

Articles

# Toward a New Public Administration Model in Romania: The Challenges of Designing Coherent Public Administration Reforms

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Keywords: Romania, reform, new public management, neo-Weberian state, new public governance, institutional efficiency

<https://doi.org/10.52372/jps39305>

Vol. 39, Issue 3, 2024

Reforming public administration in Romania has been a continuous challenge over the past decades, and the traditional model of public administration has been reshaped through various horizontal and vertical reforms. The problem is that these reforms have lacked coherent theoretical and practical trajectories. From the fall of the Communist regime in 1989 until Romania's accession to the European Union, the new public management (NPM) paradigm predominantly influenced the public sector. Since 2007, no single model of reform has gained centrality, resulting in a mix of elements that have included NPM, the neo-Weberian state, and new public governance. This study explored and clarified the challenges that Romania has faced in designing reforms to enhance institutional efficiency and professional consistency.

## Introduction

Over the past three decades, Romanian public administration has undergone various stages of transformation (M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022a). Some reforms facilitated the public sector's smooth adaptation to new contexts, specifically during the transition from Communism to democracy (Changyong Choi & Woo, 2023). Others targeted networks, partnerships, sustainability, public performance, market-oriented policies, and business-style management (C. E. Hințea et al., 2015; A. Profiroiu & Profiroiu, 2010; M. C. Profiroiu et al., 2006; M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022a). These efforts were driven primarily by the various crises occurring during this period. That is, the latest transformations and reforms in the Romanian public sector have been prompted by regime changes, economic downturns, European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) integration, and the recent Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis and security challenges.

After 1989, modernizing public administration became essential (Cepiku & Mititelu, 2010), with emphasis placed on aligning public sector operations with European and global trends (Eymeri-Douzans, 2011). Various models of organization and resource management (Table 1) were integrated and adapted in response to internal needs and external pressures (M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022a). On one hand, the new public management (NPM) model that was rapidly introduced to the country focused on redefining the roles and responsibilities of the public sector to meet standards and performance indicators (C. E. Hințea et al., 2015; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004, 2011; Tobin, 2003). Effective and modern governance thus became dependent on adopting new tools, norms, institutions, mechanisms, and procedures. On the other hand, the neo-Weberian state (NWS) toward which Romania seems to be heading today, emphasizes the professionalization and openness of the

public sector. The NWS model's approach to public administration centers on strategic planning, monitoring, and risk management (C. E. Hințea et al., 2015; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004, 2011). This approach strengthens institutional hierarchy while integrating market and network elements (Bouckaert, 2022, 2023).

Conversely, the new public governance (NPG) model, which has made its presence felt since Romania joined the EU, highlights cultural and social changes, with adaptation to new tools, technologies, and mechanisms influenced by a reactive approach (M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022a). The NPG model defines the relationship between public administration and client beneficiaries in terms of integration, coordination, and cooperation mechanisms (C. E. Hințea et al., 2015; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Chronologically, we can identify four major stages that repositioned the Romanian public administration.

The first, the Early Post-Communist Period (1989–2000), concentrated on redefining institutions and norms to establish a new organizational and operational model, moving away from the Communist model. The primary goal was to replace the centralized system that was subordinated to authoritarian political power. The second stage, spanning the period 2000 to 2007, was characterized by national efforts to satisfy all the requirements for integration into the EU and NATO. The alignment with European and transatlantic standards was driven by international commitments, thus providing direction to the reform process.

The third stage, encompassing 2007 to 2015, involved adapting and integrating good governance practices as an EU and NATO member state. During this period, Romanian public administration experimented with new models and instruments but without achieving structural transformation, with reform efforts limited to meeting minimum standards. The fourth stage, which covers 2016 to the present,

