the development directions for the essential fields ensuring the development and modernization of a country. Moreover, the number of tiers is indicative for the level of decentralization reflected in the vertical dispersion of authority and for the degree of horizontal coordination at government level (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 51).

Table 1: Number of administrative tiers in EU-27(28) countries

Countries with 2 administrative tiers	Countries with 3 administrative tiers	Countries with 4 administrative tiers	Countries with 5 administrative tiers
Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malta, Slovenia	Bulgaria, Hungary, Czech R., Denmark, Greece, Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, United Kingdom	Austria, Belgium*, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain	Portugal

Source: EUPACK, A Comparative overview of public administration characteristics and performance in EU28, 2017

*Belgium has also a fifth tier, but only for the district councils from Antwerp

Nowadays, as already mentioned above in the case of the European Union, public administration becomes increasingly more involved with the global level as it is influenced by developments not only inside the country, but also in the immediately neighboring countries, and even in far away

countries. Simply stated: Globalization has changed and will continue to change the agenda of public administrations all over the world, as trade, capital, investments and multi-trans-and international corporations operate all over the world, and tourism has turned into a lucrative industry.

Moreover, the current pandemic underpins the idea of the necessity for public administration to become more complex and knowledgeable about policies and developments elsewhere as, for instance, environmental issues, global warming, migration (from war areas, for work or other economic and social reasons) will not be put to halt by this pandemic interlude. Hence, it is obvious that even policies that seem domestic in nature could or are influenced by events elsewhere (Raadschelders & Vigoda-Gadot, 2015).

The pandemic has proven that public administration has vital roles to fulfill as regards public health, and providing for both regulation and implementation mechanisms of fine nature that address political-ideological, economic, and social issues at the same time at both strategic and operational level. Good governance encompasses both levels, and is how the acts and actions of public authorities are perceived and assessed.

3. Overview of good governance and public administration in the European Union and Romania

Good governance may be defined as the output of well-functioning institutions, which might be defined from three perspectives that are currently used interchangeably by various experts. The three perspectives are:

- a) The Northian perspective defining institutions as *rules of the game* (North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990), hence the set of laws, norms, rules that regulate the interactions and interrelationships between individuals and that minimize transaction costs, irrespective of the type of interaction (economic, political, social, etc.).
- b) The institutions as *players* perspective (Hodgson, 2006; Nelson, 1994) according to which they are regarded as the best possible mix of rules and enforcement bodies/organizations. In this case, as institutions are regarded also governmental agencies, employers' organizations, trade unions, courts, and educational entities.
- c) Finally, a third perspective is the one of institutions as self-enforcing equilibrium outcome of the *game* where institutions represent simultaneously both beliefs, behaviors, values, and attitudes of individuals in interaction with other individuals, and as organizations

with the power and necessary skills and competences for changing the rules of the game (Schotter, 1981).

In our paper, for addressing good governance and public administration we adhere to the Northian definition, as it is best fitted to reflect the relevance and impact of institutions on good governance, as direct outcome of compliance with the fundamental requirements set by long-standing institutions ensuring the well-functioning of the society as a whole. Moreover, they transcend the various ideologies (social-democratic, liberal, neoliberal, conservative, etc.), according to which a country is governed at a given time, and can measure to a certain extent, beyond mere narratives the efficiency of public administration.

In brief, the Northian perspective is best fitted for reflecting the governmental capacity and performance as regards the main components for judging the performance at governmental and administrative level in terms of transparency, accountability, stability, effectiveness, regulatory quality, corruption control, etc.

The starting point is the assertion that public administration in member-states needs to address increasingly more complex issues. These issues are identical for the central and regional and/or local tiers; nonetheless, the means and devices available for mitigating them are somewhat different, depending on the well functioning of the coordination, cooperation, and verification mechanisms, in general, and on the strength of the institutional setting/arrangements, in particular.

Main shared concerns are those related to the in-country attractiveness of the business environment stimulating investments both foreign and domestic, addressing societal issues and concerns, and harmonizing perspectives about the development of the country/ region/ locality between various interested stakeholders.

Business environment support and incentives are most relevant for ensuring competitiveness, and finally sustainable economic growth while ensuring the premises for good employment shares in country, at regional and local level. This requirement needs at the same times taking account of budgetary constraints that were imposed in the period after the economic-financial crisis.