**Table 1. Transformation of Public Administration in Romania (1989–Present)**

Pillar	Year	Policies, Strategies, and Initiatives Aligned With NPM Principles	Purpose	Implementation Status
Human capital	1991	Ensuring the social prestige of civil servants	Civil servants should be in the service of citizens, meeting the requirements of social life, the correct application of laws, and other legal provisions.	Partial
	1996	Declaring and controlling the wealth of dignitaries and civil servants	Preventing and sanctioning corruption, transparency in public administration, integrity of civil servants	Implemented
	1999	The status of the civil servants	Consolidating a professional body of civil servants; emphasis on effectiveness, responsibility, honesty, integrity, dynamism, and non-partisan attitudes	Implemented
	1999	Organization and functioning of the National Agency of Public Servants	HRM in public administration through recruitment, promotion, evaluation, and sanctioning mechanisms	Implemented
	2003–2009	YPS	Special positions in public administration (public manager) 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. INA (from 2001–2009) and ANFP (after 2009) provided professional training to various categories of civil servants.	Implemented
	2004–present	Introduction of the public manager concept	Improving civil service professionalism through private sector ideas and practices	Partial
	2012–2025	National anticorruption strategy	Stability of the anticorruption legislative and institutional framework, allocation of resources in an adequate way for public institutions to function efficiently in the service of the citizen	Implemented
	2014–2020	Strategy for consolidating public administration	Recruitment based on meritocracy criteria, professionalization, efficiency and transparency of public administration, responsiveness to the needs of the citizen	Partial
	2016–2020	Strategy regarding the Development of the Public Function	Comprehensive, coherent, and transparent management of human resources in public administration; unitary, effective, merit-based recruitment, promotion, evaluation, pay, motivation, and training	Minimal implementation
	2016–2020	Strategy on professional training for public administration	Adequate and quality training of human resources in public administration	Partial
Decentralization	1990–present	Decentralization process	Increasing local autonomy and responding more effectively to local needs	Partial

Pillar	Year	Policies, Strategies, and Initiatives Aligned With NPM Principles	Purpose	Implementation Status
	1991	Regulation of local public administration	Establishing the administrative, fiscal, and political powers of public authorities at the local level; organization and operation according to the principle of local autonomy	Implemented
	1998/2003	Organization and operation of a department/ units for public administration reform	Evaluation, coordination, and development of strategies and monitoring of public administration reform	Implemented
	2001	Government strategy for the acceleration of public administration reform	Some NPM elements, including decentralization, local autonomy, public-private partnerships, agencies and general interest in managerial techniques, and performance and quality tools	Partial
	2004 2017	Decentralization strategy	Accelerating decentralization to build local capacity to meet EU accession requirements, transfer of new powers from the central administration to local public administration authorities	Partial
	2010	Decentralization of most public hospitals and interest in decentralized hospital management	Improving management and finding additional sources of funding locally to improve the quality of and satisfaction with hospital services	Implemented
Public policies	1991-present	Development and execution of the national public budget	Regulation of public finances for better management of annual revenues and expenditures	Implemented
	1994-present	Local taxes and fees	Establishing own revenues of public authorities	Implemented
	1997	Organization and functioning of the economic and social council	Setting up social dialogue between the government, trade unions, and employers	Implemented
	2001	Government strategy for digitalization of public administration	Entire digitalization of central and local public administration	Partial
	2003	Multiannual Modernization Programs in Central and Local Government	Developing strategic thinking and planning through strategies, action plans, and annual monitoring reports	Implemented
	2003	Transparency in the exercise of public dignities	Improving access to public information and services, reducing public spending, preventing and sanctioning corruption	Partial
	2003	Central Public Policy Unit	Collaborating with relevant ministries to promote the modernization of public administration	Implemented
	2004-present	Experimentation with the CAF and MMPs	Improving monitoring and evaluation capacity, focusing on results, performance, and quality	Partial

Pillar	Year	Policies, Strategies, and Initiatives Aligned With NPM Principles	Purpose	Implementation Status
	2005	Creation of the Inter-Ministerial Task Force for Reform Coordination	Ensuring coherence in the coordination of public policy reform	Partial
	2006	Strategy for improving public policies at the level of the central public administration	Better elaboration, coordination, and planning of public policies at the level of the central public administration	Partial
	2008-2020	Strategy for better regulation in central public administration	Adopting a regulatory framework to promote economic development and reduce administrative burdens, improving the quality of public policy implementation tools	Partial
	2011	New Education Law	Clear interest in performance measurements, both individually and institutionally	Implemented
	2015	National strategy for social dialogue	Clarifying the role of social dialogue; reviewing, optimizing, and completing legislation and the institutional framework, depending on the realities of the economic and social environments	Partial
	2016	Government's annual work plan	Planning the regulatory process at the government level	Implemented
	2020	National strategy regarding the digital agenda for Romania	Ensuring citizens' and organizations' access to electronic public services (e-government services), increasing efficiency and reducing costs in the public sector in Romania by modernizing public administration	Partial
	2021-2023	Government strategy for public debt management	Ensuring the financing needs of the central public administration, minimizing costs in the medium and long terms	Partial
	2022-2035	National integrated urban development strategy for resilient, green, inclusive and competitive cities - urban policy of Romania	Local public administrations to become proactive, interactive, accessible, and fiscally sustainable; citizens to be placed at the center of concerns through partnerships and collaboration to co-create intelligent and innovative solutions	Minimal implementation
Public administration (human capital, decentralization, public policies)	2018	National reform program	A robust administration with quick and proactive reaction speed, consistency in decisions, for which there are motivated and professional human resources	Minimal implementation

Source: Authors

continues to be marked by increased crises and challenges at the European and global levels. The need to rapidly adapt and bridge development gaps has called for new structural reforms.

Looking at this chronological overview, we argue that from the fall of Communism up to the accession to the

EU, NPM was the main conceptual and institutional driving force for Romanian public administration, with this orientation promoting competition and privatization (C. E. Hințea et al., 2015, p. 43; M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022a). Since 2007, however, no single reform model has gained centrality, with mixed elements from NPM, the NWS, and

NPG coexisting. More recently, in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the security context shaped by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, public discourse has shifted to integrative tools for public administration governance, potentially indicating a direction toward a new model. Therefore, we consider it necessary to put in place appropriate instruments for rethinking the roles of the State—for it to increase its involvement in cooperation with stakeholders, create networks, and promote essential aspects such as accountability, transparency, sustainability, and resilience (C. E. Hințea et al., 2015).

Because of the abovementioned reforms, public administration in Romania today reflects the successive changes that have shaped various models of organization and operation. This study comprehensively analyzed public administration in Romania by examining the transformations and reforms from 1989 to the present across three key pillars: human resources and the transformation of civil service, decentralization, and public policies. For each model and stage of public administration transformation, we uncovered the challenges that Romania has faced in designing and implementing reforms and scrutinized the role of these reforms in enhancing institutional efficiency.

Our research also explored the transformation process of Romanian public administration by examining a combination of elements from NPM, the NWS, and NPG. The purpose was to highlight the main dimensions and implications of integrating and adapting these models within Romanian public administration as a strategy for addressing internal and external challenges. The combination of organizational, operational, and resource management models determined the chronological investigation of the transformation of public administration. This is why we outlined the transition from the traditional model of public administration (TPA) to the adoption of NPM. Leveraging the new opportunities available to Romania as an EU and NATO member, a blend of NPM, NWS, and NPG characteristics were incorporated into reform projects. Finally, in response to emerging crises and increasing internal dysfunctions, a new paradigm that combines elements of the NWS and NPG seems to have emerged, emphasizing a trend toward performance, coherence, efficiency, clarity, cooperation, and optimal resource management. Our research offers both theoretical insights and practical contributions to shaping a new model of public administration, one that integrates elements of polity, politics, and policy-making. The Romanian case illustrates the country's distinct reform path, tracing the transformation of its public administration from the fall of the communist regime to its accession to the EU and NATO, along with the implications that followed after joining these institutions.

### From TPA to NPM

The transformation of public administration in Romania stands out as a unique case among post-Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Following 1989, Romanian public elites guided this transition by promoting regulations and adopting institutions, paradigms, and solutions from the West (C. Negoită, 2015; I. C. Negoită,

2022; Pasti, 1995). These changes set Romania on a complex and dynamic path of re-founding both the public (institutional) and private sectors (Gheorghită & Luca, 2010; C. Hințea, 2006) in the early 1990s, with focus directed to power, property, and political and social capital (Park, 2022; M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022b; Sandu, 1997). An important initial consideration is the diverse administrative culture and the profound changes that Romania experienced before and after the fall of Communism. Specifically, German and French administrative traditions have influenced the administrative structure, cultural landscape, and legal and administrative frameworks in the country (Mihai, 2005; Văduva, 2016). Additionally, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire significantly impacted Transylvania, the eastern region was shaped by Russia (later the Soviet Union), and Walachia had a strong Ottoman heritage (Văduva, 2016). This historical context led to a fragmented administrative culture.

A new public administration model thus became crucial for the Romanian administrative system. This model emerged as a defining feature of the evolving democratic regime, supporting efforts to transform both the State and society (C. Negoită, 2015; I. C. Negoită, 2022). During a crisis, the TPA was employed to organize and regulate a new institutional order. In Romania, adapting and customizing the traditional Western model proved challenging due to cultural factors, political influences, and the legacy of a centralized administrative system, compounded by a lack of strategic vision and appropriate tools (Cepiku & Mititelu, 2010; I. C. Negoită, 2022). The main directions of transformation, including decentralization, local autonomy, and the deconcentration of public services, were established at the constitutional level (Romania's Constitution of 1991, revised in 2003) (M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022b). The effectiveness of these reforms was influenced by the quality of human resources, local authority funding, administrative fragmentation, and the coherence of decentralization processes (Cepiku & Mititelu, 2010).