Societal changes are just as important and relevant, as these are driven both by the pressure of technological and economic changes and transformative interactions occur both bottom-up, and top-down driven.

Next to these two large and significant components is placed the component of highest impact, respectively the one responsible for policymaking and policy implementation. This component refers to drafting,

adjusting and improving permanently regulations as to be smart, encouraging as regards administrative burdens, taxation of both public and private entities, and able to design service delivery architectures that support growth, competitiveness, and good quality of life for the citizens.

Good governance goes hand in hand with well-functioning and quality public administration, and both reflect how effective and efficient economic and social institutions are.

In the European Union, currently around 75 million employees are active in the public sector, and they represent around 25% of the labor force, with about 16% employed in central government (Eurostat database; Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2017). This workforce represents the bureaucracy responsible for translating into action, at practical, operational level the results of the policymaking processes and policies developed at the strategic level.

Obviously, the quality of government at central and regional/local level is the outcome of how well both strategic and operational levels perform in fulfilling their tasks. This combination is responsible and accountable for economic growth and achieving the objectives of European cohesion (Rodriguez-Pose & Garcilazo, 2015).

The issues of concern at European Union level are addressed to various degrees by all member-states, are the necessary reforms in each of them, with comparable contents but at different speeds in achieving common goals: increased transparency in the interactions with the business environment and society as regards governmental expenditures and procurement procedures. Other matters of concern are reducing costs and maximizing the efficiency of the civil service, enforcing and widening the sphere and scope of e-government, improved productivity, and better result orientation as regards civil service, while reducing the administrative burden for both companies and individuals.

The reforms had two main reasons, on one hand government changes aimed at adjusting to the post-financial-economic crisis effects, and on the other hand to increase the overall harmonization with the EU-28(27) in the process of integration.

It is interesting to notice that, as regards European integration, even old member-states, next to the former member-states of convergence and cohesion and New Member-State felt the pressure to adjust and initiate reforms aimed at European Union integration. This might be due to the fact that the 'one size fits all' and the economic growth focused policies, that neglected a bit more than less, the economic-institutional perspective within the European Union have shown their limits, and that the recent more

institutions-focused perspective has been taken more into account in search for answers for the future EU trajectory. In our opinion, this institutional economics perspective needs to be even deepened, considering the evolutions in some EU countries where Euro-skepticism and populism (see for instance Brexit) threaten the foundations of the EU.

Table 2 Main drivers of public administration reform within the EU-28/27

Drivers	Countries
European integration	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech R, Germany, Estonia, Greece, Spain, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovak R.
Government change	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Spain, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Finland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Great Britain*
International organizations/creditors	Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Ireland, Lithuania, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia
Citizen pressure	Denmark, Spain, Poland, Romania, Slovenia
Demographic change	Spain, Italy, Finland

Source: own selection after EUPACK, 2017

The common feature for this selection is that irrespective of the moment of EU-accession and integration, most of the reforms are top-down driven, save for a couple of reforms driven by citizens in former member-states of convergence and cohesion (Denmark, Spain) and New Member-States (Romania, Poland, Slovakia).

The selection highlights also the relevance of transparency, and of achieving a better coordination in the field of policymaking. In this respect, the delta-convergence analysis for EU-28/27 countries shows that compared with the ideal optimum score of 7, most countries still have to realize reforms and take measures for increasing transparency of the policymaking process at governmental level.

Figure 1: Delta-convergence as regards transparency of government policymaking within the EU-28/27
Source: Authors’ own calculations after EU-28/27

Delta-convergence within a group of countries exists whenever the distance to the optimum value decreases, whereas an increase in the value registered by a country or group of countries indicates the decrease or absence of delta-convergence.

In this respect, Romania is placed almost at the middle of the delta-convergence interval, for the period analyzed, respectively from 2007 to 2018. While at the beginning of the period the delta-convergence was relatively absent, as Romania recorded a 4.19 points distance against the optimum value of 7, over the entire period Romania has succeeded in reducing only very little this distance to 3.59 points against the optimum score of 7. This shows that, compared with other EU member-states, including New Member-States, Romania still needs to draft and develop better measures and actions for increasing the transparency of the policymaking process, and as regards the implementation of the policies.

Policymaking processes and policies have increased in relevance as the EU-28(27) was faced, and continues to be faced with multiple challenges in the post-financial and economic crisis period, with respect to dealing with the changing trends in labor market, increased digitalization, and automation.