Fragmentation replaced the previous concentration of power, making the decentralization of power, authority, and decision-making a central theme in the State's transformation. This involved transferring powers from the central government to communes, cities, and counties (Matei, 2009; M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022b, 2022a). This effort, however, was constrained by "administrative conservatism focused on preserving a bureaucratic model par excellence" (C. Hințea & Șandor, 2000). Culturally, politically, socially, and institutionally, Romanian public administration underwent significant changes after 1989, adopting and adapting (sometimes only partially) various models and paradigms of state and public administration transformations. This transition was further complicated by the urgency of implementing modern policies and approaches, coupled with a lack of experience and ability to analyze and adapt reforms. Randma-Liiv and Drechsler (2017) highlighted a "shortage of competent domestic policy-makers," making it challenging for Romania to reject or modify reforms proposed by international organizations, donors, or Western countries.

The transformation of Romanian public administration has been gradual. New instruments and mechanisms were

regulated and adapted in response to internal and external crises. Public interest and space were delineated in relation to political and private dimensions while maintaining cultural characteristics such as patronage, clientelism, conservatism, and resistance to change. Additionally, the context of EU and NATO memberships fostered the development of a strategic dimension for the modernization and transformation of public administration. Support from the EU, starting in 1992 and intensified by the pre-accession strategy initiated in 1998, significantly advanced modern administrative reform in Romania. Such reform was considerably influenced by France (C. Negoită, 2015; I. C. Negoită, 2022), followed by the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain (Mihai, 2005). Thus, the conditionality of EU and NATO accession was marked by comprehensive political, economic, and administrative reforms, alongside social, legal, and judicial reforms—all aimed at aligning Romanian public administration with EU standards and regulations (Randma-Liiv & Drechsler, 2017).

Given these structural changes and developments, some would argue that NPM has exceeded, while others would suggest the emergence of hybrid reform policies that blend elements from NPM, the NWS, and NPG to address various crises proactively. This critical examination explored the stages of reform in Romanian public administration, from the fall of Communism to the present, to uncover how the public system has evolved or shifted over the past three decades. Romanian elites have adopted various Western practices (C. Negoită, 2015; I. C. Negoită, 2022), indirectly influenced by European administrative trends and transitioning from a traditional approach to one focused on efficiency, market orientation, and performance. NPM was not pursued as an end in itself but emerged as a consequence of adopting an external model through regulation and subsequent adaptation of the system.

### **The Rise of NPM: Driver of Change in Romanian Public Administration (2000–2004)**

Establishing a coherent legal and institutional framework was a priority, not only for Romania but also for many states that regained their independence after the fall of Communism. Hence, the development of the NPM paradigm in Romania followed a trajectory similar to those of many CEE countries. The peak of NPM policies in Romania, supported by numerous scientific studies and practical outcomes, occurred from 2002 to 2004. During this period, efforts focused on downsizing and restructuring the public sector, experimenting with the common assessment framework (CAF), implementing multiannual modernization plans (MMPs), carrying out decentralization, improving institutional and human resource performance, and introducing significant changes to public policy formulation. These initiatives accelerated public administration reform, alleviating fiscal pressure and modernizing the public sector.

### **Internal NPM Dimension in Romania**

For both academics and practitioners, designing a new model of public administration entails a combination of

polity, politics, and policies (Eymeri-Douzans, 2019). The managerial revolution, which also affected Romania to some extent, was propelled by “a new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018), becoming the cornerstone of a new set of perceptions and tools encapsulated in the concept of “NPM for all seasons” (Hood, 1991, 1995, 2004). The ideas promoted by NPM and swiftly embraced by Romanian political elites revolved around enhancing the performance of public administration in the era of “governance” (Kooiman, 1993; Rhodes, 1997), particularly emphasizing the development of public policies, impact assessment, result orientation, and evaluation (Eymeri-Douzans, 2011, 2019). Thus, governing through management became a defining feature of the first significant modernization of post-communist public administration in Romania.

The foundations of the initial wave of public administration transformation were laid between 2002 and 2004 in response to the imperative to support administrative capacity at both central and local levels in light of EU accession requirements (M. C. Profiroiu et al., 2006, p. 17). Monitoring by the European Commission indicated that Romanian public administration “had made a major step towards adequate quality and control in programming” (European Commission, 2004). In 2004, multiannual programming was introduced for the first time through the Public Administration Reform Strategy to address issues such as cumbersome procedures, the lack of professionalism, inadequate remuneration, and flawed human resource management (European Commission, Evaluation Report, 2004). The enhancement and efficiency of public services, along with efforts to decentralize, deconcentrate, and coordinate public policies, provided “a good basis for future reform” (European Commission, Evaluation Report, 2004). During this period, the Romanian government initiated a major recruitment drive to meet additional personnel requirements. These efforts were complemented by revisions to internal legislation governing the civil service, with changes aimed at (1) implementing recruitment and promotion based on merit, realized through open competition; (2) ensuring the adequacy of remuneration through a transparent and predictable salary scheme to attract and retain competent civil servants, achieved through a two-stage salary reform (intermediate in the short term and comprehensive termination in the medium term); and (3) enhancing human resource management, focusing on better training and development of public managers (European Commission, Evaluation Report, 2004).