The current pandemic is in this respect an opportunity for highlighting the importance and putting to good use the resilient economic-social institutions of each member-state that are the backbone of the policymaking processes and policies, while attempting at the same time to improve the overall functioning of the institutional setting.

The analysis for Romania shows that it needs to undertake more steps in the process of policymaking and policy implementation for

improving the some main and decisive institutional components. In Table 4, we present a selection of the main institutional indicators that are relevant for good governance, the quality of the governmental policymaking process and that require proper tools and measures for being properly rendered operational at administrative level.

Table 3 – Institutional indicators over the period 2009-2016*

Romania	2009	2012	2016
Quality of governance institutional indicators			
Credibility of official economic information	2.86	3.17	2.50
Transparency of economic policies	3.54	3.00	3.00
Corruption level	1.22	3.25	0.25
Efficiency of fiscal administration	2.26	2.50	2.25
State's reform capacity	3.52	3.25	3.00
Sectoral reform capacity	3.00	2.40	1.80
Public-private cooperation	1.33	2.33	1.67
Public sphere coordination	1.00	1.50	0.50
Long-term vision	1.00	1.00	1.00
Long-term sectoral strategies	2.24	1.25	1.50
Public policies drafting process quality	1.74	1.20	1.40
Institutional component relevant for the business environment			
Special economic areas dynamism	0.99	1.00	-
Companies' technological environment	2.64	2.00	3.00
Public support for innovation	2.01	1.75	2.25

Source: own processing of the authors after the Institutional Profile Database,
<http://www.cepii.fr/institutions/EN/ipd.asp>

*Selected indicators. Legend: 0= worst, 4=best

According to the indicators recorded for the period between 2009 and 2016, we notice that Romania has worrying developments precisely in the areas that will be critical for the immediate period, but also on medium-, and long-term even without considering the effects triggered by the current pandemic.

As most worrying and significant decreases we notice the decrease in the credibility of official economic information and data, in the transparency of policymaking, together with a perceived increase of the corruption level.

This in turn, impacts on the operational level of public administration, and worsens some of the aspects relevant to public administration such as the capacity of coordination and the public-private cooperation environment, along with the capacity of the public administration and government to ensure and support improved technological/e-government sustained environment for companies and innovation.

From the selected components some progress is registered only as regards the technological environment of the companies, which is closer to the optimum (3 points).

These results show that Romania still needs to develop better institutional frameworks with respect to the business environment, but also with respect to the societal issues, in order to close the gap against other EU-28(27) countries.

4. SARS-COV2 as game changer

The governmental and public administration context is relevant in explaining, based on the policymaking processes and policy implementation capacity, how the current pandemic acts as game changer, and why it has gained such critical dimensions not only in the European Union, but also at global level.

First observations show that at strategic and operational level, public administrations all over the world showed almost quasi-general lack of preparedness and training for understanding the threat they had and have to deal with.

At strategic level, almost all countries of the world, including here the USA have displayed the conviction that there are no major risks, and over-confidence in the capacity of their public, and/or medical endowments and reserves to mitigate the effects of a pandemic episode.

The results are worrying as expressed in the number of human casualties. The United States registered a percentage of 32.96% in total cases outside China, while the United Kingdom recorded 5.12% cases (April 30, 2020 – all data with respect to COVID19 cases extracted from Worldometers). These two countries are the best example for countries neglecting initially the threat represented by this pandemic. Germany had a more careful approach; nonetheless, the country has a share of cases by 5%, slightly below Italy (6.30%) and Spain (7.33%). Romania records on 30th April 2020 a share by 0.38% cases.

The selected share of cases from these countries in total cases outside China shows several issues that need to be approached in the future, from among which, the first would be the need for better training the public administration as regards health and *epidemiological transition cycles* according to their formulation by Omran, in 1971. These cycles have as main points of reference the demographic pyramid, which is relevant with respect to the most vulnerable groups and categories during a pandemic, and the difference between the mortality rates and life expectancy related to main relative causes of death at the level of the country.

The model proposed by Omran (1971) considers 4 transit instances of the mortality and medical conditions' pattern, respectively (i) Contagion, epidemics and pandemics like the plague followed by famine (for instance, in the Middle Ages). The next in order are (ii) Decreasing pandemics (for instance, by means of vaccine in developing countries); (iii) Degenerative diseases (cardiovascular, neoplasms); (iv) Degenerative lifestyle conditioned diseases (various fashion diets, opioids, etc.).