In 2003, the Central Public Policy Unit was established with the aim of collaborating with relevant ministries to promote the modernization of public administration. To bolster its operational capacity, the staffing allocation of the Unit was increased, leading to the improved assessment of the feasibility, impact, and budgetary implications of normative acts. This was facilitated through the adoption of the guide and manual for the elaboration of public policies from 2004 to 2005. The integration of procedures for the development, monitoring, and evaluation of public policies into the process of public administration transformation represented a commitment undertaken by Romania

as part of the Programmatic Adjustment Loan program of the World Bank. In 2004, therefore, the pilot phase of CAF implementation was initiated and applied in EU member states at both central and local levels of public administration (M. C. Profiroiu et al., 2006, p. 13). Twinning projects conducted between 2002 and 2006, along with the establishment of public policy units in 2006 within relevant ministries, contributed to the enhanced regulation and planning of costs, as well as the improved estimation of the impact of adopted measures (General Secretary of Government, n.d.).

Initiatives such as the Young Professionals Scheme (YPS, 2003–2009) and the Special Scholarship “Romanian Government” (2004–2008) was instrumental in expediting the modernization of public administration by cultivating a core of experts equipped to undertake the structural transformation of public services (M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022a). Dedicated positions within public administration were established for young professionals, with a view to modernizing public services. From inception, these positions were tailored to a specific category of civil servants previously trained in the new paradigm of resource management within the public system (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration & National Agency of Civil Servants, 2015, p. 5). The National Institute of Administration (INA, 2001–2009) and the National Agency of Civil Servants (ANFP, post-2009) served as key providers of professional training for various categories of civil servants (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration & National Agency of Civil Servants, 2015, pp. 6–8). However, despite the significant progress made by Romania during the pre-accession phase to the EU, efforts to transform public administration did not match the pre-accession’s pace and direction. Public organizations failed to develop learning capabilities, and strategic management at the institutional level remained hindered by the gap between legal provisions and informal practices, thereby limiting the scope for change and modernization in public administration.

### **NPM Reforms Under the European Commission’s Guidance**

The implementation of NPM in Romania was carried out on the basis of three pillars: human capital, decentralization, and public policies (European Commission, 1999, 2004).

#### ***A Corporate Culture in Human Resources***

In terms of human resources in public administration, the focus shifted toward regulating civil servant roles and statuses, recruitment processes, training, and top-down external motivation. Within the new professional system of public service, significant developments were made in refining the legal status of civil servants (Cepiku & Mititelu, 2010; M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022a), with a particular emphasis on normative and ethical dimensions (OECD, 1997). The transition from a bureaucratic culture to a more complex corporate culture occurred gradually under the

NPM paradigm, largely due to Romania’s lack of a coherent and uniform system for civil servant training during the initial decade of transition (OECD, 1997).

Notably, foreign experts from the OECD were pivotal in codifying the legal status of civil servants, which resulted in revised formal recruitment conditions, evaluation processes, and enhanced early and continuous training programs for civil servants (pre-service and in-service training) (OECD, 1997). This period also witnessed the establishment of general and specialized training programs for civil servants and the creation of new specialized institutions. With support from the EU, UNDP, EBRD, World Bank, G24, and OECD, Romania received assistance and funding for the continuous and ongoing training of civil servants in central public administration (OECD, 1997). International assistance and cooperation mechanisms have been instrumental in guiding the transformation of public administration since its inception, emphasizing the transfer of knowledge, which underscored the import of NPM with a pronounced external dimension.

To achieve efficient and modern public administration and facilitate Romania’s (re)integration into European structures, reforming human resources management was imperative in the adaptation to legal and functional changes in the public sector and alignment with European and international standards (OECD, 1997). The modernization and training of human resources under the influence of NPM addressed various aspects, including educational policy, change management, performance, quality and human resources, leadership, conflict resolution, and the psychosociology of management and organizations (OECD, 1997). At the local level, a significant challenge arose from the lack of training and experience among civil servants in decentralized administrative-territorial units, hindering efforts to improve efficiency and quality.

The new conception of professional and effective training was aligned with international standards, yet its outcomes were constrained by the absence of a distinct management culture, the insufficiency of funds for training activities, the scarcity of specialized trainers, and the lack of modern tools, techniques, and educational methods in the country (OECD, 1997). For Romania, investing in human resources represented the most impactful investment in fostering an efficient, democratic, and modern public administration. The quality and efficiency of public administration were contingent upon the quality and quantity of human resources, crucial for facilitating the adaptation and self-adjustment of new public-private sector dynamics (OECD, 1997).

#### ***NPM and Partial Territorial Decentralization***

At the organizational level, decentralization was conceived in relation to the bureaucratic, pyramidal hierarchy, which depended on political decisions (Cepiku & Mititelu, 2010). The devolution of competencies to the commune, city, and county levels implicitly brought about the creation of new organizational forms and coordination mechanisms for national and local policies owing to the decentralization of power, authority, and decision-making (Matei, 2009).

However, fiscal and political decentralization was implemented unevenly, resulting in the continued dependence of local public administration powers and responsibilities on the macroeconomic control exerted by the central administration and the effectiveness of vertical and horizontal cooperation mechanisms (Matei, 2009; M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022a). In the case of decentralization, a roadmap for developing and aligning administrative capacity with sustainable economic and social development objectives was established in accordance with international recommendations and support from entities such as the World Bank, European Commission, and International Monetary Fund (Bondar, 2014; OECD, 2006). The NPM paradigm initially served as a tool for structuring decentralization by delegating tasks and responsibilities from the central to the local level and by establishing new mechanisms for direct election and organization.

In the later stages of design, the focus shifted to the content of decentralization, with the primary objective being the enhancement of efficiency in delivering public services at both central and local levels. However, a considerable challenge was triggered by weak administrative capacity, and despite the implementation of various transformation strategies (e.g., asymmetrical decentralization, inter-local unit cooperation, consolidation of local administrations, and the introduction of public managers), the expected outcomes were not realized (Neamțu, 2016).

Influenced by NPM, Romania embarked on a process of partial territorial decentralization, which was established both constitutionally and sub-constitutionally through Law No. 199/1997, which led to the ratification of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (1985). This legislation outlined the design, roles, and attributions for local governance, but the decentralization process fell short, as regions were left without legal personality, fiscal autonomy, and necessary competencies. Despite the creation of economic development regions in 1998 to manage pre-accession funds, these regions did not resolve the deficiencies in decentralization. Meanwhile, political factors consistently reshaped the institutional framework by reallocating managerial and sectoral responsibilities between county and local levels (Neamțu, 2016; M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022b). Nevertheless, Romania acknowledged the importance of local communities and, guided by European recommendations, began steering the decentralization process toward more citizen-focused objectives.

Even so, the two aspects of local management autonomy—administrative and financial—failed to foster community solidarity and local interests. In reality, local public authorities lacked the necessary resources to evolve into efficient and high-performing entities, despite the resources and investments allocated from the central government.

### ***NPM and the Quality of Public Policies***

Public policies were crafted using novel tools for analysis, forecasting, planning, implementation, and control. These tools were regulated to enhance performance and ensure accountability in human resource management

(Cepiku & Mititelu, 2010; M. C. Profiroiu & Negoită, 2022a).

## **The Demise of NPM**

Reforms in public administration began prior to EU accession and have evolved since 2007. Initially, emphasis was placed on implementing market-oriented policies and adopting business-style management practices, characteristic of the NPM paradigm (C. E. Hințea et al., 2015; Matei, 2009; Matei & Chesaru, 2014). In recent years, however, a shift in the discourse surrounding public administration has been observed.

Within this evolving context, we have witnessed the introduction of new approaches and a blend of integrative tools for public administration governance. Many of these initiatives have been endorsed by the European Commission and are reflected in strategies and directives delineating the unique European framework for public administration. These transformation projects have been financially supported through the Structural and Cohesion Funds, as well as the European Structural and Investment Funds. These efforts have also been supplemented by systematic monitoring and control measures, including country reports and recommendations. Collectively, these developments have paved the way for a new paradigm characterized by a blend of NPM, NWS, and NPG elements—a paradigm underlain by hybrid reform policies.

### **Hybrid Reforms?**

The pace of public administration reform has seen modest development from 2016 onward, with several areas still requiring correction. According to the Country Report on Romania (2017), progress in addressing country-specific recommendations has been limited: Social dialogue has remained largely formalistic, stakeholders' engagement in policymaking has been restricted, and there have been deficiencies in public investment project preparation and prioritization, resulting in the slow absorption of EU funds. Furthermore, the decision-making process has been unpredictable, with many legislative documents adopted via emergency decrees, often lacking impact assessment or stakeholder consultation. Progress on decentralizing public services and implementing e-governance measures have been equally slow.