Recently experts tend to add to these four stages another one, respectively (v) the globalization triggered epidemiological transition conditioned by global warming, and the effects of societies' polarization and by the poverty marked districts/localities/regions.

In its turn, this stage is determined by high-speed globalization, and this can be seen from the driver employed by SARS-COV2 for spreading all over the world. First, it was the business environment and the trade, and transportation activities developed, particular mention being made as regards the interactions between the highly industrialized northern part of Italy and China, by including also the services' sector. The second driver was tourism, and seasonal activities where the best example would be the ski-resort Ischgl in Austria, which is often, mentioned as the actual spreader in Europe, and to a lesser extent the Carnival in Venice.

This highlights several aspects that can be contrasted and which point to the main institutions and their sub-components that are required as backbone and legitimizing grounds for any public administration and its actions – from communication/transparency in informing the public, to the credibility/confidence and trust in public administration.

The relevant set of questions still awaiting answers as regards possible changes and improvements are related to: transparency, control, and prioritization when taking measures for avoiding the spread of a pandemic, or preventing other hazardous instances for the public. While control of pandemic might imply the restriction of activities and rights, they

need to be compensated by higher transparency for increasing the confidence degree of the public.

Another set is related to outlining new priorities, and innovative directions of action for mitigating the dramatic effects that the current pandemic will have on all fields of economic and social life.

This pandemic affects especially the functioning of the health care system either public, private or hybrid, but it has impact also on the public and private sphere in business, on the labor market and more specifically on occupations that will either change or vanish, as consequence of the current pandemic.

This implies that old standing institutions and their relevant institutional sub-components will change, or will have to change, just like the operational level – represented by the public administration will have to change, by including more innovation and pressing for deeper reforms in its inner workings, especially as pertains policymaking and policy implementation.

Core subjects for innovation will be the integration and digitalization of public services, along with the decentralization of services' supply and monitoring.

All these initiatives will require putting more emphasis on public-private partnerships, and increasing the interest in and participation to decision processes of the citizens, thus increasing also their responsibility as regards public wellbeing.

Nonetheless, better solutions need to be identified for obtaining improved results as regards specific issues. Among these specific issues are counted the traditional resistance of a heavy and bureaucratic apparatus that is most often supported by long-established and functioning formal/informal networks inside the public administration. Another specific issue is the resistance against the wide-scale implementation of e-government, and e-public administration. This situation is best highlighted, for instance, in Romania's case by the issue of the electronic signature, widely debated currently by institutional stakeholders, and under public pressure in this respect, as it continues to be non-standardized and not a specific goal of facilitating transactions, and other administrative dependent operations for the business environment and the public.

5. Possible pandemic-exit scenarios and conclusions

Our brief analysis shows that there are several directions that future research, but also political decision factors need to approach in the

aftermath of the pandemic, as it puts at risks the foundations of the world, and more specifically European lifestyle, economic growth, development, and even the European integration process.

The measures during the pandemic from closed borders to lockdown are an insidious threat for the European democracies, which implies also risks and threats for the good functioning of the economic engines and drivers at European level.

The financial mechanisms will also change, an example being the various initiatives met with assent or dissent by the EU members: “coronabonds”, versus the suspension of the European Stability Pact, or together? Moreover, and more interesting is that the way in which these financial mechanisms will be activated will also show how the institution of solidarity is affected at European and national/regional/local level.

The labor market, already in a dynamic change process, with employment and unemployment no longer the facets of the same coin, will be even more pressurized by questions ranging from types of unemployment insurances/reinsurances to ones related to minimum guaranteed income or universal basic income. Hence, labor market institutions will be subjected to increased pressures from both employers’ and employees’ organizations.

The business environment will have its own questions to deal with, and answer in the framework of corporate social responsibility and corporate accountability. The action of governments to aid, assist, and help companies either by financial supports, or by tax exemptions needs to be well pondered and balanced – lest it can become delegitimized in the eyes of the public.

The society will change as well, and all economic, financial, and labor market aimed policies, measures and actions will need to involve more the society as stakeholders, in order to avoid unwanted effects like discontent, increased skepticism in the shared European values, and waves of populism.

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