Following EU accession, NPM policies did not receive the same level of attention from the government. Since 2007, strategic planning has become the most widely used managerial tool among local public authorities in Romania, with over 87% of authorities adopting strategic plans by 2015. This orientation was motivated primarily by legal requirements for accessing EU funds, but it was also a top priority for local governments and an essential element for good governance at the local level.

With regard to reform patterns from EU accession to the present, while no single paradigm dominates the public agenda, mixed elements from all three models (NPM, the NWS, and NPG) are evident. However, NPM-specific aspects, particularly those concerning competition and pri-



vation, are the least prominent. In European countries, public administration is undergoing extensive reforms to adapt to new contexts emerging from the aftermath of the health crisis and security challenges, with focus devoted to functions and costs. These transformations, observed in Romania as well, are supported by new theories regarding management and governance in public administration.

### Toward a New Model?

The transformation of public administration, centered on the key pillars of human resources, decentralization, and public policies, was a crucial step in identifying both problems and challenges within the administrative system. This approach nonetheless fell short of providing a holistic vision encompassing national and transnational networks. These networks are essential in correlating resources, opportunities, and risk management among involved actors, along with their respective responsibilities and the degree of commitment to assumed objectives (OECD, 2016).

The adoption of the network as a conceptual model in the NWS and NPG underscores the significance of cores as well as coordinative, cooperative, and collaborative relations in shaping and executing public policies, strategic planning, foresight, and monitoring (OECD, 2016). Two institutional pillars, namely the General Secretariat of the Government and the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, play pivotal roles in coordinating governmental activities. The integration of NPG principles into Romania's public administration stemmed from the necessity to clarify the roles and complementarity of these institutional pillars in coordination and strategic planning (OECD, 2016). To foster a unified approach and vision in both central and local public administration, Romania must address challenges that include the institutional anchorage of reforms, balancing horizontal and vertical dynamics, and tackling emerging priorities (OECD, 2016).

Presently, we confront a complex decision-making process alongside new dimensions of public administration transformation evolving concurrently with economic, social, and technological changes. Themes such as budgetary governance, fiscal discipline, strategic human resource management (HRM), open government, and digital government now define the culture, organization, and operation of public administration in Romania (OECD, 2016). They are intertwined with transnational networks (NATO, EU, World Bank, OECD) through transfer and import mechanisms.

The Romanian public administration reforms unfolding over the past three decades were guided by international support and aligned with EU and NATO standards. These efforts have shaped a new governance profile marked by advancements in strategic planning, public policy development, impact assessment, and the implementation of new mechanisms to address incompatibility, conflicts of interest, and corruption. There has also been a concerted effort to promote ethical standards among public officials and managers, as well as to professionalize the administrative apparatus. Despite these structural advancements, however, Romania still finds itself in the early stages of

transitioning to the NWS and (probably also to) NPG paradigms, which involve tasks that extend beyond fulfilling basic functions. This transition is hindered by several limitations, which include the following:

1. A lack of leadership and comprehensive strategic thinking
2. A limited capacity to foster consensus and engage relevant stakeholders
3. Low levels of flexibility and transparency
4. Insufficient data availability
5. The formalization of performance metrics and the perpetuation of closed competition networks
6. The inadequate digitization of public administration
7. A limited capacity to provide and enhance digital public services (OECD, 2016)

Beyond addressing these foundational challenges, further efforts are required to fully embrace the NWS and NPG paradigms and usher in a new era of governance in Romania.

### Reform Trends

One avenue for implementing NWS and NPG principles is the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which currently stands as the most significant development initiative for Romania in the context of the green and digital age in Europe (Profiroiu et al, 2024). The NRRP is aimed at enhancing the resilience of public administration to emerging challenges, bolstering preparedness for crisis situations, and fostering adaptability, innovation, and growth potential. To achieve these objectives, NRRP principles prioritize the following:

1. Ensuring a balanced allocation of resources to mitigate territorial disparities in development
2. Accelerating decentralization to address the subsidiary challenges faced by local communities
3. Enhancing proximity to citizens and beneficiaries by fostering the more active involvement of local authorities

In line with these goals, measures are intended to be uniformly implemented at both central and local levels in a predictable, evidence-based, and participatory manner. These measures are designed to reflect the needs of citizens and businesses, driven by investments in efficient human resource management to cultivate a cadre of expert civil servants. The transformation of public administration thus assumes a pivotal role within the framework of opportunities available to Romania as an EU member state through the NRRP.

Furthermore, responsiveness to innovative social initiatives and the adoption of a more user-centric approach to public service delivery are pivotal in shaping the trajectory and pace at which public administration is modernized. These shifts reflect broader societal changes across all sectors and are aimed at tailoring public services more closely to the needs of users, particularly vulnerable groups and consumers (Demir, 2022, p. 2). Supporting pilot projects offers another avenue in which to gauge the effective-

ness of innovative solutions in reshaping services, cultivating trust, and redefining the roles and skills of public sector employees (Demir, 2022, pp. 15–21). However, the ongoing digital and information revolution within public administration and governance remains constrained, with notable disparities between central and local domains.

The integration of rapid digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI) into the public administration sector represents an additional avenue for implementing NPG. These technologies hold the potential for exerting profound and tangible impacts on the quality of services delivered by public institutions, as well as on the overall performance and efficiency of public instruments. Currently, Romania lags behind other European nations in the Digital Economy and Society Index, particularly in terms of human capital, connectivity, and the integration of digital technologies (C. M. Profiroiu et al., 2024). To address this disparity, public administration requires robust tools for elevating digital governance, including national platforms that facilitate remote and online communication between citizens and public authorities. The direct consultation and involvement of beneficiaries enable a more accurate identification and management of citizens' needs and expectations (Demir, 2022, p. 71; C. M. Profiroiu et al., 2024), while digitalization and innovation offer new, cost-effective avenues for real-time interaction.

The key measures for digitalizing public administration include safeguarding personal data, ensuring security and confidentiality, integrating all administrative activities and procedures into a national platform, and employing clear, accessible language and tools for all users of public services. Integrating digitalization and AI into public administration across all levels necessitates a concerted focus on safeguarding citizens' fundamental rights, supporting vulnerable groups, and encouraging participation and innovation across all sectors of activity.

## Conclusion

Since 1989, public administration in Romania has undergone significant changes and reforms, driven primarily by various crises but also by the country's accession to EU and NATO. These reforms were coordinated by the Romanian government with considerable guidance from European structures and Western trends. Although these reforms have positively contributed to meeting European standards, they presented a challenge for Romania, and their success depended on the government's ability to reconcile general European requirements with Romania's specific circumstances and the proposed reforms in these directions.

Against this backdrop, the NPM emerged as the primary conceptual and institutional driving force of Romanian public administration. The adoption of NPM practices and tools improved management and governance processes in Romania. Internal changes in processes, such as the implementation of MMPs and the CAF in the administrative system, serve as examples of this paradigm shift (A. Profiroiu & Profiroiu, 2010; C. M. Profiroiu et al., 2024; M. C. Profiroiu et al., 2006). Surveys measuring the perceptions of

mayors in local government and country-wide "modernizers" in Romania regarding innovative NPM practices, such as MMPs and the CAF, highlighted increased transparency in human resource processes and an overall sense of modernization.

Notwithstanding these achievements, decentralization in Romania remains incomplete, impacting coordination between government divisions and public institutions. Administrative blockages, double subordination, and redundancies resulting from inadequate coordination have caused insufficient cohesion and poor coordination in the administrative system. While NPM policies raised expectations and engendered positive changes in the efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of public services, Romanian public administration remained fragile and over-regulated. Efficiency improved to a certain extent, but a clear pattern of reform has been lacking since 2007, with mixed elements derived from NPM, the NWS, and NPG.

In Romania, as well, the NWS model occupies a central position within the new state transformation paradigm. In the wake of various crises—economic, political, social, and health—the main lesson has been the need for strategic tools for building efficient public institutions. First, achieving excellent management in public administration necessitates a well-defined institutional hierarchy. This hierarchy provides predictability and motivates civil servants to improve their performance and satisfy established objectives. Second, the market's supply and demand model is integrated into public administration to foster a culture of quality in public services, tailored to the needs of client beneficiaries. Third, the role of networks is enhanced by involving citizens and civil society in decision-making processes. Importance is attached to co-design, co-participation, and co-delivery, facilitated by clear and transparent rules (Bouckaert, 2022, 2023).

In conclusion, we consider Romania to be on the verge of an important shift in public administration, heading toward a new paradigm that combines components of the NWS and NPG. This hybrid approach reflects the country's unique reform journey, in which the NWS's characteristics are combined with the NPG's dynamic, collaborative, and citizen-centric values. By merging these paradigms, Romania has created a more flexible, responsible, and inclusive public administration system—one more suited to dealing with the difficulties of modern governance while staying true to the essential principles of public service.

For practitioners and academics alike, the Romanian case is both theoretically and empirically relevant when it comes to the experience of importing and adapting various organizational and operational models, driven by the fulfillment of a national project. Throughout this period, Romania's public administration has been caught between the formal regulation of new tools and mechanisms and the political and cultural resistance to change. The transformation of public administration has been shaped by political consensus and will, particularly during periods of crisis and historical opportunity for Romania.

Submitted: June 17, 2024 KST, Accepted: August 29, 2024 KST



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